

## NAIBI WITH ATTRIBUTES

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### Introduction

Years ago, an article of mine was published on the introduction of playing cards into Florence and the spelling of the corresponding word Naibi in the earliest documents. (1) My position was that this name was so new and exotic that it was hardly understood by the copyists and thus differently written, even in the same document. Indeed, apart from the possible use of *j* for *i* in the end of the word, *naibi* could be read together with *naibbi*, *naibbe*, and also *narbi*, with the last spelling that even entered the relevant literature in printed form, later on.

At present I am no longer convinced at that point of the significance of the various spelling, after having encountered, for example *gioco* alongside not only of *giuoco*, probably more correct but now outdated, but also in previous centuries with *giuco*, and with the letter *c* in all three cases possibly substituted by *ch*; of course, this was not a new or exotic word. The same can be found for many other words, so that the various forms of naibi writing may have had less significance than I attributed to them at the time.

Now I am continuing the study of the early times of playing cards, which, especially in Florence, were called naibi for a longer period than elsewhere (except for Spain and Portugal, of course). I knew this and was thus not surprised in encountering this strange word in the documents under examination. Something associated however has been very surprising to me, the number of different attributes that could be used together with the word Naibi. These attributes had the evident aim to specify a given card pack and to distinguish it from the similar ones.

The need to indicate the kind of Naibi in a more precise way derived from the presence of various packs on the market, which were dissimilar for dimension, quality, production method and, correspondingly, price. In other words, to indicate in account books which kind of pack was sold and at what price was unavoidable, except of course in the many cases in which only the total amount of the sale was recorded, without mentioning its single items.

All the pertinent words are in Italian. However, we cannot find most of them in a common dictionary, because their usage is now obsolete, or their meaning has changed in the meantime. Therefore, I think that some description may be useful, especially for people with a mother tongue different from Italian.

### Piccoli, mezzani, grandi

The most frequent attribute of a given pack of Naibi is related to its dimension. There are more than a pair of such attributes, which for many cases are used just to distinguish whether the cards are small or large format. This is familiar to me from personal experience: here we had two different packs on sale with exactly the same figures but with different shape: Fiorentine, larger, and Toscane, smaller. I can now suppose that this was a residual usage of a very old tradition.

I have not yet studied the actual origin of these formats, but I imagine that they can directly be associated with the current formats of the paper sheets available at the time. When you have on sale two kinds of paper sheets, of different dimension, and then you fold or cut them into the same parts (for instance 3x8), you have automatically formed both *grandi* and *piccoli* Naibi.

If this reasoning is correct, we should expect the same ratios between the dimensions of the paper sheets and the various Naibi cards. This is not however a necessary consequence: Naibi *piccoli*, *mezzani* or *grandi* could be obtained just by differently folding or cutting a given sheet of paper.

Let us begin with *piccoli* that we find usually written as *picholi* or *piccholi* in the documents. They were the cheapest and more frequent version acquired. Whenever no attribute for dimension is provided, we can assume that they were *piccoli*.

Somewhat puzzling for me is the further attribute of *piccini*. Actually, the meaning of this word is exactly the same as that of *piccoli*. I would say that in the language of nowadays *piccini* is somewhat more informal than *piccoli*, but there is hardly a difference between the two attributes. If sometimes we find the use of *piccini*, instead of *piccoli*, this might be understood as exactly the same pack. However, at least in one case, I find in the same sale some packs with the *piccoli* attribute, others with *piccini*, and this may be interpreted as if *piccini* corresponded to an even smaller version than *piccoli*.

The question is however not limited to the distinction *piccoli-grandi*, because there were intermediate formats too. These were mostly called *mezzani* – hopefully this attribute was not devoted to any intermediate measure between *piccoli* and *grandi*, but just to one of them, so that a third standard dimension was offered on sale.

The *mezzani* format was not frequent and it appears that it was only used in particular cases. The prices of the corresponding packs can be expected to be similarly intermediate, as for their dimensions. Sometimes we also find a slightly different attribute, such as *mezzanelli*, that may indicate the presence of more than one intermediate format.

As for *grandi*, their occurrence greatly depended on the quality of the pack: this attribute can hardly be found among the cheapest cards, but becomes much more frequent among the higher level products.

## **Doppi, scempi**

Here we find two unexpected attributes: *Naibi* could also be distinguished as either *scempi* or *doppi*. At once, I understood this to mean single or double packs, with direct reference to the number of their cards, 48 and 96 respectively. In other words, I saw some kind of *Minchiate* already present, so early, alongside of simple *Naibi*. (2)

Thierry Depaulis considered instead that *Naibi doppi* could correspond to packs with the same number of thicker cards, instead of a double number of them. (3) After some pondering on the corresponding dates, I have to admit that his suggestion appears to be more reasonable, as it often happens.

