

The Borja Family: Historiography, Legend and Literature

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ABSTRACT

The Borja family from Valencia (the Italian spelling is 'Borgia') have been a constant source of fascination since the 15th century because of the unusual power they came to wield in Italy and Valencia thanks to the ecclesiastical career. They caused much ink to flow in the field of legend all over Europe — mainly in Italy but also in Germany, Great Britain, France and, of course, Valencia — and were ultimately accused of every vice. They also provided a major theme for literature and films. Partly in reaction to this they became, mainly from the last third of the 19th century onwards, a subject for serious historiographical research based on archival documents. In recent years the fifth centenary of the pontificate of Alexander VI has triggered new research. I attempt here to give an overview and to offer explanations for the interest they have aroused.

KEY WORDS: the Borja family, Borgia, 16th century, historiography, legend, literary theme

The Borja¹ family from Valencia are an unusual case: in the 15th and 16th centuries they reached the highest echelons of ecclesiastical and political power in Italy and established a firm foothold in Valencia. They consisted basically of two popes, who were uncle and nephew, and the nephew's children. The Borjas acted as a veritable clan and, owing to their power and wealth, were seen as depraved, lawless and incestuous, but also enterprising, dynamic, unhyprocritical, and defenders of the church heritage. Their power aroused fear, envy and hatred, and these feelings gave rise to the so-called 'Black Legend', which encompassed the whole family and has endured to our own times. Based mostly on scandal, it sought to account for their unusual power. It gradually gained momentum, giving rise to the publication of many controversial and tendentious works in a variety of genres, ranging from mere pamphlets and pasquinades to chronicles, poetry, plays, novels and, eventually, over forty films. Not until the last third of the 19th century do we find the first serious research based on archive sources. This research has gradually been consolidated but has not displaced the literature inspired by the legend, which still flourishes. The Borja family, in short, left no one in Europe indifferent and gave rise to diverse interpretations, most of them coloured by the atmosphere of the age in which they were produced.

THE FAMILY

The origins of the Borja family are obscure. They were certainly not of distinguished descent and this was always a millstone round their necks. They came from the Aragonese locality of Borja and in the 13th century took part in the conquest of the Valencian Country under the orders of James I 'the Conqueror'. There were two main branches: one was made up of knights who bore the name Gil de Borja, while the others — the ancestors of the Borja popes — were dyers by trade and were known simply as Borja. In 1419 the two branches were joined by marriage and the similarity of the surnames lent a certain air of nobility to the Borja family's origins.² One of the bride's brothers, Alfons de Borja (1378-1458), was to become the family's first pope under the name Calixtus III in 1455. His meteoric rise was due basically to the diplomatic skills he displayed in the last stage of the Western Schism. From 1417 onwards he exercised these skills chiefly as a member of the royal chancery of King Alfons 'the Magnanimous', later becoming vice-chancellor and then president of the Royal Council in 1442. He was appointed bishop of Valencia in 1429 and created a cardinal in 1444, after which he moved permanently to Rome. He was elected pope in 1455 against the backdrop of the Ottoman threat, Constantinople having fallen to the Turks in 1453. He focused his policy, unsuccessfully, on mounting a crusade against the Turks.³ Being a foreigner, he surrounded himself with servants from the realms of the Catalan-Aragonese crown. He

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Figure 1. The Virgin Mary entrusting Siena to the care of Pope Calixtus III. Panel by Sano di Pietro. c. 1456. Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena.

also watched over his nephews' careers: Pere Lluís de Borja was appointed captain-general of the papal army but died young in 1458, while Roderic de Borja (the future pope) was made a cardinal and papal vice-chancellor, in line with a practice that was widespread in the history of the papacy. Calixtus III performed his duties discretely but efficiently and laid the foundations for his family's social ascent. Certain basically legendary anecdotes seek to attribute his rise to divine intervention. It was said, for instance, that when he was a child, Saint Vincent Ferrer predicted that he would one day be pope and would canonize him. And so it turned out. Calixtus played a major part in his family's promotion but his reputation remained unscathed by the charges levelled against his successors.

Roderic de Borja (1431-1503), who became the second Borja pope under the name of Alexander VI, was a more complex and above all a more controversial personality.⁴ Thanks to his uncle, Calixtus III, he began accumulating official posts: not only was he made a cardinal and vice-chancellor of the Roman curia (in 1456 and 1457 respectively), but he became commissioner of the papal armies and obtained various benefices and offices, including the abbey of Subiaco and the sees of Girona, Valencia, Cartagena and Majorca. He was considered one of the wealthiest cardinals of his time. After the death of Calixtus in 1458, he never left Rome, except briefly in 1472-1473, when he headed a diplomatic legation to the Iberian Peninsula and paid a solemn visit to the diocese of Valencia, which he had held since 1458.

As pope he tried, with little success, to enforce church reform, especially after the death of his son Joan in 1497. He made a few token gestures in support of the crusade against the Turks and evangelization, such as sending Bernat Boil to the New World. In one of the edicts known as the Alexandrian bulls (1493), he confirmed the dominion of the Crown of Castile over the lands discovered by Christopher Columbus on his first voyage.⁵ He gave refuge to Jews expelled from Spain, in defiance of the wishes of the Catholic Monarchs.⁶ For reasons that were political rather than ecclesiastical, he clashed with and excommunicated Girolamo Savonarola who, after the fall of the Medicis, had turned Florence into a republic that was democratic and theocratic at one and the same time. Savonarola was judged by the Signoria and burnt as a heretic on the square in Florence in 1498.⁷ The solemn jubilee celebrations staged by Alexander in 1500 have been seen, from an urban viewpoint, as the birth of modern Rome, since they turned it into an amalgam of a holy city and a former imperial capital. Alexander was a protector of several universities,⁸ notably that of Valencia, and surrounded himself with humanists, whom he rewarded with offices and positions in his curia.⁹ But first and foremost he was an outstanding patron of the arts.¹⁰

