

# Knight Death Devil – Path of Adepti

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## Knight Death Devil – Path of Adepti

[\[Figure 1: Albrecht Durer’s Knight, Death and Devil\]](#)

The second engraving in a row is Knight, Death, and Devil, which is usually interpreted as an image of a Christian soldier guided by Christian moral values, which are so powerful that he completely ignores the obstacles of a hostile world expressed by Death and Devil appearing more in the form of phantasmatic imagination than a real threat.

The source of inspiration of this engraving, which Dürer in his diaries simply called Reuter, Horseman, is sought in Erasmus of Rotterdam’s youthful treatise *Enchiridion militis Christiani*, Handbook of the Christian Soldier, which interprets the old values transplanted in light of emerging humanism.

It is a most carefully planned design, since every element of the engraving is in place of an occult meaning it conveys. Knight armored with a spear, Death, Devil, a longhaired retriever, a city in the distance, caput mortuum, and the inscription plate all bear a role in the drama performed in the wilderness. It is a strange drama based on the imperturbability of the main character, and it memorizes only the beginning of the journey and expression of the path marked by three engravings of Meisterstiche. Panofsky interprets this image as an allegory of the virtue of the Christian soldier, having the origins in the youthful writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam, who wrote *Enchiridion militis Christiani* (Handbook of the Christian Soldier).

Besides this unimaginative approach, the engraving could also carry an alternative meaning, that could be deciphered only by applying the keys of kabbalah in order to construct an interpretation. It is a story repeated many times, by many artists and throughout the history: a quest for the Holy Grail. If this engraving represents a 'Christian ideal', then it does so from the deep gnostic apprehension of Christian religion. If the beginning of a spiritual journey is represented by the fall from Eden, then this engraving represents an exposition of the path, which was so often embedded in medieval Grail romances praising the mesmerizing adventures of Parsifal. Note that the knight's goal is foreshadowed in the form of the city in the distance.

However, Dürer's engraving can be seen also as an illustration of a specific section of the kabbalistic Tree of Life. Albrecht Dürer offers us a short knowledge lecture if we want to see it there.

## DIABOLO EST DEUS INVERSUS

[\[Figure 2: Inverted pentagram rules composition\]](#)

Immediately noticeable is underlying geometry of the engraving, which is constructed over the inverted pentagram ruling all the main straight lines of the composition.

Superstition about the inverted pentagram symbolizing the evil means of Satan is well known and deeply rooted into popular culture, but on this engraving it represents a kabbalistic allusion to the 'three paths' below Tiphareth, the sixth sphere of the Tree of Life (or Sephiroth, numbers). Dürer's acquaintance with Johannes Reuchlin who was quite familiar with kabbalah – he published *De Arte Kabbalistica* in 1517 – makes it quite possible that also Dürer knew something about the subject.

[\[Figure 3: The inverted star of Ruach\]](#)

Kabbalists traditionally divide the Tree of Life in five worlds, representing various although simultaneous modes of existence:

- Nephesh or Animal Soul (Malkuth),
- **Ruach or Mind, Intellect** (Tiphareth and five concentric sephiroth around),
- Neschamah or Intuition (Binah),
- Chiah or Will, Creativity (Chokmah) and
- Yechidah or Unity (Kether).

The spheres of Ruach (sephiroth 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9) can be connected into the inverse pentagram, which is a surprising coincidence, considering the usual superstition related to this symbol. The paths around Tiphareth connecting the surrounding sephiroth in irregular pentagon drawn over the hexagon are: Teth, Kaph, Mem, Tzadee, and Resh with the sum 359, which is also the number of ShTN, Satan, the "fallen angel".

There is nothing unusual or "devilish" about this fallen world, because the Gnostics developed a whole concept of theology built upon a perception of "evil" manifestation and "good" absolute.

## THREE PATHS TO SANCTUARY

(ecstasy – temperance – mortification)

The greatest battle is always fought along the path of initiation. The prime and most important task of the adept is to enter the "Sanctuary" which is Tiphareth of the kabbalists, the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Solomon. There s/he will learn from the sources unavailable for the uninitiated, and most importantly perform the Great Work. From bellow, Tiphareth is reached along three paths of the Tree of Life:

**S, ൨, Samekh** (Temperance in Tarot) from Yesod,

**O, ם, A'yin** (Devil in Tarot) from Hod and

**N, ן, Nun** (Death in Tarot) from Netzah.

[Figure 4: Engraved drama corresponds to specific paths from Tree of Life]

The frozen characters on the engraving seem to correspond exactly to the disposition of the Tree of Life below Tiphareth. Three figures on the engraving are equivalent to the three paths leading to Tiphareth from below, and the surrounding mise-en-scène sets the context of the discourse. The city at the distance is the goal, the end of the wanderings in the wilderness, representing Tiphareth. It is a dog, the lively longhaired-retriever following the knight that symbolizes Yesod, Moon.

