# ABOUT 1420 − reflecting on marziano’s pack

Franco Pratesi − 25.03.2013

## PREMESSA (15.01.2013)

Il 3 gennaio ho inviato all’amico Lothar Teikemeir un’ennesima nota, per inserirla in trionfi .com; mi sembra un utile punto di partenza per definire meglio il mio principale centro di interesse di queste settimane − però ci vorrà del tempo perché sia pubblicata.

Limitando l’attenzione ai Trionfi intesi come carte da gioco, quasi tutti gli esperti sono ormai d’accordo che si trattava già di quei tarocchi, che in seguito hanno avuto grande fortuna fra i giocatori e (purtroppo, secondo me) anche oggigiorno fra i cartomanti. Alcuni antichi tarocchi conservati (oltre a quelli milanesi dei duchi Visconti e Sforza) fino a pochi anni fa ritenuti ferraresi sono oggi considerati di provenienza fiorentina. L’importanza della produzione fiorentina è stata confermata da molti documenti sul commercio delle carte da gioco verso la metà del XV secolo. La prima attestazione oggi nota per i trionfi è Firenze 1440.

Il mio principale problema storico è che non riesco a sciogliere un nodo di validità logica fra due ipotesi incompatibili. La questione riguarda essenzialmente l’identità fra trionfi e tarocchi, e la data in cui si ebbe tale identità, se fin dall’inizio o in seguito.

1) Non riesco minimamente a trovare nell’ambiente fiorentino dell’epoca un qualsiasi supporto per la serie completa delle ventidue (!) carte trionfali dei tarocchi. QUINDI sono portato a immaginare che le carte aggiunte al mazzo dei naibi fossero state originariamente presenti in numero minore. Penso a 4-8, massimo 12 o 16, carte trionfali. In tal caso, gli stessi soggetti presenti sulle carte potevano facilmente ritrovarsi nelle miniature, cassoni, deschi da parto, e simili opere d’arte minore, parimenti divenuti di moda con motivi trionfali proprio negli anni verso il 1440 o poco prima (non ho ancora capito con certezza quanto prima, per i vari tipi di opere).

2) Mentre si sa che in seguito si affermarono a livello regionale varianti diverse del “nuovo” mazzo di carte (tarocco bolognese, minchiate, tarocco siciliano) aggiungendo o togliendo qualche carta, non è plausibile ipotizzare che una versione originaria proveniente da Firenze con, diciamo, otto carte trionfali si sia potuta trasformare dovunque nella medesima serie di ventidue carte trionfali con le stesse aggiunte, e negli stessi tempi, di ulteriori gruppetti di carte. Ma se si accetta, come appare logico, che queste carte non si sarebbero potute trasformare contemporaneamente nello stesso modo nei vari luoghi, la ricchezza di varianti locali avrebbe reso estremamente difficile il loro commercio, che sappiamo invece attivo anche a grande distanza. (Si dovrebbe QUINDI concludere che i primi trionfi fiorentini avevano già tutte le ventidue carte aggiuntive dei tarocchi.)

#

# 1 - INTRODUCTION

The topic of the initial appearance of Trionfi in Florence in 1440 is puzzling. As for the presence in Florence of a tarot-like triumphal sequence of twenty-two or twenty-one images in the initial 15th century, I have searched it and its origin for many years already, without any significant result. (1)

It is very hard for me to admit that the designer of the additional cards of Trionfi had limited himself to introduce his original idea in a pack of playing cards, instead of compiling a poem, a sermon, any other literary work, and also, on the other hand, without building on an already existing such item, or using another sequence of images of the same kind.

In my opinion, the direction must be from any such work to the cards, and not vice versa. In other words, I believe that our problem is not that of interpreting, in a plausible way, the tarot sequence as it is, but to deduce instead the same sequence from known texts or collections of images, already existing when the Trionfi cards were first introduced.

I could not find yet any convincing solution to this problem. Therefore, let me try now to search in the other direction; namely, to connect with the known flourishing in Florence of triumphal patterns the first card pack described, in which triumphal cards were actually inserted, Marziano’s pack.

Here both items are real, and not just speculative: Marziano’s text we can read even now, about triumphal motives used by the Florentine artists we do have various documents. What is speculative below is the suggestion that the two items and the corresponding events could be connected.

