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## **In Search of Tarot Sources – After Fifteen Years**

### **Introduction**

After some years spent in searching the early spread of playing cards, with particular interest in Naibi and Trionfi in Florence, I wrote an article,<sup>1</sup> in which I tried to examine and discuss the various “theories” that could explain the introduction and the acceptance of the tarot sequence. One of the problems, probably the hardest one, was that the documentary evidence was not enough to reach a definitive reconstruction of the events.

Since then, my research has been devoted to other fields and only now, after a 15-year interval, am I coming back to the study of the early history of cards and card games. After this interruption of my research, I was convinced that many new documents would have been found in the meantime and many new theories suggested for explaining both the old data, which I was already familiar with, and all the new ones, which supposedly had been discovered.

In particular, I know that a huge progress has been done in the last years in the electronic recording of articles and whole books, and in the construction of giant databases. Every sector of our knowledge is rapidly expanding and any retrieval of information is becoming incomparably faster and more far-reaching with respect to the times in which I was actively studying these matters. Despite this huge increase of information and corresponding search tools, I have been surprised by the small progress that has been made, especially for all the documentary evidence.

Of course, some new data have been gathered here and there. In my opinion, the most useful contributions have derived from academic studies of scholars, who were not interested at all in playing cards! I have in mind the great work of Franceschini on the archives of the Este court of Ferrara,<sup>2</sup> and more recently that of Arnold Esch on the registers of the Roman customs.<sup>3</sup>

Now, I feel it is time to update my review,<sup>1</sup> discussing what has changed in the meantime. The main part of this contribution will thus be dedicated to critically analysing recent opinions on the origin of the tarot sequence and looking for alternative proposals. A first version of this article has been inserted in a web page a few months ago.<sup>4</sup> Since then, I could discover many further cases of Trionfi packs traded in Florence in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but all that does not remarkably change the general view here outlined.

Actually, there have been recent publications that update the reports present in older texts. I can quote several books: a history by one of the best Italian experts,<sup>5</sup> a compilation with interesting contributions by various authors,<sup>6</sup> a dissertation by an American researcher,<sup>7</sup> a book mostly based for the early times,

once again, on the plentiful documents of the Este court,<sup>8</sup> and a new suggestion of tarot origin from a particular Indian ancient source (which may even go beyond most of the current Anglo-American stories on the subject).<sup>9</sup>

I am however unable to select the most significant among the countless journal articles that have touched this matter, which has interested many loquacious art historians too. Even less am I able to review the many contributions that have emerged in the web, including links explicitly dedicated to tarot history. A whole book, or more, would be required to complete the task.

It can be stated, as a general observation, that what really has much increased in the meantime is the amount of discussion: early documents are almost the same, but many experts increasingly debate about them.

#### **Four Warnings**

There are no less than four points that I need to add as preliminary warnings. The first point is that one should get ready to find some recurrent sentences; first of all, that a part of the tarot sequence can be explained by one or another example, but not the whole of it.

The second point is vaguer, and concerns the originality of my opinions. Whenever I have consciously based my reasoning on something that had been published already, I never have omitted to quote my sources. It is however possible that my memory has kept no trace of some discussion and my own reflection can be found already outlined in previous texts of somebody else.

Alternatively, it is possible that some ideas can be found in discussions that I have never read – this is especially likely for the several forums in which these questions are recently debated in the web. I have to apologise for my limits in information and understanding; in other words, I have updated my knowledge on this matter, but this has not been possible in a perfectly thorough way.

The third point is easier to acknowledge: after finishing this study, I became aware of the fact that I used Italian sources more than average, and most likely more than they really deserve. In addition to a better familiarity with the language, I suppose this may be explained, at least in part, with the extravagant character of many American-English contributions to the specific topic.

The last point reduces my horizon further: from Italy to Florence. This warning implies that if one is interested in the pleasant aspects connected with a tarot birth in the North-Italian courts, it will be better to read another text. In my opinion, the contribution of Florence was essential. As for innovations, in this sector too, I prefer to think of a path from Florence to the court of Ferrara rather than vice versa.<sup>10</sup>

#### **A Change of Mind**

Before dealing with the argument, let me also mention a personal change of mind. In my past reflection, there was a kind of axiomatic statement: any literary work that could be used as tarot source had to be born, or to have acquired a wide vogue, exactly at the same time – in the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century or



just a few years earlier. Therefore I looked for a while for any work that could satisfy two contrasting conditions: to be well known at that time (so that it could be exploited as a source for the new cards) and to have been practically forgotten thereafter (so that nobody has yet found this poem-to-card correspondence).

In particular, I found at least two such works – unknown to card historians, and little known to literati as well – that had these qualities; they will be mentioned below. Now, I am becoming less rigid with my past conditions and am assuming that also some of the earlier traditions could have been involved. In particular, there are at least two different ancient traditions that should be taken into account.

The first is of course the biblical and catholic tradition, with the authority and teachings of the Roman church, so strong and undisputed in the end of the middle ages (and later on here as well, but this is another question).

The second is the classical Greek and Latin literary tradition. This has however a different correspondence: not so much with the standard tarot sequence, but rather with previous forms of triumphal sequences, as we know, first of all, from Marziano's book.<sup>11</sup>

I am instead not yet ready to accept that other cultures could be involved as sources of the tarot sequence. In particular, I am still convinced that all those schemes that have been connected with tarot were still unknown to the culture of the time: to think of Egypt, Jews, India, gypsies, and other foreign and exotic cultures is at least an anachronism.

Supposing a philosopher who created the tarot sequence on the basis of such extraneous traditions is for me just like supposing that Pico della Mirandola had lived one century before he actually did. I can only agree that he might have been a reasonable candidate as inventor of the tarot sequence, had it not been already introduced earlier on.

## **1. Ancient Traditions**

### **1.1 The Biblical and Catholic Traditions**

Of course one can find within the bible as many "useful" personages and events as one is willing to find; however, as in every other case, the problem is not to find them mentioned here and there, but instead to find them ordered in an adequate sequence in order to match the tarot one.

