

ON THE INTRODUCTION OF PLAYING CARDS IN FLORENCE

Franco Pratesi – 27.05.1987

(Italian Cards – New Discoveries No. 8)

In most histories of cards attention is devoted to their first diffusion among European countries. In particular, it has been often discussed which must be considered the first documentary evidence; nevertheless, a full agreement among historians has not been reached, see for instance the question of the Basel edict. Maybe the earliest document which is generally accepted as a proof of cards introduction in Europe is the Florentine *Provisio* of March 23rd, 1376 (actually corresponding to 1377 since the new year began then in Florence on March 25th).

Although many texts cite it, only few provide a transcription of the document. As far as I know, Zdekauer was the first to discover the document and to communicate the essential part of the text (1), although his contribution has not been often acknowledged by following historians. A comprehensive discussion in modern terms about the introduction of Naibi, after many previous suggestions, is due to Novati (2); among other things, the transcription by Zdekauer is reported and used in the discussion. Then, the text can be found again, in more detail, in the fundamental book by Schreiber (3), where the following Latin quotation appears, “*Volentes malis obviare principiis, domini priores...audito quomodo quidam ludus, qui vocatur naibbe, in istis partibus noviter innolevit...ordinaverunt et deliberaverunt, die XXIII mensis martii anni Domini 1376, indictione XV, quod in omnibus et per omnia et quo ad omnia eadem pena sis et imponatur omnibus et singulis qui in futurum ludent in civitate, comitatu vel districtu Florentiae ad dictum ludum, seu qui dictum ludum retinebunt, que, prout et quemadmodum imponeretur, seu imponi posset vel deberet, de ludo seu pro ludo ad†ardi.*”

This text was extracted from the ‘recht weitschweifig’ *Provisio* by Leo Olshki, to whom Schreiber expresses his gratefulness. Recently, Rosenfeld (4) has finally published the whole text together with that of similar contents from the session of the following day. In previous articles that author had already called attention to the relevance of the *Provisio* (5); it may be recalled that Rosenfeld has been one of the strongest supporters of an Islamic origin of European cards, earlier than that provenance became generally acknowledged; one of the contrary opinions which still deserves to be mentioned is that supposing a Spanish origin of the cards, following a particular variant of four-handed chess (6).

When I began my investigations on the *Provisio*, I had forgotten, too, Zdekauer’s contribution, as well as the indication of the folios, already contained in Schreiber’s book. Moreover, I have only known the article with the full transcription by Rosenfeld when my study was near to the end; fortunately so, since otherwise I would probably not have looked for the autograph documents. After reading the text in Schreiber’s book, I decided to control the exact spelling of a document, which appears of so fundamental a value in the history of cards. Obviously, I tried to check the original text, availing myself of the opportunity that the document is still preserved in Florence in Archivio di Stato. I first leafed through *Registri*, vol. 64, and finally I could understand what precisely was the meaning of Schreiber’s ‘recht weitschweifig’. The codex is about 60 by 40 cm large, with about 40 lines in each parchment page. The binding is of leather and wooden plates. In particular, the *Provisio* of interest here is the last but one in the volume, located from folio 273a to 294b; 44 written pages on the whole, concerning miscellaneous questions from a number of judgments against individuals to directions of general importance. Taking into account the facts, too, that the language and the handwriting are not among the most familiar ones now, I was not much surprised that on first reading I could not find the quotation at all. As a consequence, I was induced to better investigate the whole system of those documents.

In particular, in the Archivio guide-book (7) it is explained that the final redaction of a *Provisio* is only the last of several steps, consisting in preliminary discussions, voting, and so on; moreover,

several different copies should be recorded of the final redaction. In particular, two of the preliminary steps should be separately preserved. In the collection *Consulte e pratiche* – vol. 14 for 1375/77 – there should be a short description of the posed question, and in *Libri Fabarum* – vol. 40 for 1371/80 – the corresponding voting should be recorded in some detail. After these two preliminary documents, the different versions of the final *Provisio* should be represented by: a first one in *Protocolli*, notes directly written by the notary during the same discussion, a second one in *Registri*, and a third one in *Duplicati* collections.