## Marziano, Filippo Maria, and Michelino

Some years ago, I could show that the pack of special playing cards wanted by Filippo Maria Visconti, described in detail by Marziano da Tortona, and painted by Michelino da Besozzo, was one and only one pack of special cards. (2)

The actual pack with the cards painted by Michelino has been lost, so that we do not have to deal either with it or its author. The contribution of Filippo Maria is highly uncertain: actually, he could just have supplied the initial suggestion for the whole work, or his participation could have been restricted in welcoming Marziano’s own innovative project.

In conclusion, our task is in understanding as far as possible the contribution by Marziano, the best candidate for having acted as the central character in that event.

## 1.2 − Recent progress

When I wrote my first article on this topic, (2) I did it in a very synthetic way, to the point that about ten years afterwards I considered useful to add a second note. (3) I did not write anything else about it later on, apart from small quotations. In the meantime, much work has been done on the subject, especially owing to Lothar Teikemeier and Ross Sinclair Caldwell. (4)

The corresponding discussions lasted for months and years in the web (including the Tarot History Forum), getting other experts involved up to the present day. In particular, the latter author has expanded my description of the documents up to provide readers with a full transcription and translation. (5)

Since the first information that I provided on the topic, the situation has thus changed, and the discussion has much increased, both in depth and extension. I don’t feel it necessary to review all the more recent conquests, which are known to interested people and more or less easy to retrieve in the web. (4)

## 1.3 − A local exhibition

There is however one contribution that is less known and seems to me worth mentioning. In 1982 an exhibition was organised in Tortona, the home town of Marziano, in order to honour him and his works. Local experts contributed to a booklet celebrating the event. (6)

In such instances, it often happens that new information on the life and works of a given personage is provided, deriving from local sources, private and public libraries, where documents are kept, hardly available elsewhere.

In this particular case, my impression is that no significant news has been communicated. It has been a reasonable choice that of showing modern tarots in the exhibition, with the aim to provide a hint for visualising Marziano’s pack. This adds nothing to our knowledge of the topic. Regrettably, also the accompanying text does not produce a significant progress in our knowledge.

This may be taken as a further confirmation of an idea that was already plausible: Marziano’s work was not derived from any local culture or habit of his region of birth and first education. This is one of the points that I intend to discuss in the following.

# 2. discussion

I still remember clearly enough that, when I finished my first study, I was left with several doubts. Now, some of them still appear to me as unsolved, as discussed below.

## 2.1 – Date

After examining the possible years for Marziano’s work, I concluded that they could be limited to 1414-18, because later on Marziano was not only older, but also probably sicker, in his last years. The exact date of his death is unknown, probably about 1425 − only in 1423 we know that he was still alive.

My proposal has not been accepted. In the web pages of trionfi.com a date of 1424-25 is preferred. This is based on the familiar situation of Filippo Maria, who seemingly could better wish a new pack of playing cards at that time, while in love with Agnese del Maino and close to the birth of their daughter Bianca Maria. Another, and seemingly decisive, argument for postponing the range of plausible years has been found in the fact that only since 1418 was Michelino present in Milan.

This of my doubts should thus be considered as solved. I am however not fully convinced and feel the question must be further studied; in any case, its relevance is not so big, because the difference in time is of a few years, and has to be compared with the greater interval between this date and that of the first Trionfi pack appearing with its name – at present known as 1440. (7)



**Figure 1 – Front cover of the 1982 booklet from Tortona.**

## 2.2 – Structure

In Marziano’s booklet we find sixteen triumphal cards mentioned, four kings, and nothing else explicitly. The minimum possible composition of a card pack of just these twenty cards appears hardly compatible with the sense of the description. In particular, four different suits are referred to, which cannot reasonably be formed by just their kings, the only court cards mentioned. It remains thus to figure out how many were the pip cards in the four suits, if there were further court cards, and, in case, how many of them were present below the kings.

The solution that we read in trionfi.com (4) is that we are in front of a 60-card pack, with pips numbered 1 to 10 and only the four kings and the sixteen triumphs. I have also seen a rather curious interpretation, in which the four new triumphal cards corresponding to each suit have been inserted between the pip cards and their kings, in a very similar way, if not identical, in comparison to ordinary court cards.

Here too, I am not convinced that this possible reconstruction is the most convincing one, but have as yet no reliable improvement to suggest.

