# ON TRUMPS, Triumphs, AND Tarots

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## Introduction

Naibi was the first name with which playing cards were known − at least in Florence, where I have mainly studied their history. This name was soon provided with one or another attribute, in order to distinguish given groups of cards. Recently, I wrote a short note for commenting on these attributes and their possible meanings. (1) Now, it may be of interest to discuss something similar for Trionfi, another type of playing cards or games, which could be further divided into several subgroups.

As for a previous note, (2) it has been a letter (3) with the old article by Sassi (4), containing a couple of cases, that stimulated my reflections on Trionfi attributes. With this idea in mind, I intended to extend my past discussion on Naibi; however, in the case of Trionfi, there are very few attributes to discuss, and I am not able to do it satisfactorily; therefore, I will only deal with some scattered cases below.

On the other hand, still about Trionfi, instead of attributes, there are other names to discuss as alternatives, or complements, or subgroups: namely, both tarots and trumps.

## 1. Trionfi and Tarocchi

Let me first justify why I am dealing with Trionfi and not with Tarocchi. Between triumphs and tarots, which is the basic group? Many fans know only one kind of tarot, the “standard” 78-card pack. They have to deal with so many variants of this one and only one pack (intended either for players or much more often for fortune-tellers and collectors), that extending the study to further members of the family appears to be too demanding, and practically useless.

We know for certain, however, that the pack mentioned was only one among several members of a whole family, in which various packs were specifically used by players of given places and times. Let me just mention Tarocchino Bolognese, Tarocco Siciliano, Minchiate, and the several more recent 54-card packs adopted in Austria and neighbouring countries.

My opinion is that all these kinds of tarots belonged on their turn to a broader family, precisely that of Trionfi or triumphs. It is impossible to use the names of Tarocchi and Trionfi with the same meaning, even if sometimes this seems to be possible.

When speaking of Tarocchi, a sequence of special cards is always involved, whereas we can deal with games of Trionfi having triumphal cards not belonging to a comparable sequence, or, in the extreme case, games that are played with the ordinary pack, with only the four common suits, and no additional cards.

## 2. Triumphs and trumps

One of the oldest Trionfi games was precisely Trionfo spagnolo, an ancient traditional game in which no special card was added to the common pack. Games of this kind are also mentioned later on, for centuries: in Italy we find the rules of Trionfetti, alternatively called at the time as Gilé alla greca, still in the books of the end of the 19th century.

After starting the discussion with the difference between Trionfi and Tarocchi, we thus find a connected question, if possible even more fundamental, about the relation between triumphs and trumps: which one of these two “ideas” originated the other one. Unfortunately, I am not ready to discuss this point in a conclusive way, on the basis of my limited knowledge.

I certainly remember the conclusion reached by Michael Dummett, the greatest card historian that we have had. I repeat it here, just how I remember it, admitting that I may even have misunderstood parts of his discussion.

Trumps and triumphs are two items that belong to a single idea: it is not possible that the same one and only one idea was born in two independent events, so that either the idea of the trumps within the common pack gave origin, later on, to the special triumphal cards, or the implementation of the “idea” directly occurred through these special cards, and, in this case, some players only later on realised that the same game, or a similar one, could be played by selecting “special” cards within the common pack.

Apparently, both “theories” can be supported – Michael Dummett had reasons to prefer the case in which triumphs came first, and trumps later on. Whichever be the true time sequence of the two implementations, there are obvious connections between trumps and triumphs. In tarot games, there is no uncertainty between triumphs and trumps: they are exactly the same cards, the whole sequence, well apart from the four suits.

However, whenever we play a game with trumps, we associate a special character and a special name to these cards (usually a whole suit, selected by uncovering one card or according to some other rules). The Italian name for trump is now Briscola, but this is far from the original name for it, which could often be just Trionfi in the past. Even if the trump was chosen in a different way, any card of the common pack can have the same character as a triumphal card, as present in Tarocchi and in many Trionfi games.

What changes in a common card pack when it is used for a game with trumps? Apparently it remains exactly the same pack. However, we can state that it has been somewhat modified, in these instances: instead of a pack made by four equivalent suits, we obtain a pack with just three equivalent suits, and a “special” fourth suit. Trumps may be selected differently, for instance corresponding always to the same suit or to particular court cards, as the Jacks, but in any case they are a sort of “triumphal” cards.

## 3. Two divergent approaches

Coming back to the difference between triumphs and tarots, as indicated above, let us consider the very first pack of triumphs (with special cards), which has been discovered up to now. As well known at present, this pack was devised by Marziano da Tortona in Milan in initial 15th century: card historians have to admit that it was a pack of triumphs, whereas they cannot agree that it could be a tarot pack.