On the political front Alexander strove to maintain a balance in the Italian peninsula, which was divided basically into four major units: the duchy of Milan and the republic of Venice in the north, the papal states in the centre, and the kingdom of Naples in the south. Two great powers, Castile-Aragon and France, both of which coveted the kingdom of Naples and the duchy of Milan, posed an external threat. This largely explains Alexander's fluctuating policies towards them and his interventionist policy in Italy. Thus the eleven years of his pontificate were marked by alliances and rifts with the different blocks that took shape in Europe with a view to combating the aggressive policies of Charles VIII and Louis XII of France. In the end, however, he opted for a pro-French policy. These international political affairs are part and parcel of the conflicts that opposed him to the feudal lords whose domains bordered on the papal states and who had consistently competed for the control of Rome and the papacy (such as the Colonna, Orsini, della Rovere and Sforza families). To offset the influence of hostile cardinals and raise funds for military campaigns, Alexander appointed like-minded cardinals, most of them from the kingdom of Aragon. During his pontificate, the number of cardinals rose from twenty-four to forty-five and the percentage of Italians fell from 90% to 60%. Unsurprisingly, this earned him many enemies.

Even so, it was his brazen promotion of his children that raised most controversy. While still a cardinal, Roderic de Borja had at least nine children whom he acknowledged and legitimized. The identity of the mother, or mothers, of the first three (Pere Lluís, Jerònima and Elisabet) is unknown. For the eldest, Pere Lluís (c. 1468-1488), he set up the duchy of Gandia, the Borjas' chief



Figure 2. Alexander VI, as portrayed in the gallery of prelates in Valencia. Studio of Joan de Joanes. 1568. Valencia Cathedral. Museum.

possession in the kingdom of Aragon. He had four more children by Vannozza (Giovanna) Cattanei, a very enterprising and discrete Roman matron: Cèsar (1475-1507), who was destined to a church career from infancy, Joan (c. 1478-1497), who became the second Duke of Gandia on the death of his half-brother Pere Lluís, Lucrecia (1480-1519), a vital pawn in the pope's matrimonial policies, and Jofré (born in 1481 or 1482), who became Prince of Squillace through his marriage to an illegitimate daughter of King Alfons II of Naples. Two more sons are known to have been born during Alexander's pontificate: Joan, Duke of Nepi and Camerino (1498?-1546), known as the Roman Infant and rumoured to be the fruit of an incestuous relationship with Lucrecia, and Roderic (c. 1503-1527), who became a priest.¹¹

Prior to the Council of Trent it was quite common for cardinals to have children. The keeper of the Barcelona municipal journal officially recorded the second Duke of Gandia's arrival in the city in the following words: "On this day the Duke of Gandia, the son of our Holy Father Alexander, landed on the shore in Barcelona".¹² The pope made no effort to conceal his offspring and no one was scandalized. His behaviour towards the sons born during



Figure 2b. Alexander VI in papal regalia. Miniature from the Pope's Christmas Missal, c. 1500. Vatican Library.

his pontificate was more equivocal. One factor, however, caused antagonism, and that was his obsession with securing his children's future by granting them lands and titles, and the ostentatious way he treated them within the Vatican. Criticism was widespread among his contemporaries over the rapid rise of this foreign family, who owed their fortunes to the clerical career.¹³

At this point it is worth pausing to consider two of Alexander's most famous children, Cèsar and Lucrecia. Cèsar was the most brilliant and controversial of all the Borjas.¹⁴ He was born in Rome in 1475 and destined to the church. In accordance with family custom, benefices and ecclesiastical distinctions were showered upon him from the age of seven. By 1482 he was apostolic protonotary, canon of the cathedral of Valencia and archdeacon of Xàtiva, and in 1491 he became bishop of Pamplona. His tutors were the Majorcan Esperandéu Espanyol, an author of Latin poetry, and the future cardinal Joan Vera. He studied in Perugia and Pisa, where he specialized in civil and canon law. After his father was elected pope, Cèsar succeeded him as archbishop of Valencia (1492) and was created a cardinal in 1493. But a church career was not to his liking and he renounced it in 1498 to become captain-general of the papal armies. He initiated a rapprochement with the new king of France, which culminated in a journey to the French court. There the contract for his marriage to Charlotte d'Albret, the sister of King John of Navarre, was signed. The French king granted him several titles, including that of count, and later duke, of Valentinois, in southern France. With the help of the French, he won back a stretch of papal territory extending from Romagna to the Marches, and drove out the lords of certain cities who were feudatories of the Holy See. The military

efficacy of Cèsar and his armies became legendary, though his diplomacy was apparently as effective as the force of arms, if not more so. Cèsar's campaign culminated in his triumphal entry into Rome in February 1500, where he received the title of duke of Romagna.¹⁵ The attacks on Romagna continued in 1500-1502 and Tuscany came under threat. The Florentine Signoria dispatched Machiavelli as their ambassador. The image Cèsar acquired in later centuries derived mostly from Machiavelli's reports and above all his comments in *Il principe*.¹⁶ Cèsar alternated military campaigns with periods in Rome. From there he reorganized the administration of Romagna, which was ruled through lieutenants, and tried to introduce fiscal and monetary measures conducive to centralization. He commissioned Leonardo da Vinci to design a series of great hydraulic constructions to canalize the river from Cesena to the sea. The drawings have survived but the work was never carried out.¹⁷ Some have maintained that Cèsar's underlying intentions made his policies a precedent for the unification of Italy. But this theory, fostered in Garibaldi's time and in the Fascist era, has recently been rejected by Enrico Angiolini (2003) on the grounds that it arose from the ideology of those two periods and cannot convincingly be applied to the early 15th century, when Italy was dominated by feudal barons and the concept of territoriality did not exist. A parallel might be drawn with the way certain Castilian historiographers have interpreted the role of the Catholic Monarchs in Spain.

