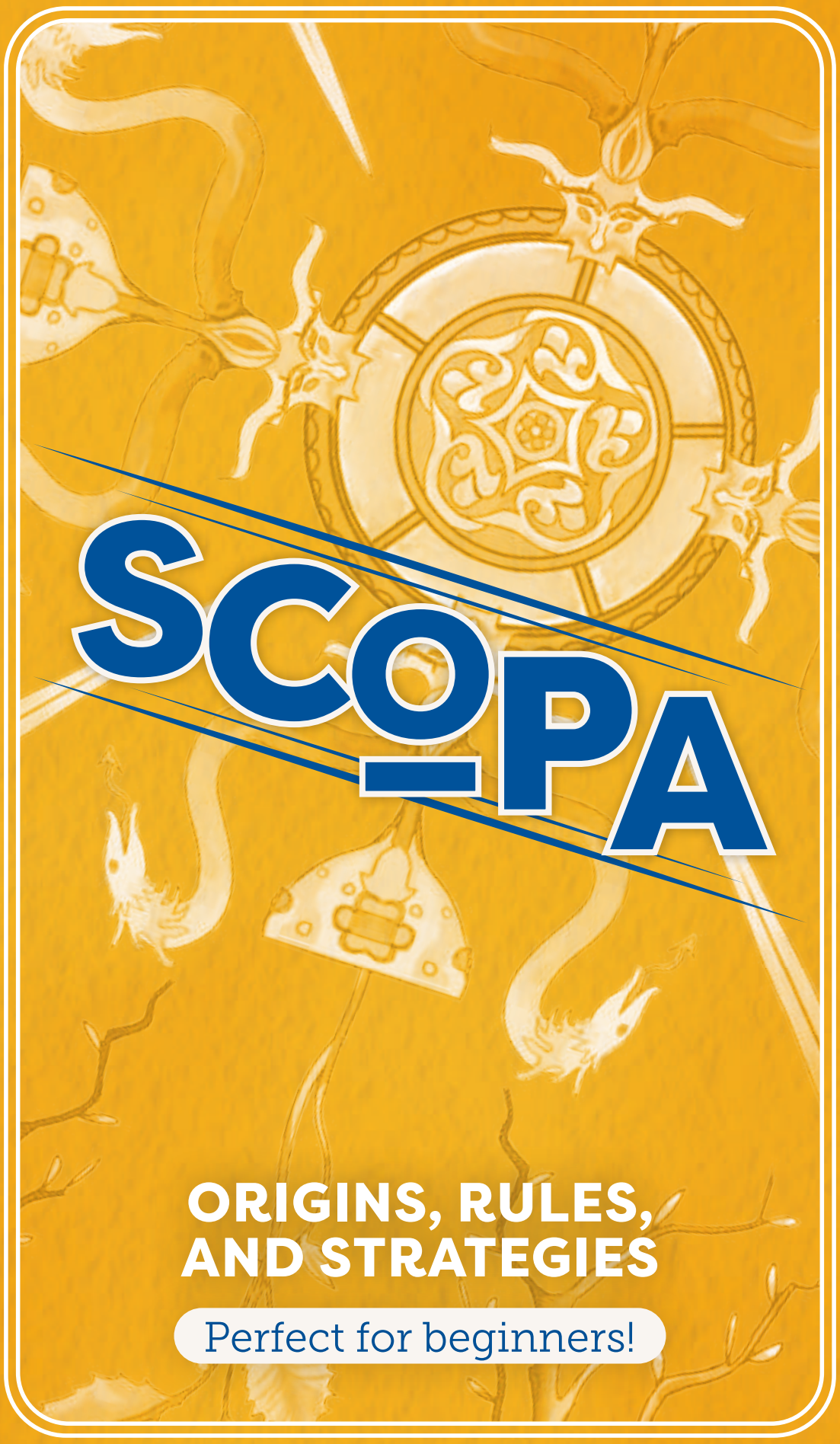
SCOPA
ORIGINS, RULES,
AND STRATEGIES
Perfect for beginners!

A TRADITIONAL ITALIAN CARD GAME THAT COMBINES STRATEGY AND LUCK!

Be the first to gain 11 points using "majorities" and the "scopa!"

Scopa is a trick-taking game that subtly combines logic and risk-taking! Between reason and chance, give in to the brilliance of the scopa!