The central figure is a knight armored with a spear, which invokes Sagittarius – the zodiacal attribution of the 14th Tarot, Temperance. Sagittarius is QShTh in Hebrew, the three letters are the three paths from Malkuth, thus representing “a bow of directed Will”. Since the path of Samekh lays on the Middle Pillar it represents a fusion of different elements in alchemical or magickal process, not forgetting that it is a mythical connecting path between Moon and Sun, a mediator in the Royal Marriage.

<i>CORRESPONDENCES</i>	<b>DEATH</b>	<b>KNIGHT</b>	<b>DEVIL</b>
TAROT NAME	DEATH	TEMPERANCE	DEVIL
TAROT NO.	XIII	XIV	XV
LETTER	NUN (FISH)	SAMEKH (PROP)	A'YIN (EYE)
ZODIACAL	SCORPIO	SAGITTARIUS	CAPRICORN
ALCHEMICAL	SALT	MERCURY	SULPHUR
GREEK	ARES	APOLLO, ARTEMIS	PAN, PRIAPUS
ROMAN	MARS	DIANA	PAN, BACCHUS
HINDU	KUNDALINI	VISHNU	LINGAM, YONI

Table of selected correspondences for Death, Knight, and Devil[2]

The three paths from the kabbalistic Tree of Life leading from the lower spheres to central Tiphareth are also metaphorically inscribed on the signature plate:

[Figure 5: Tablet with the code]

**S** stands for Samekh, the letter of **KNIGHT**, represented as **XIV**, Temperance of the Tarot with Sagittarius as zodiacal sign

**15** is explicitly **XV** of the Tarot, **DEVIL**

**13** is **XII** of the Tarot, **DEATH**.

This Dürer's engraving is in my opinion one of the most explicit images of the adventures of the path that the adept vows to take. I suggest that Albrecht Durer was telling the same story on different layers, using the most obvious visual correspondences and the most symbolic Jewish kabbalah. Thus he pinpointed exactly what he wanted to say, if we see it that way...

## Bibliography

1. Erwin Panofsky, Life and Art of Albrecht Durer, Princeton University Press, 1995
2. Aleister Crowley, 777 and other kabbalistic writings, Samuel Weiser, 1988.