Alexander's death in the summer of 1503 triggered a downturn in Cèsar's career, which had largely been funded by the papal treasury. Though ill himself, Cèsar managed to persuade the conclave to appoint a neutral pope, Paul III Piccolomini. But he died just a few weeks later and his successor, the warlike Julius II della Rovere, a former enemy of Alexander's, did not renew Cèsar's appointment as captain-general and decided to annex Romagna directly to the papal states. Cèsar surrendered to him in 1503 and was imprisoned in Rome but succeeded in escaping to Naples. There he was arrested by the 'Great Captain' (1504),¹⁸ sent as a prisoner to the castle of Chinchilla (Murcia) and subsequently to La Mota (Medina del Campo), from where he escaped in 1506. He headed for Navarre and placed himself at the service of his brother-in-law, the king consort John (Jean d'Albret) who was attempting to crush the Navarrese rebels. Cèsar died in a skirmish in Viana in March 1507, just five hundred years ago, while acting as captain-general of the king's troops. He left one daughter by Charlotte d'Albret, Lluïsa, and several illegitimate children, who remained in the care of his sister Lucrecia.

Lucrecia Borja¹⁹ was born in April 1480, probably in Subiaco. She was brought up in Rome under the guardianship of her kinswoman Adriana del Milà, in whose household her companions included Giulia Farnese, 'La Bella Giulia', the new mistress of Alexander VI. Lucrecia's marriages and the negotiations for other unions which



Figure 3. Portrait thought to be that of Cèsar Borja. Roca di Fiano, Rome.

never materialized reflect the political context and her father's objectives. In February 1491, while still vice-chancellor, he considered using her to forge links with the Valencian high aristocracy. After becoming pope in November 1492, he made her a tool of his political strategies in Italy and occasionally appointed her to specific posts, such as that of governor of Spoleto.²⁰ She often appeared beside him in public ceremonies. She also resided in the papal apartments during his absence and was permitted to open his correspondence and summon the cardinals if necessary, a situation which scandalized the master of ceremonies and diarist Johannes Burckard.

The purpose of her first marriage, to Giovanni Sforza, Lord of Pesaro, was to cement Alexander's alliance with the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza 'the Moor'. They were married in great pomp at the Vatican in 1493 but their union was soon annulled on the grounds of non-consummation. In point of fact the pope was now seeking closer ties with the Aragonese dynasty that ruled Naples. This rapprochement led to the signature, in June 1498, of the contract for Lucrecia's marriage to Alfons d'Aragó, Duke of Bisceglie, the son of the late King Alfons II. Her son Roderic was the fruit of this marriage. Joan, the mysterious 'Roman Infant' and future Duke of Nepi, had been born in 1498, a short time before the wedding. He has been variously identified as the son of Lucrecia and a servant, the son of Cèsar or Alexander and some unknown

woman (as stated in two papal bulls issued in 1501), or the incestuous offspring of Lucrecia and her father.

The renewed threat of a French invasion caused the pope to reverse his policy once more, this time in France's favour. This put Lucrecia's husband in mortal danger in Rome and he was assassinated in 1501, apparently on orders from Cèsar. In December of the same year another marriage was arranged for Lucrecia. Her new husband was the heir to the duchy of Ferrara, Alfonso d'Este, the future Alfonso I. It took a large sum of money to overcome the misgivings of Duke Ercole of Ferrara, who was unable to sort out the Borja family's murky origins. The marriage brought them the aristocratic prestige they longed for in Italy and an alliance that was beneficial to the ambitions of Cèsar, who was then in the midst of his Romagna campaign.

Lucrecia left Rome in 1502, never to return, and settled at the court of the dukes of Este. Romantically inspired historiographers viewed her years in Ferrara as a gentrified retreat that saved her from the Borjas' downfall. Alexander's death and the campaign to discredit the family placed her in a delicate situation but her relationship to the house of Este kept her more or less on the sideline. When Cèsar was imprisoned, Lucrecia appealed to various authorities on his behalf. One was her father-in-law Ercole d'Este, who envisaged the possibility of Cèsar returning to Romagna. All in all, this period was anything but a retreat. When her husband inherited the duchy as Alfonso I, Lucrecia became Duchess of Ferrara (1505). In 1508 her son, the future Duke Ercole, was born. The court was rocked by the swashbuckling disputes between Alfonso and his brothers and step-brothers, fuelled by power lust, jealousy and passionate love affairs. Moreover both Venice and the popes — Julius II and Leo X — want-

ed to absorb the duchy of Ferrara into the papal states. Consequently the duke, who had been appointed *gonfalonier* of the Church army in 1509, found himself immersed in constant wars, and Lucrecia deputized for him during his absence. He recovered the duchy but lost part of his lands to Pope Julius II.

The courtiers with whom Lucrecia surrounded herself included several humanists. One was the Venetian Pietro Bembo, who dedicated his work *Gli asolani* to her.²¹ Their more or less Platonic love letters, written in Italian, have been preserved.²² When a local humanist²³ who acted as a go-between was found dead in a Ferrara street, it was suspected that the duke had stepped in. The elimination of trouble-makers was widespread practice in Italy at the time. Lucrecia also had a half-political, half-amorous relationship with Francesco Gonzaga, the Marquis of Mantua, who was married to her sister-in-law Isabella d'Este and helped her carry out her governmental duties in Ferrara when the duke was away.²⁴

Complications arising from the birth of her last child — she had seven in all — took Lucrecia to her grave in 1519. It has been suggested that she underwent a spiritual evolution and led a more pious life in her latter years. Signs of this were the religious institutions she founded



Figure 4. Lucrecia Borja, as depicted on the bronze medal *Dell' amorino bendato*. Mantuan School, 1505. Ferrara, Musei Civici d'Arte Antica.



Figure 4b. Illuminated page from the work *Spectacula Lucretiana* by G.B. Valentini, 'Il Cantalicio', which was written to mark the marriage of Lucrecia Borja to Alfonso d'Este. 1501.

— convents for the education of her own children and those of Angela Borja, her lady-in-waiting, close friend and kinswoman²⁵ — and an exemplary letter, steeped in resignation and humility, which she wrote to Pope Leo X as her life drew to a close. The contrast between her Roman period — marked by extreme cruelty, cynicism and lewdness — and the quiet life she led in Ferrara has been stressed. Some have even considered her a saint and continue to do so today. Since Gregorovius's biography (1874), the notion that she was a victim of Cèsar and Alexander VI has endured.