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF CARD GAMES
BY THE FRENCH PLAYING CARD MUSEUM

The origins of card games remains a mystery. The paper and printing came from China, but the idea of associating multiple series of cards into hierarchies may have originated elsewhere. Some card fragments found in Egypt (estimated from the 13th century), a game from the end of the 15th century preserved in the Topkapi Palace Museum (in Istanbul), and the mention of "Saracen cards" in Italian texts point to the **Middle East as a possible origin**. However, it is indeed **in Europe** where we find the **first mention of "playing cards" in the 1370s**, and where we find the oldest examples. It is also in Europe that this type of game experienced the greatest growth.

Cards added a **new tactic** to the world of tabletop games: bluffing, as well as countless combination possibilities. It's astonishing to imagine the vast diversity of games that were designed, modified, and played on quays and sidewalks, in gambling dens, inns, and aristocratic salons. **In just a few decades, card games became widespread.** Their presence is recorded in 15th century Egypt, then in China. From the 16th century onwards, an original cardmaking tradition developed in Persia, then India, with sets of eight or ten suits painted entirely by hand. At the same time, Japan adopted European cards, which were introduced to the region by Portuguese merchants.

Since they adapt to all kinds of uses (play, of course, but also divination, art, education, etc.), traditional playing cards have always been able to reinvent themselves while remaining faithful to their original form.

HISTORY OF SCOPA
BY THE FRENCH PLAYING CARD MUSEUM

It's possible that Scopa derives from *culbas*, the "familiar game" described by La Marinière in his 1659 work *La Maison des Jeux Académiques*, a general collection of all the entertaining games to enjoy and pass the time with pleasantly, which had moderate success in the French court. What these two games have in common is players revealing cards on the table that they collect using other cards of the same value (scopa means "broom" in Italian).

Played in Naples in the 17th century, Scopa became the national game of Italy in the following century. It then traveled a lot. Some variants can be found in the Canton of Ticino in Switzerland (where Italian is spoken), but also in Hungary, the Maghreb countries (where it is called "Schkouba"), in Spain (called "escoba"), and even in Corsica. Alphonse Daudet mentioned it in his short story "Le Phare des Sanguinaires" (*Lettres de Mon Moulin*, 1869): "The Corsicans (...) spend all their days in the kitchen playing endless games of Scopa, only stopping to relight their pipes with a serious air and use scissors to chop large leaves of green tobacco in the palm of their hands..."

In short, this Italian game was played wherever cards with Latin suits (cup, sword, staff, and coin) were used. One of the most famous variants of

Scopa is “il scopone scientifico,” the name that Italian filmmaker Luigi Comencini gave to one of his most famous films. In France, where this game is little known, the film was called The Old Woman’s Money. It is the story of a countess who gambles huge sums at Scopa against two impoverished people, Peppino and Antonia, living in a Roman slum. To them, gambling was a chance to change the fortune that society did not grant them.

SCOPA IN POP CULTURE

As we have seen, Scopa has a rich history that has spanned centuries. It has long been anchored in Mediterranean culture, so much so that the *sette bello* (7 of Coins), the trump card in all variants of the game, has become a symbol of luck and success in Italy. It is therefore not surprising to see some people wearing this lucky charm to try to attract the favors of destiny:

- The grand motorcycle champion Giacomo Agostini, like many Italian racers, cut his teeth on the high-performance motorcycle from Morini called "Settebello."

- The TEE (Trans Europe Express) was one of the icons of Italy's 1960s economic miracle. This train, with a panoramic lounge bar in the nose, was dubbed the "Settebello" by the Italians. This is why the Italian state railways decided to make this name official, painting Scopa cards and the name "Settebello" on the train's engines.

THE CARDS OF SCOPA

A game of Scopa uses 40 cards **divided into 4 groups** called "suits."

In Italy, there are 3 major types of cards, whose suits vary:

- French-suited cards (heart, club, spade, and diamond) in the northwest of the country and in Tuscany.
- German-suited cards (heart, bell, leaf, and acorn) in South Tyrol.
- Latin-suited cards, which include two different types and whose illustration vary slightly:
  - Italian-suited cards in the northeast (staff, cup, coin, and sword).

  - Spanish-suited cards in most of Southern Italy (club, cup, coin, and sword).

