

# The Sola-Busca Tarocchi

## Astral Imagery Encoded in Trump XIII Catone

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The Sola-Busca is a Ferrarese tarocchi produced at the court of the House of Este, Dukes of Ferrara, Reggio and Modena, and dating from 1491. It is the earliest complete deck of tarocchi cards in existence and its fine detail is attributable to its production from copper engraving plates. The Sola-Busca disguises its true import beneath historical narratives derived from Plutarch, Livy and the Alexander Romance literary tradition; but this carefully prepared ‘surface’ has been rendered unstable and polysemous by the systematic use of ambiguity in the spelling of names and the presence of symbolic counters that point towards deeper, occulted levels of meaning.

In keeping with the deck’s polysemous construction, trump XIII Catone can be construed as a reference to the Roman jurists Cato the Elder or his great grandson, Cato the Younger. Only the presence of a severed head inclines our judgment to favour Cato the Elder since in his ‘Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans’ Plutarch relates how, when young, Marcus Portius Cato (the Elder) visited his friend, Lucius Valerius Flaccus, a consular governor, and, out of curiosity, prevailed upon him to behead one of the condemned criminals so that he could watch. As is so often the case with this deck, the narratives associated with the historical figure are insufficient to fully account for the imagery used to depict them. This partial separation of imagery and narrative opens the way for the deck’s designer to introduce a second and even a third narrative layer within one compact image.

In the case of XIII Catone the historical narrative fails to establish a convincing rationale for the subject’s winged boots, the various martial items and the grotesquely large and impaled head at the figure’s feet. We therefore need to step away from the historical narrative and re-appraise the image once more. The head on the ground is much larger than any human head and is therefore suggestive of some mythical creature. The spear, passing through the left eye in such a



*Trump XIII Catone*

prominent way, serves to draw our attention to it. Why is it highlighted in this way? The top right hand corner of the card depicts a star shedding its influence upon the scene. We can sense the feeling it imparts by the grim and malefic mood evoked by the imagery. Our clues, then, are the act of decapitation, the presence of the inhumanly large head, its pierced left eye, the winged boots, martial items at the figure's feet and the malefic nature of the star's energies.

The medieval astrological text, *'The Book of Hermes on the Fifteen Fixed Stars'* allows us to interrogate the possible candidates from amongst the fifteen fixed, 'Behenian' or 'root' stars. When we review their attributes Caput Algol stands out as the most likely candidate. Not only is its influence considered highly malefic, its name is derived from that of the ancient Babylonian demonic entities called *Gallu* via the Arabic *Al-Ghul*, meaning the "head of the ogre". It is from this word that we derive the word 'ghoul' for a class of evil, blood drinking, demonic entities. Caput Algol is also known as the 'Demon Star' or 'Satan's Head'. In astrological lore the star is associated with the ancient hero and demigod, Perseus. Perseus famously killed and decapitated the serpent-haired Gorgon, Medusa, whose gaze turned people into stone. The second-century BCE astronomer and mathematician, Hipparchus, made a separate constellation out of the stars around Algol to represent Medusa's head. It was usual for the whole group to be referred to as 'Perseus and the Gorgon's Head.' In this arrangement Algol is represented by the left eye of Medusa – the eye penetrated by the spear in XIII Catone.