#### **Jacob's Ladder**

As far as I know, one promising such case has recently been suggested, on the basis of Jacob's ladder.<sup>12</sup> While sleeping in the open air with a stone under his head, Jacob had a dream in which he clearly saw a ladder leading to God. There were angels moving up and down on the ladder, but what is most interesting for us are the ladder's rungs: they may be related to the cards in the tarot sequence.

Frankly speaking, I have not yet been able to see an exact correspondence between these rungs and our cards. How precise is the sequence of the rungs in

the mystical ladder? Similar ladders, considered more or less important, exist for various religions – let us limit our attention to “our” religions, from Jewish to Catholic.

Jacob’s ladder is well known, but differently explained, even if more recent traditions tend to directly equate the ladder with Jesus, the real intermediary between God and us. Let us first read however a description by a Hebraic expert: after all, it is to them that this part of the bible belongs, before any other population.<sup>13</sup> It seems that the rungs of the ladder are only four, described as successive “worlds”: of action, of formation, of creation, of intimacy.

Alternatively, let us read which is the opinion of one of the many evangelic churches: more than the Roman church, they pay attention to possible interpretations of every line of the bible. This description is strange enough: the rungs are not so many, and again not defined with the wanted precision, but here they are double-faced – a direct consequence of the different functions of the ladder when Jesus comes down towards us, or when we mount in the direction of God.<sup>14</sup>

We have in any case to examine how important the Ladder is within the Roman church. I could not find any information in a book proposed for their official teaching, in spite of its 790 pages;<sup>15</sup> this is not too surprising, given that any teaching from the Vatican is commonly based more on their own tradition than on bible reading.

I have thus searched for the *Scala mistica* in the all-embracing Catholic Encyclopaedia, which was published in Florence when I was a school pupil.<sup>16</sup> I was rather surprised to find *Scala mobile*, “sliding wage scale”, seemingly not an outstanding religious subject, exactly where I hoped to read *Scala mistica*.

I am still wondering whether Jacob’s ladder can have a significant part in the Catholic doctrine. Importance apart, my impression has been that the mystical ladder does not have an established sequence of identical and equidistant rungs, as any sound ladder should have. Often, it is as if we had – in the expected place of one rung of the ladder – two, three, or not any of them.

It seems to me again that some correspondence with the tarot sequence can actually be found, but not at all with the wanted precision. What we should find is instead something similar to the catholic *Via Crucis*. I write similar and not identical because *Via Crucis* itself is too late and too limited to be used as a direct source for the tarot sequence.

Which would then its advantage be? It not only tells a story, it so does in a succession of 14 particular illustrations. Somebody adds a 15<sup>th</sup> image, and different versions exist as well, but in limited cases, just as for the tarot sequence.

I have recently seen in a forum in the web exactly a set of images that have been put into correspondence with the tarot sequence, the *15 Signs of the Last Judgment*.<sup>17</sup> These fifteen images have first of all the advantage that they correspond to distinct stages and thus represent a complete set, corresponding to the fifteen signs announcing the arrival of the last judgement. I have thus searched



in several reference books whether this tradition was widely accepted in Florence at the time, but could only find scarce copies of the text and no figure.<sup>18</sup>

### **Climachus' Ladder**

We have to search a religious sequence of the kind mentioned, circulating widely in the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Something I could find, even from some years before. We have just to pass from Jacob's Ladder to that of John Climacus, the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, with the advantage that here the rungs are better defined, and precisely in the number of thirty.

If you search a bibliography for John Climacus, you will find that we have Latin translations of his work from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, that in the same century his book was first printed and then had a few further editions in the following centuries. I have nothing against these data, but I have personally leafed through a thick manuscript of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, compiled in Italian and in a beautiful Florentine handwriting of the time, kept in the Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence (BRF).<sup>19</sup> Of course, this date is early in comparison with the editions that allowed this work to be better known; however, it can belong to a time, in which the tarot sequence was first conceived.

I must confess that what I mostly hoped to find in this manuscript were no less than thirty beautiful miniatures corresponding to the rungs of the ladder. Unfortunately, there is no illustration; nevertheless, this Florentine text has appeared to me interesting enough.

In the following weeks, I continued to search similar manuscripts in the BRF, and found further specimens, written in the same or in the following two centuries – thus indicating the existence of a real tradition about it.<sup>20</sup> Instead of Climachus' Ladder, I also found a Jerome's Ladder, with different rungs, in better agreement with current Roman teachings, with the same number of thirty rungs.)<sup>21</sup>

It is easy to find which were the thirty rungs of the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, which consists of thirty chapters, or rungs.<sup>22</sup> The 30<sup>th</sup> rung has surprised me more than others: where one could expect to find the Holy Trinity, we just find "our" three theological virtues, taken together.

The thirty rungs can be grouped into the following sections: 1–4: Renunciation of the world and obedience to a spiritual father. 5–7: Penitence and affliction as paths to true joy. 8–17: Defeat of vices and acquisition of virtue. 18–26: Avoidance of the traps of asceticism (laziness, pride, mental stagnation). 27–29: Acquisition of *hesychia*, or peace of the soul, of prayer, and of *apatheia* (dispassion or equanimity with respect to afflictions or suffering). 30: concerning the linking together of the supreme trinity among the virtues.<sup>22</sup>

I will not maintain that this could represent the source of the tarot sequence: I only confirm that – if someone finds any useful elements here – this work at least had a certain circulation in Florence at the time.

## 1.2 The Classical Tradition

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the classical tradition began to find again scholars and interested persons. Of course, a real flourishing of these studies only occurred in the following century, together with the appearance of several new translations directly coming from the Greek classics.

Before the appearance of the tarot sequence, some fashion for triumphs occurred in Florence. They certainly had a historical basis in the Latin tradition, but this had at the time a sort of revival, leading among others to triumphal processions and Petrarch's *Trionfi*. Triumphal scenes became an ordinary subject for painters, and somehow entered the world of playing cards too.

