

Each king in a deck of playing cards represents a great king from history:

representing the four great empires of Greece, Rome, the Jews, and the Franks.

Spades - King David

Hearts - Charlemagne

Clubs - Alexander, the Great

Diamonds - Julius Caesar

The original card suits were based on classes and can be traced back to France around 1480. Suits included: spades (royalty), clubs (peasants), hearts (clergy), and diamonds (merchants).

French and British decks of the 16th century were said to often depict Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, the biblical King David and Charlemagne on the king cards — representing the four great empires of Greece, Rome, the Jews and the Franks.

Today's 52-card deck preserves the four original French suits of centuries ago:

clubs (♣), diamonds (♦), hearts (♥), and spades (♠). These graphic symbols, or “pips,” bear little resemblance to the items they represent, but they were much easier to copy than more lavish motifs. Historically, pips were highly variable, giving way to different sets of symbols rooted in geography and culture. From stars and birds to goblets and sorcerers, pips bore symbolic meaning, much like the trump cards of older tarot decks. Unlike tarot, however, pips were surely meant as diversion instead of divination. Even so, these cards preserved much of the iconography that had fascinated 16th-century Europe: astronomy, alchemy, mysticism, and history.

Some historians have suggested that suits in a deck were meant to represent the four classes of Medieval society. Cups and chalices (modern hearts) might have stood for the clergy; swords (spades) for the nobility or the military; coins (diamonds) for the merchants; and batons (clubs) for peasants. But the disparity in pips from one deck to the next resists such pat categorization. Bells, for example, were found in early German “hunting cards.” These pips would have been a more fitting symbol of German nobility than spades, because bells were often attached to the jesses of a hawk in falconry, a sport reserved for the Rhineland's wealthiest. Diamonds, by contrast, could have represented the upper class in French decks, as paving stones used in the chancels of churches were diamond shaped, and such stones marked the graves of the aristocratic dead.

While pips were highly variable, courtesan cards - called “face cards” today, have remained largely unchanged for centuries.

British and French decks, for example, always feature the same four legendary kings: Charles, David, Caesar, and Alexander the Great. Bostock notes that queens have not enjoyed similar reverence. Pallas, Judith, Rachel, and Argine variously ruled each of the four suits, with frequent interruption. As the Spanish adopted playing cards, they replaced queens with mounted knights or *caballeros*. And the Germans excluded queens entirely from their decks, dividing face cards into *könig* (king), *obermann* (upper man), and *untermann* (lower man)—today's Jacks. The French reintroduced the queen, while the British were so fond of theirs that they instituted the “British Rule,” a variation that swaps the values of the king and queen cards if the reigning monarch of England is a woman.

The ace rose to prominence in 1765. That was the year England began to tax sales of playing cards. The ace was stamped to indicate that the tax had been paid, and forging an ace was a crime punishable by death. To this day, the ace is boldly designed to stand out.