

PLAYING CARDS IN LUCCA

Franco Pratesi – 5 ottobre 1995

Introduction

At the present time, Lucca is one of the ten provinces into which the Italian region of Tuscany is divided (the last one, Prato, having been acknowledged only a couple of years ago). Viewed from today, one may find it surprising that the production and the use of cards in Lucca were so relevant as to deserve a treatment of their own, because this is to be expected for cards in an independent state as it was Tuscany or in its chief town, Florence. There are, however, a number of reasons which induced me to carry out research on the history of cards in Lucca.

Historically, it must be realised that Lucca had, indeed, been an independent state for centuries, either as a republic or as a duchy, although not quite among the greatest in Europe. It was the last town of Tuscany to enter the Grand Duchy, in 1847, a few years before the formation of the Italian Kingdom. There are technical reasons too; in particular, several tarot packs from Lucca, preserved from old times, have the number of cards in the pack and some figures which are surprising.

Apart from the keen interest in Lucca cards, which has recently arisen in the prolific environment of English collectors, I could find no specific study on them, except for a short communication, which will be mentioned, and used, in the following text. (1)

A chronological order will be followed below, even if matters gathered are in themselves rather scattered – several original documents, a couple of cards, some laws, a book, and so on. Several different time limits could be chosen with equal relevance; but I have set the limit of this study at about 1861 with the foundation of the Italian Kingdom. To documents recently discovered, I will add, in a few cases some short information on matters already known to the experts.

1. Prince Francesco Antelminelli Castracani Fibbia (1360-1419)

He, of course, is the alleged inventor of Bolognese Tarocchino. Documentary evidence is based on his portrait, made in the 17th century and directly provided with biographical notes. The picture is kept in Bologna, and has been described and discussed in depth, especially thanks to Michael Dummett. (2) This Prince would have been a man with many hereditary titles, as it sometimes occurred in those days: *Principe di Pisa, Monte-giori, e Pietra Santa, e Signore di Fusechio, filio di Giovanni, nato di Castruccio Duca di Lucca... ebbe per moglie Francesca, filia di Giovanni Bentivogli.*

I have looked for information on this personage in the main public libraries and archives of Florence, Pisa, Bologna and Lucca, not only on printed reference texts, but in several archival documents and manuscripts devoted to the history of the main families of the mentioned towns. As for the offspring of Castruccio, the Duke of Lucca, even the list of his own children varies in different documents.

Indeed, there were so many children born in those times, including natural ones, that it is hard to be sure that anybody vaguely mentioned did not really exist. Moreover, Francesco was indeed a recurrent name in the Antelminelli family of Lucca. Some support evidence can also be found, indicating that earlier members of the family were indeed involved in the control of gambling activity in Lucca. Thus, a member of the family, possibly at a different date, could have come to Bologna and brought his experience on the best organisation of gambling and play although I could not find any trace of this particular Francesco, nor of the prince.

A Giovanni, son of Castruccio, can actually be found in some of the family trees. Apparently, he held some public office in Pisa, where it appears to have died in about 1343, thus several years

before the birth of his alleged son Francesco. This was at a time when they had not yet learnt how to keep and use refrigerated seminal cells! Therefore, I am prepared to state that this Francesco never existed and that he was just “produced” in the 17th century by his alleged progeny. He can definitely be eliminated as a famous personage, since a dozen different trees that I have checked show no offspring to Giovanni, son of Castruccio.

2. An example of early play in taverns

The oldest document which I was able to discover about playing cards in Lucca is a play, which equally well might have occurred several centuries later. Domenico di Jacopo da Pietrasanta complains about Cecco da Cascina because he had been very rude in addressing him while he was observing people playing cards in a tavern of Massa Lunense. (3) We have no information on the specific game played, but the date of 12 October 1419 is early enough to be recorded for people playing cards in taverns around Lucca. This is probably the first bystander we know by name in the history of playing cards. We can assume in any case that the game had already spread its tentacles widely.

