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**1400-1408: Florence-Arezzo trade
of naibi**

Introduction

This research was carried out in Arezzo, at the Archivio Storico della Fraternita dei Laici¹, whose collection still contains the account books of Giglio di Bettino, a silk-dealer and mercer, who was active in Arezzo at the beginning of the 15th century. The documents examined have yielded new information concerning the trade in playing cards in the very first years of the 15th century, a period for which this kind of information has hitherto been almost entirely unavailable.

*Searching for information on
Giglio di Bettino*

Some information on Giglio di Bettino can be found in the archive of the Opera del Duomo in Florence: he is mentioned there as a guarantor in 1425². The archive also contains a previous and more interesting document³: an appeal dated 5th November 1422 by his brother Galeotto, also written on Giglio's behalf. The two brothers had been found guilty of failing to pay debts left by their father Bettino after his death. Galeotto explained that neither brother was responsible for their father's estate, because it had been forwarded, in accordance with their father's will, to a certain Pietro di Simone di Broglio. The brothers were prepared to take the debts upon themselves only if the legal heir could not be found. We can thus deduce that Giglio's family could not be a wealthy one and that the two brothers had to set up in business for themselves. Moreover, we learn that the family did not come from Arezzo but from Ricasoli, a small village 3 kilometres from Montevarchi. The village still exists, on top of a hill 251 metres above sea level; it is now reported to have just one hundred and fifteen inhabitants. We also find Giglio in a book dedicated to the documents on the local schools and cultural life⁴. He is cited there as a witness to a notary deed dated

19th April 1436, in which the will of Maestro Francesco di Ser Feo di Nigi was registered. Further and more complete data should be found in the *Catasto 1427* section of the Archivio di Stato in Florence, where one usually finds basic information on properties, incomes, family composition, and similar useful evidence. The *Catasto-Campioni*⁵, however, contains only an assessment of his taxable income: «Giglio di Bettino setaiuolo, a c. 810, L.295 s.7»; it amounted to relatively little, but nevertheless more than average, especially if one considers that many families had no taxable income at all. As indicated there, more detailed information should have been recorded at fol. 810, supposedly of the *Catasto-Portate* volumes. There are four such thick registers for Arezzo, numbered from 200 to 203; all of them were searched, without success. I found the name of Giglio di Bettino in two other places: fol. 835v, «Aggiunta adì 14 di dicembre 1429. Gilio di Bettino. Messi c. 810» and fol. 838v, «Adì 18 d'ottobre [1427] Arezzo, Gilio di Bettino Setaiolo. Messa a libro c. 810». The book in question was No. 203, but unfortunately folios 791 to 810 are missing.

Our Giglio and his account books have however been examined in the framework of a dissertation project⁶, which is accessible on the web, and its author has kindly informed me of the relevant results of her research⁷. In particular, she succeeded in finding the fol. 810, mentioned above, in another *Catasto* book. The essential information is that, at the time of the *Catasto*, Giglio was fifty-five years old and lived with his wife, forty; they had no children. Let us be satisfied with the fact that he worked in his shop for a long time; on the other hand, his income in the late 1420s clearly confirms that he had reached a middle-class position by then.

The account book

Several of Giglio's account books have been checked; in particular, two of them⁸; they are common *Libri di debitori*, with short entries recording

1. ANTONIELLA 1985, 1989.
2. See duomo.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/eng/html/s020/c084/t003/tblock00.htm.
3. See duomo.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/eng/html/s015/c050/t003/tblock00.htm.
4. BLACK 1996.
5. Florence, Archivio di Stato, *Catasto*, 273, fol. 25v.
6. See archeologiamedievale.unisi.it/dottorato/sites/archeologiamedievale.unisi.it/dottorato/files/becattini_0.pdf
7. Ilaria Becattini, personal communication, 21st November 2012.
8. Arezzo, Archivio Storico della Fraternita dei Laici, Archivi dei Testatori, 3385, *Libro di debitori* and 3388, *Libro di debitori*.

the name of the person concerned, and the amount of money involved in that particular business arrangement; usually, the information on the goods traded is limited or absent. Much more useful was a smaller book (as often occurs with these registers), entitled *Memoriale*⁹. It is obvious that when the moment arrives to keep only some of the account books preserved in a given archive, those with records of minute trades are the first to be got rid of. As a consequence, finding such booklets still available for study is a rare occurrence, and we were very lucky to find such detailed information. This particularly useful book nevertheless has a drawback: its folios are unnumbered and for each page one has to figure out what its actual number might be; there are slightly fewer than one hundred folios in the whole book. If anybody crosschecks the data below in the book – as is always advisable – and does not find the given entry there, the search should be continued on the adjacent pages.