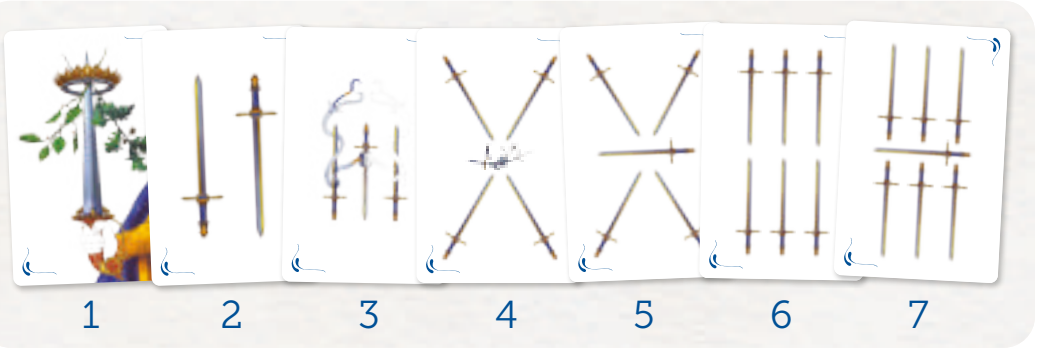
CONTENTS

The cards here are a **revised version of the Spanish-suited cards**, present in the Naples region. The cards are the same as in traditional decks, reworked by **Italian artist Massimiliano Nigro**.

Our version of these suits:

Each suit has 10 cards:

- 7 cards with values from 1 to 7



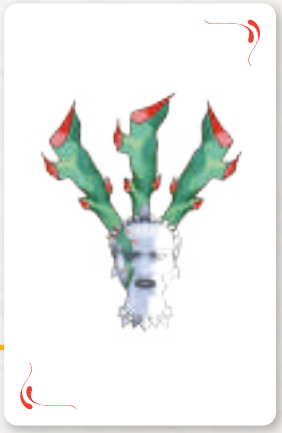
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

According to historic codes, the numeric values are not shown on the cards. Our cards follow this code: you can determine the value by the number of times the symbol appears on the card.

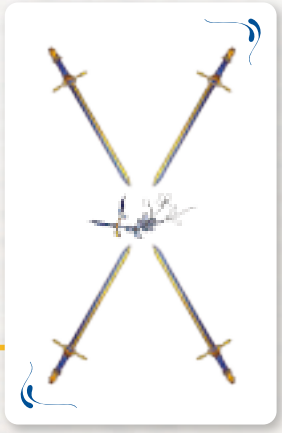
- 3 face cards:
  - *Il fante* (knave) with a **value of 8**.
  - *Il cavallo* (knight) with a **value of 9**.
  - *Il re* (king) with a **value of 10**.

8 9 10

For these three face cards, the usual codes were incorporated (the knave wears a hat, the knight is on his horse, and the king wears a crown), but everything was reworked. For example, the value of each face card was discretely incorporated into its illustration to help players.



Here, you can see 3 clubs, so this card is the 3 of Clubs.



Here, you can see 4 swords, so this card is the 4 of Swords.

HOW TO PLAY

There are **several ways to play Scopa**. The rules outlined here are fairly common and are the **perfect starting point for beginners**.

OVERVIEW AND GOAL

Scopa is a competitive trick-taking game for 2 to 4 players that plays over an indeterminate number of rounds. The game ends at the end of the round when one player **reaches or exceeds 11 points**. A game generally lasts between 15 and 30 minutes.