Nevertheless, let me go on discussing the possible alternative interpretations of double packs; in particular either as formed by thicker cards, or by a double number of cards with the same thickness.

Previously, we have somehow endeavoured to find a solution to the puzzle of the pair of cards. (4) Now, we have to go on for a further step, how it is possible to pass from *Naibi scempi* to *Naibi doppi*. This I have already discussed and interpreted as passing from a simple to a double pack. (2)

As for dimensions, neither width nor height appears to be suitable for introducing a doubling with respect to the ordinary shape. The only remaining dimension is thickness: here it is possible to imagine two different packs, the former with thinner cards, the latter with thicker ones – obviously with all cards of each pack having the same thickness.

We find however a problem that involves the actual making of any playing card. It is obvious that any playing card cannot consist in just one sheet of paper. The minimum is to have one front sheet and one back sheet pasted together. In order both to avoid any see-through possibility and to strengthen the card itself, a thicker intermediate sheet was considered as a necessary addition. In many cases, a composition of four sheets was suggested as preferable. Something we know from the documents on card making preserved in the South of France. (5)

It is evident that with such a multilayer product passing from single to double thickness can be obtained in various ways. What appears the simplest one, namely to multiply by two any sheet present in the single card, becomes at once untenable, because after all we only need one front and one back sheet, even in a double card. What about doubling the number of intermediate sheets? Here again it appears as a simpler way that of substituting just one intermediate sheet with another one, of a greater thickness.

In my opinion, this substitution could be made easily and without a remarkable cost increase, also because it was not at all necessary that this thicker sheet of paper had any special characteristic (it was not even required that this was a white paper). In other words, if the number of the cards in our two single and double packs is kept constant, their prices should be very similar. I am not thinking of identical prices, because there could be additional costs in the production process, including pasting and stiffening of the cards.

If on the other hand a double pack is such because it contains a double number of cards, there is no reason to expect a difference in costs between one double pack and two single ones. Again, there are reasons to expect some small differences, but justifications can be imagined for changing the total price of the double pack both toward higher and lower prices with respect to the total price of two identical packs: however, the difference with respect to a 2 ratio should be low in that case.

Here we approximately find a 1.7 ratio instead of 2. If you maintain that this ratio is too low and the difference with respect to the “expected” ratio of 2 is too big, I can understand this, but on the other hand the same ratio appears too high to me, with respect to what could be justified for the same number of thicker cards.

A somewhat different interpretation would be thinking of a different way to make the cards, for example as Naibi *rimboccati*. In this case too, the difference in price appears a little too high. In any kind of explanation we have probably to introduce not only the cost increase due to the material used for the cards, but also that of the production process itself.

## **Dozzinali**

I had already introduced this attribute in a previous note. (2) It was there a definition provided by me, not yet encountered in the documents of the time, but only present in the current language for items of that kind. *Dozzinale* simply means sold by the dozen and it may be interpreted as low-quality, mass produced. The same word can thus be applied to anything – even if not actually sold by the dozen – of minor value with respect to the best items of that kind.

This particular word I have then found applied at the time to Naibi explicitly. If you read Naibi *dozzinali*, they were sold by the dozen, or at least were of the same quality as any object that could be sold in that way.

The great lesson of Sylvia Mann, (6) still far from widely recognised among collectors, was that precisely packs of this kind are the most interesting for the history of playing cards. Unfortunately, when we reach the bottom level of the production, we obtain objects that more than extraordinary products are predestined to be wasted in a little while. No surprise that thousands of pages have been written on Visconti tarots. The weakness is that anything deducted from those unique items can be misleading with respect to the ordinary channels of *trionfi* production and trade.

## **Fini**

This attribute is at the same time the easiest to understand and the most difficult to evaluate with precision. If Naibi are indicated as *fini*, this means that they are of a superior quality with respect to ordinary ones. How much superior? Clearly we have here a contrast between two trends.

On the one hand, there may be a tendency to the best possible masterpiece made by the most skilful artist. In this direction, one can imagine an endless series of increasingly better products, whose prices could similarly increase in a continuous way up to very high limits. As a matter of fact, we see Naibi on sale at greatly different prices, corresponding to a quality that could increase from ordinary to very high levels. One special pack of Naibi, with the use of gold and fine painting, could be sold at the price of fifteen or more ordinary packs. This trend seems to have occurred, but only in special cases.

On the other hand, we have of course the dissimilar trend to get a standard product even for the

packs with improved quality, so that they could be traded with a fixed price, current in various workshops and places. In several cases, a renowned painter could regularly provide the seller with packs that were both *fini* and standard.

### Particular cases

*Messi a oro, messi doro, dorati.* This is a certain indication of gilded cards. What remains unclear to me is whether the gold foil covered the whole surface of the card and the picture was applied on top of it, or we had first the painting and then the gold foil on the background parts that had been left free.

