

1451 – ONE COMMON PACK OF TRIONFI

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INTRODUCTION

I have recently restarted my studies in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, ASFI. (1) In searching in some of the account books kept there, I found a record that appears to me of great interest. In particular it supports my old conviction that Trionfi had an early spread among common people, at least in Florence. The present note describes and discusses this recent finding.

1. ZOOM IN

1.1 One archive – ASFI

Archivio di Stato is the name that now indicates any section of the public archive of Italy, present in all the main towns of the country. The ASFI is thus now just the Florentine section of this whole net of archives; (1) its oldest part was however the great archive of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, and for earlier times of the Florentine Commune. Not surprisingly, there are thus kept almost countless books and files of documents, from the middle ages to nowadays; they are so numerous that can be better indicated in an unusual manner – we read in the descriptions of ASFI that they are... more than 75 km long.



Figure 1 – Archivio di Stato di Firenze, seen from Porta alla Croce.

It is feasible for me to think of archives that contain even more pieces, or that contain older documents. If however we assign an increasingly greater weight to the documents as a function of their age, I am pretty sure that to find other archives as rich as this one is a hard task.

Many people have visited the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence, but few of them know that this was just the top floor of the great building designed by Giorgio Vasari, the Uffizi, the Offices, where the old documents were carefully kept, for centuries. (2) I could visit the archive only a few times there; out of the past visitors in that place, I fear that few are still alive.

In the late 1980s all these materials were translated in a new building, located near Porta alla Croce, one of the old gates of the town (this gate was kept in its place while the city walls were demolished for obtaining a wider avenue, when Florence became the chief town of Italy).

To become really familiar with this whole archive, I fear that a full life is not enough. First, one has to become old (and this requirement I have satisfactorily observed); second, one should have visited the archive day after day for many hours (and this has not been my case, because for several decades I did not enter the archive at all).

As occurs for most archives, the material is organised in sections, which are inevitably many in this case, more than six hundreds. Here only one of these sections is of interest, but it is a big one.

1.2 One Section – CRSGF

After the French revolution and the following wars, Tuscany had for some years a French government; with two Napoleon decrees (24 March 1808 and 13 September 1810), the Tuscan institutions of monasteries, nunneries, and other religious corporations were suppressed.

In particular, the countless books that had been preserved in all these religious institutions were collected in public archives: if they had some literary interest, they went into one the main public libraries of the town (and many of them can now be studied in our Biblioteca Nazionale); if they were administration books, or similar documents, they were addressed to “Direzione centrale degli archivi di Stato”, and can now be examined in a dedicated section of the Florentine Archivio di Stato. (A comment, maybe superfluous, is that in the two last institutions the word Stato corresponds to Tuscany or Italy, respectively.)

This section, *Corporazioni religiose soppresse dal governo francese*, CRSGF, contains almost ten thousand books and files. In general, a numbered series of archive pieces is associated to a given convent, or religious corporation; the correspondence is nearly perfect, even if in a few cases we find two series for a given monastery. Now, when we search in the corresponding inventory (four big volumes, by the way), we find 253 series and 4 appendices.

The amount of books kept for each series varies from a few books to hundreds of them. In this vast archive of documents, there are two circumstances that enormously reduce the books of our specific interest.

A first selection can be made on a simple basis – let us eliminate all items which probably are not of our interest: they are more than 99%! As a matter of fact, most account books contain records of the administration of the convents, or of their possessions. Now, finding monasteries where playing cards have been produced or even simply acquired does not seem as the most reasonable of the researches.

(I put down this suggestion here as a correct one, even if I have found a lot of nuns engaged, within their nunneries, in one or another of the single steps of the silk fabrication – especially those involving the most of patience and the best of craftsmanship. Without any stimulation for further research, as yet, I can thus easily imagine some nuns taking care of pasting or painting playing cards, in case in addition to religious images.)

As a consequence, only the few monasteries remain of our interest, which have kept account books of merchants and retailers working outside of the convent, in the same way as the Estranei section in the AOIF. (3)

Having thus greatly reduced the scope of our search, there is a second step available for further reducing the selection: we can go farther by inspecting the relative dates of the account books. Most of them belong to the following centuries, especially from the 17th and later ones. They can be useful for other studies, but are clearly of no interest for the initial spread of playing cards and Trionfi. As a result, less than 1% of the books of this section are interesting for us.