Lucrècia's death in effect marked the extinction of the Borja family in Italy. It survived in the kingdom of Valencia, however, through the dukes of Gandia.²⁶ There it got off to an inauspicious start with the premature death of Pere Lluís, the first duke. He was succeeded by his stepbrother, Joan de Borja, whose marriage to María Enríquez in 1493 sealed the ties between the Borja family and King Ferdinand II 'the Catholic'. Roderic — now Pope Alexander VI — always took a keen interest in events in Gandia. No sooner had the new duke left Rome for Barcelona than he sent him detailed recommendations — written in Catalan — on various aspects of his behaviour. The young man appears not to have taken his father's advice very seriously because his Barcelona lifestyle was not particularly appropriate to his rank. His brother Cèsar rebuked him

for running about the rooftops, chasing cats.²⁷ However he was destined to be short-lived: he was summoned back to Rome and murdered in 1497, apparently on orders from Cèsar, who was preparing his new secular career.

After the death of Pope Alexander in 1503, the Valencian branch of the Borja family became independent of the Vatican. With the dowager duchess María Enríquez as regent, it acquired a Hispanic orientation: she secured her son Joan's inheritance and placed herself under the protection of Ferdinand 'the Catholic'. Later she entered the convent of Santa Clara in Gandia and became the abbess. Under her son Joan, the third duke of Gandia (1497-1543), contacts with the court of Castile were resumed and reinforced. Joan assisted the emperor Charles V with troops and funds in the War of the Brotherhoods and the duchy became a battlefield. In 1521 he was defeated by the army of the Brotherhoods, which destroyed his palace, complete with the archives.²⁸ His son Francesc de Borja, the fourth duke and future saint, upheld the ties with the monarchy and became viceroy of Catalonia.²⁹ Later, when he joined the Jesuits, the dukedom passed to his son, Carles de Borja, who gave it new vitality by marrying the heiress of the neighbouring counts of Oliva.

The management of the Borjas' dukedom put an end to its earlier fragmentation. A move was made towards jurisdictional unity by buying up minor seignories and investing large sums of money in annuities.³⁰ Thus the lineage became the creditor of the cities, towns and inhabitants of its domains. The economy of the duchy of Gandia was based on the cultivation of sugar-cane and the exploitation of tread-mills for the manufacture of sugar operated mainly by Moorish labour.³¹

The atmosphere at the court of the dukes of Gandia was dominated by Franciscan spirituality, while at the court of the counts of Oliva, a more literary ambience reigned. When Duke Joan de Borja, the father of Francesc de Borja (Saint Francis de Borgia) died, he left behind a library of 280 titles. Half were religious works in the Franciscan line of thought, but twenty-seven were by Erasmus and eleven by Lluís Vives. Joan de Borja was a patron of university professors and fostered the conversion of Moriscos. None of this, however, prevented the dukes of Gandia from joining rival factions when necessary or getting involved in family crimes, following the tradition of their Roman forebears.³² We find the first explicit praise of members of the Borja family during the period of Duke Carles de Borja (1550-1592): Jorge de Montemayor extolled certain ladies of the lineage,³³ while Gaspar Gil Polo lauded Calixtus III, Alexander VI, Cèsar Borja and other later Borjas from the duchy of Gandia.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The impact of Jacob Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860) caused interest in the culture of Renaissance Italy to grow and spread all over Europe.



Figure 5. Caricature of Pope Alexander VI as the Antichrist. Anticlerical engraving, c.1500.



Figure 6. The Pope portrayed as the Antichrist. Engraving by Lucas Cranach the Elder. 1521.

Thus archive research was stimulated and efforts were made to go beyond the legend. Romantic historiographers retrieved many documents and laid the foundations for the rigorous studies carried out in the 20th century. Hitherto unknown documents from the great archives — notably those of the Vatican and the Dukes of Osuna — were published in many places.³⁴ The first major work to deal with Pope Alexander VI was the monumental *History of the Popes*³⁵ by Ludwig von Pastor (1854-1928), which was translated into virtually every language. Drawing on documents from the Vatican's secret archives (recently opened to researchers) and some 230 other European archives, it used facts to counteract the growth of the legend. The Belgian historian Peter de Roo (1839-1926), who was a militant Catholic, published five volumes of new materials on the pope in 1924.³⁶ Midway through the 20th century, Elías Olmos y Canalda, a researcher from Valencia with similar leanings, published several valuable and previously unknown documents lent by Lluís Cerveró (1955).³⁷ And Miquel Batllori himself devoted his inaugural address to the Real Academia de la Historia in 1958 to Alexander VI.³⁸

Romantic historiography also launched the fashion of historical and literary biographies. In a bid to avoid the anti-Borja legend, the biographers themselves started raiding the archives — mainly the notarial archives — and studying diplomatic and private correspondence. The ini-

tiator of this current was the Protestant writer and historian Ferdinand Gregorovius (1821-1891). While writing his magnum opus on medieval Rome,³⁹ Gregorovius published some excellent travel books between 1856 and 1877⁴⁰ which demonstrate his profound knowledge of Italy as a whole and his skills as a writer. In 1874, at the height of his career, he published his highly successful biography *Lucrezia Borgia*,⁴¹ which was one of the first attempts at the historical rehabilitation of a member of the Borja family and gave the trend lasting momentum. Gregorovius used fresh information from the archives — mostly from Rome, Modena and Mantua — and drew extensively on contemporary chronicles. This wealth of narrative detail permeates the entire book, which immediately became a benchmark work and is now a classic that is periodically republished and retranslated. His contributions were completed, and occasionally rectified but never surpassed, by later works. Foremost among these are *Isabella d'Este e i Borgia* by Alessandro Luzio (1915), *Lucrezia Borgia* by Maria Bellonci (1939)⁴² — repeatedly republished and now itself part of the canon —, Geneviève Chastenet's book (1993),⁴³ and above all that of Sarah Bradford (2004),⁴⁴ who drew on documents — mostly contemporary correspondence — from Mantua, Modena and other Italian archives.

