

The Borgias

SPAIN'S FIRST CRIME FAMILY

By Alexander Peters

Wrapped in a carpet, the horribly bloated and badly decomposing body of Pope Alexander VI was pummelled and pushed unceremoniously into a hastily made coffin. No priests attended his burial nor were there wax tapers, lights, solemn masses or chanting monks. It was August 1503 at the Vatican and the Spanish Borgias' iron grip on power was unravelling fast.

BACK IN THE Vatican, Alexander VI's private chambers had already been pillaged, so all that remained were a few hangings and cushions. Meanwhile, the Pope's son, the ruthless and terrifying Cesare Borgia, was desperately trying to secure his position, despite barely recovering from the illness that had killed his father. As Captain General of the Church, he had already taken possession of his father's treasures and sent for reinforcements, whilst his men - under the loyal and cruel henchman, Michelotto - held the Borgo. But no one knew better than Cesare how fragile Borgia power was now that the Pope was dead. With enemies in every direction, the family's very existence was suddenly at stake. Quite simply, the Pope had died too soon.

Ultimate power for the Borgias had always depended upon the papacy, which they first obtained in 1455 when Alfonso Borgia was elected Pope Callixtus III. He lasted only three years, although by then he had promoted two of his nephews to the position of cardinal. One of these was Rodrigo Borgia, who was only 25 when appointed but soon became Vice-Chancellor of the Church. He was to serve five Popes over the course of the next 34 years before becoming one of history's most notorious Popes himself, remembered for his astonishing excesses and the creation of one of the first 'mafia' crime families.

In fact, there was nothing exceptional about the blatant nepotism of Callixtus III. This was the age of 'secular' Popes who, at best, combined piety with a rapacious lust for wealth and temporal power. Living in a splendour that was the envy of kings, the poverty and modesty of early Christianity had long been forgotten by the papacy. In the explosive and dangerously unstable atmosphere of High Renaissance Italy, being Pope was about power and riches - with the Borgias developing their talent for attaining it into a fine art.

Indeed, 450 years later their reputation - and that of the supreme creativity of Italy at the time of the Borgias - was summed up by Orson Welles in his legendary film *The Third Man* (1949). The protagonist, Harry Lime, says:

“with mind-boggling corruption the norm, political infighting was literally murderous, set within a frightening environment of bitter intrigue and dark betrayal”

“in Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, they had 500 years of democracy and peace. And what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.”

Orson Welles may have been a bit unfair to Switzerland, but he was not exaggerating about the Borgias, nor the incredible emergence of stunning artists. Alongside Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci were Titian, Raphael and Bramante - all working in ▶

How It Happened

1455

Alfonso de Borgia becomes Pope (Callixtus III)

1492

Rodrigo Borgia becomes Pope (Alexander VI)

1497

Leonardo da Vinci paints *The Last Supper*

1502

Leonardo da Vinci starts the *Mona Lisa*

1507

Cesare killed in an ambush in Navarre

1514

Copernicus first states that the earth circles the sun

1458

Pope Callixtus III dies

Last Moorish stronghold in Granada conquered by Ferdinand and Isabella
Columbus discovers the New World

1499

Cesare starts conquest of the Romagna

1503

Pope Alexander VI dies
Pope Julius II crowned and reigns until 1513

1508

Michelangelo starts painting the Sistine Chapel

1519

Lucrezia Borgia dies

1484

Boticelli paints *The Birth of Venus*

1494 - 1559

Italian Wars (a series of conflicts that involved all the major countries of Europe and the states of Italy)

1500

Cesare murders Lucrezia's second husband Alfonso of Aragon

1504

Cesare surrenders Romagna to Pope Julius II and is sent to Spain as a prisoner

1513

Machiavelli writes *The Prince* based upon Cesare Borgia

an environment of extraordinary decadence. For political or church leaders the stakes could not have been higher. With mind-boggling corruption the norm, political in-fighting was literally murderous, set within a frightening environment of bitter intrigue and dark betrayal.

Then into the fray marched Pope Alexander VI, an ambitious, skilled and ruthless statesman. He pursued wealth and temporal power single-mindedly, using every instrument at his disposal, including the assassination of his enemies. Amazingly, he also loved hunting, orgies, riotous parties and, perhaps most of all, women. He had several long-term mistresses who bore him at least nine adored children, of whom two in particular (Cesare and Lucrezia), were to play a major role during his papacy.

As soon as he was Pope, Alexander VI began to consolidate and increase the power and wealth of his family. Cesare was made a cardinal when he was only 18 and his elder bother, Giovanni, was made Duke of Gandia (the Spanish ancestral home of the Borgias). Meanwhile, Lucrezia, in a magnificent ceremony in the Vatican Palace, was married to the strategically important Lord of Pesaro, Giovanni Sforza. Alexander's plan was to take control of the papal states of central Italy to increase the wealth and secular power of the church - whilst also distributing land, titles and ever further riches to his own family. A 15th century Tony Soprano, his family was everything and furthering their interests was paramount.

In 1497, to Alexander's appalled grief, his son Giovanni was murdered. This was

possibly done by Cesare, who the following year resigned as a cardinal to become Duke of Valentino and Alexander's military right-hand man. By 1500 Cesare had conquered the Romagna and been appointed by Alexander as Captain General of the Church, making him one of the most powerful men in Italy.