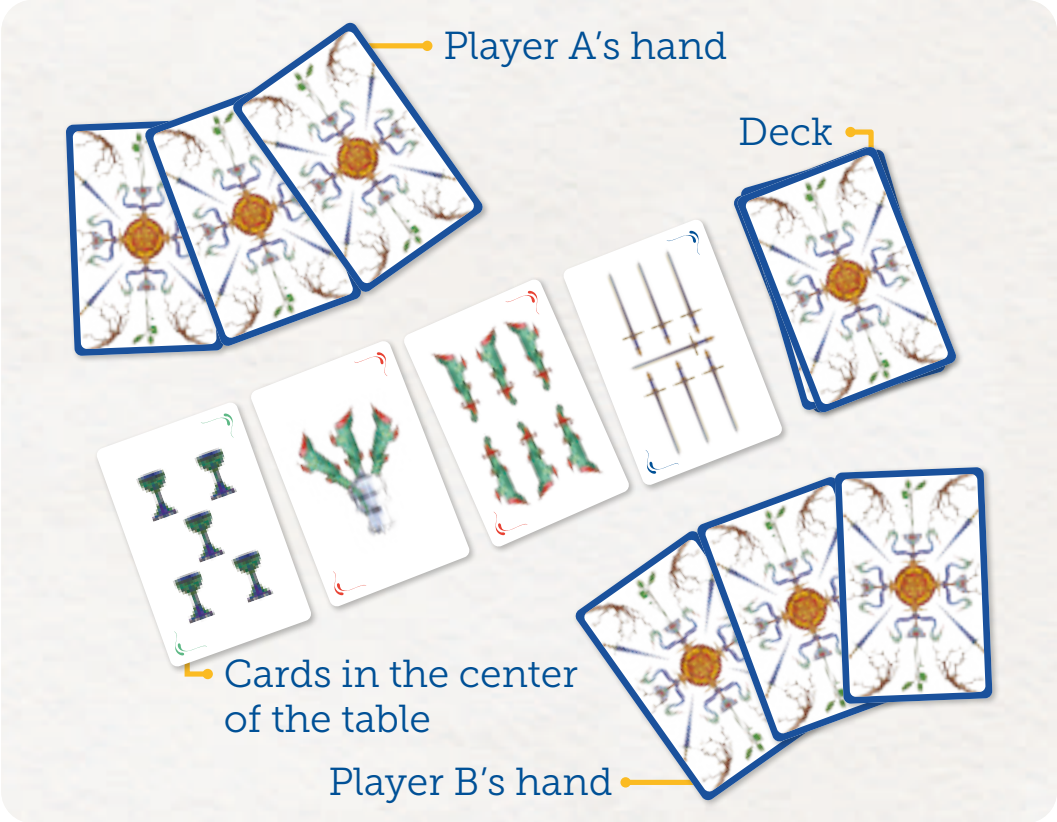
On your turn, play 1 card from your hand in the center of the table to capture other cards. **Form majorities this way and make scopas** to gain as many points as possible.

SETUP FOR A ROUND

Before the first round, randomly choose one player to be the dealer.

The dealer **shuffles** all 40 cards, then **deals 3 face down to each player** counter clockwise (starting with the player to their right). They then reveal **4 cards face up in the center of the table**. Finally, they form a **face-down deck** with the remaining cards.

If you reveal 3 Kings in the center of the table during setup, take back all the cards and repeat these steps from the beginning.



Note: All examples used in this booklet refer to a 2-player game.

ROUND OVERVIEW

Take turns playing counter clockwise, starting with the player to the right of the dealer. On your turn, you must **capture** or **place**.

CAPTURE

Capturing is the only way to take cards from the center of the table and gain points.

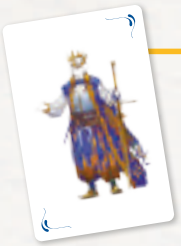
Choose 1 card from your hand and **place it face up in front of you**. You can now capture 1 or 2 cards from the center of the table.

- **Capture 1 card:** The played card must be the same value as the captured card.

- **Capture 2 cards:** The played card must be the exact same value as the sum of the 2 captured cards.
  Only values count here; the suits do not matter during this phase.

After capturing cards, place them, **in addition to the card played to capture them, in a stack face down in front of you**. Cards you capture are called a "trick," and will only be used during final scoring. You can never look at your previous tricks.

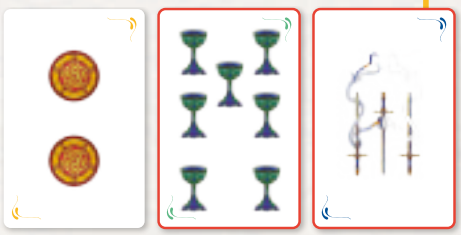
If you play a card that would let you capture multiple cards, **you must always capture the fewest cards possible**. If there are multiple combinations possible with the same number of cards, you choose which to capture.



Played card

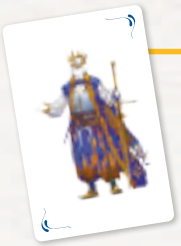
10

Cards in the center of the table



2 7 3

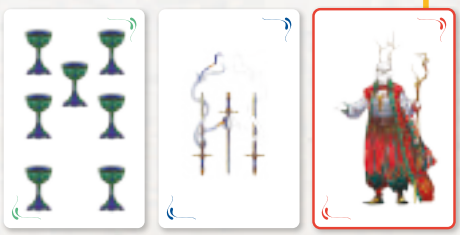
By playing a King here, you can capture 2 cards that, when added together, have the same value as the King. You can therefore capture the 7 and 3 (7 + 3 = 10).