3. The first law, and some further laws, against card playing

Pellegrini reminds us several documents on playing-cards in Lucca, already discussed in monographs by Salvatore Bongi. (4) The latter historian writes that card-playing was tolerated in Lucca longer than elsewhere, since it was only forbidden the 28 August 1436 (although no reference could be found for previous years). At this date, all card games were prohibited, except for the traditional *della diritta e della ritrosa* and *al trenta*. The reference to *al trenta*, here quoted as a traditional game to be allowed, is early, compared with other towns; the reference to the game *diritta* is instead common in many places.

Diritta, sometimes found with the Latin name *ludus rectus* in the statutes, appears to be the first game ever played with cards in Italy, and from its name it appears that it could be played in two distinct ways. The most straightforward interpretation of these is of a trick game that could be played either to win or to lose, as often occurs in the following centuries. Other interpretations are possible, as for instance on the basis of the conventional hierarchy of the cards themselves, counting more either as their pip value increases, or as it decreases.

The laws on card games were somewhat modified in the following years, until the Lucca Statute of 1539 clearly states *che nessuna persona ardisca o presuma giuocare al giuoco dei naibi o carticelle*. The corresponding fines, however, could not be exacted from women or from males younger than 14 years old. In the statutes of 1558 every gambling game is forbidden, cards included.

4. The two cards by Vincenzo Busdraghi

From Pellegrini’s note, mentioned above, we have other important information, in fact, the kernel of the note itself, about the two ancient cards reproduced in the figure.

A renowned printer in Lucca was Vincenzo Busdraghi, and a detailed description of his works is now available. (5) To begin with, we are informed that Busdraghi established his workshop in 1549 and that he used old printing types initially, until he obtained new ones in 1551.

The presence in his workshop of old type may be compatible with the presence there of old blocks for printing playing-cards. Apparently, he still had the blocks, but they could no longer be used, because cards had been forbidden in the meantime. Pellegrini points out two examples in which Busdraghi used his blocks for printing the corresponding figures. They were used, however, not for playing-cards, but as a decorative item applied to the frontispiece of a document. Of course,

it was not as impressive as the coat of arms of a noble family or the blazon of the town, but it was better than nothing at all, or merely a flourish.

In 1563, the game of cards was forbidden for the third time; thus in 1565 Busdraghi could use his Temperance, 11x7 cm, for decorating a four-page decree on ornaments. By the end of the same year, he again printed a short decree this time on crimes, and we find Justice placed at the top of the frontispiece. Of course, two cards are too few for reconstructing a full pack, but it must be acknowledged that these are very early representative specimens. In particular, both of them happen to be lower than the triumphal cards left in the “typical” Lucca tarot pack, see below (thus adding a possible further reason for their use out of the play).

Pellegrini ends his study with some consideration about the origin of these cards. They could have been engraved some years earlier than the beginning of Busdraghi’s activity. The only local engraver known in those times is Michele Lucchese, also named Lucchesino, who moved to Rome in 1556. Pellegrini adds, however, that other engravers, unknown to us, were probably active at the time.

LEGGI, ET DECRETI del Magnifico Consiglio

GENERALE DELLA CITTÀ DI

LUCCA SOPRA LI MALEFIZII

ET IL PORTARE DELL'ARMI

Fatti dell'anno. 1532. 1540. 1543. 1544. 1545.

1546. 1549. 1550. 1551. 1556. 1558.

& del 1560. liquali non sono nelli Statuti stampati.



In Lucca per Vincenzo Busdragho.

DECRETO

del Magnifico Consiglio

GENERALE DELLA CITTÀ DI

LUCCA SOPRA LI ORNAMENTI

FATTO ADI. XV. DI MARZO

MDLX



In Lucca per Vincenzo Busdragho.

Figure 1 – Decorations printed in 1565 from tarot blocks. Front pages of *Decreti Busdraghi*. (Biblioteca Universitaria di Pisa, A.V.5.35.4/5)

5. The cards used in Casino in 1672

A finely executed manuscript in Lucca National Library contains official resolutions of the local Casino. (6) A single chapter – the last but one – is very interesting since it contains a price-list for playing cards. They are distinguished according to being either new or used, and according to their kind. All the prices are here stated in Grossi.