1.3 One Convent – Santa Maria Novella

Let me limit here my attention to Serie 102, corresponding to the convent of Santa Maria Novella, one of the greatest and oldest of Florence. (4) Now, few Dominican friars live there and most of its buildings are becoming a public museum. (5) However, the professor of physics in my first studies in the university was Mario Galli, precisely a friar living there – a few years after the middle ages. More important was of course the stay there of the whole papal court, especially in the years of the Council, in the late 1430s and early 1440s.

In the time of our interest, we had in Florence another convent of Dominican friars, which became even more important for the cultural life of the town, the Convento di San Marco. Maybe it is mostly known thanks to Savonarola, but it had been the preferred location for the cultural activity of Cosimo dei Medici, il Vecchio. These friars followed the Osservanza rule, a kind of reformed section of the traditional way, represented, up to present days, by Santa Maria Novella.

The time of interest corresponds to the flourishing of Renaissance and some of those masterpieces are kept in the church, such as the Masaccio's fresco of some years before, or the upper part of the façade by Leon Battista Alberti, of some years later.

Not surprisingly, the number of pieces coming to the ASFI from this big convent is great, reaching a little more than 500, more than 600 with the Appendix. However, with our very useful first criterion not to consider the administration of the convent, we are left with a little section of books in the *Eredità* subsection. Moreover, for the second criterion, only to consider the 15th century, we are practically left with one family to examine: *Eredità Bandini*, just three account books.

1.4 One Family – Bandini

Bandini is a rather common family name in Florence. In the phone directory for 2011/12 we can count no less than ninety entries at this name. If we go back in time for sixty years, one of my dozen friends of the school-days had this family name. We have however to go farther, towards even earlier times. Searching in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, we still find a score of personages belonging to this family. (6)

In these cases, better than with a single family, it would be more correct to deal with its several branches. In particular, considering the popularity of this family name, it is easy to expect that they had many branches and that it would become a difficult task to track, for each of them, its expansion and, in case, its extinction. In our specific case, it is rather the extinction of a family branch that is involved, because this is the most frequent instance for churches, convents, or hospitals receiving the inheritance of heirless families.

It may be worthwhile to directly jump to the renowned Catasto 1427, the first complete list of the Florentine families, with records of their possessions, and so on. There we find two Bandini families. The first, with no less than 14 members (or *bocche* as they were mentioned in these documents), was headed by Francesco di Romolo, dealer in cloth. The second family, with a more “modern” four members, was headed by Giovanni di Lorenzo, a young notary. (7)

1.5 One Author – Ser Giovanni Bandini

The person of our interest is precisely Ser Giovanni Bandini di Ser Lorenzo di Ser Agnolo. The profession of notary had seemingly an almost hereditary character in this family: as a matter of fact, both Giovanni's father and grandfather were named with the typical Ser label.

We are lucky enough to have met him already in Catasto 1427. The family lived in Quartiere Santa Maria Novella, Gonfalone Leone Bianco. By then, it was a very young family, formed by Giovanni 23 years old, wife Pantassalea 18, brother Luigi 5, son Lorenzo 1. This situation however corresponds to twenty-four years before the event of interest here; I had to follow him in the next editions of Catasto and search for other documents.

Fortunately, I discovered in time that this project had already been completed recently. A lot of information on this notary has actually been obtained thanks to... Boccaccio's Decameron: Marco Cursi has studied in detail the extant manuscripts of this masterpiece, beginning with his doctoral dissertation, and has then written a whole book on them. (8) More recently, the same author has succeeded in retrieving the name of the copyist of a manuscript kept in Paris, (9) nobody less than our Giovanni Bandini.

The situation thus reached has some ground-breaking character: on most of these manuscripts the name of the copyist can be found directly written in the book, and then no further information can be discovered on these persons; here, on the contrary, we do not find the name of the copyist (only first derived by Cursi from other copies signed by him), but then much information could be added on his life. (9)

The main source for the life of Ser Giovanni has been another book arrived in the ASFI from Santa Maria Novella. (10) It is not included together with the three books of the inheritance, and I have only leafed through it when I had already read the main information in Cursi's article.

Something for later times, after Giovanni's death, can be deduced from another book of the inheritance. (11) It was compiled later on by Agnolo, son of Giovanni (and he too a notary by profession), who mentions both his mother Pantassalea and his brother Marco.