Played card

10

Cards in the center of the table



7 3 10

However, here, you cannot capture the 7 and 3 with your King, since you have to capture the fewest cards possible. Therefore, you only capture the King in the center of the table.

SCOPA (“BROOM” IN ITALIAN)

Making a scopa is the ultimate move! It’s an excellent way to gain extra points and reduce your opponents’ options.

On your turn, if you can capture **all the cards still revealed on the table**, announce “Scopa!” To remind you of your scopa during final scoring, flip one of this trick’s cards face up in the stack in front of you. Then continue the round normally: the player to your right takes their turn (they can only place a card since there’s nothing to capture).

You can capture the 2 remaining cards thanks to your knight (6 + 3 = 9, which matches the value of your knight). You can make a scopa!

Then flip one of this trick’s cards face up in the stack in front of you.

If the dealer makes a scopa by playing the final card of the round (when the deck is empty and they play their last card), they capture the trick normally, but do not gain any extra points from the scopa (see Final Scoring, page 18).

PLACE

Placing a card can be a strategic move, but more often than not, you will take this action because you have no other choice.

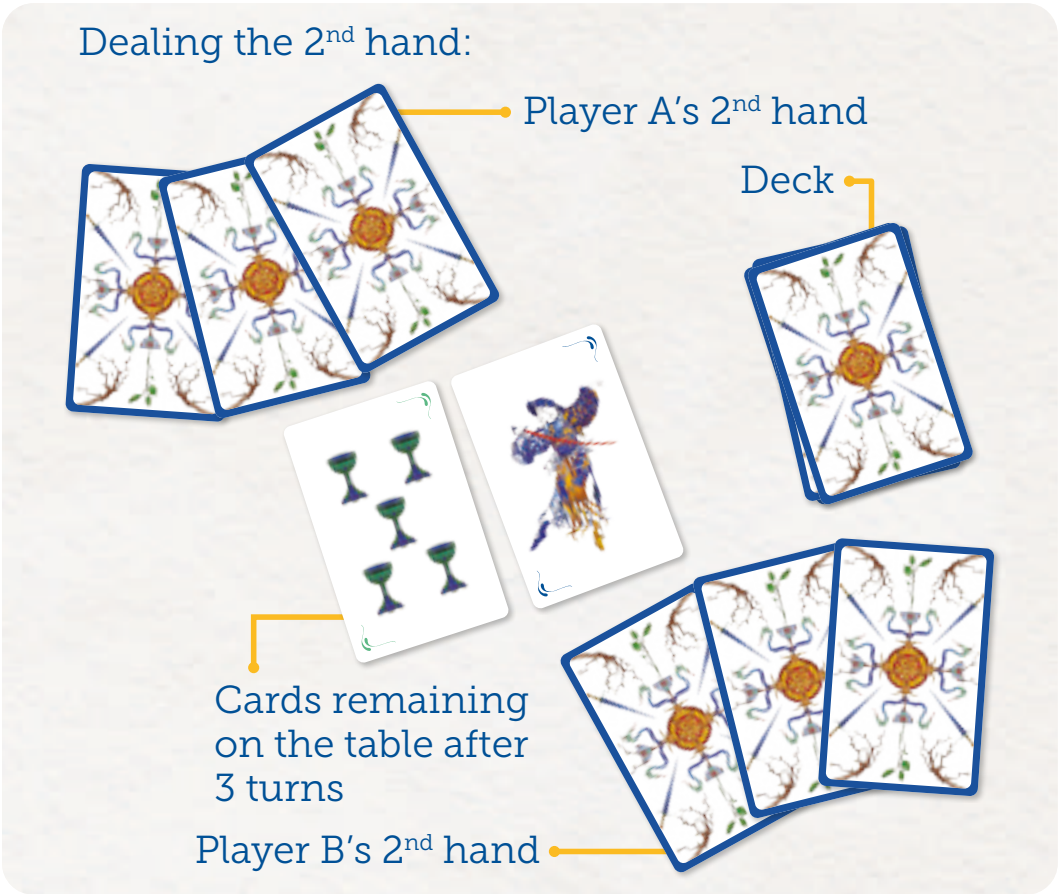
Choose 1 card from your hand and place it face up in the center of the table, next to already-revealed cards.