On the introduction of *Trionfi* into the manufacturing of playing cards, two early documents have been found recently: 1440, *Naibi a Trionfi* in the Journals of Ser Giusto Giusti (Fig. 1);<sup>23</sup> 1452, *Naibi di Trionfi* in the account books of Florentine silk dealers (Fig. 2).<sup>24</sup> These basic documents have been reproduced here; to note that the quotation of 1440 is shown according to a copy of 1621-22, the only one kept. The direct link of the first *Trionfi* known to *Naibi* is very significant.

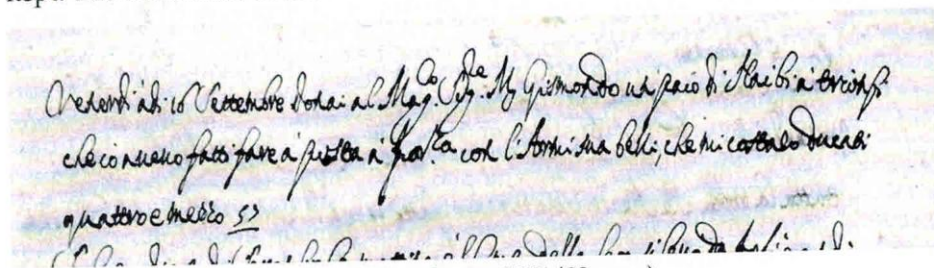


Fig. 1: BNCF, II.II.127, l. 41v, 1440 (but from a 1621/22 copy).

(su concessione del Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali della Repubblica Italiana / Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze)

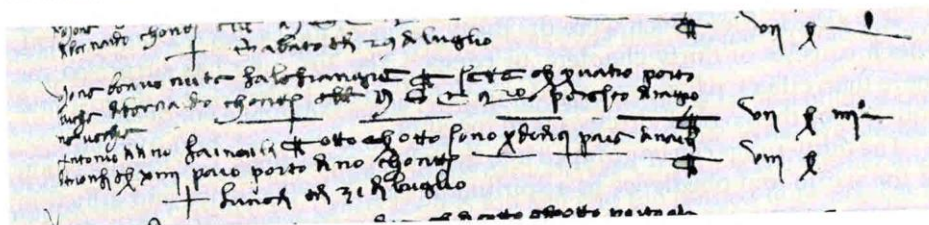


Fig. 2: AOIF, 12793, Uscita C, 1446-1461 (1452) l. 64r.

Probably the main reason to involve the classical culture in our search is however the first pack of *Trionfi* known to us, that of Marziano da Tortona. The personages that we find on its sixteen triumphal cards are precisely gods of the Greek-Roman tradition.

It remains a hard task however to explain how this triumphal series could be transformed into the known tarot sequence, which is the subject of this review. It appears as a new research, that of finding suitable triumphal playing cards



different from the tarot sequence, which is of interest here. Regrettably, in that case the preserved evidence is even less than for tarot.

## **2. The Florentine Socio-cultural Environment**

Now, whenever I investigate the Florentine environment at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, I find no philosophers, poets, or literati inclined to think in the "tarot way". Something of that kind can easily be found later on. For instance, a personage like Lorenzo il Magnifico – together with the exceptional company of his friends – can easily be imagined to be connected with the introduction of the Trionfi game, but it was born earlier than his birth.

### **2.1 Luigi Marsili and his Cell**

As for some early revival of the Latin culture, I have in mind Luigi Marsili (1342-1394). He was an Augustinian cleric in Santo Spirito monastery of Florence.<sup>25</sup> He gathered in his cell a few interested young men, the most skilful offspring of the richest families of Florentine merchants. He had the habit to teach them the main parts of the classical culture, in a time in which this teaching was hampered by the church.

This was clearly an exception with a similar provenance. Luigi Marsili was so successful that his brothers became jealous and the Commune had to make claims to the upper degrees of the Augustinian hierarchy in order that he could go on with his tutoring.

We have to remember that monasteries still were the typical places where almost all of the manuscripts were kept, whichever their contents. All the manuscripts of the monasteries that contained writings different from religious themes were not open to public reading – not even to most brothers themselves.

If the birth of tarot required some revival of the classical culture, the sources were thus few. On the other hand, to clearly indicate a connection of that kind we have the triumphal cards devised by Marziano; there is no need of any catholic subject – the Latin sources are more than enough.

### **2.2 Paradiso degli Alberti**

Another Florentine environment, in which new cultural events took place, is the *Paradiso degli Alberti*.<sup>26</sup> Recently, I commented on their *Palazzo dei Diavoli*,<sup>27</sup> in the opposite direction as for its denomination, and also for its location: both mansions were located outside of the city walls, *Paradiso* to the East (as common for the family estates), *Palazzo dei Diavoli* to the West.

Unfortunately, nothing of that *Paradiso* has survived to our times. On the cultural environment of that place under Antonio degli Alberti (?-before 1428), and the gatherings that occurred there, we have however a useful witness of the time<sup>28</sup>, described and discussed in a comprehensive historical work.<sup>29</sup>

It was still uncommon to gather literati and experts of the fine arts, to begin with music, for conversations of the kind that we better know from a few court environments or some academies of the following times. There were banquets,

dances, recitals, and learned discussions. Apparently, the intellectual occupation at the highest level was the proposal of some question to be discussed: obviously, the most cultivated persons were expected to provide convincing and conclusive answers.

As the name of the Alberti family had a promising sound to my ears, I checked these particular discussions – and found nothing connected with our tarot sequence.

### 2.3 Triumphal Processions

Especially since the times of Moakley's work,<sup>30</sup> a connection has been suggested between the tarot sequence and the traditional arrangement of the participants in a triumphal procession, or similar events, be they of the religious kind or even parts of a carnival festival.

It seems to me that these processions mostly occurred later on, when the tarot pack was already in common use. It was thus possibly the sequence of the triumphal cards to have some influence on the sequence of the triumphal chariots; in that case our task would be changed: to examine the cards, and to deduce plausible structures, elements, and combinations for the processions.

There was no fixed order to be respected in every manifestation. We do not even know what to search: either a kind of average structure of such processions, or just an individual occurrence, which could have been as remarkable, as to be remembered for a while, so that it could inspire a creator of the tarot sequence.