This account book has been compiled in a way that makes it highly convenient for our research. Leafing through it, we see long lists of various goods, commonly occupying a full page, sometimes two. These lists concern articles that Giglio had acquired for his shop; he apparently purchased stocks of goods to maintain a long-lasting supply line for his retail sales, and this book was used to keep a careful record of these purchases. Most of his suppliers were from Florence; certainly Florence was the source of all his supplies of playing cards.

In the book under examination we read for example detailed lists of leather ware, from gloves to purses and handbags; these lists we can pass over because they contain no playing cards, or *naibi*; the same thing occurs for tools and hardware, full pages of items of related kinds. Our task is thus simplified: we just have to check the lists of goods provided by the Florentine mercers, and sometimes we find *naibi* among many other goods, including the more usual clothes and all manner of haberdashery.

Naibi records

The pages with *naibi* records that have been found number sixteen; all the corresponding entries are summarised in the table overleaf, where numbers and attributes within brackets have been derived from other records present in the book. All suppliers are indicated as «di Fiorença», except for Tancredi, noted as «a Fiorença». In principle, «a» only indicates the place of the store, whereas «di» includes the mercer's provenance – we may thus suppose that Tancredi worked in Florence but came from another place. In any event, we can neglect this nominal difference, and consider Florence as the real place of origin of all these packs (unless they had arrived in Florence from other towns, another possible hypothesis, which however is hardly plausible at the time). As for the type of cards in question, let me refer to a previous study¹⁰, and to the discussion which follows.

The sequence of the trade

It may be useful to discuss what has been found, in the framework of what could have been expected. Actually, there is no reason to have expected to find a significant production of playing cards in Arezzo; at most, we might find a wandering cardmaker, settling there for a few months.

Therefore, discovering a mercer in Arezzo who about once a year picks up stocks of playing cards in Florence is something that could have been expected, though no similar information had previously been found, to my knowledge.

The trade could have been organized differently, however. For instance, Giglio might have purchased his stocks directly from the Florentine cardmakers – in so doing he might have expected to pay less for them. He could also have had just one Florentine mercer as his exclusive supplier of playing cards, whereas in fact we find several of them here, including one silk-dealer.

The evidence found may thus lead to some discussion. When Giglio arrived

9. Arezzo, Archivio Storico della Fraternita dei Laici, Archivi dei Testatori, 3391, *Memoriale*.

10. PRATESI 2012, pp. 39-50.

Supplier	Folio	Date	Packs	Kind ^a	s./dozen	s.d./pack	Total L.s.d.
Michele di Silvestro Nardi e fratelli merciai	9v	1400/11/12	02	FIN	(168)	14	1.8.–
Francescho di Ladiato (?) merciaio	10v	1400/11/12	10	GRA	(52)	4.4	2.3.4
Michele di Silvestro Nardi e fratelli merciai	21r	1401/10/10	12	MEZ	(52)	(4.4)	2.12.–
Michele di Silvestro Nardi e fratelli merciai	34v	1402/10/21	24	(MEZ)?	38	(3.2)	3.16.–
			12	MEZ	50	(4.2)	2.10.–
Michele e fratelli detti	35r	1402/10/21	04	FIN	(114)	9.6	1.18.–
			02	FIN	(78)	6.6	–.13.–
Michele di Silvestro Nardi fratelli merciai	41r	1403/05/09	18	MEZ	44	(3.8)	3.6.–
			24	PIC	(32)	(2.8)	3.4.–
			06	FIN	(120)	10	3.–
Tancredi di Rosillutio e comp. merciai	47v	1404/02/15	03	(FIN)	(108)	9	1.7.–
Francescho di Ladiato (?) merciaio	48v	1404/02/16	12	(MEZ)	(44)	(3.8)	2.4.–
			12	(PIC)	(28)	(2.4)	1.8.–
Francescho di Ladiato (?) merciaio	52r	1404/06/26	4	FIN	(126)	10.6	2.2.–
Piero Taçi e Stefano di Nado merciai	53v	1404/06/26	12	MEZ	(40)	(3.4)	2.–
			12	PIC	(28)	(2.4)	1.8.–
Piero Taçi e Stefano di Nado merciai	58r	1405/01/16	18	PIC	(29)	(2.5)	2.3.6
			12	MEZ	(40)	(3.4)	2.–
			03	FIN	(144)	12	1.16.–
Piero Taçi e comp. merciai	66r	1405/10/09	18	MEZ	40	(3.4)	3.–
			18	PIC	29	(2.5)	2.3.6
[missing]	70r	1406/05/24	6?	FIN?	(96)?	(8)?	2.8.–
			06	PIC	(66)	(5.6)	1.13.–
Piero Taçi e comp. merciai	77r	1406/12/15	02	FIN	(198)	(16.6)	1.13.–
			06	MEZ	(38)	(3.2)	–.19.–
			12	PIC	(27)	(2.3)	1.7.–
Bernardo (?) di Lodovicho e comp. setaiuoli	80r	1407/07/12	18	MEZ	38	(3.2)	2.17.–
			18	PIC	27	(2.3)	2.–.6
			04	FIN	(88)	7.4	1.9.6 ^b
Piero Taçi e comp. merciai	88r	1408/07/24	12	MEZ	(38)	(3.2)	1.18.–
			18	(PIC)	(21.4)	(1.9)	1.12.–
			04	FIN	(168)	(14)	2.16.–

a. FIN: *fini*; GRA: *grandi*; MEZ: *mezzani*; PIC: *piccoli*.