Minchiate	nuove	8	usate	5
Primiera		5		3
Ombre		7		3
Nuove di Francia da Primiera		4		
Con 8,9,10		5		
Tavolieri		2		
Dadi	ad arbitrio dei giocatori			

The information on French cards may be useful to experts, as well as that on different packs being used for Ombre and Primiera. It must be noted that the game of Minchiate is here quoted at first place and with its traditional name. If a peculiar game and pack for Lucca was used, it has left no trace here. It can thus be supposed either to have been introduced later on, or to have been locally known as, and used instead of, ordinary Minchiate.

6. The composition of the typical Lucca tarot pack

English experts have concluded that a very peculiar tarot pack was used in Lucca (for an updated discussion, see Dummett, (7) pp. 269-272). The general aspect of the surviving cards of this provenance indicate a strong analogy with Minchiate cards. It is not so surprising then, that a local variant was developed in an independent state, with its own production, however small. Nevertheless, the number of cards in the pack is limited, but in way different from every other reduced tarot pack in use elsewhere. In particular, triumphs are limited to twelve; the seven cards from VIII to XV and the five highest and unnumbered ones of the Minchiate pack.

This has been the starting point for my research, after a suggestion by Sylvia Mann. I have not yet been able to find any local explanation, nor even explicit mention of this strangely reduced pack. By the end of the 17th century the most popular card game appears to have been Minchiate, as elsewhere in Central Italy. It seems probable that the reduction of the pack, as proved by packs coming from the 18th century, originated not only within the pack, but also within the game of Minchiate, instead of in classical tarot.

7. Gambling in Bagni di Lucca

In many of the little states into which Italy was formerly split, it was possible to distinguish a different play and gambling environment between the chief town and the province. Thus, usually it was only the chief town, and sometimes only the court, which used the finest cards made. Favourite games could be different, with a much lower following of the fashion games outside the chief town. In the villages, old traditional games were always more successful.

In the case of Lucca, this traditional separation between town and country, or between the main town and smaller ones, is provided with a third element, the gambling environment of Bagni di Lucca. This thermal resort was being visited for cure already in the Middle Ages. The presence of a spa in the neighbourhood of Lucca provided a particular environment for play and gambling. From the earliest times, we have evidence of gambling there. Unlike other places, the activity here was

limited to summer months, but in those few months people put more money into play than in the rest of the year.

Gambling continued at an amateurish level there for centuries, becoming more professional during the second half of the 18th century (when gambling suddenly began to flourish everywhere in Europe), and more so during the 19th century.

I imagine that interesting police records are kept about this particular gambling environment, but I have not yet examined them. I could, however, verify that a remarkable quantity of packs were handled there in the summer, and that, apart from cards, the administration derived a large income from the concession there of the game of Biribisso and, in later years and with smaller amounts, of Biliardo.

8. The Proventi

Unfortunately for us, little evidence remains on the collection of taxes on playing cards in Lucca, at least as far as I could ascertain. The fact is that there was no direct control by the administration on the production or imports of playing cards. As in several other states, this business was leased to contractors who collected duties themselves. Only these contracts, and the corresponding total incomes, have been recorded by the administration.

The concession on playing cards was, in fact, auctioned every third year. The income was entered in the registers alongside that coming from licenses given to taverns, mills, ferries and slaughterhouses, and there is a problem in finding these specific documents. In general yearly balance-sheets, only the total income from licences and concessions is provided, so that these sheets are almost useless for our purpose. (8) Looking for minute-books and drafts, (9) where each inn, mill or slaughterhouse is recorded with all its duties and payments, is difficult enough. But we must search minutely for our item, which can be compared to looking for an individual tavern, from among many dozens listed. I could only find out a fraction of these detailed minute-books; probably they have not been preserved as a whole series. Some relevant records may thus have escaped my attention and some others may have been lost for ever. I have collected following data for concession holders, years and yearly amounts of the contract.

