## 1433: FLORENCE - DIRITTA AND PILUCCHINO BEFORE THE COURT

Franco Pratesi – 11.12.2011

## Diritta − the game

Diritta was one of the first card games documented in Florence. The word simply means that the game was played in a “direct” way, and another game, with various names, was often associated with it: Torta, or Vinciperdi, orRitrosa. The latter game probably was nothing else than the former game itself, played however to avoid taking cards or points instead of collecting them. To play in a direct way was mentioned for various games, and sometimes also attributed to the game of Triumphs. It is thus unclear whether, and when, this attribute could either be described as a typical way of playing these games, or rather that it was used to indicate a specific card game, as apparently occurred in Florence.

To my knowledge, the first time that we read of a game “directly” played was in 1420 in Milan. ([[1]](#endnote-1)) The attribute is here expressed in Latin: *secundum antiquum et rectum modum*, according to the ancient and direct manner. Contrary to the following cases, in which we have just the name of the game, without any further indication, here some detail is added: one puts his own cards onto the table saying for each of them its true value and nothing else; if one plays for instance the Jack of Swords, one has to say Swords and Jack (and plausibly to use this card following the established order of the cards). It is evident that this information does not explain a lot of the actual rules of the game. It seems however that some new games had been recently introduced in which the values of the cards were instead more or less upset or reversed – at least a part of the cards could be played without conforming to their ostensible value.

Was this the same game that we often find quoted in Florence? I have some doubts about it. What I feel certain is that at least in Florence the game of Diritta was a traditional game, the first and the oldest to have been allowed − together with its companion, Vinciperdi – by the laws of the Florentine commune and of the neighbouring ones.

I have studied the appearance of these games. Up to now, I have found several early dates and corresponding places, in which Diritta has been documented. I feel that the following list taken from the journal *The Playing-Card* (TPC) is not complete, but may be useful to recognise the early spread of the game: 1436 Lucca; ([[2]](#endnote-2)) 1437 Borgo S. Lorenzo; ([[3]](#endnote-3)) 1445 Sesto Fiorentino;([[4]](#endnote-4)) 1448 Calenzano; ([[5]](#endnote-5)) 1450 Florence; ([[6]](#endnote-6)) 1450 Gambassi; ([[7]](#endnote-7)) 1459 Volterra. ([[8]](#endnote-8)) The first dates mentioned are somewhat earlier than the first documents on Trionfo, but the last ones correspond to a time, in which Trionfo had become a valid challenger and seemingly the first offspring of Diritta.

I know that with Naibi it was possible to play further games, and especially gambling games of a substantially different character with respect to Diritta. Some of these gambling games, such as Condannata and Terzae quarta, are mentioned earlier than Diritta itself; however, these gambling systems could have been introduced instantly − by adapting the rules of one or another of the ancient dice games to the new playing cards − whereas when we find Diritta mentioned it appears as a traditional well-established card game, and I even suppose that it was THE game that arrived here together with the playing cards. ([[9]](#endnote-9))

## Diritta − the trial

After a long introduction, we are now ready to enter into the court. For most verdicts of this time in Florence, only some scattered documents are kept in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), in the section *Giudice degli Appelli e nullità*, which I studied long ago, ([[10]](#endnote-10)) and has also been studied at an academic level. ([[11]](#endnote-11))

The judges, “Conservatori delle leggi” in this case, ([[12]](#endnote-12)) have to consider both the report available and to hear the objections of the indicted, before giving their verdict. The report for charges of gambling and blasphemy was then possible in an anonymous way. Several special boxes (*tambura*) had been located in a few places of the town, especially near the main churches, and anybody could post his report into them. In these years, it was possible for the informer to claim a part of the fine (usually one fourth; in case he didn’t sign his report, he could specify a way to be recognized when applying for his amount.)

In this verdict, the anonymous report is more or less verbatim copied, as follows. *Dinanzi a voi Conservadori delle leggi e buoni costumi come questo dì 22 di marzo manifestovi come io vidi giucare a giuoco di carte cioè alla diritta Federigo di Stefano speziale a San Nicholo e Bruogio di Antonio di Ser Manno sta a San Miniato a Monte e stano presso a vedere giucare al detto giuoco Atterrito di Stefano Ciucci.*

We find here two pioneering card players: Federigo di Stefano and Bruogio d’Antonio. Together with them we also find the name of a kibitzer: Atterrito di Stefano Ciucci. It is not so important who they were, but what they were doing.

What we catch a glimpse of are two friends while playing cards with a third friend observing their game; nobody else. There is no hint to a group of gamblers, as those who were found in the same year while playing and blaspheming, typically at Logge Buondelmonti, in Piazza Madonna, or near the Porta di San Pietro Gattolini.

The place is not mentioned, but San Nicolò and San Miniato are both in the SE part of Florence that now is better known to tourists thanks to Piazzale Michelangelo, with the corresponding view… and parking area.

Also the way in which the game is mentioned is of some interest: the players were playing a card game, namely Diritta. It is not absolutely certain, but this statement may even be interpreted as if a card game played in these conditions could not be different from Diritta.

Let us come back to the trial. The report had been posted in March and the box had been opened on 24 April; now, still in April 1433, the judges examine the three persons indicted and ultimately find all of them not guilty.

This verdict is easy to understand, and for more than one reason. No witness was called upon and the players could thus maintain that they had not played at all. All the three most feared aspects of card playing were clearly absent here: plausibly, no great money was staked; no blasphemy had been reported; no treacherous gathering of many persons had occurred.

In particular, I am convinced that, at least in part, the merit of this verdict must be traced back to the specific game of Diritta, not one of the various gambling games that could be played with naibi, but the most popular card game of the time, which could be played for a modest amount of money, or no money at all.