Anybody wishing to know more about Ser Giovanni, should just study the article mentioned, in which detailed information can be found. (9) As for his family, I had written that it appeared as a "modern" one, but matters went differently: the parents had no less than nine children, six of whom died however very young, from a couple of hours to a couple of years old, or only slightly more.

Two books of deeds written by Ser Giovanni are kept in ASFI. (12) I have leafed through the second of them and verified that the number of deeds greatly decreased after 1440. We know the reason, described and discussed in some detail in Cursi's article. In that year the career and the life itself of Ser Giovanni changed abruptly: he became infirm and deformed and had no relief from any therapy in the following years.

As a consequence his limited possessions rapidly dissolved and he had to change to a great extent his profession, after he had to give up his public offices. His following workplaces as a notary for private deeds – indicated in the course of time at Montughi, Campi, La Lastra, Badia fiesolana, Montelupo, Calenzano – were only suitable for a lesser activity. Together with, or instead of, his travelling around for his job, he had to combine with it that of a copyist of manuscripts, working at home and hardly making a living for his family.

In addition to the frequent deaths of his children, and his poor health conditions, Ser Giovanni met remarkable troubles to marry off Tancia (his only daughter, born in 1428, absent in both Catasto editions quoted here), and Agnolo as well. It would be of some interest to report the details, be it for nothing else than to allow a comparison with the court marriages reportedly connected with the most famous Trionfi. This I am handing down to people more inclined to expand real facts into stories and novels, and am referring again to Cursi's article. (9)

I have looked for the composition of the family in Catasto 1451, the year of our interest: it was formed at the time by Giovanni 47, Pantassalea 42, Agnolo 20, Marco 7, Ridolfo 3. (13) As in some

previous cases, Giovanni asks to be recognised as too indigent to be taxed and adds some comment on his present poor state, due to his infirmity, commenced a dozen years before.

In conclusion, Ser Giovanni Bandini was not a particularly remarkable personage. As a person involved with public charges or affairs, it is easier to find some information about his father or his son Agnolo. On the other hand, he cannot of course be considered as an illiterate labourer. We can distinguish and conclude that in comparison with an average social state, his education was higher and his prosperity lower.

1.6 One Book – Pezzo 419

We have seen that only three books have been kept for the Bandini inheritance. Now, only the first of them is of interest for us, because the other two books belong to following times: N. 420 dealing with years 1566 to 1568; No. 421 from 1467 to 1487.

Our book (14) is a thin book of a rather small format: only 36 leaves, with a large part of them left blank; dimensions of the leaves are 15x21 cm. A large parchment leaf has been used as a cover, and an official deed can still be read in its internal face. The handwriting of Ser Giovanni is easier than average to read.

On the first page we read the usual presentation of the book begun on 1 May 1450 at La Lastra, together with the beginning there of an office. Below, three lines indicate that it had to be compiled as three subsequent sections: debit and credit, beginning at leaf 2, incomes from leaf 15, outcomes from leaf 30. The three sections programmed have been respected only in part, and the sections have remarkably different amounts of records.

Section one contains some intermediate blank pages and ends on leaf 7v; then we have a continuation of the third section, from 8r to 11r (1 April 1461); section two only occupies half page of 15r, with just four records; section three, on the contrary, runs from 30r (2 May 1450) up to the last page of the book, 36v (9 February 1451 – actually 1452) and then continues as indicated.

Each page of the third section contains about twenty entries, with often the sum of the corresponding values, of about L.30, indicated at the bottom. The page with the record of our interest does not have a total greater than others; in case, it is slightly less than the nearest previous and following ones. I have not calculated the exact average value for each entry, but it should not significantly differ from about one and a half Lira, or 30 Soldi.

The expenses are mostly associated with food. Logically, each element acquired is not individually recorded, so that we find reasonable combinations of two to four elements among bread, meat, chickens, pigeons, eggs, sausages, lasagne, and so on. Sometimes we find firewood, shoes, or one of a few other items. The impression is that all expenses were limited to cover the most essential needs.

1.7 One entry – 16th in leaf 35v

Here we finally reach the real focal point of the whole study, just a line of text, a single record, corresponding to a single item among so many similar short entries of various goods acquired for personal use, most just for everyday nourishment.

On leaf 35v, we find a list of twenty entries, out of which only the 16th is of our specific interest. (We cannot be disappointed, nevertheless, because it is an unusual and very useful record.)

