

DAUPHINÉ CARDS ON THE WRONG TRACK

Franco Pratesi

The playing-cards to be discussed here formed a sheet used as cover for a book containing a funeral oration of the end of the 16th century. (1) If we give numbers to the cover pages, we find 1 and 4 blank, 2 and 3 with cards. The booklet with this extraordinary cover is kept in Turin, in the Archivio di Stato. (2) These cards appear to be on the wrong track, not so much for being French cards in Italy but rather for being playing-cards in a funeral oration, a fact requiring a short preliminary comment.



**Figure 1 – Part of a sheet of playing-cards, described in the text.
(Torino, Archivio di Stato)**

A considerable amount of ancient cards has been discovered in the original bindings of contemporary books. As a rule, the date of printing of the book can be considered a good approximation of the date of the cards themselves: while they cannot be later than the book, they can be only slightly earlier (to be much earlier is not likely owing to the short life of playing-cards and of their sheets). For these reasons, it is not plausible to support the idea that the cards to be discussed here are much earlier than the booklet. However, we don't have here any proof of contemporaneity between printing and binding. In principle, the cover could have been applied to the book much later. Here comes into discussion the nature of the text, an occasional composition which nobody would have cared to protect if decades, or even a few years, had passed after the facts mentioned. In any case, the choice of this specific sheet for this purpose still appears something highly unexpected. A possible explanation may be that the bookbinder – working carelessly – did not finish his job by adding and pasting a blank sheet to cover up the

figures.

The cards that can be seen in the sheet are only a part of the courts. It is not surprising that no pip cards are present as they were not produced with printing blocks. However, even among courts, the information provided is not complete. We find useless duplication of parts of same cards whereas others are completely absent. As can be seen in the figures, we have two arrays of courts in each of the two sheets. Sheet A has in the upper array KH, QH, JC, KC and in the lower one KD, QD, JS, KS sheet B has QH, KH, JC, QC above and QD, KD, JS, QS below. In particular, we have fully represented at least once: KH, KD, QH, JC, JS moreover, we have about 70% of KC and KS and about 50% of QC and QS. Completely lacking are thus only JH and JD.

At first sight, it is surprising that the two sheets show exactly the same cards ordered into two different series, and in particular with Kings and Queens having their own places interchanged in the row. However, the two sheets can be considered part of same block by which 24 figures were printed at same time, a format for printing blocks that seems to have been rather common. [On the other hand, it is known that a characteristic of some French cards was to print courts with two blocks of different structure, one for 10 of each red Jack and one for 10x2 of the other Courts. Thus, it can be considered that the sheet here is an almost complete specimen of the last kind and this may lead to the hypothesis that the maker came from Lyons rather than Grenoble (S.M.).]

For a deeper insight into the cards, the first useful hint is the name of the maker, Jacques Boiseset, clearly written on the cards. We don't know him from other sources. Considering that families of makers often worked for centuries, a search has been done in correspondence to the Boiseset as well as the Boisset names. The only maker found in the principal catalogues (D'Allemagne, Keller, and so on) has been François Boisset, active in Paris in 1728. Specimens of his cards are shown in the reference works. It is easy to remark that the figures of the cards considered here are obviously older. Moreover, they appear to belong to a different pattern: the Dauphind portrait. Thus, rather than carrying out further investigations about the maker, the attention will be focused on the portrait itself.

Some indications can already be found in Willshire, (3) where F47 is Dauphiné by Genevoy and F48 is Dauphiné by Francesco Franco on verso of latter sheet is the following memorandum 'trovate nella fodera di un libro stampato a Torino nel 1600' (found in the cover of a book printed in Turin in 1600). Thus, both for provenance and date they happen to be very similar to the cards described here.

About the Dauphiné portrait the most specific treatise to be examined should be that by Maignien. (4) I have not yet examined this treatise and I add some information provided by Sylvia Mann. Among other things, in the book complete sheets are reproduced of cards, first by Jean and Pierre Garet (1648-72, and 1660-80 respectively, and as reproduced in Hoffmann, (5) and secondly by Charles Cheminade (1714-44), all of Grenoble, the latter being inscribed not only with the maker's name but also 'F.P. LETRANGER'. Presumably these were for export, probably to Piedmont.