You cannot place a card that would let you capture. If there are no other cards in the center of the table, you must place a card.

You choose to place the 1, since it does not let you capture any other cards. You simply add it to those already revealed on the table.

EMPTY HANDS

Once all players have played their 3 cards, **the dealer deals 3 new cards** to each player, as described previously (but does not reveal any new cards to the center of the table). The game continues and the player to the right of the dealer begins their turn.



END OF THE ROUND

Once all players have played 3 more cards and the deck is empty, the round ends. **Before continuing to final scoring, the last player to win a trick captures all the cards still in the center of the table and adds them to their stack of tricks.** Then continue to final scoring.

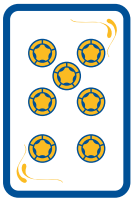
FINAL SCORING

Each player gains the following points and adds them to any points previously gained.

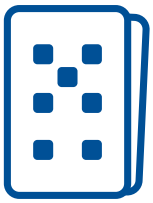
3 player aids are included with the cards.

• **1 point** for the player who captured **the most cards**. In case of tie, no one gains this point.

• **1 point** for the player who captured **the most *denari*** ("coins" in Italian). In case of tie, no one gains this point.



• **1 point** for the player who captured ***il sette bello*** ("the beautiful seven" in Italian), meaning the 7 of Coins.



• **1 point** for the player who captured **the most 7-value cards**. In case of tie, the tied player who captured the most 6-value cards gains this point. If there is still a tie, no one gains this point.

• **1 point** for **each scopa** you made (count the number of face-up cards among your tricks).

END OF THE GAME

The game ends at the end of the round when one player **reaches or exceeds 11 points**. The player with the most points wins. In case of tie, play one or more rounds until the tie is resolved.

For longer games, you can play until someone reaches 16 or 21 points.

QUICK STRATEGY

Here are some tips to keep in mind to quickly improve your skill.

NEVER LET YOUR NEIGHBOR MAKE A SCOPA!

Making scopas is the most efficient way of gaining points. You should prevent your neighbor from making them whenever possible. To do this **always leave cards on the table that total over 10**. Since the card with the strongest value is the king (value 10), you can guarantee that at least 1 card will be left on the table.

An opponent's scopa is even more dangerous since it means the next player can only play a single card on the table, which could kick off a chain reaction of scopas.

The 1 of Swords has a value of 1, while the King has a value of 10. To capture both cards at once, you would need a card with a value of 11, which doesn't exist.

WATCH OUT FOR 7'S AND *IL SETTE BELLO*

Capturing as many 7's as possible and *il sette bello* lets you gain points. If a 7 is in the center of the table, capture it as fast as you can (often using a face card).

Furthermore, always play as if your opponent has 7's in their hand, and never give them the opportunity to capture cards with these hypothetical 7's. When capturing, the played card is also captured. You want to ensure your opponent doesn't end up with a 7 in their trick just because they were lucky enough to have it in their hand. To do this, **never leave cards on the table that total 7**. If they are never able to play a 7 to capture cards and therefore win a trick, your opponent will be happy to place it instead.

For example, if there is a 6 and 4 on the table, you should not place a 3 (since 4 + 3 = 7) or a 1 (since 6 + 1 = 7).