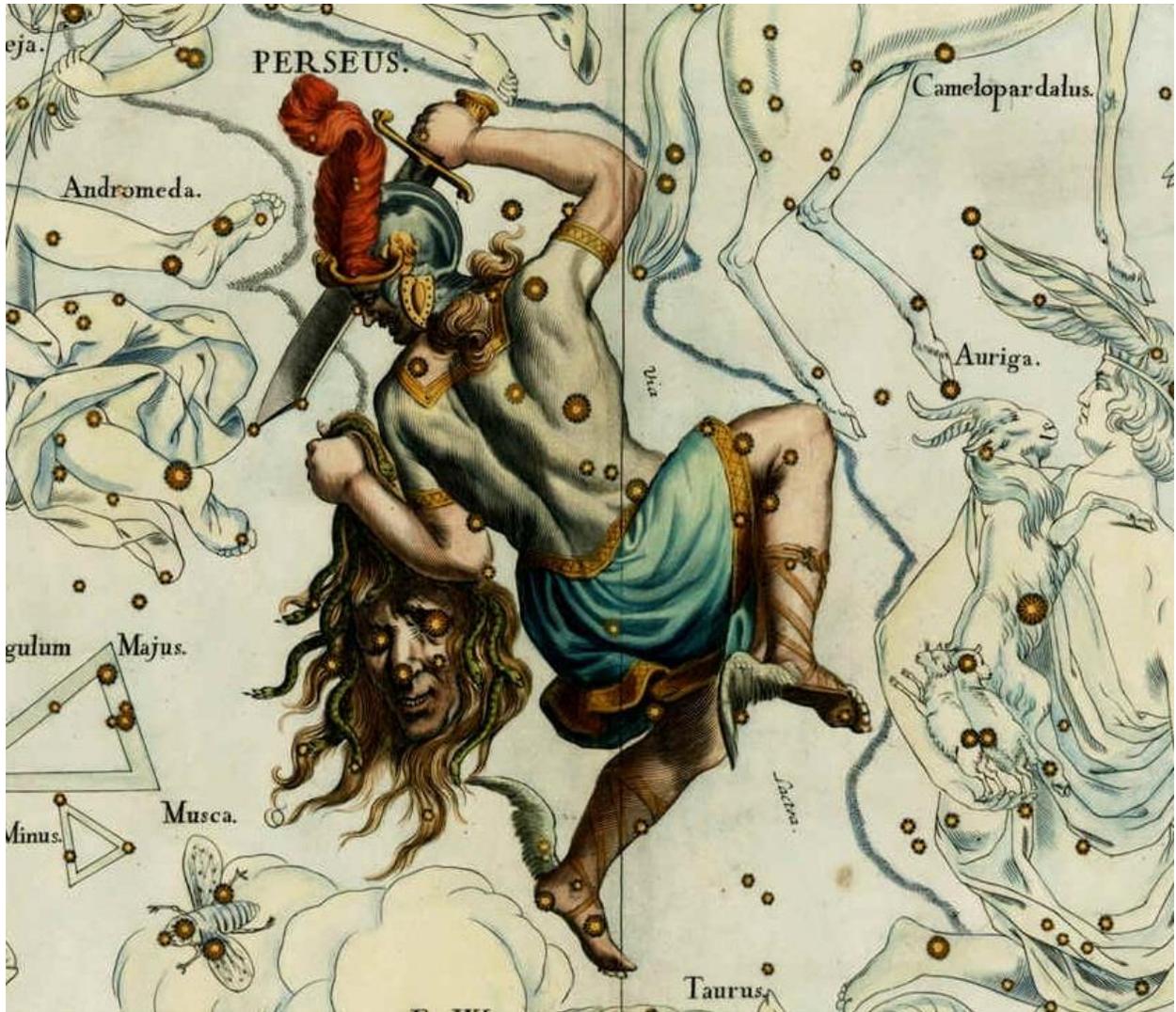
Because of Perseus' divine paternity (he was one of Zeus' sons) for his task the gods equipped him with a helmet of invisibility, a mirrored shield, a sword (called a *harpe*), a bag and winged sandals that would allow him to fly. This equipment is just visible around the figure's feet (*below*). Following this chain of associations, we can confirm that the standing figure depicted on XIII Catone is a coded reference to the constellation Perseus (*below*).

Although the constellation Perseus is an important one in its own right, the card's imagery appears to have been designed to accentuate the subsidiary constellation called the Gorgon's Head.



*(above) Detail from XIII Catone*

Within the grotesque, inhumanly large, decapitated head of Medusa, our attention is drawn, ineluctably, to the speared left eye. Whilst the group of stars that constitutes the Gorgon's Head was considered to be purely evil, its main star, Caput Algol, is likened to the most malefic combination of Saturn and Mars imaginable; it is the most unfortunate and dangerous star in the heavens with a reputation for causing violence and unnatural death. It is significant that the designer has made such a, quite literally, pointed reference to the most evil source of astral energies in the heavens. How can we account for this fact?



*(above) Perseus Constellation. Algol is the highlighted left eye in the head of Medusa.*

*Johannes Hevelius, Johannes Hevelii Prodromus astronomiae (1690).*

Before the Council of Trent, the inauguration of the counter-Reformation and the establishment of European wide inquisitorial activity, the practice of magic was pervasive at every level of society across Europe. The particular form of magic prevalent amongst the Renaissance elite was

learned ritual magic utilising planetary and astral forces. Amongst the elites, astrology and magic provided an essential component of their strategy to survive and prosper in violent and turbulent times. The magical realisation of specific material outcomes required the assistance of those daemonic beings who were naturally suited to offensive operations - in other words, demons. The result was that at least one branch of elite Renaissance magic tended to manifest in dark and sorcerous forms, and it is this form that the deck uniquely captures. The principal magical use of Caput Algol would be in operations of attack sorcery wherein it would be used to 'fix' the malefic intent of the sorcery in place and so magnify the intensity and duration of its effects.

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