Giuseppe Neri	1716-19	226.5
Antonio Domenico Lucchesi	1719-22	188
Santi Giovannelli	1722-24	188
Santi Giovannelli	1724	288.5
(interrupted after a condemnation)		
Vincentio Benucci	1724-27	620.5
Santi Felice Giovannelli	1727-30	765
idem	1730-33	300.5
....		
Santi Felice Giovannelli	1742-45	375.5
Nicolao Franceschini	1745-48	300.5
idem	1749-51	334.5
Jacopo Antonio Giulianetti	1752-54	750.5
Nicolao Franceschini	1755-60 (2 times)	330.5
Stanislao Alderano Franceschini	1761-66 (2)	300.5
idem	1767-69	245.5
idem	1770-72	200.5
idem	1773-84 (4)	160.5
idem	1785-90 (2)	186.5
idem	1791-99 (3)	160.5
Giovan Battista Lucchesi	1800-02	262

This income was abolished on 13.11.1801 with a legislative decree by the Governo Provvisorio. After that, it was included among the items controlled by Octroi (see following section). Some years later, the old traditional system was restored but I have only found out the records for the first few years:

Rocco Felice Giannini	1812-15	800 franchi
Luigi fu Jacopo Mencacci	1815-18	1032.5

9. Under the Octroi

A large register is kept in the Archivio di Stato of Lucca under the title of Octroi, with records of counts for several concessions, bread, brandy, gunpowder and especially slaughterhouses. We read in the inventories that this register was found on sale and bought by the Archive in the 19th century. A few pages contain items of interest, concerning playing-cards.

On 1.1.1810 the government assumed the control of the establishment in Lucca where cards were produced, and Luigi Maury was named as the director. He belonged to a family of cardmakers, which I was able to follow to Florence until 1818 and in Leghorn for some years later on. We find many other names here, but none appears specifically to correspond to a cardmaker. To begin with, *Bertini cartaro* just sells the paper needed for card production; most of them are either sub-contractors or employees in the business of selling or keeping packs of playing cards.

It is interesting to discover the various packs in use, their number of cards and their price. Cards were divided according to the number of cards in the pack, 52, 40 and 32. We also find corresponding names as *carte da faraone*, *tresette*, *picchetto*, respectively. The names themselves provide a useful hint, indicating that the full pack was preferably used for gambling and not for games of the whist kind, and that the main use of the hombre pack was not (or no longer) for the Spanish game. Within each class, cards were distinguished according to quality. Thus we usually find at least two different prices for the “same” cards; sometimes an even lower price is indicated for faulty cards. In a few cases, better quality is indicated as *fiomite* instead of *bianche*, apparently referring to the back. No trace can be found here of either Minchiate or tarot, probably already an obsolete game.

10. The Beby game

A complete book, entirely devoted to this game, was published. (10) It starts, interesting enough, *Del Giuoco del Beby, sue regole, e modo di giuocarlo. Il Beby è un giuoco di carte in parte di azzardo, ed in parte di scienza inventato da S.S.R.C.L. di B.D. di L.* Thus, the game is of a mixed kind, subject partly to chance and partly to skill. None other than the Duke had invented it: *Sua Signoria Reale Carlo L. di Borbone Duca di Lucca*. Although this game could hardly have become part of the popular traditions of Lucca, the book may be worth summarising here.

Four play two against two; the pack consists of 52 cards (two packs are used alternately). There is some analogy with whist. Cards are dealt face-up until each player receives a suit different from the other players. The two red suits play against the two black ones. In the second pack a card is turned face-up, thus determining the grand-trump (GT) and the dealer (being also the player who does not change place in sitting in front of his partner and between both opponents of the suits of different colour). The original suits of the four players are personal trumps (PTs) for the whole rubber.

Following suit is mandatory – but if void in the suit a player may either trump or discard. Cards are cut to the left and dealt to the right, thirteen all, in three or four batches at dealer’s choice. They cannot be seen before the deal is completed, so that after a wrong deal, any additional card may be taken at random from a hand and awarded to the player missing one.

The GT is changed on each turn of dealing and is determined by turning up a card from the reserve pack by the player at the right of the dealer, the first to play. The PTs remain the same for the rubber. Any trump can be played only if void in the suit led. PTs are won by cards higher in rank among other PTs or any card among GTs. Obviously GTs can only be taken by higher values of the same suit.