“ Cesare was charismatic, a master politician and able general. He was also a cold-blooded murderer ”

In Cesare, Alexander had the perfect person to forward his grandiose plans. Utterly ruthless, highly intelligent, brave and secretive, Cesare was an opportunist who was supremely ambitious. His motto was 'either Caesar or nothing' and he operated on the basis that the ends always justified the means. Dressed dramatically in black, often masked (to hide syphilitic scars), he was charismatic, a master politician and able general. He was also a cold-blooded murderer who killed his sister's defenceless lover, Perotto, and her second husband, Alfonso of Aragon. Notoriously, in

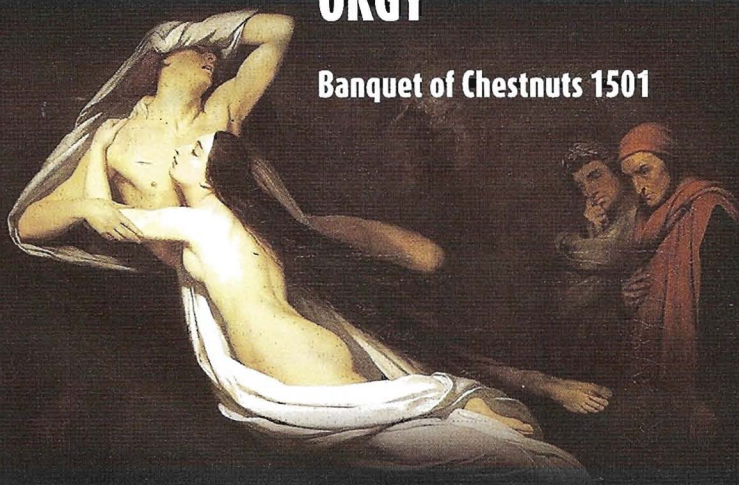
1502 at Senigallia, he also executed his own unsuspecting *condottieri* (mercenary) leaders by garrotting them when he doubted their loyalty. At the time, he was the most feared man in Italy, although beloved by his father the Pope, who admirably condoned his actions.

Lucrezia was the favoured daughter of Alexander and vital as a means for the Borgias to secure alliances through her marriages. A *femme fatale*, she was engaged twice by the time she was 11 and subsequently married three times, as the shifting political alliances of Alexander and Cesare demanded. Amazingly, at 21, she was made Regent of the Vatican (and therefore caretaker of the church!) whilst Alexander was away inspecting his new conquests.

But Alexander's efforts to create a powerful and long-lasting Borgia dynasty were not to succeed. Just before Cesare could consolidate Borgia power, the Pope died, possibly (and ironically) from poisoning. Hated by the Italians, who viewed them as a Spanish mafia, the Borgias had lacked sufficient time to build a long-term, solid power base. Universally feared, Cesare had made too many enemies to exist without the overt support of the papacy and, shortly after the death of Alexander, was stripped of his church titles and papal possessions before being sent back to Spain as a prisoner. Eventually escaping, he died as he had lived: outnumbered and killed in a bloody ambush. With him died all Borgia ambitions and one of the most extraordinary episodes in European history. ✕

ORGY

Banquet of Chestnuts 1501



An orgy held in the Vatican Palace and hosted by Cesare in the presence of Pope Alexander VI. By the light of candelabra, 50 naked prostitutes searched for hot chestnuts scattered on the floor. They were quickly joined by the partygoers, who were rewarded according to their displays of virility.

MURDER

Death of Cesare 1507

In light armour, riding a huge charger and carrying a massive, double-pointed lance, Cesare outpaced his escort. Arriving in a ravine, he was ambushed by three knights and their foot soldiers. Mortally wounded, he fought desperately before being overwhelmed and killed.

Who's Who

Alfonso Borgia 1378 - 1458

Pope (Callixtus III) 1455 - 1458

Born in Xativa, Valencia
First Borgia Pope
Made two nephews cardinals
Pious but nepotistic



Rodrigo Borgia 1431 - 1503

Pope (Alexander VI) 1492 - 1503

Born in Xativa, Valencia
Had a small army of children
Handsome, clever, ruthless and brave
Loved women, hunting, power and riches

Cesare Borgia 1475 - 1507

Son of Pope Alexander VI

Made cardinal at 18
Ruthlessly ambitious, secretive and murderous
Syphilitic and dressed in black
Commanded papal armies
Died alone in an ambush in Navarre
The inspiration for Machiavelli's *The Prince*



Lucrezia Borgia 1480 - 1519

Favourite daughter of Pope Alexander VI

Femme fatale, engaged twice by age 11 and had three husbands
Made Regent of the Vatican in 1501
Accused of incest and murder by poisoning
Painted by Titian and Veneziano

Guiliano della Rovere 1443 - 1513

Pope (Julius II) 1503 - 1513

The 'Warrior Pope' who drove French out of Italy
Hated the Borgias and destroyed Cesare
Master politician and strategist
Morally indifferent, probably a homosexual
Patronised Michelangelo, Bramante and Rafael

