

**8th Gaetano Cozzi Prize for studies on the history of games, 2024**

FRANCESCO BORGHERO

*Il dado e il dogma. Le normative sul gioco d'azzardo nella legislazione degli ordini monastici benedettini di Camaldoli, Vallombrosa e Monte Oliveto (XIII-XVI secolo)*

(Dice and dogma. The rules governing gambling in the legislation of the orders of Benedictine monks in Camaldoli, Vallombrosa and Monte Oliveto, 13th-16th century)

Treviso,

14th November 2024

**Citation**

The study submitted by Francesco Borghero, *Il dado e il dogma. Le normative sul gioco d'azzardo nella legislazione degli ordini monastici benedettini di Camaldoli, Vallombrosa e Monte Oliveto, XIII-XVI secolo* (Dice and dogma. The rules governing gambling in the legislation of the orders of Benedictine monks in Camaldoli, Vallombrosa and Monte Oliveto, 13th-16th century) examines the relationship between ludicity and the religious world, with special reference to the contemplative monastic orders. In the Middle Ages, the prohibition of gambling, in particular, applied without exception to the whole of the *societas christiana*, obviously including ecclesiastics. The author reconstructs the discipline covering ludic matters in Christian morals and ethics and the specific reasons for banning it amongst the clergy. Already, the Church Fathers pointed out the ontological incompatibility between Christian identity and games of chance, which were devilish by their very nature and therefore “closely akin to the practice of ordeals”. Imperial and canonical bans, added to in the Carolingian period by interdictions laid down by synods, councils and capitularies, were expression of the need to ensure a distance between clerical *status* and the laity with their worldly ways, including gambling. In the 12th and 13th centuries, theological reflection found expression in a “fundamental contrast in the ethical status of the ludic universe, based on a distinction between games of chance and games of skill”, between licit and illicit games. From the 12th century on therefore, the playing of games was closely disciplined for the *societas christiana* in general and for the clergy in particular. Gambling continued to be banned, especially in canon law, and the prohibition was reinforced, for those committed to the contemplative life, by the constitutions of the monastic orders. In order to outline this “dialectic process between the *ius proprium* of the Benedictine orders and the ecclesiastic *ius commune*”, the author examined the constitutions in force at Camaldoli, Vallombrosa and Monte Oliveto. They confirm the proscription of gambling (dice games, but also board games and chess) but they do so because it involves the *maneggio* or handling of money, which, as Francesco Borghero emphasises on several occasions, in fact refers to the *detenzione* or holding of private property and is therefore incompatible with the principle of property held in common, which is one of the tenets of monastic life. The author, however, does not neglect to underline that early mediaeval rule-book sources were already stating that the association of *ludus-clericus* should be one of “moderation [...] and that the happy



medium should be the standard to which the man of God should conform". This allowed room, therefore, for the playing of 'moderate' games to be an identifying characteristic of the man of God. Referring then to the 'Dresden school' of Gert Melville, the author recalls the puzzle games documented in monastic circles from the 8th century, and associated with the manifestation of *humilitas* and *caritas*. And in fact contemplative communities considered some games in the light of aids to the acquisition of the virtues and to intellectual diversion, both as a path to knowledge of God. By the middle of the 12th century there emerged a *ludus religiosus* in Cistercian circles, "a forerunner of Aristotelian-Thomistic theological reflection on *ludus licitus*". A *ludus licitus* which, in monastic circles, took on a ritual character and a cultic and religious quality, converting itself from a game of chance to a game of skill and knowledge; *iocus monachorum* legitimised because it offered a way to achieve virtue. Characteristics and qualities, as the author concludes, that perhaps make the definition of games arrived at from the 20th century unsatisfactory, at least for an understanding of what was happening in monastic and religious circles in the Middle Ages.

With methodological precision and critical clarity, Francesco Borghero has revealed the complex and dynamic relationship between the religious world and games (not only games of chance) during the Middle Ages. He has done so through detailed examination of the rules and moral and religious attitudes in force at the time, pointing out key moments and, most importantly, for the first time investigating the ludic dimension of a number of late mediaeval monastic communities.

For these reasons the Selection Board for the eighth *Gaetano Cozzi Prize for studies on the history of games*, 2024 has decided to award a Special Mention to the study by Francesco Borghero and to recommend that it be published in the forthcoming issue no. 30 of the journal *Ludica. Annali di storia e civiltà del gioco*.

The Selection Board, comprising members of the Scientific Committee  
of *Ludica. Annali di storia e civiltà del gioco*:

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