Another important information that we obtain on the game is that it could be played by two persons. This does not exclude that the game could also be played by two couples of players or among four individual players (as it occurred for several popular games later on), but that it could be played by two individual players is now certain, and this fact is ascertained already when we find this game quoted in Florence for the first time.

At the time, Diritta was not yet formally allowed, but in a few years it was precisely the game that officially emerged as an exception in the lists of games prohibited by the law.

## Pilucchino − the game

This section deals with the ancient card game of Pilucchino. First of all, we have to discuss ~~its~~ the name itself. This Italian unusual name can certainly be associated with the verb “piluccare”, not very usual either. To explain its meaning, we have to enter into a vineyard. It is late in the summer and the bunches are ripe. You wish to cut a bunch and eat it, but there is an alternative way: instead of cutting the whole bunch of grapes, you just take only one or two grapes from many bunches.

This is how I would have explained the meaning of this verb, but I have then found that this personal idea is not very original. Even my English Zanichelli dictionary reports, for piluccare: to pick (grapes from the bunch); and the parenthesis is not mine, it is in the dictionary! Obviously, the meaning can be extended from eating grapes to eating sweets, for instance, and may even lose its association with an eating process.

Now we have just to substitute something in the example above: instead of picking grapes from the bunch we actually have to pick cards from the pack. Unfortunately, I feel that this can be done in more than one way.

To obtain a version that is convincing (to me), I have to reflect on the ways in which we used to pick cards while playing our popular games. I understand that something could have changed from the 15th century to the time of my early years, but something (maybe even more than that) has also changed from those years up to now.

In the popular game of Scopa, nobody picked cards from the pack – they were dealt in subsequent batches of three at a time. In the game of Briscola, after the first deal of three cards, everybody picked one card at his turn after playing every hand. In the game of Tressette, the cards dealt at the beginning were no less than ten: the situation was different in case we played in two or in four. When four played, all the forty cards were dealt at the beginning. When two played, after the first deal of ten cards, everybody picked one card from the pack after every hand, until some remained on the table.

I apologise for having reminded in some detail the current ways of playing that were once used in Florence (and not only in Florence, and not only in the far times of my youth). This may be useful however to convey the possible interpretation of the same game (as Tressette above), which could be played either with subsequent deals, or by picking cards from the table, according to the various situations in which the game was played.

What may be my conclusion from the discussion above is that the introduction of the new name of Pilucchino among the various names of the early card games could certainly correspond to a new game, but could also correspond, instead, to a game already known and already played with different deals of the cards.

I have to admit that the name that I like the most for the early Florentine card games is just Gioco dei naibi. In the absence of further information I am inclined to trace back to this individual game a lot of names of card games that we find mentioned: Diritta, Torta, Vinciperdi, Ritrosa, and now Pilucchino too. If you think that these various names are not enough, I can add Pizzica, documented a few year later on, with supposedly the same meaning as Pilucchino. Now we are ready to search the oldest mention of Pilucchino.

## Pilucchino − the trial

In my recent search in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, in the same book in which I found the interesting trial for Diritta players, discussed above, I found another trial, again before the Conservatori delle leggi, ([[13]](#endnote-13)) which provides us with the first known mention of Pilucchino.

*Nella via dei Servi colle carte a pilucchino giuocò addì 17 di maggio 1433 Giovanni di Pasquale cassiere in Mercato Nuovo, Matteo di Luca della Ancisa sta a San Pier Maggiore. … Nel corso dei Tintori alle carte a pilucchino giuocò detto dì Atterrito di Stefano Ciucci, Piero di Donnino dipintore tra forgerinai, Giovanni barbiere agli Alberti.*

In the same page, we find two events reported, among others, with the complete date, year, month, and day. There are further cases of games and gambling, but the two mentioned ones have an important point in common: in both of them Pilucchino was played. In the first case, there are two players mentioned, as just two were the players indicted for having played la Diritta. In the second case, there are three players mentioned, but it is not clear if they could play the game together or if the third one was waiting for his turn.

By the way, the first player mentioned in Corso Tintori (as Via dei Servi too, a Florentine street still existing under the same name) is nobody less than the person whom we had found as a kibitzer in the case of the Diritta game, one or two months before.

## Conclusion

Let me conclude this discussion. Of course, my personal interpretation of both Diritta and Pilucchino as simple variations of the same Naibi game may be wrong: further documents may prove that one or both of them had completely different rules. In any case, the two particular trials that we have followed here, with their 1433 date, certainly have provided new and interesting documents for the history of the first Florentine card games.

## Notes

1. *L'As de Trèfle*, N. 51 (1993) 4-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. TPC, Vol. XXIV No. 5 (1996) 134-141. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. TPC, Vol. XVIII No. 4 (1990) 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. TPC, Vol. XVIII No. 4 (1990) 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. TPC, Vol. XVIII No. 4 (1990) 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. TPC, Vol. XIX No. 1 (1990) 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. TPC, Vol. XL No. 3 (2012) 167. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. TPC, Vol. XVIII No. 4 (1990) 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. TPC, Vol. XL No. 3 (2012) 166. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. TPC, Vol. XIX No. 1 (1990) 7-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Andrea Zorzi, *Battagliole e giochi d’azzardo a Firenze…*, in G.Ortalli (Ed.). *Gioco e giustizia nell’Italia di comune*. Viella, Roma 1993, pp. 71-108. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. ASFI, *Giudice degli appelli e nullità*, 77, c. 481. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. ASFI, *Giudice degli appelli e nullità*, 77, c. 489. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)