

# THE IMPERIAL AND PAPAL HIERARCHIES AND THEIR MERCENARIES

The allegories illustrated in Simone's twenty-two miniatures, if connected to a series of numbered cards would have constituted an educational pastime and a valid remedy capable of overcoming the consequences of games of hazard.

The 31<sup>st</sup> dialogue of the *De Remediis* advises *to teach by playing* and the two Tuscan friends hoped that if they mixed noble concepts with the strategies of chess and the rules of chance, that govern dice, it would encourage more people to read them, as if they were two doctors who knowing they have to administer a bitter medicine, add honey to it.

As both of them loathed all games of hazard, they did not realise what an explosive contrivance they were putting together, as they carefully added their sweetening!

The allegories had been painted on cards, so the numbered images had to be transferred onto cards as well, to be held in ones hand, hidden from the other players, so that the ability, necessary when playing chess and the luck, indispensable when throwing dice, which had, until then, been kept strictly separate, were suddenly inextricably combined, originating a game that immediately fascinated the players, entranced by the infinite strategies it opened up.

**King, Queen, Knave (see the German *Knabe*=boy, son) and Knight of coins in the Bembo pack. Remark the uniform cloth used for the clothes of the royal family, whilst the Knight, as in the other three suits, wears clothes of different cloth and bears different devices.**

The poetic message, that Francesco and Simone so wanted to spread was immediately ignored. Alas, in the hopes of extinguishing the burning passion for hazard, they had lit an even more devouring fire!

The *Triumphs* and the other philosophical allegories, linked to the numbered cards spread rapidly. People noticed almost immediately how much more exciting it was to play with the numbered cards by themselves, separating them from the rest of the pack and inventing new games on the way.

Only the noble and more cultured classes, although playing with the numbered cards, continued to use packs with seventy-eight cards, as an intellectual pastime, just as the poet had hoped.

To make the game more attractive, Francesco and Simone, drawing on the game of chess, had devised a decreasing series of numeral values, in order to allegorise the hierarchies of power subject to the pope and the emperor, and maintain the scheme, based on seven and its multiples, that governed the pack.

## IMPERIAL MINT AND CHALICE OF SALVATION

The imperial administrative hierarchies, symbolised by coins, were made up of the King, Queen and Knave - prince and commander of the armies - and then by the Knight, followed by ten armed men (vassals on horseback and their followers on foot). The series thus comprised fourteen cards. The coins represented the right of the state to mint coinage, the state treasury, the banking echelons, the various European consortiums serving the emperor and his subjects.

Another series of fourteen cards, on the other hand, illustrated the hierarchies faithful to the pope, bearing the symbol of the chalice or cup, which alluded to the international array of prelates, who administered the sacrament of Communion, upholding the Church.

The chalices and the coins were to represent the unarmed formations commanded by the rulers of the destinies of Europe. In France, the coins, in time, were simplified and changed into diamonds, or bricks (symbolising the sovereign asset: land and houses), i.e. *carreaux*, in French, in Italian *quadri* or *mattoni* (squares or bricks), in English, the term *diamonds* indicated a highly transportable and universally acceptable form of currency. The chalices were simplified and changed to hearts, perhaps as an allusion to the power exercised by the prelates on peoples' hearts, i.e.: on the souls of the faithful.

Hearts and diamonds were painted red, the colour of living blood, which runs through our veins and makes every activity possible.

## GLADIIS ET FUSTIBUS

During the years in which disorder, war and the crumbling of certainties, led society to desire a return to social order (the Carolingian era in Italy, France and Germany or the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Spain, when the bases of the Spanish monarchy were being constructed), the support for the new system was so heartfelt, that poets and musicians composed songs like the *Chanson de Roland*, *El Poema del Mio Cid*, etc., followed in England by the tales of Arthur and his knights – paying tribute to the feudal order and the military classes.

**Detail from the Tryptich of St. Laurence (workshop of Lorenzo Monaco, 1407), Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon.**

**Ace of Cups from the Castello Ursino pack - Ace of Cups from the Visconti pack.**

Petrarch and Simone did not foster such illusions. They had seen how the power-holders of their own times used the companies of mercenaries solely to increase their own wealth, without any thought for their subjects or, in the case of the popes, for the faithful. Too often had they seen the horrible reality of war, to praise it.