The cards rank as follows: Q,K,J,A,10,9 and down to the 2. In points, Q is worth 3, K and J 1, A 2, and double these values for GT suit. Moreover, 1 point is attributed to the 9 of GT, and to each trick. The 5 of GT wins 3 points if taken together (in the tricks of a partnership) with the 9; otherwise it counts nothing. Again for cards of GT present in the tricks, the highest four (Q,K,J,A) count 8, five (Q,K,J,A,9) count 10, six (Q,K,J,A,9,5) count 15. The two last combinations take double value if announced in the hand by a player at the beginning of the game; if he then loses any of these cards, all points melded are lost. The game is stopped whenever the points melded are enough for winning.

Four Qs in hand count 24, but they no longer have their usual values in the tricks. Moreover they cannot be trumped by personal or GTs; if void from the suit dealt and in GT, a player may use a Q for a trump. For cards found in the tricks won by a partnership, 4 points are attributed to four Qs, 1 to four Js, Ks, or As. The ace of GT is called Beby and may be joined – only once – to three of a kind (Q,K,J) scoring correspondingly 4 or 1 points respectively.

A game is sixty points. The losers pay as many units as they lack to 60 and twice that value if they have not reached 30 (*partita doppia*). A slam is paid 100 units without counting the points and the game is continued as it was.

Rubbers are played. If a third game is required, it is somewhat different, particularly because GT is not used. The highest four, five and six-cards are scored for each suit: they count 4, 5, and 6 respectively, or twice this value if melded in hand and won. Four Qs count 4 in tricks and 12 more in hand (and cannot be trumped). Four Ks, Js, or As count 1. Points of melds may be added to those deriving from tricks and the game may be interrupted as soon as the winning score is reached.

Usually three rubbers are played by changing partners so that all play with all – if dealing indicates otherwise one deals again until a suitable partner is determined. Payment occurs by chips, with an agreed upon value in money. Initially each player adds twelve chips to the pot, each subsequent dealer adds two chips. A chip must be added by any player losing in a hand his 5 or 9 of GT, two by the losers of the hand containing the Beby, or both J and Q (or J,K,Q). In the third game two chips are paid by a player losing the A of his PT. The pot at the end of the rubber is divided in two identical parts taken by the winning partners.

If not amended before play begins, misdealing costs to the dealer 12 units to the pot. Ten points are due both from the player and his partner for renounce. These can be added to the score and they may be used for getting over 30 but not over 60: at most, the score may reach 59 and stops there (in case, the same points may be subtracted from the score of the opponents). A game said to be won and then verified not to be, costs 12 points, again to be added to one's own score or subtracted from that of the opponents. The game is then continued. If a card is shown, the opponents may play it at their will. If at the end of the play a card is missing, the hand is declared null and is played again. The book ends with five pages of advice for good play.

11. Under the Florence revenue

Many documents on the production of cards in Tuscany are kept in the Archivio di Stato of Florence. I was unable to find any detailed information about cards in Lucca, but this is not surprising, since Lucca was an independent foreign town. However, the situation changed in 1847, when Lucca entered the Grand Duchy. From 1849 to 1862 the production of Lucca was recorded year after year, and separately for the current packs, together with that of the other cardmakers of Tuscany working (except for one maker in Leghorn) in Florence. During this time, the name of the

Lucca maker is Vincenzo Guidotti, who later (in 1861/62) appeared to be working together with his son Antonio.

The following table shows the production of card packs in Lucca in those years. (Letters following the number of cards in a pack indicate: p = piccole or small, g = grandi or large; m = Minchiate:

Year	52p	40p	32p	52g	40g	32g	m
1849/50	-	2317	176	-	52	119	?
1850	-	1950	144	-	31	104	?
1851/52	-	2988	582	-	83	160	-
1852	-	4546	253	-	76	95	-
1853/54	-	5720	262	-	46	126	-
1854	-	4626	264	-	39	143	-
1857/58	-	5394	115	-	27	74	-
1858	-	5654	-	-	20	96	-
1859	-	5584	-	-	39	40	-
1860	-	6640	-	-	40	37	-
1861/62	-	6530	-	-	15	55	-

During the first months of 1862, the Guidotti family only produced one single kind of card-pack, 40p, the production being 550, 524 and 420 packs for the first three months respectively.