Unfortunately, not all of these sources have proven to be useful, since nothing concerning cards could be detected in *Consulte e pratiche* and in *Protocolli*. The former collection reports only a short list of events in correspondence to the sessions of March 1376, something as barely outlined orders of the day; probably only the essential points were recorded and several minor points, such as cards, were not listed. Plausibly, a discussion on that topic occurred on an earlier date, which could not be identified. Further investigations may provide evidence on preliminary discussions, which should have occurred before the final *Provisio* was voted, thus reaching even earlier dates with respect to that renowned 23rd March 1377 for the presence of cards in Florence; i.e., in Europe. In any case, no records appear to be reported in this collection for the days of interest here. On the other hand, the series of *Protocolli* unluckily presents a gap precisely in correspondence to the end of the 14th century: vol.8 of the series reaches the date of January 10, 1372, whereas vol. 9 covers the beginning of the following century, being mainly concerned with the year 1417. Except for this period, a remarkable part of the collection appears to have been preserved, with each volume corresponding to a few years.

Nevertheless, the information gained from the remaining documentary texts has been of a certain interest. Let us begin with the final records of the *Provisio*. Two writings are preserved which differ only in several minor details. The first is apparently that copied by Olshki and is contained in *Registri*, vol. 64, on folios 275b and 276a, near to the end, as point 3 of the *Provisio* of March 23, 1376. The only modification which can be suggested to the text reported by Schreiber is to add after ‘*eadem pena*’: ‘*sit et imponatur et imponi possit et debeat omnibus et...*’. The corresponding text in *Duplicati* is, first of all, more clearly written. It occurs on f. 3b, covering also the initial part of f. 4a; in fact, the *Provisio* can be found here at the very beginning of the codex. Moreover, the relevant sentence appears to be more correctly written: ‘*ludus, qui vocatur Naibe, in istis partibus noviter inolevit*’. Thus we have, correctly, ‘*inolevit*’ instead of ‘*innolevit*’ and ‘*Naibe*’ – written in firm writing – instead of ‘*naibbe*’.

Obviously one of the essential parts of the information certainly derives from the adverb ‘*noviter*’, or very recently. Thus the witness is certain, and verified by several practically identical versions, that the game of cards had recently begun to flourish in Florence. Although it is not explicitly stated, it may be deduced from the text that a real rage of card playing had begun. In fact, if only a few people played cards, certainly the matter should not have arrived to the highest levels of the Florentine legislative power.

We have already encountered two slightly different versions of the common name of cards, and this series is not ended since in the remaining document quoting the same session, *Libri Fabarum* vol. 40, f. 244, listing the topics put to the votes – together with the corresponding results – they are quoted as ‘*na(i)bbj*’. Here the relevant line is, ‘*3. provisionem disponentem de pena ludentium ad naibbj. displ. 31*’. The letter ‘*i*’ is lacking on first writing and appears as inserted later by same hand. A further hint for the foreign provenance of the name may be that it is here used as a plural accusative without any modification due to declension. This third form of that odd word, reported in the three different versions referring to same council, appears to be the first one to have been written, since the recording of the voting results should have occurred during the same session, whereas the final documents were probably written several days later.

“*Displ. 31*” above represents the recording of the votes against the decision taken in the *Provisio*. From the mentioned documents the number of voting people can be assumed as 197, which remained unaltered until point 14th of the *Provisio*, becoming then 206. It may be interesting to

consider how these 197 Florentines voted on different points, in order better to understand the weight of the opposition; in our case the consistence of those, who considered cards to represent a legitimate play-tool. Unfortunately, there is a mistake in the recorded results of the votes. Both records of *Provisio* report 174 yes and 23 no for naibbe/Naibe, whereas the book of voting records, *Libri Fabarum*, has, as stated before, 166 to 31. In particular, there is a misfit corresponding to a shift of one place in the sequence between the two documents. The impression is that in *Libri Fabarum* the second 23, precisely corresponding to cards, was not reported, after having been recorded for the previous point; 31 is reported instead, which should correspond to the following 4th point, and the series continues with the correspondence of numbers shifted by one item. In any case, be it 23, as much more plausible, or even 31, it represents a little opposition: the corresponding numbers for the 14 initial points of the same *Provisio* are, according to *Registri* and *Duplicati*, 52,23,23,31,42,0,57,57,51,61,31,31,27,43. Thus, apart from an unique case of an unanimous decision, both numbers 23 and 31 practically corresponded to a minimum of the contrary side.