b. This total should be changed into L.1.9.4, in agreement with the price indicated for a pack, and an integer for a dozen.

in Florence to acquire his supplies, playing cards were probably too small a trade to justify a separate purchase; only a mercer could simultaneously provide him with playing cards and with all the other items he acquired with them. In a few cases, however, we find that he entered the shop of a second mercer, just to buy a few additional packs of a different kind. Of course, the evidence that the Florentine mercers could sell stocks of cards shows that the local cardmakers must have been providing them with

a copious supply of packs (or another mercer did, but I would rather ignore this hypothesis, if only because of the consequent increase in cost). On this evidence, we are missing the starting point of the trade, the producer; we can only observe the hand-over from stage two to stage three; as for stage four, the consumer – or maybe another retailer in a village shop – the account book again gives no information. Another missing item of information is whether Giglio was the one and only seller of playing cards in Arezzo – in

which case, one has to be cautious in deducing values for the overall consumption of playing cards in Arezzo and the neighbouring area. We are obviously free to reflect on these *naibi* packs the better to understand the trade situation in Florence, or in Arezzo, or in both of them. The share of this specific contribution to the total trade at the time was certainly greater for Arezzo than for Florence – but it is a very poor consolation to see vaguely that a numerical relation may exist between

numbers that remain unknown. In conclusion, what we observe here is only a part of the whole trade path and, in particular, directly involves neither the producer, nor the consumer. This must be kept in mind in order not to infer more from these numbers than is reasonable. Within the limits indicated above, the value of this information is nevertheless very great. We learn in particular that playing cards were by then easily available in Florence, offered on sale like other ordinary goods and tools; they could be acquired at will in the shop of a mercer or even in that of a silk-dealer – from the shop of Lorenzo di Bartolo and Matteo di Zanobi¹¹ for example, though this was in later times.

Naibi kinds

These records give us an insight into the playing card market at an early stage. Actually, even in the earliest year mentioned – 1400 – we cannot speak of *naibi* as a new playing tool, since the first known reference to them in Florence had occurred almost a quarter of century earlier. However, our knowledge of their production and use remains very unsatisfactory, especially as regards their initial distribution. Our insufficient knowledge makes even these records appear as new and revolutionary evidence: nobody could have expected that packs of *naibi* were already on sale and easily available by that time, and already of the same kinds as those we know from later times. Particularly interesting is the information on their dimensions: the accounts show all three typical shapes of the packs, *piccoli* or small, *mezzani* or middle-sized, and *grandi* or large. Rather unexpectedly, *mezzani* were traded in a somewhat greater quantities than the cheapest *piccoli*. The fact that *grandi* were only present in a single transaction is not a sure indication that they were produced in correspondingly lower quantities than the other kinds – this could be a choice by Giglio, who doubted whether he could sell them in or around Arezzo. Moreover, a distinction already existed between

ordinary and *fini* or fine cards, as it continued to do in later times; not only – we also learn of two different grades of *fini* packs, acquired in the same trade. Of course, *fini* cards were acquired by Giglio in reduced quantities.

Naibi prices

Again, as far as is known, nobody has so far had any idea of *naibi* prices at this (for us) early stage. We may be surprised to find that these prices did not change to any great extent over time. This is true not only within the nine years documented here, but also by comparison with the prices that we know from later instances. These prices form a set of numbers that appears to be consistent and suitable for a trustworthy statistical deduction. We can thus obtain reliable average prices for a dozen ordinary packs: 30s. for *piccoli*, 41s. for *mezzani*, 52s. for *grandi* (these values correspond roughly to 2s.6d., 3s.5d., and 4s.4d. for a single pack, respectively). A couple of further points must be noted. The last value, for *grandi*, corresponds to the only item present, and is not a statistical average like the previous ones. In all the individual trades of both the 138 *piccoli* and 156 *mezzani* packs, the deviations from their average values are relatively small, which encourages further confidence in these results. On the other hand, by averaging over all the 40 *fini* packs we find a price slightly lower than 10s. Apart from the record of two different kinds of *fini* cards in the same trade, we do not find here a confirmation of two different predominant prices; we rather find a notable dispersion of prices around the average value mentioned, which may point to the presence of various qualities and prices of *fini* packs on the market. The total number of only 40 *fini* packs recorded may however be too low for deducing a conclusive result. It is also possible, on the other hand, that the top part of the production is missing here: any *fini* packs of an even finer quality could have been too expensive for Giglio to sell.