The most remarkable of the biographies of Cèsar Borja is William Harrison Woodward's *Cesare Borgia*, published in 1913. The author's explicit aim was to write a historical work and criticize the partisan or Romantic treatment of the topic that was prevalent at the time. Still a seminal work, it had numerous continuators, especially among the English. Sarah Bradford is one.⁴⁵

The Borja legend was discussed at a congress held in 1992 in the small German city of Schwäbisch Hall to mark the 500th anniversary of the election of Alexander VI.⁴⁶ The organizer was the historian Marion Hermann-Röttgen, a specialist in the legend, to whom we owe the first detached and objective studies to deal with it as a literary theme (1992).⁴⁷ Among the papers presented was one by Marià Carbonell i Buades on Roderic de Borja as a Maecenas, which was outstanding for its scope and novelty.⁴⁸

Other recent events to mark the fifth centenary of the pontificate of Alexander VI have given rise to numerous studies about him. Of special note were the eight conferences organized by the association Roma nel Rinascimento⁴⁹ between 1999 and 2001, at which major progress was made in the study of the Borja family: *Roma di fronte all'Europa al tempo di Alessandro VI*;⁵⁰ *De València a Roma a través dels Borja*;⁵¹ *Principato ecclesiastico e riuso dei Classici. Gli humanisti e Alessandro VI*;⁵² *La fortuna dei Borgia*;⁵³ *Le rocche alessandrine e la rocca di Cività Castellana*;⁵⁴ *Alessandro VI. Dal Mediterraneo all'Atlantico*;⁵⁵ *Reflessioni per un pontificato*⁵⁶ and *Alessandro VI e lo Stato della Chiesa*.⁵⁷

Certain conferences which, while not specifically devoted to the Borja family, deal with them partially also

warrant attention. One was the international conference *Roma e la Spagna. Crogiolo della cultura europea nell'età moderna*, organized by the Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior on 8-12 May 2007. One of the themes was *I Borgia e i Re cattolici: la configurazione della presenza spagnola a Roma*. Contributions included “La Corona d’Aragona e i Borgia” (The Crown of Aragon and the Borjas) by Bruno Figliuolo (University of Udine) and “La Corona di Castiglia e i Borgia” (The Crown of Castile and the Borjas) by Julio Valdeón (University of Valladolid).

In 2002 various institutions in Ferrara dedicated a series of events, exhibitions and publications to Lucrecia Borja, duchess of Ferrara, and her times. Of special significance were the articles that appeared in *Schifanoia*, the journal of the Istituto di studi rinascimentali di Ferrara.⁵⁸ Another noteworthy publication was *Lucrezia Borgia “La beltà, la virtù, la fama onesta”* (2002).⁵⁹ On the topic of Cèsar Borgia as Duke of Romagna, the volume of miscellanea *Leonardo, Machiavelli, Cesare Borgia. Arte, Storia e Scienza in Romagna 1500-1503*, published in 2003, is of great interest.

Valencia marked the jubilee of Alexander VI by staging the congress already mentioned — *De València a Roma a través dels Borja* (2000) — as part of the series organized by the association Roma nel Rinascimento. Prior to this, however, the city had organized other events, starting in 1992, the fifth centenary of the election of Roderic de Borja as Pope Alexander VI. Miquel Batllori was the instigator of the different events. The results included the following: the publication of a revised and updated Catalan translation of Mario Menotti’s *Documenti inediti sulla famiglia e la corte di Alessandro VI* (1917), edited by Miquel Batllori and Ximo Company (Valencia, 1992), which contains a far-reaching and innovative study by Marià Carbonell, “Sobre la iconografia de l’apartament Borja del Vaticà”; Volume 17 of the journal *Afers*, devoted to the studies presented at the congress on the Borja family held in Germany, with an introduction by Miquel Batllori (Catarroja, 1994); the First International Symposium on the Borjas dedicated to ‘Renaissance Europe’ and held in 1994, which provided a state-of-the-art survey of major Borja-related topics (Valencia, 1998); and the volume of miscellanea published by the Generalitat Valenciana, *Els temps dels Borja*, in which Miquel Batllori also took part (Valencia, 1996). To these must be added two exhibition catalogues containing new contributions — *Xàtiva, els Borja: una projecció europea* (Xàtiva, 1995) and *Sucre & Borja. La canyamel dels ducs* (Gandia, 2000) — and *Estudio sobre los Borja*, a series of lectures given in 2001 as part of the Borja Year celebrations and published by the Real Academia de Cultura Valenciana (Valencia, 2002).

Father Miquel Batllori’s contribution to the study of the Borja family warrants a separate mention. Most of his research is in Volume IV of his *Obra Completa* (Valencia, 1994). Later he brought out a series of hitherto unpub-



Figure 7. *The Whore of Babylon* (allegory of the Roman church) by Albrecht Dürer. *Apocalypse* series. 1521.

lished letters: *De València a Roma. Cartes triades dels Borja* (Barcelona, 1998). Miquel Batllori was the prime instigator of research into the Borja family, an unfailing participant in all conferences on the subject, and the author of many prologues to exhibition catalogues and other publications. He always acknowledged that his undertakings were the upshot of the work done by Lluís Cerveró (1902-1983) in the archives in Valencia. Cerveró’s extensive card indexes of historical and cultural documentation, including some on the Borjas, can be consulted in the Arxiu del Regne de València. Part of his attempt at a *Genealogía documentada de los Borjas. Siglos XII-XVI* is preserved in the historical archives of the Jesuits of Catalonia, along with a preliminary study by Batllori (Rome, 1969)⁶⁰ which was never completed but may be considered a precedent for the first volume of the series *Diplomatari Borja*, published by the Institut Internacional d’Estudis Borgians.⁶¹ In 2005 Miquel Navarro published the first biography of Pope Calixtus III, which has contributed much new documentation and become a seminal reference work.⁶²

This year, 2007, is the fifth centenary of the death of Cèsar Borja. To mark the event the Institut Internacional d’Estudis Borgians will devote the Second International Symposium on the Borjas, to be held in Valencia and Gandia on 21-23 November, to ‘The Pope’s Children’. On



Figure 8. *The Apocalypse*, according to an engraving by Albrecht Dürer. 1498.

the agenda are papers on “History and written culture” and “Patronage and representation: the image of the Borja family”, a panel discussion about “Documentation on the Borjas in European archives” and several optional events. The institute’s recent activities also include: the above-mentioned series of publications on documentation about the Borjas (“Diplomatari Borja”), a series of canonical works (“Biblioteca Borja”), and a web site (www.elsborja.org) containing up-to-date bibliography and filmography. The institute plans to complete the sections already accessible on the web site with a journal on the Borjas entitled *Revista Borja*.