Two different approaches are thus present together now, in the plentiful literature about tarots and similar cards.

1) The “tarot approach”, which supposes an early appearance of the tarot sequence of 21/22 cards. Indeed, if one so wishes, any Tarocchi variant that has existed (Bolognese, Siciliano, Minchiate, of Central Europe) can easily be explained with subsequent modifications applied to an original sequence, either eliminating a few cards, or adding − as for Minchiate − a further set of special cards to the same sequence.

2) The “triumph approach”, alternatively, gives more importance to the earliest packs known – to begin with the first of them, that designed by Marziano – and allows more freedom in trying and reconstructing early “experimental” packs, only vaguely known in the best cases, or else only the fruits of arbitrary reconstructions.

I will provide a few examples below, but others could be discussed. The earliest Visconti packs have already been discussed many times, in my opinion much more than they ought to have. In particular, a remarkable part of the discussion concerns the reconstruction of these packs, whether some missing cards of the sequence were originally missing (“triumph approach”) or just manufactured in a second time as replacements for cards, belonging to the standard tarot sequence, and lost in the meantime (“tarot approach”).

## 4. Merging the two approaches

Between the two approaches mentioned, intermediate ones are certainly possible. The most obvious way is to suppose that the “triumph approach” is more correct for the earliest times, whereas the “tarot approach” may be valid later on.

The problem here is that the introduction of a tarot sequence of 21/22 special cards could not be too late, as sometimes suggested. It is true that variants of the tarot sequence existed in various towns, but all variations occurred around the same established series. When can this series be considered as regularly accepted? I do not know precisely the year, but it is not difficult to suggest a date not far from the middle of the 15th century.

It seems that we get a completely certain attestation of the “standard” series only a few decades later on, but supposing that soon after 1450 it did not yet exist is a hypothesis that involves a lot of uncertain and complex justifications.

What now about Marziano’s pack? As for tarot examples, it is a specimen positioned “below zero”! In my opinion, it is not even ascertained that it could represent the first example of Trionfi. I would prefer to state that it is just the first pack of Trionfi, which up to now we have found documents about. It is at this point that the “triumph approach” better finds its place of application. What is certain is that in this pack, and also in other early packs, the “standard” tarot sequence is not yet present – apparently, it was introduced and accepted later on.

## 5. The confusing example of the 70-card pack

One specific case, seemingly intermediate, for which a debate between the two approaches is justified is that of the 70-card pack, documented in Ferrara. This marks in my opinion a kind of borderline: I would better speak of Trionfi before it, and of Tarocchi later on.

Nobody knows which these 70 cards were, but it is certain that this pack could not be formed by the same number of cards within the “common” four suits. In other words, supposing the existence of a fifth suit becomes unavoidable. What about this fifth suit? We can differently “imagine” it.

If we follow the “triumph approach”, it is not difficult to reach the proposal of Lothar Teikemeier of four “common” suits of 14 cards each, accompanied by a new fifth suit of 14 triumphs, rather similar in its structure to the previous four suits, or maybe (which would merge into the other approach) a reduced tarot sequence. (5)

Unfortunately, this composition of the pack does no longer fulfil the numerical condition valid in Marziano’s triumphs. In that case, it was possible either to consider a fifth suit of 16 cards, or four groups of four cards added to the four existing suits, or both of these cases at the same time. To obey this condition, the fifth suit should have been formed by a number of cards multiple of 4, more reasonably 12 or 16, certainly not 14.

If instead we follow the “tarot approach” in reconstructing the 70-card pack, we only have to solve the question of how long was the additional tarot sequence in this case, because, with respect to “standard” tarot, eight cards are missing. Various solutions are thus possible, with a differently long sequence.

We can suppose to have the same four suits as in tarot, and as a consequence the sequence would only contain 14 cards. By the way, this is the same length as in the previous proposal from the alternative approach, but here the sequence is imagined with its own configuration, independent of that of the other suits.

However, we can even try and suppress one or two cards from each of the four suits, and thus obtain an additional sequence of 18 or 22 cards, respectively. With some surprise on my part, I do not remember having read an interpretation of the 70-card pack as “simply” formed by merging two “standard” parts: the tarot sequence of 22 cards and the 48-card Naibi pack. I guess that somebody has already proposed it in the past.

## 6. Trionfi attributes

Most of the attributes that we find for Trionfi simply indicate the particular kind of cards used. This may first of all refer to dimension, Piccoli and Grandi, with the intermediate Mezzani size mentioned in very few cases, or not at all.

Sometimes we find instead attributes added for distinguishing the actual quality, such as Dorati or Fini. I do not remember having found any Trionfi belonging to the Dozzinali quality, the lowest that we find mentioned for cards. I am wondering whether such cards could have existed later on, or instead a Trionfi pack never became as popular as the cheapest playing cards.