## 2.3 − Copies

What Jacopo Antonio Marcello (1399-1465) had sent in 1449 were two packs of cards, both lost now, and two distinct texts: the original Marziano’s work, and his long letter to Queen Isabella (1400-1453), Duchess of Lorraine, reporting the circumstances of the finding, and so on. The two mentioned works could be dated ca.1420 and 1449, respectively.

What we find is a different situation. Marziano’s work had been copied and this text cannot correspond to his original writing. Moreover, both independent parts, Marziano’s and Marcello’s, had been copied here by the same hand. In other words, not only Michelino’s pack has been lost, but also both originals of Marziano’s and Marcello’s works have similarly been lost. What remains is one copy of them, made later on, for Queen Isabella, or for anybody else.

The existence of this copy may be taken as a proof of some fortune acquired by these texts, in addition to their appreciation by the Queen.

## 2.4 − Figures

In my first article, I wrote the following statement on this matter. “Maybe the most useful indications derive from the very description of the traditional way in which these gods were portrayed, generally to be found near the end of each chapter.”

This is a fundamental point (or better, two points, see below) that has induced me to further reflect on the whole subject. We have sixteen gods of the Roman tradition; at Marziano’s time, their meaning could obviously not be the same as in the classical times − the ancient gods were those who people worshipped before the success of Christianity.

Now, it had become evident for anybody, that these ancient gods had not enjoyed a real existence, but had just been invented and cultivated by the priests, millenniums earlier on. There were no reasons for reviving any belief in them; they had only to be considered for educational aims, to begin with achieving a better understanding the ancient literatures and art objects.

In reading Marziano’s book, the situation becomes clear. His task is to select the most important of the pagan gods and to describe who they were, which had been the “speciality” of each of them, and so on. Just by studying these few pages, one becomes familiar with that environment, mostly forgotten at the time.

For some interesting contribution to the discussion of this selection of the gods, and especially the insertion of an extraneous figure among them, as Daphne may appear, let me refer to Lothar Teikemeir’s notes in trionfi.com, (4) and the tarot-history forums.

The discussion on the description of the gods could finish here, but there are further points that are important too. The information provided by Marziano on the aspect of the gods is much more complete and detailed than strictly required from the previous point of view. The iconographical part of his descriptions actually is not predominant, but is nevertheless fundamental.

Apparently, Marziano intends to teach his readers not only who these gods were and which were their characteristics. At the same time, he intends to teach any artist how he should properly carve or paint each and every of these gods.

It is thus not so tragic that we have lost Michelino’s pack: it could not be too different from the indications provided by Marziano, with enough detail.

## 2.5 – Deification

Marziano speaks of a deification of his gods. This point had escaped my reflections, and has been brought to my attention by Ross Sinclair Caldwell. Actually, if you have a god, there is no evident reason to deify him. On the other hand, if you have a hero, as Hercules, then it is reasonable to officiate some kind of sacred ceremony, such that he was a human hero before it, and became a god or a demigod later on.

Following the teachings of the Roman church, one is not familiar with any deification – this sounds rather as a dangerous heresy. Nevertheless, it is precisely in this widespread religion that important ceremonies exist in which particular believers are changed in their status, during their afterlife, and more than once; there are different degrees in their career, with the two highest being to enter the Blessed, and then the Saint stages.

The ancient gods were almost forgotten in the time of interest here, so that they needed a kind of ceremony to revive their images, even if not of course their cult. We thus assist here to a kind of triumphal ceremony, in which the gods themselves represent the triumphal subjects.

In this case, we are fortunate to have both the indication of the sixteen images selected and the idea of a deification making their triumphal nature clear. This will have repercussions in actual practice, with their use by players as special cards with the function of trumps. Regrettably, I could yet find no such correspondence for the tarot sequence, and remain somewhat puzzled by the relation between trumps, triumphs, and tarots. (8)

## 2.6 − Sources

The previous discussion may become a guideline to search for Marziano’s sources. The selection itself of the gods is a first essential point for finding a confirmation among writers who had previously dealt with the same topic. The problem is that the sources to find should match various aspects, as follows.

1) adding any triumphal card to the playing cards;

2) selecting precisely those sixteen gods;

3) describing for those gods the inventions they forwarded to the humankind;

4) applying the idea of deification;

5) describing exactly how these personages must be painted.