The main reference book on French-pattern cards is obviously D'Allemagne. (6) This treatise deals with Dauphiné portrait mainly in vol. I. As for the origin, Lyons makers early appear to have produced this portrait – together with other patterns. On p.101 a sheet by Jehan Genevoy is reported with a suggested date of years 1591/7, found in the binding of a book and kept in Paris Bib. Nat. Worth reporting is the comment on the clothes of the courts: 'Les figures des rois ne manquent ni de noblesse ni d'expression, et les broderies de leur vêtements rappellent encore les riches étoffes de la Renaissance. Par contre, la dame, tenant en main une fleur rigide, semble avoir été inspirée par la mode nouvelle. Les valets de trèfle et de picque portent chacun une large banderole indiquant le nom du maitre cartier'. D'Allemagne also reports (p.104 and 105) some

cards by Boulin [the name is Bourlhion in Maignien] of Grenoble 1612-23 and by Jean Garet. Out of the many packs produced during the 18th century D'Allemagne only knows some loose cards, as those reproduced on p.119. In vol. II, p.300ff., interesting information can be found for later times, particularly for mid-18th century when card production in Grenoble underwent a strong reduction, until in about 1780 the Dauphiné portrait – as produced in Grenoble, Romans, Valence and Chambéry – was definitely dropped in favour of the portrait de Paris.



**Figure 2 – Part of a sheet of playing-cards, described in the text.
(Torino, Archivio di Stato)**

Sylvia Mann in 1966 (7) comments on the misfortune of these cards, of which not even a single pack has survived. From sheets with the courts the complete style can be derived. According to this expert, the two most characteristic cards are the red Jacks, precisely the only two courts which are here completely lacking. Sylvia Mann stresses the similarity between JC and that of regional packs of Southern France as well as to Jack of cups in French-Spanish aluette packs.

Jean-Pierre Seguin (8) comes back to the cards by Jean Genevov to observe, as D'Allemagne had already done, the introduction into the card world of the fashion of the time – especially with QS, but also with the other Qs and J5. That is considered to represent an exceptional case, since the clothes of the courts usually corresponded to patterns which were fully independent of the actual fashion of the time.

The Dauphiné portrait was also taken into account by George Beal who again has discussed Jacks as being particularly specific, (9) including a reproduction of the two red Js, those lacking in the present sheet. As shown, all the main sources deal with the pattern, its characteristics and, sometimes, its evolution. Up to now, no cards precisely reminiscent of those reported here have

been found.

Finally, in the catalogue of the Cary collection, (10) very similar cards do appear: FRA sheet 130, reproduced on p.236 of the IVth volume. The corresponding essential description is: 'Jaques Noiret, c.1570, 90 x 54 mm. Single figure. Block, stencil and hand coloration. Back plain. Square borders'.

The opportunity can be taken to insert here for the present sheet a description endeavouring to follow Keller's style:

Jaques Boiseset, c.1598, ca 92 x 55 mm, single figure, parts of sheet corresponding to 24 cards, hand coloured. Back plain. Square borders.

KH holds in the left hand a sceptre with fleur-de-lis tip.

QH holds sceptre in the right hand and a flower in the left the front of her dress has a long interlaced ribbon.

JC with the right hand supports a halberd, the left hand on hip holds the scroll with maker's name, chain mail trousers to the knee. Between his ankles a glimpse is caught of a far bush, the only hint of a landscape.

QD holds sceptre and flower as QH.

KD besides the sceptre in the left hand, he holds a falcon in the right.

JS holds a halberd and is ready to draw his dagger, even if the uniform appears more adequate to a parade than a battle. Bears the scroll with maker's name between his ankles.

KC bears in the right hand the sword on the chest he has the double-headed eagle. QS has a long flower in the right hand she is easy to distinguish from the remaining queens by her sleeves, puffed out but close-fitted to the wrist as are those of JS.

KS bears in the right hand a sceptre with a three-lobed tip.

QC holds a flower in the right hand she has in the front of the dress an interlaced ribbon, shorter than that of QH.

Very recently, Sylvia Mann has brought a further contribution to the Dauphiné pattern in her catalogue. (11) There are at least three descriptions of it. One of them obviously deals with the pattern while describing the French regional portraits. Another describes the adoption of the pattern in Switzerland, particularly in Geneva. A third one is more relevant to the present study since it regards the spread of the pattern in Northern Italy. Not only Turin is mentioned but Milan too. Both Piedmont and Lombardy in Italy appear to have used – for centuries – the Dauphiné portrait.

That brings us to the focal point of the question: how could the same cards interest so different regions. If examined in today's situation, it seems a journey of cards from France to Italy, involving two countries divided by the Alps. The situation was not so simple at the time, more countries being involved. It was the makers of Lyons who established the Dauphiné portrait; however, these cards seem not to have been used in Lyons itself and must be considered to have been born as exports. It is well known that Lyons was a major centre for export of cards to many areas inside and outside of France, but it is not evident how different countries adopted the same pattern, which had its origin outside of them all.