THE LEGEND

So far I have dealt with facts. But their interpretation is another matter and can give rise to a parallel history, based on imagination and fantasy, which seeks to explain events that are out of the ordinary or difficult to believe. The public image created by this parallel history can acquire greater historical significance than the true situation, which is often more complex. Interpretation is subject to certain overall factors which must be borne in mind.

The papacy had had a bad reputation ever since medieval times, notably among religious sectors in favour of

reform. This climate was reinforced by the Schism and the desire for reform grew stronger as time passed. There was widespread criticism of the papacy and church corruption generally; charges of simony, abuse, influence peddling, lax morals and ostentatious wealth were everyday occurrences. Far from providing the remedy, the return of the Avignon popes to Rome accentuated many of these defects, offering new targets to pro-reform sectors, both Protestant and Catholic, including the Erasmists. And the popes, who no longer attended the solemn coronations of Germanic emperors, revived the splendour of former times through papal coronations, long, solemn liturgical celebrations, lavish ornamentation, and the flamboyant opulence of the Vatican and the cardinals’ palaces. All this turned Rome into an ecclesiastical city that was also a court.

On the political front, the 15th century popes had tried to turn the papal see into a sort of hereditary — or at any rate consolidated — monarchy: hence the practice of appointing relatives to the cardinalate. The first Borja pope, Calixtus III, adopted this same practice, as did his nephew Roderic de Borja, first as a cardinal and later as pope. He was highly skilled in the field and competed, on an equal footing but with papal subtlety, with the great Roman families, who used the same strategy. The need to guarantee loyalty, forge alliances and provide successors by means of nephews or sons, just as European monarchs did, may explain the popes’ numerous progeny, quite aside from — or in addition to — concupiscence, which in any case was not exclusive to the Borjas. However the method proved unreliable — appointing their children did not guarantee that the papal see would remain in the family — and it was also expensive, because the pope had to buy the cardinals’ votes in order to be elected. Consequently, in the long run it was abandoned.

Administration was another key factor. In all European courts the bureaucracy was growing fast and the Vatican, which needed to recover its lost control over papal territories, was no exception. For while the popes were absent from Rome during the Schism, powerful neighbouring families had established their authority over small areas and were not always receptive to the fundamentally money-making demands of the Holy See. Political alliances proved insufficient and had to be backed up by military action which, during this era that saw the formation of modern states, came to the forefront, not merely in Italy but throughout Europe.

Private morals had also been affected, in the Vatican and the church as a whole. The rule of celibacy was not strictly observed and many priests had children. The clerical career, we should remember, was not a free choice or vocation: for the second son it was an obligation. No one was scandalized by this situation, though some discretion was expected of high churchmen who, moreover, behaved in all respects like veritable feudal lords, defending their inheritance with arms if necessary, as did the monarchies and the nobility generally.



Figure 9. *The Deeds of the Antichrist* (detail). Luca Signorelli, fresco in Orvieto Cathedral (Chapel of San Brizio). 1499-1502.

But besides these overall factors, at least three more considerations helped to focus criticism on the Borja family: they were foreigners, they were rich, and they had successfully established a veritable dominion over the whole of Italy, to the detriment of established lords. The Black Legend of the Borjas originated in the well-known diary kept by Alexander VI's own master of ceremonies, Johannes Burckard. It was gradually fed by new features, such as the notion that the only explanation for Pope Alexander's wealth and success was that he had made a deal with the Devil, or was the embodiment of the Devil or the Antichrist. The Borjas already had a bad image during the pontificate of Alexander VI, especially in Italy, and we know the pope paid no attention to the charges but joked about them instead. Not only was he a foreigner, but the power and riches he built up fuelled the envy and fear of various Italian princes, especially those who were in theory his vassals. His family-orientated conduct — the attempt to use his children to establish a realm in Italy and consolidate his family's hold on the papacy — helped to win him enemies. Admittedly, previous popes had also had children,⁶³ but Alexander VI had at least nine legitimized offspring and followed the example of his predecessor Innocent VIII by celebrating their birthdays, weddings and funerals with great pomp in the Vatican apartments, and this really was a novelty. In Italian diplomatic circles all this gave rise to different but invariably negative interpretations, though the context in which they were expressed was political and often propagandistic. Soon those who wished to abolish the papal states, such as the Erasmists, joined the chorus of protest, while Protestant propagandists, who were to be responsible for boosting the Black Legend, were even more vociferous. The reformists had long considered Rome — where only the Vatican was of any consequence at the time — as a place of abomination, a Babylon, and the popes as Antichrists.⁶⁴

We have already seen that the Black Legend of the Borjas was consolidated after the death of Alexander VI in

1503. The prime instigator was the papal diarist Johannes Burckard, who gave a terrifying description of the pope's death. He claimed he had been poisoned and that on the evening of the first day of the funeral rites, his body — according to an incumbent of Saint Peter's — underwent a major transformation:

The ugliness and blackness of his face increased, so that when I saw him, towards eleven o'clock at night, his face looked like rag or a very dark blackberry, all covered in purple, with a very large nose and an enormous mouth; inside his mouth, his tongue had doubled in size and protruded from his lips; his mouth was open and was so horrible that nobody who saw it would ever have said there could be another like it. That night, after midnight, he was taken from that place [behind the grill of the high altar in the Vatican] to the Chapel of Le Febbri and placed beside the wall, in the corner to the left of the altar, by six carriers who were laughing and blaspheming against the pope, or jeering at his corpse,



Figure 10. *Lucrecia Borja*, as portrayed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. 1861-61. Tate Gallery, London.

and two master joiners, who made the coffin too narrow and too short: they cut off part of his mitre and covered him with an old tapestry, and pounded him hard with their fists to force him into the coffin. There were no candles and no light and no priest or anyone else to take care of him.⁶⁵

This ghoulish account obviously aims to show that the transformation was a divine punishment for the pope's sins and demons had carried him off to hell. The text produced a great sensation: it became one of the basic ingredients of the Black Legend and poison was to be associated with the family ever after.