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Plates

Figure 1: Albrecht Durer: Knight, Death and Devil



dim. 25x19.2 cm

Figure 2: Inverted pentagram rules composition

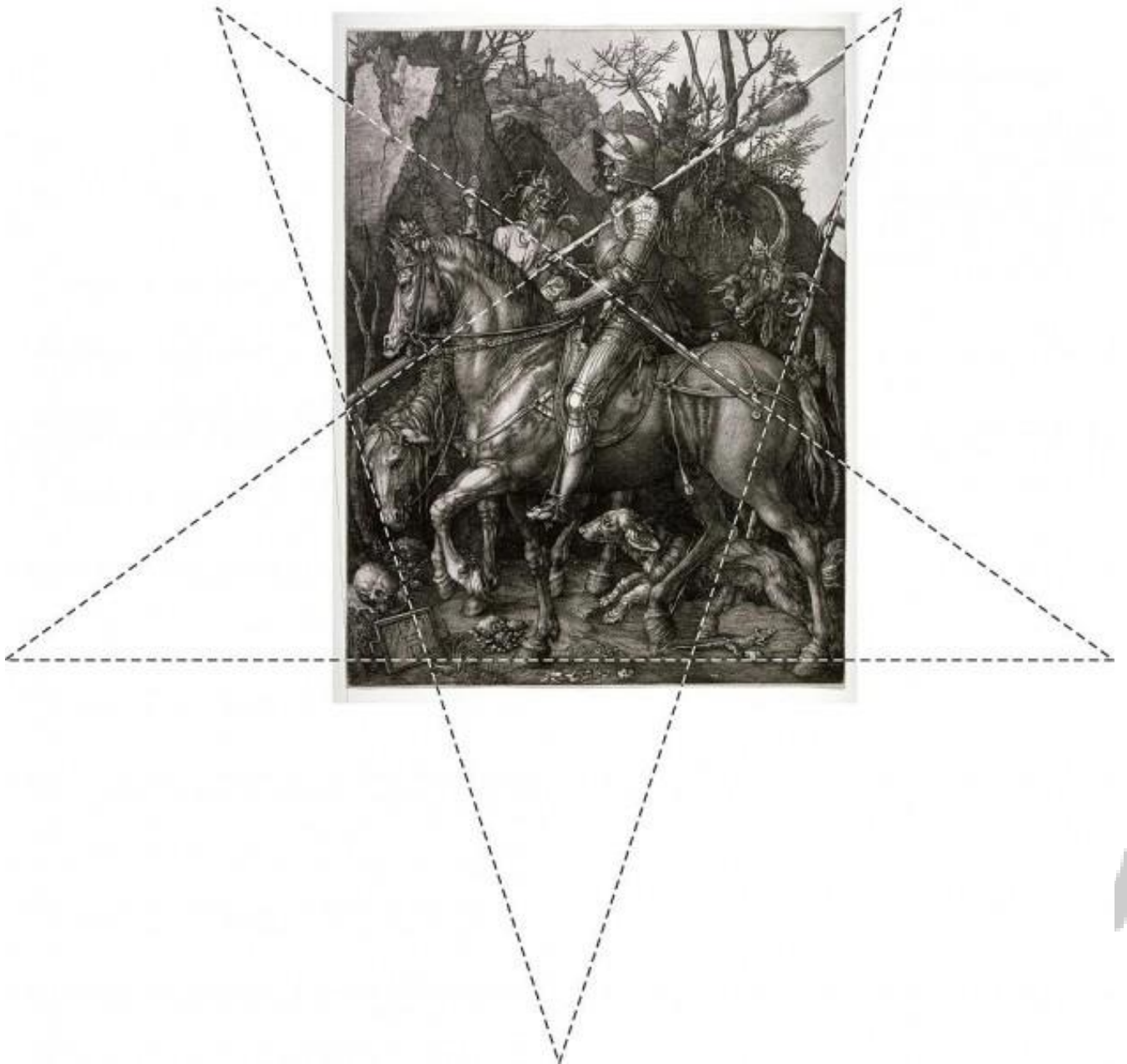