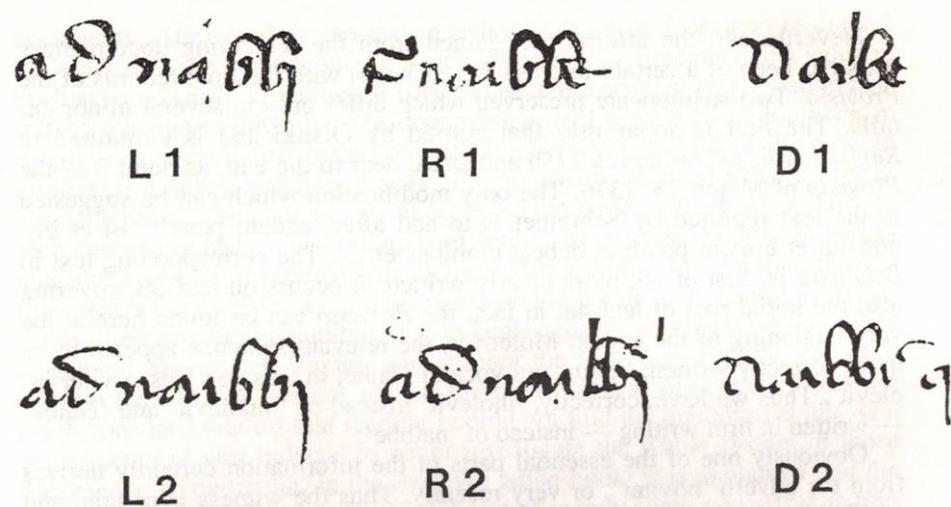


Figure 1 – Reproduction of the original writing of the word Naibi.

Different records of the same sessions; from the manuscripts of 1377 preserved in Archivio di Stato di Firenze.

1 refers to 23.3; 2 to 24.3; L to Libri fabarum; R to Registri; D to Duplicati, (see text).

In *Libri Fabarum* it can easily be noted from the following folio, corresponding to the following day, that most of the already approved questions were again discussed and voted. That appears not to be an usual procedure; maybe it was due to the great number of points that had to be voted the day before. Certainly, the composition of the council was different, at least from a quantitative point of view, and also the three public copyists were different (Conero Spinelli, Bono Salamie and Lupicino Gualberti instead of Mattheo Marchi, Spinello Bandi and Giorgio Cei). To this second session belong corresponding reports in *Registri* and in *Duplicati*. The essential part of the report from *Registri* has been first indicated and fully published by Rosenfeld (4). In general, the texts of the second session appear shortened and the votes are, if possible, even more favourable to the confirmation of the decision; but on that subject Rosenfeld has already discussed in some detail. Among the considerations discussed by that historian, one is based on reading ad \ddot{a} rdi as ad cardi, so that an hypothesis is put forth of both naibi and carte being involved. The meaning of the text and the examination of all remaining documents provides, however, much greater support to the common interpretation of players of naibi to be sentenced in the future as gamblers (on the basis of ad \ddot{a} rdi's analogy to gambling).

Rosenfeld already remarked that a different spelling was used for naibi in the two successive sessions, but we now obtain no less than six quotations of naibi with three from each session

deriving from *Libri Fabarum*, *Registri*, and *Duplicati*. We can read them all in Fig. 1. The corresponding transcriptions for the successive sessions may be taken as na(i)bbj and naibbj from *Libri*; naibbe and naibbj from *Registri* and Naibe and Naibbi from *Duplicati*. On the whole it would be difficult to find out more variations in writing, a fact indicating how even the public amanuenses had obvious difficulty to find the exact spelling of that name, certainly a far from traditional one. Not only did cards had a foreign provenance, but they had not yet an established name in Florence during that same 1377, when their diffusion as a gambling tool was already as great as to induce the government of the town to discuss and to sentence against them.

Notes

1. L.Zdekauer "Il giuoco in Italia nei secoli XIII-XIV e specialmente in Firenze" in *Archivio Storico Italiano* Ser. IV tomo 18 (1886) 20-74.
2. F.Novati "Per la storia delle carte da giuoco in Italia" in *Il libro e la stampa* (1908) 54-69
3. W.L.Schreiber *Die altesten Spielkarten...*Strassburg 1937
4. H.Rosenfeld "Zur Datierbarkeit fr̄her Spielkarten in Europa und im nahen Orient" in *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* 1975, 353-371; see also H.Rosenfeld "Das Kartenspiel in Europa im 14. bis 16. Jahrhundert und der Orient" in *Der Schlern* 60 (1986) 725-732.
5. H.Rosenfeld "Die Beziehung der europaischen Spielkarten zum Orient und zum Ur-Schach" in *Archiv f•r Kulturgeschichte* (1960) 1-36; H.Rosenfeld "Zur Vor- und Fr•hgeschichte und Morphogenese von Kartenspiel und Tarock" in *Archiv f•r Kulturgeschichte* (1970) 65-94.
6. P.Bidev *Die Spanische Herkunft der Spielkarte* Winsen-Luhe 1973.
7. Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali *Guida Generale degli Archivi di Stato Italiani Vol. II*. Roma 1983, p.49-51.