We read there: *A di detto per 1° paio di trionfi per mio spasso s. 12*. The day, indicated in previous entries, was 5 August 1451. Our goal has been reached, we have hit the very central point of our target.

This point of arrival can actually become, on its turn, the starting point for further comments. Now, it is time to zoom again; at this point, in the contrary direction, that of extending the perspective and the discussion.

2. ZOOM OUT

2.1 Trade

For the Trionfi pack considered here, the buyer is known, and the corresponding information has been outlined above. On the other hand, the seller regrettably remains unknown to us – unless he belonged to the family of Lorenzo d'Antonio, grocer at La Lastra, who already acquired Naibi from Lapino Lapini thirty years before. (15)

The seller could be the maker himself, who probably was happy of any possible sale of his products, and could likely gain a higher price from an individual purchaser, in comparison with that granted by retailers who acquired his cards for trading them further.

On the other hand, the source could likely be one of the local stores – we have already encountered (3) card packs sold at the time in several kinds of shops, sometimes rather unexpected, such as silk-dealers.

In any case, the impression is that this purchase was a simple one; in other words, we can deduce that acquiring a pack of Trionfi was by then as simple as acquiring the other items recorded in this account book. Apparently, they were acquired locally, in a way similar to what may happen nowadays.

The same situation would have been easy to understand in the case of a pack of Naibi, because they already had a circulation lasting three fourths of a century. Our author did not acquire however a common pack of Naibi, he acquired a pack of Trionfi. In my opinion, this expression must be completed as follows: he acquired a pack of Trionfi, which had already turned into common packs as well, available to any card player!

2.2 Date

Nobody knows when the new card pack of Trionfi was first introduced. Most historians now believe that the packs that got the name of Trionfi already were the same (or very nearly the same) that we later know as Tarocchi. This is probable, because hypothetical experimental patterns with additional cards that varied in number and figures from town to town apparently were not compatible with the intense card trade that already existed at the time of the first quotations known to us.

However the first Trionfi pack recognised up to now, due to Marziano da Tortona, used sixteen gods on the triumphal cards, and several other packs could have existed containing triumphal cards different from the tarot sequence (for instance, Imperatori or Corone packs). (16)

Possible experiments apart, the first document on Trionfi has been associated for a long time with the 1442 date in Ferrara, but now this has been substituted by Florence 1440, indicated by Thierry Depaulis, when Ser Giusto Giusti had a Trionfi pack made according to his directions – with the coat of arms of its beneficiary, Sigismondo Malatesta. (17)

We do not know yet how long Trionfi packs were made and used in Florence before 1440. A few years later, Trionfi packs were also produced in other places and we have information about them from documents or cards of the North-Italian courts, especially Ferrara and Milan.

2.3 Price

In the present book, we have the opportunity to compare the price of this pack of Trionfi with any other purchase recorded by the same buyer at the same time or very near to it. In general, we could expect that this price were located among the most expensive items acquired. Let us try and verify the actual situation.

In comparing the price of this Trionfi pack with the other entries, it is apparent that this record is not at all more expensive than the average value of all the entries. It is true that here we have a

single item, and not the combined cost of a few elements (as occurring for food), but the cost of these cards is comparable with the cost of a loaf of bread with some meat acquired together.

We can do more than this, and examine for comparison other records of Trionfi sales at the time.

(3) What we can reasonably expect is that this pack is not among the most precious ones, packs made for exports, as were those made by Filippo di Marco and recorded in Cambini account books (18).

On the other hand, it is similarly reasonable to expect a price somewhat higher than that offered by traders who had to further sell the same item. When compared with the known prices at the time, this is in satisfactory agreement. Actually, only very few Trionfi packs could be traded at a somewhat lower price at the time, and this value of 12 Soldi can be considered as compatible with an average price.

2.4 Pack

We would have been interested in many further details about this pack. Everything concerned with the cards, including their total number, their figures, the techniques employed for their production, and so on, is regrettably missing here, as on the other hand we are accustomed to find in any report of the time.

It has been a common mistake of most historians to suppose that Trionfi were first introduced around 1450 for an exclusive utilisation within the North-Italian courts. This was mainly supported by the very few artistic packs preserved from that provenance.

Artistic value apart, it is a real pity that the pack found here in the domicile of Ser Giovanni has not been kept instead of those precious ones. Card historians could have derived from it more useful and correct information!

