

THE BORJA FAMILY, UNIVERSAL VALENCIANS



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COURTYARD, PALAU DUCAL. GANDIA

DURING THE FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURIES, THE BORJA FAMILY WIELDED POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS POWER OVER RENAISSANCE ROME. ACCOUNTS OF THEIR LIVES, MIXING FACT AND FICTION, HAVE GIVEN RISE TO A CONTROVERSY OF ENORMOUS PROPORTIONS.

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PALAU DUCAL. GANDIA

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Amongst the families our country has given to history there is no question that the most universally known is the Borja family, especially under the Italianized form of their surname, Borgia. Recently, as part of the events surrounding the 1994 "October" Awards, a symposium was held on the Borjas in which a number of specialists discussed the main points of the political and family life of this Valencian clan which, amongst others, produced two popes, a saint and such well known characters as Cesare Borgia and his sister Lucrezia. At the same time, the fourth volume of Father Miquel Batllori's Complete Works, *La família Borja* (Edicions Tres i Quatre) was presented. This book takes a fresh look at the history of this family without the usual prejudices and preconceived notions.

The Borjas were originally from Aragon and settled in the region of Valencia during the twelfth century. One

branch of the family settled in Xàtiva and began to prosper after taking the side of King Peter the Ceremonious in the War against the "Unió". This was the start of an ascent which was to take off when one member of the family, the Bishop of Valencia Alfons de Borja (1378-1458), a man with extraordinary powers of diplomacy, travelled to Italy with Alfons V and eventually came to occupy the Papal throne with the name Calixtus III (1455). His coronation was the unexpected result of the differences between two of the most influential families in Rome at that time, the Orsinis and the Colonnas.

The new Pope surrounded himself with people he could trust and placed two of his nephews in the papal court: Pere Lluís (c. 1430-1458) and Roderic (c. 1431-1503). Pere Lluís became captain general of the pontifical armies. Not a few Italians commented that his aspiration was to achieve a royal crown over

a united Italy. But the death of Calixtus III caused a reaction in Rome against the Borjas and Pere Lluís was forced to flee the city. He died shortly afterwards, leaving his immense fortune to his brother Roderic.

Roderic, who by then had been made a cardinal, managed to withstand the difficulties of the moment and with the help of his money, so they say, was elected Pope in 1492 with the name Alexander VI. Before and after he was crowned Pope, Roderic had a series of children, amongst them Pere Lluís (c. 1458-1488), Cèsar, or Cesare, (c. 1475-1507), Joan (c. 1475-1497) and Lucrècia, or Lucrezia, (1480-1519), by Vanozza Catanei. In 1485, Pere Lluís bought the Duchy of Gandia from King Ferdinand the Catholic and married Maria Enríquez, the King's cousin. But Pere Lluís died young and duchy and wife passed into the hands of his brother Joan, who was murdered in 1497.



MOULDING, PALAU DUCAL, GANDIA

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At that point, the Dukes of Gandia cut themselves off completely from Italian affairs and settled down definitively in the capital of la Safor. This branch includes such notables as the fourth Duke of Gandia (grandson of Joan), Saint Francis of Borja and the Viceroy of Peru, Francesc de Borja i Aragó (c. 1577-1658).

Meanwhile, in Rome, the rest of Alexander VI's children (who, in spite of having adapted their surname to the Italian spelling, Borgia, still used Catalan as their everyday language, even in correspondence), followed a brief but brilliant trajectory which led them for a few years to be the most powerful family in Italy, but which started a rapid decline following the death of Alexander VI in 1503.

Cesare, who at first devoted himself to a career in the Church—he was Bishop of Pamplona at the age of sixteen and Archbishop of Valencia and a cardinal

before he was twenty—, gave up the cloth and moved to the court of Louis XII in France, where he received the title of Duke of Valentinois and married Carlota d'Albret. Then, with the help of the King of France and the money from the Papacy, he embarked on the conquest of Romagna, the first step on the way to the formation of a kingdom in central Italy. Shortly after this, he took Urbino, at the same time as the Pope granted him the title of Duke of Romagna. All these victories, achieved either through force or cunning, aroused the admiration of Machiavelli, who saw in him a man of talent able to bring about something as ambitious as the dream of a unified Italy. Machiavelli's admiration for Cesare Borgia was such that it inspired him to write the book which for years was almost required reading for any man of state: *The Prince*.