There are diaries of the time (I mean before 1440, the first mention known of Trionfi produced in Florence) that have been kept. One of them<sup>31</sup> has been used for an interesting book on the subject.<sup>32</sup>

The Florentine youth was organised in several companies and any opportunity was welcome for celebrating with collective dances, processions in the richest and amazing costumes, tournaments; several lists were organised as well, of the kind of the well known Palio of nowadays.

I have looked for any hint toward a sequence of the tarot kind before 1440, and found nothing again. As a rule, all participants to tournaments and similar events wore precious and showy dresses, which however were identical for each company. Different were only the objects that were offered as a prize to the winners: they usually were unconventional and precious art objects, but again no link with our tarot sequence.

One might search some analogy in the number of participants. In the occasion of a public dance, they were precisely twenty-two – probably long-awaited by divination fans of nowadays – but we cannot rely on this number, because we find any number of participants here, usually an even number between ten and twenty.



### 3. Possible Literary Sources

Let me begin with our three greatest masters, really three giants in the literature of the time, or of any time, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.

#### 3.1 Dante Alighieri (1265-1321)

Dante – why not? *Divina Commedia* is a masterpiece with so many events and personages that it should not be too difficult to select a series acceptably connected with the tarot sequence. Even if the poem had been written decades before, it was the object by then of many analyses and discussions.

In imagining a ghostlike travel of this kind, we can begin with the soul imprisoned in the deepest parts of hell, and gradually climbing up to the purgatory and then up to the highest heavens. Nobody can state that the numbers and qualities of angels or demons described are not enough. In so thinking, we have remarkably reduced the horizon in which to search, and this may already be considered as a good progress. However, we are again unable to find there an ordered sequence, as we are looking for.

Let me mention nevertheless a recent attempt by Giordano Berti, maybe the most reliable among the Italian authorities on these topics.<sup>33</sup> He has just developed a tarot pack on the basis of Dante's work, providing it with an accompanying book, where you will find all the wanted connections. Of course, it would have been better for us if these connections had been found in the contrary direction, not from the cards now designed to the corresponding Dante's events, but vice versa as an ordered sequence going from Dante into the cards.

#### 3.2 Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374)

The immediate connection between Petrarch and the tarot sequence is through his celebrated *Trionfi* poem. Nothing is nearer to the triumphal sequence, to begin with the identity of the names. The problem here is similar to that found in other cases: the analogy is certain; some cards can be directly compared with the particular triumphs celebrated in the poem. However, this is only true for a part of the cards. Most cards of the tarot sequence cannot be put into connection with the poem.

A recent book<sup>34</sup> may however be worth discussing, which places both Petrarch and Simone Martini at the origin of tarot, in Avignon. In reading this book, I had the impression to read a book of two centuries before; this involves its style as well, with a dialogue form in some parts, which was common in the past. Even more outdated appear some other concepts, to begin with "carta" intended as a playing card, whereas it better denoted a sheet of paper in the corresponding quotations.

As for Naibi, it seems that they were born as an extension of an already existing series of tarot cards. It is expressly stated that "apart from all the suggested forced analogies of this name with the Arab language, we know for certain that it has the meaning of magic or sorcery in Hebrew". No comment.

The origin of tarot would have been connected with Pope John XXII (1249-1334), who was too old and tired to continue to read books, so that several authors were at work in order to provide him with books reduced to pure sequences of images.

If I have not misunderstood the text (I am ready to acknowledge my limited understanding) they thus explain the birth of our tarot sequence just as an extension starting from the six Trionfi celebrated by Petrarch; moreover, they go on extending further the set of the triumphal cards to include also the cards of the four suits.

As a useful result, we obtain that the tarot sequence was already born, even if in a rather secret form, before the death of Simone Martini (1344) and Petrarch (1374). I am always searching to antedate the birth of our Trionfi, but never got so far. Here, I am not able to formulate my conclusive comment in English – let me do it in my mother tongue: *Troppa grazia, Sant'Antonio!*

### 3.3 Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375)

A connection between Boccaccio's works and the tarot sequence has been, or can be, variously suggested. First of all, one may think of his *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, with so rich references to the classical tradition, moreover revisited with allegories introduced by the Christian culture.

However, I have been mostly impressed by two recent contributions to the subject, from a different Boccaccio's work. The first is by Lucia Nadin, a specialist of history and literature, who has dedicated a particular attention to the history of playing cards.

In a book on the literary references to playing cards,<sup>35</sup> she shortly comments on a previous article dealing with Boccaccio's *L'amorosa visione* and tarot.<sup>36</sup> The author reminds us how in that article several figures belonging to Minchiate are referred to as appearing in Boccaccio's work. In particular, Amore, Fortuna, and Carro are mentioned, together with all seven Virtues. Lucia Nadin states that this view appears to be questionable because Boccaccio's text can be dated around the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and thus – when speaking of Minchiate – it is too early (even for me).

Lucia Nadin adds (almost verbatim translated) that "in fact, the remarks by Petrucci should be reversed: it is the entire knowledge of the middle ages, with its continuous typical presence of ethics and allegory that will ultimately settle (with exchanges between the religious and secular cultures) in the iconographical world, into which playing cards are also inserted."<sup>35</sup> As an emblematic example she cites Mantegna's Tarocchi.

I was thus very curious to read Petrucci's contribution, completely new to me. What I have found is something really astonishing, at least for me: I was not prepared to study an interpretation in which the anus is central and recurrent and just a secondary distinction is about which of the two human sex tools is located nearby – written in Italy, by an erudite woman (where erudite is here a mandatory attribute).



What has our tarot sequence to do with these up-to-date considerations? Actually, the personages of our cards are mentioned at the beginning of the article, with the comment that only for Philosophy, at least if interpreted to the letter, no correspondence can be found.

Apart from the "scientific" interpretation of the poem, the contents of Boccaccio's *L'amorosa visione* are very rich in personages and in a couple of cases the subject of the vision can even be considered as exactly the same as in the corresponding tarot cards (for instance, as far as the Wheel of Fortune is concerned). As I said, this occurs just in a few cases, all the rest we have to sort from the countless possible situations, as usual for any similar work with many characters.