Every such attribute does not indicate a different way of playing the game: the game or the games that can be played with a Trionfi pack do not depend on its dimension or quality. Obviously, what depends on size, and especially on quality, is the price of the pack, which could become several times higher than average in case of gilded cards, or of cards painted by the most renowned artists.

More interesting for us is however another kind of attributes, which may suggest variants in the packs, and especially in the games for which they were used. Unfortunately, we only find a few of them, and usually with a meaning that is not clear enough. Later on, we find attributes such as Trionfi a due per due, indicating the 4-hand variant, contested between two pairs of players. Local variants are also mentioned, such as Trionfetti alla veneziana.

In the course of time, also the common attributes of Grandi or Piccoli acquired different meanings with respect to the original ones, which were only related to the card size. A particular specimen of Trionfi grandi will be found in the following, and it is an early example.

As for Trionfi piccoli, they could in some cases become known as Trionfetti, and it is known that this name was mainly associated with a game with trumps that did no longer require the typical additional sequence of triumphal cards. A possible reason is that the Piccoli attribute was afterwards applied to pack thickness rather than − or in addition − to the size of the single cards.

I feel not ready for a systematic description: the data are few and, moreover, rather undefined. Searching for some more detail, I am for the moment only able to add a few cases in the following.

## 7. Fabriano law on card games - 1507

Sassi’s article (4) contains a well-documented study on the laws against gambling in Fabriano, and their changes in the course of time. Most interesting here is for us a law of 1507, with useful indication about Trionfi and other games. We even know how this law was written: by a commission of four experts, who could examine the whole question in detail. This text is thus worth reproducing in full, as done in Sassi’s article.

*Nemini liceat in terra Fabriani eiusque territorio et comitatu aliquo modo vel quesito colore ludere ad aliquod ludum cartarum sive tassillorum nisi ad infrascripta et qualitatibus inferius specificatis v. ad ludum cartarum vulgariter nuncupato al più e meno. It. ad ludum derectum chiamato chi fa più iochi. It. ad ioco de triumphi de ventura scoprendo la carta che ven triumpho. It. ad triumphi de vintuno et de vintotto purché in uno ioco integro de dicti triumphi non se ioche tra le parti più de doi bolognini* (il bolognino era la quarantesima parte del ducato o fiorino) *etiam. Facendo ad salendo in uno ioco integro non se venga a perdere et vencere più de dicti doi bol. It. ad ioco de ronfa non excedendo più de un denaro per puncto et sei denari per l’ultimo e ciascuna iucata. It. ad ioco chiamato le sminchiate* (a Firenze minchiate) *ad li quali iochi per tucto de dì et de nocte se possa iocare con le qualità specificate*.

Gambling is as usual prohibited and among card games only the following are allowed:

1) *ad ludum cartarum vulgariter nuncupato al più e meno*.

2) *ad ludum derectum chiamato chi fa più iochi*.

3) *ad ioco de triumphi de ventura scoprendo la carta che ven triumpho*.

4) *ad triumphi de vintuno et de vintotto*.

5) *ad ioco de ronfa* [L’antenato del notissimo e tuttora comune Picchetto].

6) *le sminchiate* (a Firenze minchiate).

For games 1 to 4 there is a limit of 2 bolognini that can be won or lost for each game. For game 5, ronfa, no more than 1d. for point, or 6d. for the last trick, or 6d. for any deal (seemingly this game required somewhat more strict or exact limits). For game 6 there is no limit indicated, but one may understand that the same limit is valid as for games 1 to 4.

There are a few interesting points, which can be examined one after another:

1) The game of Al più e meno seems a kind of Vinciperdi, a game that could be played either to win or to lose, or better always to win, but either with the most or the least of cards or tricks or points taken. Contrary to my previous opinion on this game (when I supposed it to be exactly the same of Diritta, with only a change of rule for winning with the least of tricks) it seems here that the same game Al più e meno could be played in both forms.

2) We know that Diritta or Diritto was early allowed in Florence and in other places, but here we have the additional information that it was traditionally named “a chi fa più giochi”, who wins more tricks or maybe deals.

3) For the first variant of Trionfi mentioned, Scoprendo la carta che ven triumpho, a reasonable hypothesis can be suggested, see below.

4) The second variant of Trionfi indicated here, De vintuno et de vintotto, is instead highly unclear.

5) The game of Ronfa is also early documented. It appears as a game of a different kind − a simpler precursor of Primiera − and also the different ways used here to limit the corresponding stakes may be a confirmation.