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**PETRARCA SIMONE MARTINI E LE CARTE:** Rolando Fusi e Rosalynd Pio – Editore Bonechi Ed. il Turismo – Firenze

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(From *Familiarum Rerum XXII 14*) - To Peter of Poitiers, on the changing of customs and specially of the military art

*...Thou knowest Scipio's edict, issued near Numantia; an edict that was famous and well known, whereby prostitutes, women sutlers, and small shopkeepers were expelled from his camp, which is to say, pleasure was sent into exile and virtue was called to his aid, and with virtue came victory. He imitated Metellus in Numidia, using the same council and the same object: he banished pleasure and restored strength to his army and thereby led the Roman ensigns to a victory they had long forgotten how to achieve. Do not expect me to tell thee what discipline reigns amongst our militia, nor what customs and order prevail in the camps, neither can I tell you of the prudence of their leaders or of the vigour and moderation of the soldiers. Thou wouldst think thou hadst entered not the abode of heroes, but the brothel of prostitutes and the taverns and bawdy houses of procurers. It is truly thus, nor does the barbaric horde get honestly drunk on wine; if the most outlandish drinks do not abound, they call on famine as a pretext, or scarcity or unquenchable thirst, which is supposed to excuse their escape and their dedication to drink. This is the progress of military art: from arms, military ambition has risen to their cups; it does not matter how they fight, but how they drink and get drunk; in this, allied to their enemies, they compete day and night with their squadron members, and the glorious victor is he who can drink deeper and offer more wine... What canst thy hope from such institutions, such discipline? The visible effects are truly worthy of drunkards.*

*This breed of robbers – and the unhappy Italians do not know or pretend not to know – dwells in our country not to fight, but to plunder and drink: an ancient sickness. We read that, drawn by our good harvests and above all by wine, this race came in ancient times to Italy; unfortunately they are still doing it and encounter on our threshold no enemies but imitators of their madness. Wherefore, little by little, everything degenerates, our homeland's dignity, our language, our customs, our way of living in peace and war....*

*How can we marvel if authority in our country is dead and buried, freedom oppressed, peace in our world does not last and war has no end, if we cannot even keep ourselves quiet, nor win with such mercenaries? How can we vanquish those who do not want to win, but consider winning a defeat? They are horrified by the idea of returning home; and who can blame them? For they have enjoyed the taste of Italy and fear the end of the war which would put an end to their drunkenness and licentiousness. Although, even if they wished to, they could not vanquish the enemy, vanquished as they are and captured and oppressed and disarmed by their own vices, having become degenerate slaves of their lust...our armies, full of thieves and robbers, plunder their allies, more than their enemies and trust more to flight than to valour, more to spurs, than to their swords, they are readier to deceive than fight, and prefer to break trust than wound the enemy. As there is no Senate in their country to punish crime, or chastise cowardice ... therefore no misdeed is punished and the greatest impunity and prizes are granted to the most unworthy.*

*Innocence is mocked; abstinence takes the name of fear, faith is stupidity, whereas deceit is called prudence and ability; modesty labelled as miserliness, frugality - avarice, chastity is derided as rustic...And if the leaders are drunk, our soldiers bibulous, what else can they do but what is customary after a drinking bout? Snore, perspire, not the honoured sweat of hard work, but*

*feverish sweat, like womanish hirelings, like mountebanks. They age in their tents, dedicating themselves to jokes, dinners, dice; they plunge into pleasure, surround themselves with droves of whores...each is his own leader. They love stench, idleness, the name of war, to which they owe their salary, but they hate war itself...Lazy, ignorant, fearful, loquacious, they have arms and horses, not to serve their masters, not to defend their homeland, but for their own gain, pomp or amusement.*

*One should really marvel that such causes do not produce effects, as it cannot be that, with such leaders, with such soldiers, with such customs, ruin be not near and that in the meantime, whilst it delays its arrival, we be not torn by endless war, peace be dead, virtue exiled and the State, torn apart by the hands of its own citizens and by foreigners, be enslaved and in misery.*

Such is Petrarch's hatred against the gratuitous brutality and cruelty of mercenary troops, that he draws on the Gospel of St. Matthew (Ch. 26 v.47) where the military contingent, armed with **swords and staves**, are described arresting Jesus in the garden of Getsemane, thus comparing the thousands of poor "Christians" massacred by the mercenary hordes, to the Christ, insulted and killed.

In the cards, the armed men *cum gladiis et fustibus*, were mere "numbers" to be tossed into the hurly-burly of war, with no thought as to whether they were to survive or be slaughtered.

In chess, pawns are sacrificed to protect more important pieces. The decision to include in the pack two opposing armies at the service of the Empire and the Church – the two Suns around which their whole educational pastime revolved - was undoubtedly inspired by this ancient, widely known game, which reflects the military values of all eras.

**King, Knave, and Knight of swords in the Bembo pack: the sumptuous clothes of the unarmed contingents are here replaced by steel armour. Here too, the device born by the Knight differentiates the vassal from the royal family.**

In the Italian regional packs, the mercenary troops maintained their medieval appearance, armed with swords and staves, i.e.: pikes or lances. In the French cards, on the other hand, swords very soon became *piques*, which the English called *spades*, probably recalling the broad spade-shaped swords, that were five fingers wide at the hilt, called *cinquedea*, that were very much in vogue towards the end of the 1300s.

The staves or lances were changed into three-leaf clover or fleur de lys crosses (perhaps derived from the Guelph or French lilies), known in Italian as *fiori*, in French, as *trèfles* and in English as *clubs*, probably because the shape recalled that of the maces used for splitting the helmets of the enemy. These new symbols were painted black - the colour of dark death.