### 3.4 Minor Authors of Suitable Texts

I have not found any significant progress in this part of the research. I only had a kind of encouragement<sup>37</sup> to insist in that search. The suggestion was in itself even more precise: not only has one to search for a poem or a book exactly of that time, which could originate the acceptance and subsequent spread of the sequence, but one should also search for a text, in which only three of the four cardinal Virtues are present.

I have to admit that my search here has been a quick one, but I have not found yet any such book or series of images, in vogue at the time in Florence. For different times and places, we actually can find authors, who dealt separately with the three "moral" Virtues as a complete set, and considered Prudence independently.

The two works that I had indicated in my previous review<sup>1</sup> are *Belial*,<sup>38</sup> in which Jesus goes through a trial by the devils, and *Imperiale*<sup>39</sup> with more references to the Latin tradition of triumphs. Both of them satisfied the condition to have been well known at the time and forgotten later on. However, as in many other cases, the correspondence between the triumphal cards and the text of these works was only convincing for a group of the cards, not for the whole sequence.

Another important book previously discussed<sup>1</sup> is the *Liber de Moribus Hominum et Officiis Nobilium* with connections possibly suggested between chess and playing cards. For my part, I have nothing essential to add to my short discussion of the time, which could only be extended with more references and examples. In actual fact, I can mention one new contribution here too: the discussion on a proposal by Lothar Teikemeier, described in [trionfi.com](http://trionfi.com) and in the "tarohistory" forum, which directly connects – for the first time to my knowledge – chessmen with just the triumphal cards.<sup>40</sup>

More candidates could be retrieved if the design of the tarot sequence were dated in the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century or even in the following one – but at the time playing tarots had already become a widely spread tradition through most of the Italian towns. This is not only valid for authors and books, but also for places and personages.

## 4. Figurative Arts and Card Making

### 4.1 Current Images of the Time

For all the figures of the tarot sequence we can find some antecedent as a traditional image of the middle ages, in Italy and elsewhere. It seems that the sole exception is Hermit, whenever represented with the hourglass.<sup>41</sup> It was actually first introduced around 1440 – where? In Florence, of course.

Our problem however, as mentioned many times, is not to compare tarot images with traditional ones, but instead to search a whole series, among the same traditional images, reminding the tarot sequence.

In tarot we can find two kinds of figures, good and bad, angels and devils. There was a typical image or a sequence of images that reminds of this aspect. Indeed, one of the most recurrent illustrations that could be found in most churches, even before entering them, is a traditional image of the life to come. We see some of the personages in a lovely proximity to angels and saints; others (having somewhat less complied with church precepts) punished in the most fanciful ways, among the devils.

This idea is simple and it has been the first one occurring to my mind, while reflecting on this topic. However, it cannot be considered an original idea of mine: several authors have already remarked that one or another of these very religious scenes contained personages that could also be found in the tarot sequence.

What we need in addition to the above mentioned possible comparison is something quantitative, suitable for assisting any player to remind the values of his cards in the correct succession. In any case, we have not yet reached our goal: the hard problem remains how to select precisely the twenty-two figures requested; of course, if we had to select 220 of them, the problem would be more difficult to solve.

Do we find in the tarot sequence a design of a decreasing damnation, or an increasing sanctity? In my opinion, something of this kind can again be found, as an evident pattern, only in some groups of cards, not in the whole sequence.

### 4.2 Amongst Workshops and Gamblers

Just as for a Catholic provenance, another idea that comes to my mind at once is that cardmakers could use as additional images for playing cards some of those that they were precisely producing at the same time. For instance, Antonio di Giovanni di ser Francesco already in 1430 states that his woodblocks were used for producing both Naibi and holy pictures.<sup>42</sup> It is exciting to find in the same workshop two different kinds of images, simple playing cards and figures of a religious kind, a combination not too different from their appearing together in a tarot pack, almost in the same years.

The idea of inserting directly the saints within a card pack had however obvious drawbacks, especially because the same cards were used more for gambling than for playing friendly games. It is not clear for me who could benefit the most from the birth of tarot, cardmakers, players, or somebody else.



One of my old ideas was that it happened with cards the same that had occurred with tables: all table games were forbidden, except the one that was played with all the thirty men placed on the board. This clearly rendered less comfortable for gamblers to play the common dice games on the same boards.

Similarly, the presence of the additional triumphal cards could render card games less easy to play for gambling. With the thicker pack, they could better play a trick-taking game as *Diritta*, early allowed in several places.

However, when we search the meaning of the tarot sequence, our way of thinking is different: we mostly think of a philosopher, a scholar, or a churchman, who designs the new pack, with more attention to teaching or reminding of something than to changing the actual playing conditions.

#### **4.3 A Special Spanish Pack**

A pack that may provide some indication on early triumphs is the Spanish pack described to card experts by Ross Sinclair Caldwell.<sup>43</sup> It is an extraordinary pack from several points of view. First of all the cards are assigned to noble personages, all female. In addition to the 48 cards of the ordinary pack (at least for Spain and some other places), we have here a 49<sup>th</sup> card indicated as emperor. Actually, this card does not correspond to a real emperor, because it represents the Countess of Castañeda, the same lady, whom the whole pack had been dedicated to.

From Florence, we already had news of packs associated with the *Imperatori* name. However, we had never heard of just one of them, supposedly present within the pack; in general, an *Imperatori* pack was mentioned, namely a pack where in addition to queens and kings also emperors, and maybe empresses, were present.

From a document from Ferrara, 1423,<sup>44</sup> we hear of a pack of eight emperors. This quotation is also somewhat ambiguous. These could be eight additional cards to be inserted into an existing pack; for instance, it could be one emperor and one empress for each of the four suits, or more likely it could be a new pack containing eight emperors or personages of a similar highest level, independent of the four suits.