Another doubt that I have is whether the gold foil could be substituted by a gold paint, or even a gold-like material or paint. What I know is that gold-beater workers (*battiloro*) were very active at the time, and also often associated with the manufacturing of silk products.

*Le chorone.* It seems that this attribute corresponded to the smallest contribution of gold to the painting. These were not gilded cards: gold paint (or foil) was only applied to the crowns of the personages. This small change was enough to remarkably increase the price of the pack.

*Tinte le figure.* All the figures were painted. This is clear, but I am not sure of the exact meaning of this attribute, when coming to the detail. First, it is unclear to me whether for figures only the court cards were intended or all of the cards. Second, I am uncertain whether packs without this attribute were either printed without any painting, or just painted in a simplified way with respect to these.

### Avantagiati

This attribute is not easy to understand, even though the word “advantage” is in any case connected with it. First of all, some facts must be examined preliminarily: in the language of nowadays, no goods on sale are marked as *avvantaggiati* any longer. It is an obsolete word. When this attribute was applied to objects on sale, this did not only occur for Naibi. I have read of other goods offered in the *avantagiati* version.

We can discuss, with the help of dictionaries and common sense, what exactly this attribute could indicate. The understanding becomes rather hard, because the connected “advantage” could be of various kinds. A possibility is that the attribute was seen from the point of view of the purchasers: you have an advantage in buying these specimens, typically because they are offered at a reduced price. This could be associated with a slightly inferior quality, or to particular conditions of sale for items of the same quality. In this case, we should find a reduction, however little, of the mean prices of these packs, which is contrary to the available evidence.

The interpretation that appears to be more likely is thus connected with an “advantage” present in the given pack – and here it becomes easy to imagine a somewhat better quality. Even this kind of advantage, however, could assume several forms. If we include other goods in the search of its meaning, we find that it could also correspond to items of greater dimension, larger shape. This meaning is hardly associated with our Naibi, for which we already had such attributes as *piccoli*, *mezzani*, and *grandi*.

In my opinion, some “improvement” on the shape of the pack is implied, such as with some additional cards, with a more careful production, with special paper, and so on. However, I admit that the easiest way to interpret this attribute is to consider it as a – nobody knows how significant – variation of the *fini* attribute: typically a better drawing and/or painting. Only if one is searching (as I am) for some sort of *trionfi* before this name became used, it is possible to see them already present here, but this may be a kind of hallucination.

### Rimbochati

The attribute *rimbochati* (at present, *rimboccati*) can be understood with the help of two independent items. The first, their price, is very important. As a matter of fact these packs appear to have been sold cheaper than usual packs. This fact is enough to let us exclude some simple alternative explanations.

The second item is represented by the objects for which the same attribute, and the correspondent verb, are still used nowadays. *Rimboccare* (tuck-up in my dictionary) is mainly used for the bed. If you have suffered from bad dreams and your blankets and bedspreads are in disorder, it will be fine if someone tucks your bed clothes up. Similar cases may be rolled up sleeves, turned up trousers, tucked up skirts.

Now, with both elements working together it seems to me that the solution is one and only one. If we have two packs, one “simple” and the second “rolled up”, it is the latter that we expect to be more expensive. In our case, however, the contrary occurs, and my interpretation is that these *rimboccati* cards had already been used and then treated, instead of being thrown out, as second-hand items that could merely be sold again with a new larger back sheet folded around the edges of the old front one.

### **A forme**

This attribute immediately reminds us of the woodblocks used for producing the playing cards. They were usually precisely called *forme*. In this case, however, what is for me rather hard to admit is the absence of this attribute for most of the Naibi encountered. At the time, I suppose that the making of cards without the use of blocks had disappeared from any current production. On reading the entries in the lists of items sold, it could appear that, on the contrary, the packs made with woodblocks still were a minority of the production. This interpretation, however, could be easier for me if the date were at least a half century earlier. I would prefer, for the moment, to suppose that this attribute was usually unexpressed.

### **Da imperatori; otto imperatori**

I have not yet found this attribute among those recorded in Florence for Naibi. This particular way of mentioning some Florentine packs is known from a few purchases of Florentine cards acquired for the court of Ferrara. It is thus possible that a pack that in Florence did not require a special attribute, did so when imported into other towns.

The meaning of this attribute is better understandable than usual: emperors are explicitly implied. It is not tenable that these packs were so called because they were of a such superior quality that they could be made not only for a king but for someone at an even higher level.

This superior social place could be better related to additional cards in a pack, where certainly kings and very probably queens were already present. What about a pack provided with such additional cards? In my opinion, we are moving toward a *trionfi* pack.

In one reference, we obtain the additional information of eight emperors. This is somewhat surprising, because eight is a number that is already high for kings: to get eight kings together is already a task that doubles their common presence in a card pack.