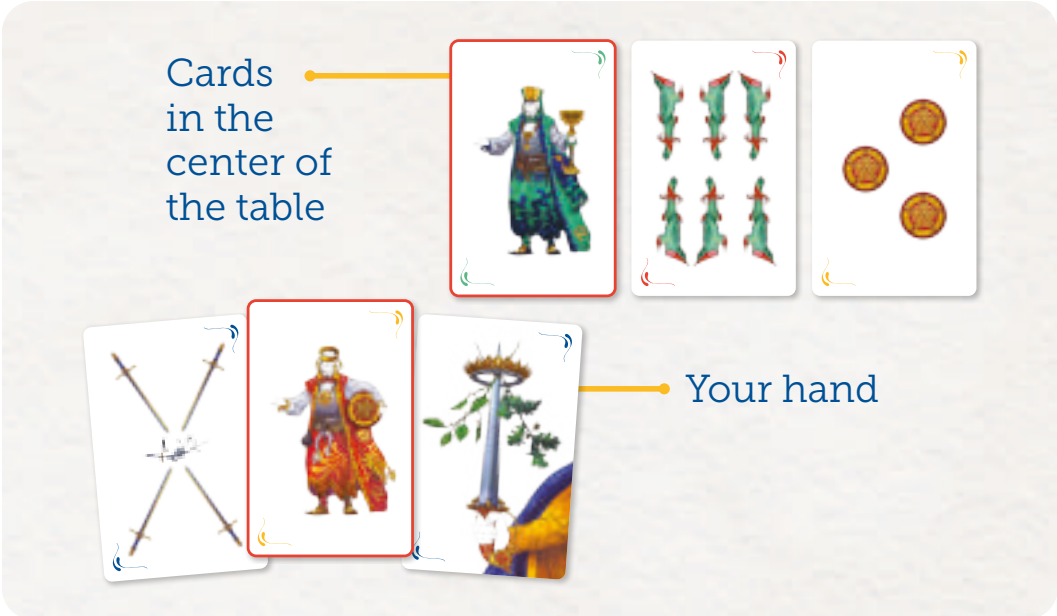
COUNT CARDS

This is difficult to pull off, but worth it if you get it right. This will let you know when to ignore, without a doubt, the two previous strategy tips. By knowing which cards are already out of play, you can easily guess your opponent's hand and therefore play more freely. If you're unable to count all the cards, **it's most important to count the face cards and 7's**, which are the most influential cards of a round.

BLOCK THE GAME

If you are the last player to have two Kings in hand, **you can block scopas** by playing a King on the table and keeping the other in your hand. Only you can capture the King revealed on the table. Be careful though, since this technique only works for 3 turns maximum.

You are able to block the game with other cards, as long as you are counting cards. For example, if you have the last two Knights (value 9) and all the 1's are out of play, place one of your Knights on the table. It cannot be captured, since it would have to be captured by a King at the same time as a 1 (9 + 1 = 10), but there are no more 1's.



VARIANTS

Scopa is a traditional card game that has been played since the 17th century. Therefore, it has several local variants. We have chosen the most interesting among those we played during our research! **The variants are combinable**, so don't hesitate to mix and match.

TEAM PLAY

This variant plays in **two teams of 2 players**. To use this variant, make the following changes:

During setup, choose seats so that teammates are not sitting next to each other. You cannot communicate or reveal your hand to your teammate. Before final scoring, gather all the cards captured by both players on a team, then score points as if they were for a single player.

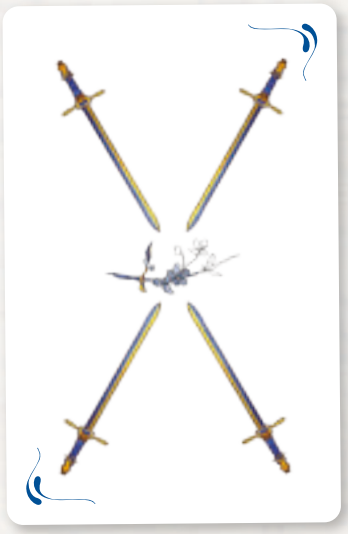
LA PRIMIERA ("FIRST" IN ITALIAN)

This variant adds a bit of complexity to the game. To use this variant, make the following changes:

During final scoring, ignore the "1 point per player who captured the most 7-value cards" rule. Instead, **give 1 point to the player with the highest *primiera***.

To determine your *primiera*, take the highest-valued card you captured in each of the 4 suits and add up their corresponding values, as shown below.

Highest-valued captured card	*Primiera* value
None	0
1	16
2	12
3	13
4	14
5	15
6	18
7	21
Knave, Knight, or King	10



4 of Swords,
primiera value: 14

3 of Cups,
primiera value: 13

King of Coins,
primiera value: 10

Knight of Clubs,
primiera value: 10

Since these cards are your 4 highest-valued cards in each suit, your primiera is valued 14 + 13 + 10 + 10 = 47.

IL SCOPONE SCIENTIFICO

This variant is interesting if you would like to play a **more expert** game, by reducing the amount of luck.

To use this variant, make the following changes:

During setup, **deal all the cards equally among players** (do not reveal any in the center of the table).

The player to the right of the dealer plays first; they must place a card. Play the following turns normally. The round ends once all players have played all their cards. Continue to final scoring as normal.

You can also use this variant with Team Play.

CAPTURE MORE CARDS

In several variants, it is also possible to **capture more than 2 cards at a time** (often 3, but sometimes more). This lets you make more scopas, since the table will be cleared more easily.

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