Only the countless books and articles by art historians on early tarots would have had even less reasons to be written. Unfortunately, only few researchers have learnt the great lesson given by Sylvia Mann, that precisely the common playing cards – whenever available – represent the most useful source of the historical information on the subject.

2.5 Utilisation

We can deduce something additional and useful from the short comment added for this purchase: *per mio spasso*, for my own amusement. This is an important annotation for us. This pack has been acquired just for personal use, exactly as we might have done in our days.

Differently from the pack acquired by Ser Giusto Giusti eleven years before, (17) this pack had nothing of special value; it was not intended as a present for some public figure. At present, evidence for a widespread and early use of Trionfi by common people is scarce or missing. Many authors still believe that at the time Trionfi still were an exclusive pastime for court ladies and other few personages of the high society.

It is therefore essential that Ser Giovanni Bandini states in his record that this pack was instead acquired just for his personal use, thus a rather ordinary playing set for a rather ordinary person. Moreover, even much more so than in our days, this pack acquired for personal pleasure could not be intended for playing Patience games.

The purchase had been for personal use, but not for being used by an individual player. We have seen that the family of Ser Giovanni was formed at the time by two parents and three sons, two of them still in their earliest years. We can freely assume that this pack was used by the family, possibly together with one or another friend coming from neighbouring families – in any case, a familiar circle.

It is rather fatiguing for me to insist once again to suggest that for the early history of cards (Trionfi included) we need first of all to find new documents, because in the presence of data

coming only from the courts we are predisposed to make the common mistake of assuming that the game was typical of the courts, and only of them.

It is just the documentation left that mainly comes from these high-class environments. (The likelihood of making the same mistake becomes even greater when people base their reasoning on the few precious cards preserved up to now.)

2.6 Suggestion

Many historians, and especially the plentiful category of art historians, are interested in the masterpieces of the Renaissance. In order to improve our knowledge about these precious art objects, some of these historians are even ready to spend hours and days in leafing through the ancient documents.

Recently, the economic aspects connected with the production and trade of art objects have thus acquired an increased attention by several researchers. In their search in the account books of the greatest merchants, they can hardly find an information on the small trade of such trifling objects as ordinary packs of playing cards. If one looks for data of our interest, account books of a particular kind have to be searched.

We have seen cards and Trionfi traded by mercers, grocers, and even silk-dealers, in any case retailers, with small trades. (3) The last finding has gone farther away from the main channels: Trionfi have been found in the records of the everyday shopping done by a private person.

Of course, I cannot invite all historians to verify the presence of Trionfi or other playing sets in these scarce account books – they are not promising and rewarding enough. What I am able to invite researchers of the subject is again to come down from the court palaces and just try and imagine, as much as they can, how many more playing cards and Trionfi were circulating at the time, possibly anywhere in Italy, and certainly in and around Florence.

CONCLUSION

I have described the finding of the purchase in 1451 of an individual pack of Trionfi, in an account book of domestic management. The specific evidence clearly shows how at the time Trionfi packs had turned into common playing tools in Florence. Several further comments have been provided, as well as some indication for future research.

NOTES

- (1) <http://www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/nuovosito/>
- (2) <http://www.uffizi.org/museum/history/>
- (3) <http://trionfi.com/franco-pratesi>
- (4) <http://www.smn.it/arte/convent.htm>
- (5) http://www.museumsinflorance.com/musei/santa_maria_novella-cloist.html
- (6) http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/tag/bandini/Dizionario_Biografico/1/
- (7) ASFI, *Catasto*, 77, l. 254.
- (8) Mario Cursi, *Il Decameron : scritture, scriventi, lettori : storia di un testo*. Viella, Roma 2007.
- (9) Mario Cursi, *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 38 (2010) 1-28.
- (10) ASFI, CRSGF, 102, 82.
- (11) ASFI, CRSGF, 102, 421.
- (12) ASFI, *Notarile antecosimiano*, 1524 and 1525.
- (13) ASFI, *Catasto*, 710, l. 143.
- (14) ASFI, CRSGF, 102, 419.
- (15) <http://trionfi.com/lapini-playing-cards>
- (16) <http://trionfi.com/trumps-trionfi-tarots>

- (17) <http://trionfi.com/giusto-giusti>
- (18) <http://trionfi.com/filippo-di-marco>