One of the problems with these *Imperatori* packs is that the name is too similar to that of *Kaiserspiel*, known as a game of the early *Karnöffel* family, to be completely independent from it. However, it is known that games of this family were played with the ordinary pack, missing additional cards, but, on the other hand, with some of the normal cards provided with names and meanings, which remind us of characters that we find explicitly painted on some triumphal cards.

Thinking of the production method, the addition of one card could mean the use of three woodblocks instead of two, or a complication in any case. Whichever the detail, in no case could an *Imperatori* pack provided with just one additional card be recognised under the few mentions kept for triumphal cards.

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## 5. Sequence Formed by Groups

### 5.1 A Suggestion by Michael Dummett

We have often found that it was easy to retrieve a source for any individual card of the tarot sequence, whereas it has been hard – indeed, really impossible for me – to find a reliable source for the whole sequence. However, there can be intermediate cases: we can suppose that the tarot sequence derived from assembling, instead of twenty-two individual cards, about four or five groups of five or four cards each, respectively, or even less.

The idea of the tarot sequence having been composed by different groups of cards is not new, but has recently been supported by Michael Hurst,<sup>45</sup> developing previous suggestions by nobody less than Michael Dummett.<sup>46</sup>

Dummett concluded that, apart from the three Virtues – which occupied various positions according to place and time – the other cards of the sequence were practically independent of the particular order adopted and could be divided into three successive groups, bottom, middle, and upper. Initially one finds cards from Bagatto to Papessa (with the suggestion that Papessa could be born as a conversion of Prudenza, the missing cardinal virtue) then a second series connected with conditions of human life, from Amore to Morte, and finally a third series related to celestial and spiritual powers.

We have thus reached a situation in which the tarot sequence can be seen as formed by groups of cards, which are weakly linked between different groups, but strongly linked within each of them.

### 5.2 Mnemonics

Whichever the immediate origin of the tarot sequence, its aim was not intended for divinatory aims, as usual nowadays. The triumphal cards were needed in card games, in which they had the specific role of trumps. Being a set of figures quite different from the common four suits, and with no pip cards, there should have been a system for indicating the increasing power of the cards belonging to the sequence.

Now, let us imagine being in the shoes of the players of those times. How to remember the true succession? We know, for instance, that several short poems were composed, in the course of time, exactly for assisting players in that task. The question could only be solved by adding numbers to the figures, and this was done indeed, in many cases, which however appear to be somewhat later than the initial utilisation of the tarot sequence.

If one has to remember twenty-two items in an exact succession, mistakes are probable. There is however a chance to make the task easier: imagine that instead of having to remember items 1 to 22, one has to remember items grouped as A 1 to 5, B 1 to 5, C 1 to 5, D 1 to 5, E 1 to 2. The progress is great, although the twenty-two items have not diminished.

At this point, it becomes straightforward to apply one of the methods of mnemonics, which, by the way, was a technique already widely employed at



the time. Let us see one of the many options: we associate the twenty-two cards to the rooms of a house with four floors and a top smaller floor. In each floor we have five rooms, and two in the top floor; we have now simply to adjust group A with one item in each room of the ground floor, and similarly in the upper floors, up to the two items in the top floor.

The task is evidently much simplified. Moreover, something is changed in the structure itself of the sequence. It is now essential, as before, to memorise the succession of the individual cards, but this is now only needed within the groups. There is no longer the prerequisite that the highest card of a group has an evident link with the lowest card of the upper one. The division into groups indicated can be varied in order to better fit the actual groups of the sequence: our house can be somewhat dissimilar from floor to floor, if useful.

It seems to me that the duty for the designer of the sequence becomes thus easier. It is no longer necessary to think of a philosopher with a superior mind, capable of finding subtle links between subjects, essentially invisible to any layman. Several groups of images somewhat related within each group, but mostly independent between successive groups, can be devised even by a... cardmaker, if useful for his job.

### **5.3 Mantegna's Tarocchi and Number 7**

Among others, two of the major Italian experts<sup>5,35</sup> have put the accent on the evident relation of the tarot sequence with Mantegna's Tarocchi. We often read that they were neither Mantegna's nor Tarocchi, and this is usually the only comment that we find in incidental quotations. Now, they can be dated around 1465, and it is thus well established that they were made in a time when the tarot pack was already a rather common playing tool. Apparently, it is thus impossible to use Mantegna's Tarocchi in order to explain the earlier tarot sequence.

As a matter of fact, both Italian authors mentioned are not suggesting that the tarot sequence was derived by trimming down those fifty figures, but that both sequences grew in the same milieu. Clearly, if any meaning exists for the sequence, this is much more evident in Mantegna's Tarocchi: in the tarot sequence the division into homogeneous groups can be controversial, but seems to belong to a rather similar scheme.

If we think in terms of the mentioned suggestion of the great Michael Dummett, of three consecutive parts, we may arrive at three groups of seven cards, with Matto having been added later on. While the ten figures in the five groups of Mantegna's Tarocchi are easy to distinguish, for tarot the situation is somewhat more confuse. Several authors – of books too<sup>5,34</sup> – are however ready to remind us of the weight of number seven in the culture of the time: seven virtues, seven planets, seven days of the week, seven arts, seven stages of our life, and so on.

This aspect is particularly emphasized in the book by Fusi and Pio,<sup>34</sup> who consequently notice that the number of cards in the whole tarot pack, before the introduction of the Matto, is therefore nothing other than seven by eleven.

### 5.3 An Additional Comment

The question of the origin of the tarot sequence is actually not yet solved when we pass from the task of explaining the sequence of twenty-two cards to the task of explaining three groups of seven cards – even once ascertained (not yet for me) that they can be convincingly divided in such a way.

There are further problems: is it possible that the various groups were added to the Naibi packs in successive times? If we think in terms of groups of seven cards, this is not the best way to increase the number of cards in any pack for any game – any prime number is rather to avoid than to accept. Much easier would have been the task if the groups were formed by four or eight cards.

The suggestion of consecutive additions of groups of cards has another drawback. Let us assume that we had (in Florence, I mean, but anywhere else it would be the same) a centre of production and export. Once the purchasers were accustomed to play with a given pack, it was hardly believable that they were inclined to adopt various adjusted versions later on, with new groups added, and exactly the same new groups in every place of destination. We have to remember that card players are usually very conservative with their playing sets!