6) Minchiate (locally called Sminchiate) is again a game that can be considered to belong to the Trionfi family.

This whole information is very interesting and has forced me to extend the subject of this paragraph farther than the particular games of Trionfi discussed here.

## 8. The three puzzling variants of Trionfi at Fabriano

Coming back to our subject, we do not find many variants of Trionfi indicated at Fabriano: only two-three of them, and they are rather puzzling.

The first game should be similar or identical with Trionfetti de la ventura, which at about the same time we find mentioned in the *Barzelletta nova*, in the Venetian milieu. (6) It appears to have been played with the ordinary pack − in the same way of Trionfo spagnolo − because it would be a nonsense to uncover a card for determining the trump suit, in the presence of a special “suit” purposely devoted to that use

On the other hand, I do not know for Trionfi any attribute similar to De vintuno et de vintotto from other places or times. If one applies the “tarot approach”, the beginning of a possible clarification is easy and credible: indeed, it is accepted by most experts that the tarot sequence of 22 cards developed from a previous 21-card sequence, without the Fool. I leave to supporters of the “tarot approach”, however, to extend this suggestion in order to include the 28 too.

Unfortunately, even the “triumph approach” does not provide any plausible answer. To find some indication, it seems that we have to turn to a new “trump approach”: in other words, as the former Trionfi variant was seemingly played with the common pack, we can imagine that the latter variant was played in the same way. In that case, we should deeper investigate the presence of 21 and 28 in other old games (especially within the traditional Primiera and Tressette families), where they may have been recurrent numbers for card combinations or points.

There is a further problem with these suggestions, connected with the game of Trionfi, without any attribute, that was mentioned in the same town of Fabriano on 18 August 1476, in a formal application of local young people to have it allowed in public places. In similar cases, as for other places in the same years, we are not accustomed to associate a Trionfi game with the common pack.

Also the quotation here of Minchiate is not as expected. These cards are mentioned in a time that is intermediate between what I was kind enough to indicate as Minchiate-1 and Minchiate-2, (7) namely two groups of quotations, the first in the 15th century, the second well into the 16th century − most experts do not accept that they could be related to the same game, as I am ready to admit. Now, if we find further quotations, as this one, bridging the two time intervals mentioned, the assumption that it really was the same game becomes more plausible.

## 9. Statute of Montecatini Val di Cecina - 1529

Some time ago, I found that “Trionfi grandi overo Germini” was a game allowed in the statute of 1529 of Montecatini Val di Cecina. (8) Now, finding triumphs as an exception among forbidden games is not an extraordinary occurrence: something similar can be found down to the middle of the previous century. What may be more significant is the indication in this local law that in actual practice Germini and Trionfi grandi were two dissimilar ways to denote the same game.

The interpretation of this law cannot be different. In that place and in that time Trionfi grandi were only used in the form of the typical 96/97-card pack, unless the name was applied − then and there − to a reduced Minchiate pack.

In any case, I am not willing to extend this interpretation to different places and times; on the contrary, I am ready to admit that another pack (and a different number of cards as well) indicated as Trionfi grandi could be used elsewhere.

## Conclusion

I have discussed some well known matters related to various ancient card packs. In particular, the name of Trionfi has been associated both with different tarot packs and with packs that are not accepted as tarots. The same name of Trionfi, when associated to card games instead of card packs, could recurrently denote games played with the ordinary 4-suit pack.

There are now many experts of Tarocchi packs. Trionfi packs and games receive less attention, even though we can affirm that any Tarocchi pack belongs to the Trionfi family. In my opinion, it is thus useful and maybe necessary to extend the study from tarots to triumphs, and to trumps too.

Of special interest appear to me some experiments of Trionfi attested before any “standard” Tarocchi became accepted. Unfortunately, the specimens that are known to us are still very few and often rather uncertain as for their constitution. This situation may justify the isolation of Tarocchi as a single object of study, as it seems now the case for most experts. However, at long last it should be more rewarding to reconstruct the whole framework in which tarots, triumphs, and trumps were born, and this is hardly possible on the single basis of the 78-card tarot.

## Notes

(1) <http://trionfi.com/naibi-doppi-scempi>

(2) <http://trionfi.com/es45>

(3) Francesco Allegri, Letter of 30.03.2012.

(4) Romualdo Sassi, *Atti e memorie della Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Marche*, Serie VII, Vol. III (1948) 137-153.

(5) <http://trionfi.com/0/f/>

(6) Franco Pratesi, *The Playing-Card*, Vol. XVII No. 2 (1988) 58-65.

(7) <http://trionfi.com/germini-1517-1519>

(8) Franco Pratesi, *The Playing-Card*, Vol. 40 No. 3 (2012) 179-197.