Historically, Dauphiné had been sold to the King of France in 1349 and remained for centuries the region assigned to the heir to the French throne. Dauphiné is very near to Lyons and it may not be surprising that this big production centre succeeded in providing suitable playing-cards to the neighbouring country. But what about Savoy and Lombardy?

Dauphiné and Savoy are neighbouring regions however, unlike Dauphiné, Savoy has formed for centuries with Piedmont an independent country extending on both sides of the Alps (one has

to remember that the dukes of Savoy became in the 19th century kings of Italy). Except for some intervals of transitory loss of independence, only in 1860 did Savoy become a region of France, after a plebiscite characterised by a practically unanimous vote. As for cards, it may be recalled that the first of the many books about the possible meanings of tarot images was printed in 1565 in Mondovì where a few years earlier was founded what can be named the University of Savoy. That Dauphiné cards were largely used in Turin – the main town of Piedmont and from 1559 of all Savoy – may be somewhat surprising. In the absence of strong political and administrative links with Dauphiné, the main possible explanation is by means of geographical proximity, favouring the exchange of several products.

The question repeats itself when passing from Savoy to Lombardy. As far as I know, in the case of Milan, there were again no clear political or administrative reasons for supporting a local spread of either Savoy or Dauphiné goods. Maybe that was only related to a particular situation of the playing-card market so that French cards arriving from neighbouring Savoy were accepted due to advantages in manufacturing with respect to earlier Italian-suited packs. Sylvia Mann suggests to me two alternative explanations for the spread of Dauphiné cards to neighbouring countries. The first would be related to fashionable games requiring French cards even in Italy (similarly to the present situation here where it would be impossible to play bridge with Florentine cards). The second one would link the import of French cards to the wars of the time, French soldiers bringing their cards with them.

Be it as it may, another puzzling point remains, we have indeed another example of the spread of a card pack precisely in the same countries. It corresponds to nothing less than the tarot pack. In case of Dauphiné cards we are faced by common French cards which always remained far from Paris and mostly flourished in peripheral regions (South-Eastern parts of France and neighbouring parts of Switzerland and North-West Italy), and that is precisely what tarot did. Thus either going with or against the mainstream, both were then the main packs used for card games on both sides of the Alps: ‘Marseille’ tarot and ‘Dauphiné’ cards. Apart from the very names, the spread practically in the same countries of both these particular packs would be a good point for further investigation.

Coming back to the Boiseset cards here described, Milan simply happens to be the printing place of the book, which could have been bound in Turin, the town where its contents were more relevant. In either case, Boiseset cards may be used as a gauge of the spread of French patterns into Italy even if, as discussed above, further information is required for reconstructing the exact reasons and conditions of the spread of the Dauphiné portrait.

Notes

1. *Oratione di Francesco Caccia, dottor di leggi, oratore e consigliere di stato del serenissimo duca di Savoia Carl’Emmanuello fatta nella morte della serenissima infanta Donna Caterina d’Austria duchessa di Savoia.* In Milano, Nella Corte regia, per Pandolfo Malatesta, Impressore Reg. Cam. Con licenza de’ Superiori 1598. Ad istanza di Girolamo Bordone e di Pier Martire Locarni, librai.
2. The corresponding data are: Cerimoniale, Funerali, Mazzo 1 (1598). The kind help by Dr. Gattullo has to be acknowledged.
3. W. Willshire, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Playing and Other Cards in the British Museum* London 1876, text communicated by Sylvia Mann.
4. E. Maignien, *Recherches sur les Cartiers et les Cartes a Jouer a Grenoble.* Grenoble 1887.
5. D. Hoffmann, *Die Welt der Spielkarte. Eine Kulturgeschichte.* Leipzig 1972 Fig. 23.
6. H.R. D’Allemagne, *Les cartes à jouer du XIVE au XXe siècle.* Paris 1906.

7. S. Mann, *Collecting Playing Cards*. Worcester 1966 p.72.
8. J.P. Seguin, *Les jeu de cartes*. Paris 1968 p.63.
9. G. Beal, *Playing Cards and Their Story*. Newton Abbot 1975 p.48.
10. W.B. Keller, *A Catalogue of The Cary Collection of Playing Cards in the Yale University Library*. New Haven 1981 vol. 2, p.200.
11. S. Mann, *All Cards on the Table*. Marburg 1990 pp. 13, 42, 171.