However, if we have various groups and we assume that they were inserted together into the new pack, then there is no longer a big difference between the sequence as a whole, and the same sequence as formed by more groups.

The question is somewhat solved if we are satisfied with a weak solution. There is no strict meaning in the sequence; there is no exact literary or artistic source for it; there is only a fertile ground in which groups of cards could be conceived as an illustration of the human situation in the society, confronted with religious themes and especially with the limited time of life, after which what really becomes important (with devils possibly to avoid) is to climb through the celestial bodies up to the Last Judgment.

In my opinion, the same conclusion could simply have been reached by observing the twenty-two cards, if only one were naive enough.

## 6. The Florentine Milieu around the Literary and Artistic Cultures

After reviewing the cultural, literary, and artistic environments, it remains to focus our attention on further aspects of everyday life in Florence at the time. People were then very active in several enterprises – they were not only building the *Cupola del Duomo* (which by the way was not a minor achievement).

### 6.1 Manufacturing

What could be at the origin of the tarot sequence in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century? One can think of individuals – a poet, a philosopher, a painter, a cardmaker – but the problem is not only to find the discoverer, one has also to explain the success of the idea itself. Whoever might have designed the sequence, he should have had many followers, and an easy access to artistic manufacturing.



Let us imagine that the tarot designer was a hermit. This hypothesis is hardly believable, but not wholly impossible. What is mostly wrong with it? It is the success of the idea, its early spread through most Italian towns. In that case, we have to find not only the first origin, but also a second place, where the new pack could have been produced in large quantities and exported here and there.

If anybody continues to think of Ferrara, I suppose this at most could represent the first point, if anybody likes it better, but not the second. Even for Milan I have serious doubts. If not for the first point above, at least for the second, I cannot avoid imagining that it was located in Florence.

Indeed, what was needed was a whole set of conditions, difficult to find together: first of all, near a developed literary culture (Florence had the highest); a high-level manufacturing facility was required as well. From these points of view, Florence was at the time the most developed town in Italy.

My opinions have recently been confirmed by a lot of documents<sup>47</sup> that attest how Florence was the main source for producing and exporting playing cards. Even the oldest reference to Trionfi has recently changed from 1442 in Ferrara to 1440 in Florence.<sup>23</sup> By then, another town in which one could order a Trionfi pack did not exist yet, as far as we know.

## **6.2 Commerce**

I hope that even those, who still believe that a hermit (or better a lonely and secluded philosopher) could have designed the tarot sequence, can agree with my suggestion that the cultural and manufacturing environment of Florence was the best source for any further spread of the new packs.

There is an additional reason for that suggestion. The Florentine merchants had established rock-solid trade channels, already for centuries. Only in Venice a greater international market existed at the time, but this supremacy did not yet exist for manufacturing, both as amount and artistic level of the products.

In terms of value, the most precious good was... money, and Florentine bankers made their trades with all European countries, kings and courts included. Then we find wool and silk products, and the top-quality Florentine merchandise was anywhere longed-for. At the time, trade of Florentine art objects became common too.

Along the established channels it was easy to associate the trade of playing cards with that of the other goods. Even if we limit our attention to the very special trade of playing cards, we find more documents of card exports from Florence than from any other Italian town.<sup>47</sup> If a competition existed, this could be based in South Germany – and, but only for later times, in Bologna or Venice.

## **6.3 Tarot Spread**

If we observe the amount of goods traded at the time, and the many destinations for their export, it is impossible to believe to a rather slow spread of the new tarot packs, as it was outlined in the current histories, even by the

great Michael Dummett (except for the rapid transmission from Milan to Ferrara or vice versa).

Up to now, we have had to rely on many discussions on a very few documents, not to mention the even fewer playing cards kept from those times. It has been inaccurate to base all the conclusions to the sole documents discovered.

As soon as new documents appear, it becomes evident that we have to change the traditional view of the spread of the new tarot cards, into a more reasonable one. For instance, if we have no useful document from Bologna and Venice up to now, this is far from proving that they did not play a role in the early diffusion of tarot. (From Bologna, it is easy to imagine a prompt scattering towards the places of origin of the many students – in Venice they had a pre-eminent international market.)

On their arrival into Rome, and even into Sicily, we have now more reasonable dates.<sup>47</sup> For these and similar destinations there is still way for progress. The Florentine trade was also very active toward several foreign countries – in our field I think for instance of Lisbon, where the Florentine pattern was early adopted by the Portuguese.

As soon as we are able to place the trade of playing cards within the general context of the trade of Florentine goods, through the established channels used by the local merchants, a rapid diffusion of the new pack to any connected place becomes increasingly likely.

## **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, my conclusion here cannot be a conclusive one. I have continued my research on plausible sources for the tarot sequence and critically analysed several suggestions, in addition to those that I already had examined years ago.<sup>1</sup>

My impression is that finding the cultural environment favourable for the introduction of the tarot sequence remains a hard task, even though my preference still points to the extraordinary Florentine cultural environment.

Let me moreover remind the pre-eminent level of the Florentine manufacturing and trade resources at the time. As a matter of fact, our task is not, or not only, to find an isolated philosopher, who could design the tarot sequence, but to understand how it could obtain the wide success that it actually enjoyed.

The recent discovery of further documents<sup>47</sup> compels us to change the traditional view of a game that first found some vogue in two North-Italian court environments and then “descended” towards the main Italian towns in the course of decades, if not centuries. A path of this kind is only reasonable, in so far as we base our reflections just on the few cards and documents that are known to us.

We should not confound the frequency of documents discovered with the frequency of card trades at the time. It is obvious that most documents come from the courts, instead of laymen. The documents that could really assist us



are the account books of the Florentine cardmakers before the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century; unfortunately, I could detect none of them.