Burckard, in his *Liber notarum*,⁶⁶ also reproduced — or invented — the most famous pamphlet against Alexander VI and his family, known as the *Letter to Silvio Savelli*,⁶⁷ which purports to be dated 1501 but in all likelihood was written later. It claims that the pope was the Antichrist in person, Lucrecia was guilty of every possible wickedness, and the power-hungry Cèsar's attempt to set up the duchy of Romagna was the work of the Devil. The tone is somewhat apocalyptic and the recipient is told to circulate the letter throughout the empire. It is a veritable inventory of the clichés that were ultimately to evolve into the Black Legend: the prefiguration of the Antichrist, crime, lasciviousness, and so on. The overall tone can be assessed from an excerpt:

There is no longer any crime or shameful act that does not take place in public in Rome and in the house of the pontiff. [...] Who could fail to be horrified by the account of the terrible, monstrous acts of lechery that are committed openly in his house, with no respect for God or man? Rapes and acts of incest are countless, his sons and daughters are utterly depraved, great throngs of courtesans frequent Saint Peter's Palace, pimps, brothels and whorehouses are to be found everywhere, a most shameful situation!⁶⁸

In 1509 the young historian Francesco Guicciardini adopted the same tone in his *Storie fiorentini*. The pope, he admits, had great courage, judgement and energy, but his entire reign was affected by the fact that he bought his post with money; he was guilty of every vice and was dominated by lust for both sexes to the point of committing incest with his daughter Lucrecia; he was extremely avaricious, seeking not just to preserve his wealth but to accumulate new riches; in his time benefices, dispensations, episcopal sees, the cardinalate and offices of all kinds were sold off, as in a flea market; he had many cardinals and other prelates poisoned to seize their possessions; he was very cruel, and ungrateful to those who helped him; he followed no religion, observed no faith, and made many promises but kept only those that were useful to him; he neglected justice, and Rome in his day was a lair of thieves and murderers; his ambition was boundless.⁶⁹

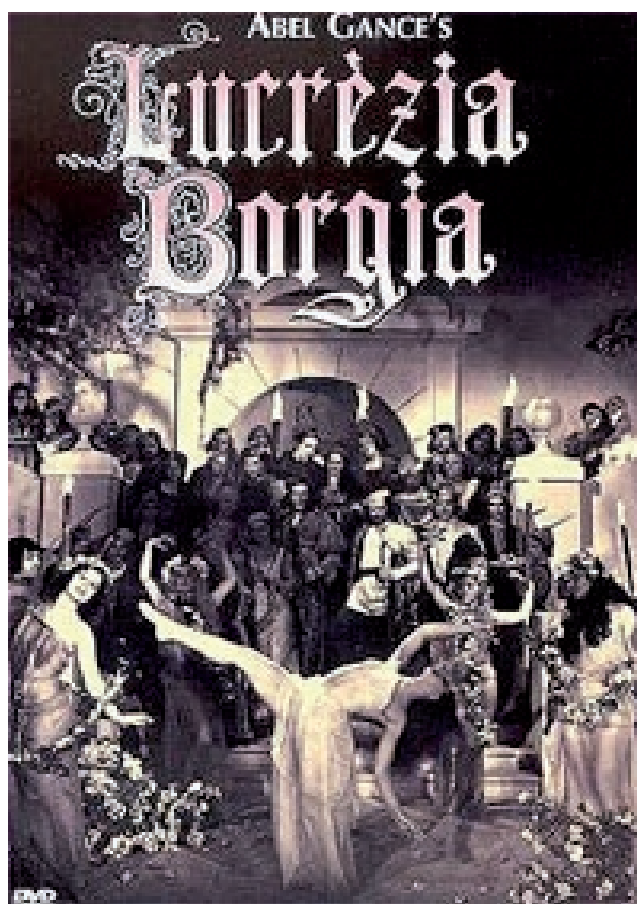


Figure 11. Abel Gance's film *Lucrecia Borgia*. Black and white, France, 1935.

The contemporary Venetian diplomat Girolamo Priuli made the picture even blacker by giving currency to the notion that Roderic de Borja “had given his soul and body to the great demon in Hell” in return for his election at the 1492 conclave. Different versions of the pact were spread about by Savonarola's followers. On 22 August 1503, just a month after the pope died, Francesco Gonzaga, the marquis of Mantua, wrote from Rome to his wife Isabella d'Este in the following terms:

When [Alexander] was ill he started to talk. These were his words: “I'm coming, you're right, just wait a moment”. Those who knew his secret understood from this that while he was in the conclave, after the death of Innocent [VIII], he sold his soul to buy the papacy and it was agreed that he would keep it for twelve years. Others claim to have seen seven devils around him at the moment of death; immediately his body began to boil and foam started coming from his mouth, like a cauldron on the fire.⁷⁰

This was a way of accounting for the great power he had acquired throughout Italy.⁷¹

The Borjas were also a favourite target for Protestant propagandists. Negri da Bassano, for instance, reproduced all the details of the deal with the Devil, adding that



Figure 12. Gerolamo lo Savio's film *Lucrezia Borgia*. Black and white. Silent. Italy, 1912.

the Devil appeared to the pope dressed as a protonotary and later as the pope himself (1550).⁷² The Italian Protestant Masserio, the author of an anti-papal tract written in 1553, and above all the former Carmelite John Bale, a Protestant exile from England, wrote in the same vein. However the Lutheran Johan Wolf, the author of a large illustrated volume issued in 1600, exerted greater influence, as did the French Calvinist Philippe de Mornay, who published another imposing tome in 1611. The idea was the same: "Some relate the deal with the Devil. Alexander's actions were clearly the work of the Devil. Everyone agrees that no one ever used such evil arts to win the papacy."

