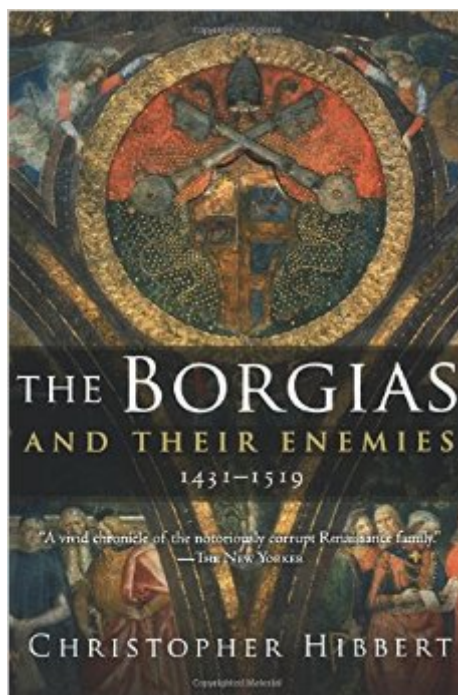


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The Borgias And Their Enemies: 1431-1519



Synopsis

The first major biography of the Borgias in thirty years, Christopher Hibbert's latest history brings the family and the world they lived in "the glittering Rome of the Italian Renaissance" to life. The name Borgia is synonymous with the corruption, nepotism, and greed that were rife in Renaissance Italy. The powerful, voracious Rodrigo Borgia, better known to history as Pope Alexander VI, was the central figure of the dynasty. Two of his seven papal offspring also rose to power and fame "Lucrezia Borgia, his daughter, whose husband was famously murdered by her brother, and that brother, Cesare, who served as the model for Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Notorious for seizing power, wealth, land, and titles through bribery, marriage, and murder, the dynasty's dramatic rise from its Spanish roots to its occupation of the highest position in Renaissance society forms a gripping tale. Erudite, witty, and always insightful, Hibbert removes the layers of myth around the Borgia family and creates a portrait alive with his superb sense of character and place.

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Customer Reviews

The Borgias are one of the fun families of the Renaissance. While probably not as bad as suggested in the original material, there is sufficient smoke to suggest some fire was going on at the Papal Palace. While the family produced two popes Calixtus III and Alexander VI, this book mainly focuses on the later as its central force. What we have is the unique situation of a pope with a family (highly irregular considering he was supposed to be celibate) whose interests he is all too eager to promote. This he did by playing off the powers of Naples, Milan, and France off against each other in order to get the best deal possible, sometimes with mixed results. Were this happening in the

21st century, one can imagine the premise for a good situation comedy or at least a bad nighttime soap opera (which it was in the 1980s). The family consists of Pope Alexander VI, his son Cesare, his daughter Lucrezia, Juan, the favorite son. There is also Giulia Farnese, who managed to secure an appointment for her brother to be a cardinal because she happened to be the pope's "main squeeze," although that is another story involving yet another dynastic family in Renaissance Italy. During his somewhat short reign as pope (1492-1503) Alexander VI employed every delightfully despicable feature of Renaissance diplomacy to advance the fate of his family. The Borgias probably were unique in the history of the world to feature a relatively high body count at family reunions. Unlike the Medici, the Farnese, the Doria Pamphili or the Della Rovere, the Alexander's family did not stay long as high flying players in the game that was Italian 16th century power politics. While Machiavelli speaks glowingly of Cesare in "The Prince," he clearly did not have the abilities to sustain his family's standing once his father died.

For the general reader, Italian history is difficult. British history, like American history, is about one country tied by one language. While these histories have religious and political strife they are very unlike the situation where city states and a religious superstructure vie for power. The many narratives and subnarratives, inclusive of the monumental art created at this time, make it hard for the general reader. A focused work like this is most appreciated. I particularly liked that Hibbert brings us to Rodrigo Borgia within 10 pages. (I put down *Perfect Hostage: A Life of Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's Prisoner of Conscience* because she was not yet born after the first 70 pages.) Another quality I liked was that the quotes from primary sources are translated using modern English. The content is striking. It's hard not to marvel at how bad the Borgias were and how much they got away with. The Borgia Pope, Alexander VI, is 2 popes away from the Medici heir whose reign will have to deal with Martin Luther and his theses. It is clear that the Protestant movement was not the result of (only) Leo X, but found its roots in the extreme corruption, violence and perversion of faith in the Borgia period. Another thing that is striking is the serenity and virtue ascribed to Lucretia, who seems to be unaware of the murderous qualities of her family, particularly Cesare.

Christopher Hibbert (1924-2008) was one of England's foremost historians and clearly an expert in this realm of study. Among his numerous other works, he also wrote *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall*. I was looking for a well-written biography of the infamous Borgias and Hibbert has provided it. Over the 328 pages he describes, in colorful prose, how the Borgia Family (in what is now Italy)

came to power through the Catholic Church, their sexual antics, their propensity to murder even their own family members to either gain or maintain power, and their ultimate demise. Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia, the father of Lucrezia) was the chief instrument of the Borgias and he never hesitated to engage in simony by selling red caps (Cardinal status) to bolster his support or even to simply expand his own personal notable coffers of treasure. He also had sired sons: Juan, Joffre, and Cesare, the latter of whom never ceased to invade fiefdoms throughout Italy, thus expanding the Borgia Empire. Pope Alexander VI, at various points, took to arresting and executing cardinals, poisoning some of them, all to loot and pillage their homes of treasure. The "vacated" positions were then sold by the Pope to the highest bidder, "...men of dubious reputation..." being no barrier to his actions. Disappointed applicants who spoke out later were rewarded by strangulation using a garrote. Much of this wealth was used to fund Cesare's endless military campaigns. The author pulls no punches on the details of the depravity and the gruesomeness of this demented but powerful family.

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