Now, I would be tempted to give up again this whole research, and resume it only after another fifteen years, but I fear this will be too late for any useful contribution of mine.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Franco Pratesi, *The Playing-card*, Vol. 37 (1998) No. 2, 64-68 and No. 3, 111-116.
- <sup>2</sup> Adriano Franceschini, *Artisti a Ferrara in età umanistica e rinascimentale*. Vol. 1. Roma-Ferrara 1993.
- <sup>3</sup> Arnold Esch, *Economia, cultura materiale ed arte nella Roma del Rinascimento*. Roma 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> <http://trionfi.com/search-tarot-sources>
- <sup>5</sup> Giordano Berti, *Storia dei tarocchi*. Mondadori, Milano 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> G. Berti, A. Vitali (a cura di) *I Tarocchi : Arte e magia*. Le Tarot, Faenza 2006. (presented to me by Andrea Vitali).
- <sup>7</sup> Christina Olsen, *Carte da trionfi, the development of tarot in fifteenth-century Italy*. Diss. Univ. of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 1994.
- <sup>8</sup> Veber Gulinelli, *Delle carte da gioco italiane, storia e diletto*. APM, Carpi 2011.
- <sup>9</sup> Gerardo Lonardoni, *La via del sacro : I simboli dei Tarocchi fra Oriente ed Occidente*. Martina, Bologna 2008. (presented to me by Andrea Vitali).
- <sup>10</sup> Franco Pratesi, *Cartophilia Helvetica*, 11. Jahrgang No. 4 (1996) 11-13.
- <sup>11</sup> Franco Pratesi, *The Playing-card*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1 and 2 (1989) 28-38.
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.letarot.it/page.aspx?id=110>
- <sup>13</sup> [http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article\\_cdo/aid/658156/jewish/Jacobs-Ladder.htm](http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/658156/jewish/Jacobs-Ladder.htm)
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.veregraceofgod.com/sermons/df-gen22.htm>
- <sup>15</sup> *Catechismo della chiesa cattolica*. Libreria editrice vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1992.
- <sup>16</sup> (Ente per l'enciclopedia cattolica e per il libro cattolico, Città del Vaticano) *Enciclopedia cattolica*. Vol. 11. Sansoni, Firenze 1953.
- <sup>17</sup> <http://forum.tarothistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=865>
- <sup>18</sup> Michele Barbi, *La nuova filologia e l'edizione dei nostri scrittori da Dante al Manzoni*. Sansoni, Firenze 1938.
- <sup>19</sup> BRF. MS 1393.
- <sup>20</sup> BRF. MS 329, MS 1351, MS 1697.
- <sup>21</sup> BRF. MS 1406.

- <sup>22</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Ladder\\_of\\_Divine\\_Ascent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ladder_of_Divine_Ascent)
- <sup>23</sup> <http://forum.tarothistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=773>
- <sup>24</sup> <http://Trionfi.com/Naibi-Trionfi-dozen>
- <sup>25</sup> <http://www.augnet.org/?ipageid=2160>
- <sup>26</sup> [http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio\\_Alberti\\_\(scrittore\)](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Alberti_(scrittore))
- <sup>27</sup> <http://trionfi.com/palazzo-dei-diavoli>
- <sup>28</sup> Giovanni Gherardi da Prato, *Il paradiso degli Alberti*. (A cura di Antonio Lanza), Salerno, Roma 1975.
- <sup>29</sup> Arnaldo Della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze*. Carnesecchi, Firenze 1902.
- <sup>30</sup> Gertrude Moakley, *The Tarot cards*. NY Pub. Lib., New York 1966.
- <sup>31</sup> Bartolomeo del Corazza, *Diario fiorentino (1405-1439)* (A cura di Roberta Gentile). De Rubeis, Roma 1991; (indicated to me by Lucia Ricciardi).
- <sup>32</sup> Lucia Ricciardi, *Col senno, col tesoro e colla lancia. Le lettere*, Firenze 1992.
- <sup>33</sup> [http://www.giordanoberti.it/html/giochi\\_tarocchi\\_dante.htm](http://www.giordanoberti.it/html/giochi_tarocchi_dante.htm)
- <sup>34</sup> Rolando Fusi, Rosalynd Pio, *Tarocchi un giallo storico : Le carte perdute e ritrovate*. Bonechi, Firenze 2001; reprinted 2004 with title: *Petrarca, Simone Martini e le carte*. Available on-line:  
[http://www.geneseideitarocchi.net/genesi\\_dei\\_tarocchi\\_copertina.pdf](http://www.geneseideitarocchi.net/genesi_dei_tarocchi_copertina.pdf)
- <sup>35</sup> Lucia Nadin, *Carte da gioco e letteratura fra Quattrocento e Ottocento*. Pacini Fazzi, Lucca 1997.
- <sup>36</sup> Franca Petrucci Nardelli, *Quaderni medievali*, 24 (1987) 57-75.
- <sup>37</sup> Ross Sinclair Caldwell, Personal communication. February 2012.
- <sup>38</sup> Dittmar Heubach, *Der Belial*. Heitz, Strassburg, 1927.
- <sup>39</sup> Jacques-Charles Brunet, *Manuel du libraire*. T. 5. Paris 1864, coll. 801-804.
- <sup>40</sup> <http://trionfi.com/chess-tarot-playing-cards>
- <sup>41</sup> Simona Cohen, *Renaissance studies*, 14 (2000) 301-328; (indicated to me by Ross Sinclair Caldwell).
- <sup>42</sup> Franco Pratesi, *The Playing-card*, Vol. XIX No. 1 (1990) 7-17.
- <sup>43</sup> Ross Sinclair Caldwell, *The Playing-card*, Vol. 39 No. 1 (2010) 35-56.
- <sup>44</sup> <http://trionfi.com/imperatori-cards-ferrara-1423>
- <sup>45</sup> <http://pre-gebelin.blogspot.it/2011/12/michael-dummett-and-tarot-iconography.html>; (indicated to me by Ross Sinclair Caldwell).
- <sup>46</sup> Michael Dummett, *FMR*, No. 30 (1985) 50-57.
- <sup>47</sup> Various notes at: <http://trionfi.com/franco-pratesi>