The simplest explanation that I can find for the number of eight emperors is to imagine two emperors per suit, either a young and an old emperor or maybe better an emperor and an empress. I say the simplest explanation just because I feel some reluctance in admitting that no explanation can be found.

The only pack in which we find additional emperors has only one of them. (7) Now, as for additional cards, eight may be too many, if referred to emperors, but one appears to be too little to provide a new attribute of *imperator* to a Naibi pack. I have the impression – but nothing more than that – that some Florentine packs had additional figures that were not fully understood in other towns.

Another possible explanation is that this pack was a “simple” one as for the number and kind of cards, but it had some peculiarity that allowed it to be accepted by card players, who were addicted to games of the Kaiserspiel family, using at the same time a standard pack and special names of personages associated to some of those cards.

## **A trionfi**

This name used as an attribute for Naibi I did never encounter up to now. It has been a great merit of Thierry Depaulis (8) to discover its presence in the *Journals* of Giusto Giusti. (9) This attribute has a huge historical importance. People exist who think of tarot as something of a much higher level with respect to simple playing cards. Something that could be offered to cultivated persons as a kind of spiritual tool.

Only a few of the tarot experts are ready to admit that it originated instead within the current environment of playing cards. Now we have the proof of that origin. Naibi *a trionfi* exactly explains that trionfi only were a particular kind of playing cards, a version of Naibi, to be similarly used by common card players.

I am not yet certain of the exact date of the origin of Trionfi. The first Naibi packs that we now find indicated with that attribute in 1440 could only be among the first that had got this name. One can imagine that some kind of trionfi existed earlier, without this special attribute, or name.

Now, after Naibi *a trionfi*, we are ready to accept a further change, from the attribute to the name itself. For these cards, the name of Naibi is no longer necessary and the *trionfi* attribute quickly becomes the name itself of this Naibi pack. Some experts may expect that these extraordinary packs were much more expensive than common Naibi. Even at the customs of Rome, Carte and Trionfi were taxed separately. (10) Here we find instead that in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century ordinary trionfi existed on sale at about the same price as ordinary cards of a similar quality.

If one hunts for Trionfi significantly more expensive than ordinary Naibi, the hope remains to find prices corresponding to that situation in previous years. Of course, I am speaking of Florence – in other towns it is possible that a “simple” pack of Trionfi was not so cheap, or even did not yet exist.

## **Prices**

The price of a pack of Naibi cannot be basically considered as an attribute, in the same sense as all those indicated previously. Recently, however, I found Naibi mostly quoted in account books of sellers, and reading here the sale price of a given pack corresponds to knowing a most significant of its “attributes”.

Actually, price is something more than that. On the basis of the different prices, we can obtain such quantitative evaluation that no common attribute can provide: a “usual” attribute simply gives us a white/black condition, whereas with prices we get countless possible nuances.

If I insert the price among the attributes, this means that I use it in a particular way. Typically, I check whether the price is higher or lower with respect to what may be considered as the standard price of a pack. This simple additional “attribute” is usually enough to solve doubts about the meaning of another attribute provided together. Your pack is mentioned as X and you are uncertain about the meaning of this X (as it has been discussed above for *avantaggiati* for instance): simply with the help of the corresponding price you can eliminate some alternative explanations.

Different from all the other attributes, the price “attribute” has the additional advantage that it is always present, at least whenever card packs are individually recorded in the account books that I have examined.

## **Conclusion**

Playing cards were called Naibi in Florence for a long time. Often, one or another attribute was added to this name, in order to better identify to which kind of playing cards they actually corresponded. In the present work I have collected and discussed the attributes that I am finding in my present study. As a general comment, it can be added that only few of them were already known, and that the exact meaning of some of them remains rather uncertain. Further research may provide more precise explanations... and further attributes.

## Notes

- (1) Franco Pratesi, *The Playing-Card*, Vol. XVII, No 3 (1989) 107-112.
- (2) <http://trionfi.com/naibi-on-sale>
- (3) Thierry Depaulis, Personal Communication, 30.01.2012.
- (4) <http://trionfi.com/paro-paio-para>
- (5) Jean-Michel Mehl, *Les jeux au royaume de France*. Fayard, Paris 1990. pp. 159-164.
- (6) Sylvia Mann, *Collecting Playing Cards*. Bell 1966.
- (7) Ross Sinclair Caldwell, *The Playing Card*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2010) 35-56.
- (8) Thierry Depaulis, Personal Communication, 31.01.2012;  
<http://forum.tarothistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=773&sd=d&start=20>;  
<http://tarotforum.net/showthread.php?t=171059>.
- (9) Nerida Newbiggin, *Letteratura Italiana Antica*, III (2002) 41-246.
- (10) Arnold Esch, *Economia, cultura materiale ed arte nella Roma del Rinascimento*. Roma 2007.