## 2.7 − A Florentine provocation

A special feature that yet has no sound basis is whether any or all of the mentioned sources to search can be connected with the Florentine environment and culture; namely, the place where the first known Trionfi flourished in 1440.

One can be reasonably certain that Marziano could not derive his invention from the local culture of his place of birth. This was certainly the fruit of his studies. Now, we know that he studied in an unusual high number of Italian universities. It appears as a logical conclusion that he moved from a university to the following one, in order to increase his knowledge, to find places with a different culture, possibly at a higher level of teaching and learning.

It is certain that his last place of learning had been Florence, where he graduated. What at the time made Florence the most cultivated town in Italy was not however the local university. There one could find professors at the same level and in almost the same matters as in other towns. Much more stimulating was the Florentine cultural environment outside of the university; this did not have a comparable equivalence in any other town.

My thesis is that Marziano was inspired by several aspects of the Florentine culture and thus we have to place there the origin itself of the special card pack, reportedly described by Marziano in Milan.

As for any other thesis, mine has to be proved, and here is the difficult part of the discussion, which I am only able to outline in a schematic way. I have leafed through several manuscripts kept in the main Florentine libraries. Most of them are undated and it is not sure if they could be written earlier than the dates involved here, about 1420 or 1440.

As it had occurred for the 22-card tarot sequence, I was not able to discover any sequence of exactly the same sixteen gods selected by Marziano, in any of the manuscripts examined. Probably it is possible to find some text, in which all of these gods are present, belonging however to a longer sequence.

What has surprised me more than anything else in this comparison has been the observation that the second point discussed above, the description of the way in which these gods have to be figured, was already present in the literature of the time. I have particularly in mind an undated manuscript of the Biblioteca Riccardiana, (9) but am confident that this was not an isolated case.

This is not surprising too much. If the question how to properly paint a historical personage could be asked everywhere, in any Italian town, it was in Florence that more artists had to answer that question, and especially in those years.

## 2.8 – Possible sequels

Obviously, the main problem is the previous one, where Marziano’s compilation could come from. However, the problem of reconstructing the following events may be important as well. I have purposely written “may be” and not “is”, because we have to take into account the possibility that Marziano’s pack was a singular case, without any previous or following similar item.

It is not really necessary to assume that there was a kind of evolution of different models, up to the final tarot pack. In other words, we can easily suppose that nothing of this kind existed between the appearance in Milan of Marziano’s pack and the first records of Trionfi, now corresponding to Florence 1440.

If we assume that the tarot pack was born in Florence (or elsewhere) a few years before 1440, without any previous change of its typical features, the importance of Marziano’s pack is greatly reduced − it was just an isolated experiment.

The alternative hypothesis is that there did exist intermediate packs between Marziano’s and tarot. This might induce us also to believe that the Trionfi cards of the 1440s could be somewhat different from tarot, and that the known tarot triumphal sequence was only introduced and accepted later on.

This process would have involved the subsequent insertion of other groups of cards in the pack up to reach a completely different sequence, whose source, once again, has still to be found. For my part, I am not able to envisage any step-by-step transition from Marziano’s triumphs to the tarot sequence.

# CONCLUSION

Some reflections have been outlined on Marziano’s special pack of playing cards. The possibility has been indicated that the underlying idea was derived from the Florentine culture of the time. For Marziano’s pack, further findings are required to select the best possible explanation, both for its sources and, if any, its followers. This task is interwoven with that (similarly yet unaccomplished) of finding the sources of the tarot sequence, and in ascertaining whether it could be introduced step-by-step, with a possible partial contribution of Marziano’s work.

## NOTES

(1) <http://trionfi.com/search-tarot-sources>

(2) *The Playing-Card*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1 and 2, (1989) 28-38.

(3) *The Playing-Card*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 3 (1999) 144-151.

(4) <http://trionfi.com/0/b/>

(5) *The Playing-Card*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1 (2004) 50-55 and No. 2 (2004) 111-126.

(6) *Marziano da Tortona e i tarocchi : Tortona 30 ottobre-14 novembre 1982* [Tortona 1982] 40 pp.

(7) <http://forum.tarothistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=773>

(8) <http://trionfi.com/trumps-trionfi-tarots>

(9) BRF, MS 805.