It is interesting to compare this production with that common among Florentine makers during the same years. In general, the production of “grandi” was greater in Florence. Chiari, the only maker to produce every kind shown in the table above, made more “grandi” than “piccole”. In the following times, not surprisingly, we find sometimes “piccole” quoted as “toscani” and “grandi” as “fiorentine”. Usually, however, the production missing in Lucca was very low also in Florence.

Conclusions

In undertaking this study, it was my intention to solve a couple of enigmas, starting with the true identity of Francesco Antelminelli and ending with an explanation, or at least an exact description, of the peculiar tarot pack used in Lucca. I must frankly admit that neither result has been obtained. However, from digging out documents in the archives, some information has been collected which I wanted to communicate, notwithstanding its scattered character. Further research is evidently needed to fulfil the original objects. I don't know whether I shall have an opportunity to go on searching in this way. But whether it be myself or someone else, one reward in so doing is finding Lucca to be a very pleasant town to visit, either for a short stay or for exploration.

References

1. F. Pellegrini, *Le carte da giuoco nella stamperia di Vincenzo Busdraghi*, Bollettino Storico Lucchese, 1932 n.2, p. 132-136.
2. M.Dummett, *The Game of Tarot*, London: Duckworth, 1980 pp.; see also G.Zorli, *Il tarocchino bolognese*, Bologna: Forni, 1992, pp. 27-29.
3. *R.Archivio di Stato di Lucca*, (Regesti III, pt. II, p. 124), Pescia 1933.
4. S.Bongi, *Bandi lucchesi*, Bologna, 1863.
5. L.Matteucci, *La Bibliofilia*, 18 (1917) 225-239. 328-356, 19 (1918) 26-39.
6. Bib. Naz. Lucca, MS 2707: *Deliberazioni del Casino*
7. M.Dummett, *Il mondo e l'angelo*, Bari, 1994.
8. ASLU, Direzione Generale delle Finanze, *Bilanci*.
9. Such as Proventi, in the series, *Offizio sopra l'Entrate*, 420 ff.

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Additions and Corrections

This article appeared in our last issue, and the following alterations apply:

p.134: . . . , but this is to be = , as it might be [?]
 . . . have certain cards = have a specific/given/peculiar number of cards [the very number of cards existing in the pack is meant]

. . . it is hard to be sure that everybody mentioned actually existed = it is hard to be sure that anybody mentioned did actually not exist [people mentioned in family trees did exist; people mentioned anywhere could actually have existed even if not recorded in family trees]

p.135: . . . is a play = is a situation

. . . tentacles = use, adoption [?]

p.136: . . . earlier than those of Busdraghi = earlier than they had been acquired or used by Busdraghi

. . . used playing cards = playing cards in common use

. . . usate 5 = usate 4

. . . indicate = indicates

p.137: . . . can = could

p.139: . . . alternately). There is some = alternately — with some

p.141:References

5. L. Matteucci, *Saggio di un catalogo delle edizioni lucchesi di Vincenzo Busdrago (1549-1605)*, La Bibliofilia, 18 (1917) pp. 225-239, 328-356, 19 (1918) pp. 26-39.

6. Biblioteca Nazionale di Lucca, MS 2707: *Deliberazioni del Casino*.

8. Bilanci, in *Direzione Generale delle Finanze* and in other series.

9. . . . and Proventi 1806-15 in: *Computisteria dello Stato*, 193.

Figure Caption

Decorations printed in 1565 from tarot blocks. Front pages of *Decreti Busdraghi*. (Biblioteca Universitaria di Pisa: A. V. 5. 35. 4/5).

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Figure 2 – Additions published in *The Playing Card*, Vol. XXIV No.6 (1996) 196.