

# The Sola-Busca Tarocchi

## An Encoded Saturnian Theme

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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.

Trump XVIII Lentulo depicts a figure placing a large, freestanding liturgical candle upon an altar with his left hand, whilst his right hand grips his beard. The figure is richly dressed in a long, single-piece gown whose opulence stands out amongst the austere military-style dress of the majority of trumps. The strange arrangement of the head covering is suggestive of an ancient cap known as a pilleus rather than hair. What does this attention grabbing display portend? In Book XIV of Martial’s Epigrams, *On the Presents Made to Guests at Feasts*, we learn,

*“Now, while the knights and the lordly senators delight in the festive robe (Latin: synthesibus), and the cap of liberty (Latin: pillea) is assumed by our Jupiter; and while the slave, as he rattles the dice-box, has no fear of the Aedile ... what can I do better, Saturn, on these days of pleasure, which your son himself has consecrated to you”.*

*Martial. Epigrams. 14.1.*

Martial, in describing the typical social features of Saturnalia highlights the ‘festive robe’ (*synthesibus*) an ornate, single piece garment worn solely at dinner parties and of such rich material as to be only affordable by the wealthy. It was based upon a Greek pattern, called a *synthesis* and its daytime use was frowned upon except during the festival of Saturnalia when, in



*Trump XVIII Lentulus*

line with the carnivalesque reversal of order and status that characterised that festival, it was routinely worn during daytime. Likewise, the ‘cap of liberty’ (*pillea*) was an ancient form of headwear known as a *pilleus*. Servants, who were not ordinarily permitted headwear, were allowed to wear a *pilleus* during Saturnalia so that it came to be specifically associated with the festival. One of the sources of this imagery is Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*,

*“the Romans called their priests flamines, from the close-fitting piloi or caps, which they wear upon their heads, and which have the longer name of pilamenai”*

*Plutarch. The Life of Numa. 1.7.5.*

A red cord or *vittae* tied around the *pilleus* distinguished its wearer as one of the *Flamines*, the Roman priests who served the official cults.<sup>1</sup> In XVIII Lentulus the tendency of the cap and the beard to merge arises from the artist’s colouration, not from the texture of the cap and beard which are, in fact, quite distinct. In addition, during the festival candles of various kinds were exchanged as gifts and placed upon altars.<sup>2</sup>

XVIII Lentulo has been specifically designed to display the main social features of the week-long festival of Saturnalia. Of particular interest is the figure’s knotted belt. The texture of the belt and the configuration of the knot have been rendered so as to be reminiscent of a large serpent. The artists intent is clearer when we examine the relevant portion of an unpainted card (below). The congruence of this detail with the deck’s larger Saturnian themes only becomes apparent when we examine the earliest Orphic theogonies. We find the relevant portion cited by the second century CE Church Father, Athenagoras of Athens,

*“... how Zeus’ mother, Rhea, sought to avoid his advances by changing into a dragon; but Zeus, also changing into a dragon, bound her with what is called the Herculean knot of which the rod of Hermes is a symbol”*

*Athenagoras of Athens, Apology, 20.*

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<sup>1</sup> Sebesta, J.L. & Bonfante, L. (eds.) (2001). *The World of Roman Costume*. p.52. Note 41.

<sup>2</sup> Macrobius. *Saturnalia*. Book I:7.32.



Detail of XVIII Lentulo

The fifth to sixth century CE Neoplatonist and last *scholarch*, or head, of the Platonic Academy of Athens, Damascius, highlighted the metaphysical significance of this myth,

*“Ananke was united with the Dragon-Serpent Cronos, being of the same nature, or Adrastea”*

*Damascius. On the First Principles, 123.*

In identifying Rhea in her serpentine form as Ananke or Adrastea, Damascius reveals her metaphysical significance as a representation of the cosmic force of Necessity, whose daughters are the three Moirae or Fates. This grouping is familiar from Plato’s Myth of Er in which Ananke or Necessity appears as the ‘spindle of necessity’, a force penetrating and affecting every level of reality; and whose daughters spin, measure and cut the life thread of every living being.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Plato. Republic. 10.616b-617d.

Athenagoras identified the serpentine or Herculean knot as the symbolic basis for the ‘rod of Hermes’ or Caduceus. We find this identification expanded upon by in the fifth century CE by Macrobius,

*“It is apparent that the Sun is worshipped in the guise of Mercury from his Caduceus; the Egyptians designed it in the form of two intertwined serpents, one male and one female. They are bound together in the middle by the so-called knot of Hercules, their heads join in a kiss whilst their tails end in wings.”*

*Macrobius. Saturnalia. 1.19.16-17.*

We are left to ponder the significance of this compact imagery within the context of the deck’s overarching worldview. Whilst Saturnalia is usually described as a week of role reversal, joy and fun for all classes, its underlying significance belies this upbeat assessment. It is usual for us to identify Saturn with the celestial body of that name; but the Saturn referenced in the deck is a far more ancient demiurgic deity. In the third century BCE, under extreme pressure from the Carthaginian general Hannibal who had fought his way from Spain to the heel of Italy, and under the threat of an attack on Rome itself, the rites of Saturn had been expanded as an *evocatio* of the Carthaginian god with whom Saturn was identified, the notorious Ba’al Hammon or Ammon; a deity revered throughout North Africa and the Levant, whose rites featured the distinctive form of sacrifice known as *molk*, the immolation of small children, from which the Biblical name Moloch was derived.

Livy describes how, in fear of what might befall Rome, new rites were instituted,

*“Finally – the month was now December – victims were slain at the temple of Saturn in Rome, a feast was laid out for the gods, another for the public, and for a day and a night throughout the City the people cried out “Saturnalia”; the day was declared a holiday in perpetuity.”*

*Livy. The History of Rome. Book 22. Chapter 1.19-20.*

In the midst of the despair occasioned by the destruction of the Roman army at the battle of Cannae, and after consulting the Sibylline books to determine the most appropriate course of

action, two couples, one Greek and one Gallic, each consisting of a man and a woman, were buried alive in a stone lined chamber. In parallel, a Vestal virgin, accused of unchastity was also buried alive.<sup>4</sup> The gladiatorial contests that used to be held in the Forum as an integral part of the traditional funeral rites of distinguished leaders were transformed out of all recognition by being transferred to the arena as a regular feature of the week-long celebration of Saturnalia. The fourth century CE poet, Ausonius, commented,

*“it is well known that gladiators once fought in the forum during funerals; now, towards the end of December, the arena claims its prey from those who appease the one who bears the sickle with their blood.”*

*Ausonius. Ecolgues. On the Roman Festivals. XXIII.*

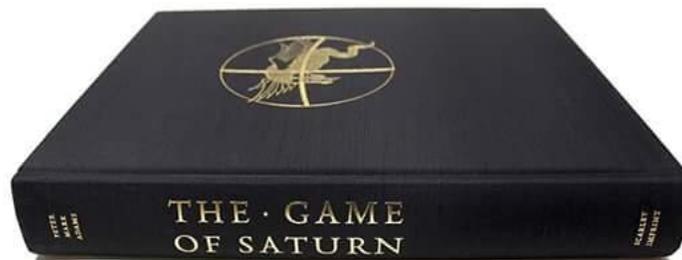
The deck’s Saturnianism references this far more ancient deity, also known as Kronus, and not the celestial body, and its planetary intelligence, that we commonly refer to as Saturn.

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<sup>4</sup> Livy Book 22.55-57.