Figure 3: The inverted star of Ruach

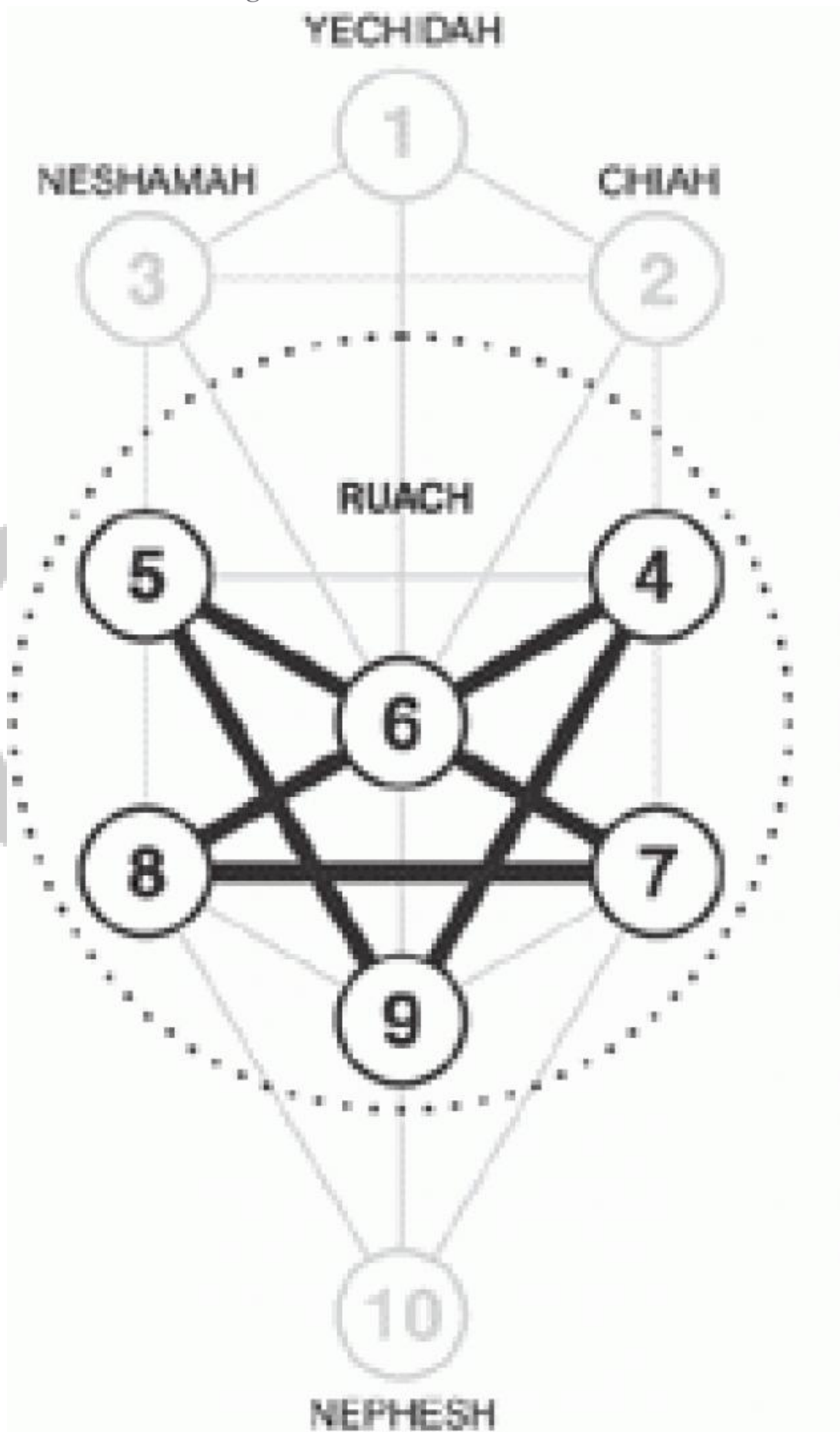


Figure 4: Engraved drama corresponds to specific paths from Tree of Life

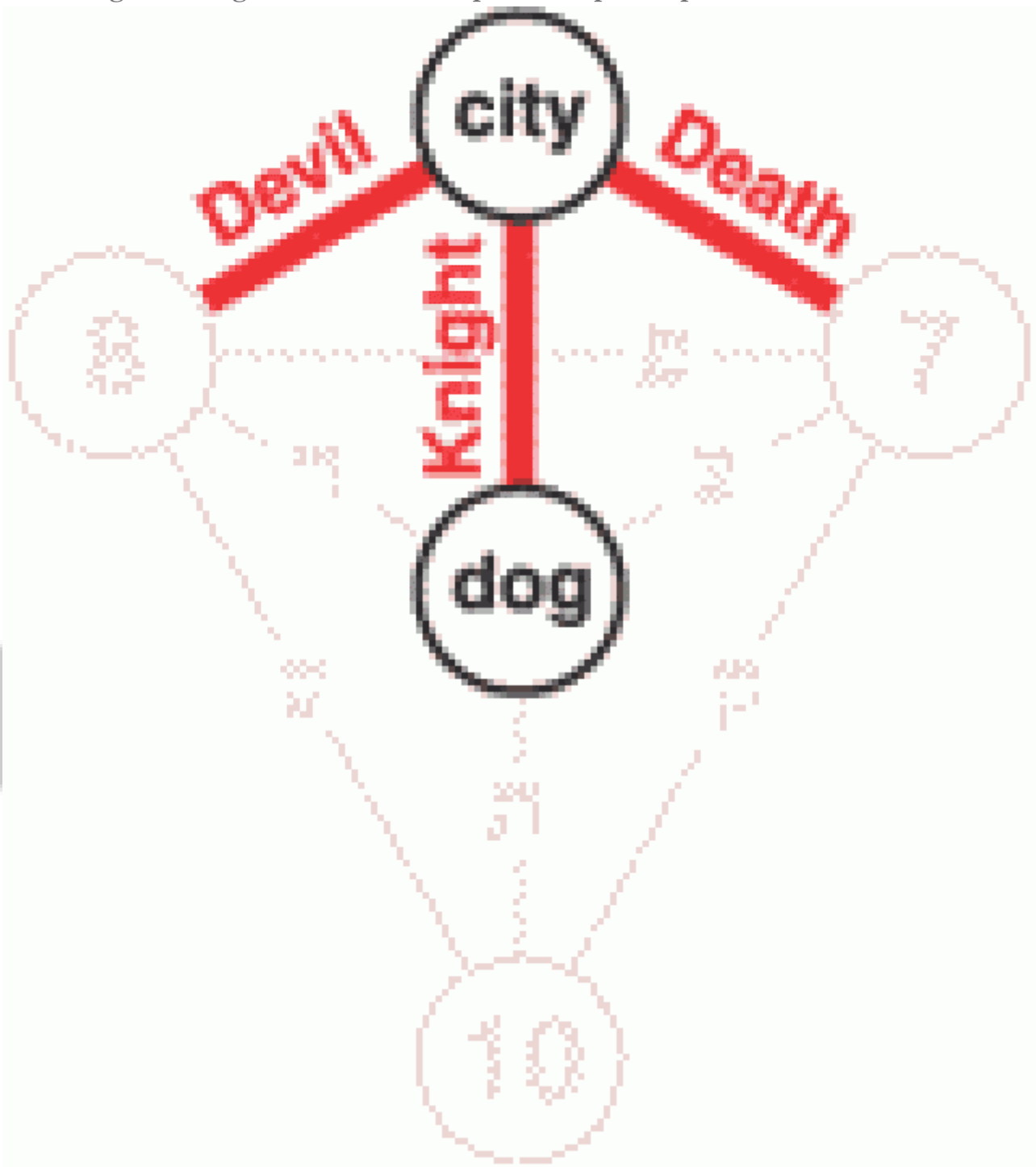


Figure 5: Tablet with the code