Towards 1600 Alexander VI's deal with the Devil became part of the second version of the legend of Faust, which appeared in a volume by the Lutheran Georg Rudolf Widman, published in Hamburg in 1599. Faust, Widman claimed, was impressed by the wickedness of Alexander VI, who had first invoked the Devil during his student days in Bologna, and he further insulted the pope by branding him as a 'Marrano', a baptized Jew who believed in nothing. The epithet had been applied to Alexander and his son Cèsar as early as 1493.⁷³

Cèsar Borja also had his place in hell, according to Gregorio Leti, a convert to Protestantism, whose influential *Vita di Cesar Borgia detto il duca Valentino* was published under a pseudonym and a false imprint in Amsterdam in 1655 and reprinted several times. It concludes with an account of how "whistles and terrifying voices were heard

round the tomb [of Cèsar] for a long time", a sign that his acts had been those of a devil.

Among Catholic writers, the figure of the pope was eclipsed by that of Cèsar, especially after the appearance in 1551 of *Elogia* by Paolo Giovio, the bishop of Nocera. Giovio accused Cèsar of "being born of an accursed seed" and of "unbelievable bestiality". Cèsar, of course, had a powerful defender in Machiavelli, who actually mythicized him by depicting him as a model prince. But in the long term the diffusion of Machiavelli's *The Prince* not only made Cèsar famous but caused him to inherit the stigma associated with the figure and political theories of the Florentine diplomat in certain Catholic circles. And this stigma eventually strengthened the Black Legend.⁷⁴

Writers in the kingdom of Aragon also turned their attention to Cèsar Borja. Foremost among them was the Aragonese historian Jerónimo Zurita who, in his *Historia del rey don Hernando el Católico*, heaped criticism on him, primarily on the grounds that he went over to the king of France, the enemy of Ferdinand 'the Catholic'. Zurita adopts the tone of earlier pamphlets, though his intentions are political rather than moral. He denounces Cèsar as a "cruel beast", full of "frivolity and great audac-



Figure 13. A lock of Lucrecia Borja's hair, found among her letters to Pietro Bembo. Ambrosiana Library, Milan

ity and insolence". He accuses him, in lavish detail, of having murdered, in 1500, Duke Alfons d'Aragó, the husband of Lucrecia Borja and gives a lengthy account of the pope's death by poisoning in 1503. Finally he describes Cèsar's death in 1507 as a divine punishment.⁷⁵

Zurita, however, was an isolated case and other Valencian historians, such as Gaspar Escolano, answered his charges by defending the Borja family. Some poets too, among them Gil Polo, remembered the popes with kindness and indeed no trace of the Black Legend of the Borjas is found in Valencia in the 16th century. This silence may have been due to the great power of the dukes of Gandia; from the middle of the century onwards, the prestige of Francesc de Borja and the recently founded Company of Jesus may have been added factors. The Borja family unquestionably produced some great personages, with very different orientations, and ranging from one extreme to the other. And it should also be recalled that Saint Francis himself was the great-grandson of a pope and the grandson of an archbishop of Saragossa.⁷⁶

THE BORJA FAMILY AS A LITERARY THEME

It is fair to say that the Borja family owe most of their fame to literature — notably narrative and dramatic works — and later to films based on the legend. We pass over the very plentiful poetry, since it was usually of a humanistic, courtly nature, and dedicated to their exaltation as patrons.

Narrative works about the Borjas appeared from the 17th century onwards. Examples include: *La vita del Duca Valentino* by Tommaso Tommasi, (1655); *Fausts Leben* (1791) by the German Friedrich Maximilian Klinger (best known for his drama *Sturm uns Drang*), which has the court of Alexander VI as its main setting and compares Faust to the pope on the basis of their respective pacts with the Devil; *Les Borgia* (1842), one of Alexander Dumas' first novels;⁷⁷ *Angela Borgia* (1891) by the Swiss writer Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, which describes Lucrecia Borja's passionate court in Ferrara; *La Rome des Borgia* by Guillaume Apollinaire (1913),⁷⁸ a veritable compendium of the Black Legend; and *A los pies de Venus (Los Borgia)*, one of the last novels of Vicent Blasco Ibáñez (1926). Writers who have tackled the subject more recently include Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, in *O Cèsar o nada* (1998), and Joan Francesc Mira, in *Borja Papa* (1997), both of whom are less indebted to the fantasy of legend.

The following are some of the most noteworthy of the many dramatic works: *El gran duque de Gandia* (c. 1650), attributed to Calderón de la Barca;⁷⁹ Victor Hugo's melodrama *Lucrece Borgia* (1831),⁸⁰ which provided the basis for the operatic libretto *Lucrezia Borgia*, set to music by Gaetano Donizetti and premiered in Milan in 1834; *Das Liebeskonzil* (1895) by Oscar Panizza;⁸¹ *I Borgia* by Pietro Cossa (1878);⁸² and *The Duke of Gandia* by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1908).⁸³ In recent years Manuel Vi-

cent has produced *Borja, Borgia* (1995), a sort of secular *acte sacramental*.⁸⁴

Film makers⁸⁵ began to show interest in the topic in 1908.⁸⁶ Before the advent of sound movies (1929), sixteen films on the Borjas had been produced in Europe (half of them in Italy) and the United States. Lucrecia Borja was the protagonist of more than half of these, five were about Cèsar Borja, and the rest dealt with the family. The first sound film on the Borjas was by the French director Abel Gance in 1935.⁸⁷ Over forty films have appeared to date, with Italian films ranking first, followed by French and Spanish productions. Lucrecia Borja, invariably in her more or less diabolical guise, remains the most popular theme and since 1968 erotic films, for the most part, have been predominant. The latest is an Italian-Valencian film entitled *Els Borja*, focussing on Cèsar, which was showing in Barcelona until recently. Neil Jordan has been working on his super-production *Lucrezia* (USA) since 2002. Out of curiosity, the most famous actors who have played the star roles include Orson Welles as Cèsar (1949)⁸⁸ and Paulette Godard as Lucrecia (1949).⁸⁹

The subject of the Borjas continues to exert fascination and seems far from exhausted. Much unpublished documentation is still waiting to be studied.

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- [13] See the section on "The Legend" on pp. 71-75.
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