Currency rates over time

We are accustomed to comparing prices for trades in different years; this is generally acceptable, especially when the time intervals are small. If we compare prices at time intervals of several decades, however, we cannot rely on the supposition that these monetary units kept exactly the same value in the course of time. If we examine the Florentine currency in some detail, we find that there were various and complex ways for accounting and paying. A basic coin was of course the florin, but there existed several kinds of the denomination, with different values and particularly with different ratios within the L.s.d. system used in the account books.

In the 15th century, as in most early times, they did not have a coin corresponding to the *Lira* of the account books. Originally, the *Lira* was a *Libbra*, a pound, a unit of mass, matching the amount of silver needed to produce exactly 240d. coins called *piccioli*: 12d. corresponded to 1s. and 20s. (or 240d.) to 1L. in the account books. Concurrently with this silver basis, the gold florin was introduced in 1252 and for a short period this new coin corresponded to 1L. The situation changed shortly afterwards however and the *Lira* amounts matching 1 florin increased to 4 at the end of the 14th century, 6 at the end of the 16th century, and then remained practically constant at 7 for a couple of centuries.

From a recent summary by a specialist¹², we can extract the indicative values of 3.75, 4.00 and 4.25, respectively, for the years 1400, 1425 and 1450. If we plot these ratios as a function of the years, we find a practically straight line. It thus becomes easy to interpolate the “real” prices of the goods traded for any year of the interval, by applying a multiplying coefficient, *R*, to the prices recorded. This procedure can be followed with sufficient precision by employing a simple expression: $R = 4.58 - Y/400$, where *Y* is the year in question. Having multiplied any price

in the books by R, for every year of the interval indicated, all the prices found are valid for the same year, 1425, and we have thus obtained safely comparable values.

Changes in naibi prices

It is not so convenient, however, to use the procedure indicated above to find the "real" value of our cards, and of most other goods: direct comparison of the prices found in the account books for the years 1400-1450 can already offer an acceptable approximation. It may be different, however, if we extend the limits to previous and following periods – the sharpest increases in florin values actually occurred in the last parts of both the 14th and the 15th centuries. In effect, the difference between the values at these two points in time does not even reach 15 per cent. This means that the prices of Giglio's ordinary *naibi* packs could, at most, be assessed in 1450 at 3s., 4s., and 5s. for *piccoli*, *mezzani* and *grandi*, respectively. There are further reasons supporting more constant values of the goods traded than could be expected from currency changes. For instance, when a buyer paid for his purchases in kind, with his own products, the transaction could be largely unaffected by simultaneous changes in money values. On the other hand, it may also be wrong merely to follow the currency changes: for some goods, the general behaviour corresponded to "real" values decreasing in the course of time, but various exceptions have been reported¹³. A rather similar indication comes from another sector: the same source indicates that from 1350 to 1525 a manual worker earned precisely the same day wage of 10s. (this clearly matches the known fact that the labouring class had run into increasing poverty by the later date). Having suggested that the prices of playing cards of the same kind remained almost constant in the course of time, we should isolate and discuss actual cases in which the prices recorded were quite different. It is possible to mention several instances

in which the prices recorded in the following years were remarkably different from the "rule", both for cheaper and for more expensive packs; these cases of outstanding price changes should plausibly be explained by the different quality of the playing cards involved. In particular, we may think of the *naibi piccoli* made by Nicolò di Calvello in the late 1440s¹⁴; at around 1s. a pack, their price was less than half what might have been expected. As mentioned above, the discrepancy may be due to the introduction of a cheaper process for their production rather than to reduced prices for the same cards, and immediately some new printing or painting method comes to the mind.

Conclusions

In the early years of the 15th century, Giglio di Bettino acquired supplies of *naibi* in Florence, once or twice in a year, to be sold in his shop in Arezzo during the following months.

From the corresponding records, we obtain previously unknown detail on the kinds and prices of playing cards traded at the time. The new information obtained is rich, surprisingly rich for the period, involving more than three hundred card packs for the very first years of the 15th century.

Most of the rare information that has reached us from these early times has come from royal courts, simply because it is mostly from these milieus that handwritten documents have been saved.

Naibi, however, represent a more widespread game instrument, available to common people, and this report is a further confirmation thereof: here, we find a retail shop stocking more card packs than one might reasonably expect to find in a dozen royal courts of the time.

In the case of the account book discussed here, one may conclude that the main difficulty in searching in a book of this kind is not to discover a needle in a hay-stack, as experts used to tell me about this kind of research, so much as to discover the atypical hay-stack, where needles do exist.

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