Following the conquest, Cesare started on the job of organising a centralized

administration and restoring cities and fortresses. The architect he assigned to carry out this task was the great Leonardo da Vinci. But the death of Alexander put an end to all his hopes. The rise to the Papal throne of one of his political enemies, Cardinal Giuliano delle Rovere, as Julius II, was the final blow to his dreams. The new Pope ordered his detention in Ostia and forced him to return, one by one, all his possessions in Romagna. From there he went to Naples, where at the Pope's instigation he was arrested by Gonzalo Fernández de Cordoba, who had him sent back to the Iberian Peninsula. Cesare remained in prison for some time, until he escaped from the castle of la Mota and took refuge in the court of his brother-in-law, the king of Navarre. Shortly afterwards he died from the wounds received in a skirmish.

For her part, at the age of thirteen Lucrezia was married to Giovanni Sforza



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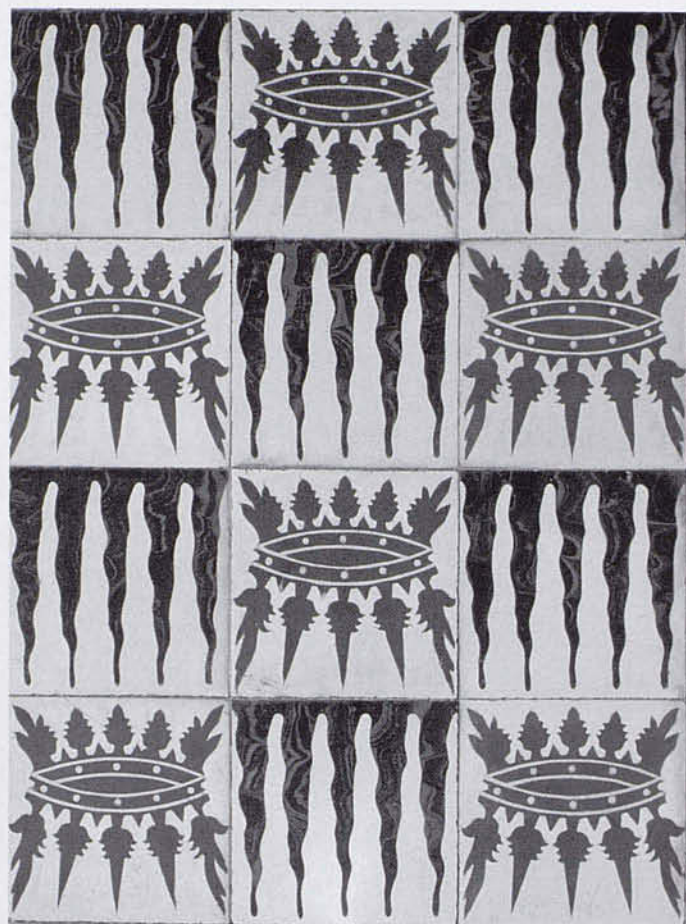
by her father Alexander VI, a marriage which was later invalidated by the Pope himself on the grounds of the husband's impotence. In August 1498, she was married for a second time, to Alfonso, Prince of Bisceglie, the bastard of the royal family of Naples. Following the alliance of Cesare with the French, enemies of the Neapolitans, Alexander VI's son had his brother-in-law murdered so as to rid himself of a possible obstacle to his policy of unconditional alliance with France. It seems to have been during Lucrezia's period of widowhood spent in the Vatican—where on three occasions she took over the administration of Church affairs during her father's absence—that she acquired her reputation as a libertine and loose-liver. This was also the time when the mysterious "Roman child" was born (if it ever was born), supposedly the fruit of her incestuous affair with her own father. In December 1501, she was married for a

third time, on this occasion to Alfonso d'Este, son and heir of the Duke of Ferrara. When she moved to her new home in Ferrara, Lucrezia broke for ever with Rome and began a completely new life far from the political interests of her father and brother, who had used her as an instrument of their ambition. She was made Duchess in 1505 and won everybody's affection and respect at the centre of a brilliant court surrounded by artists like Pietro Bembo and the great Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto, the author who praises the figure of this lady in the greatest work of poetry of the Italian Renaissance, *Orlando furioso*. After 1512, though, she withdrew from court life and began a discreet existence which lasted until her death in 1519 as a result of a miscarriage.

Lucrezia Borgia's historical reputation, though, is entirely undeserved, as her biographers have shown, especially

Maria Bellonci. Her graceful female figure has been made the odious protagonist of the works of great writers like Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas and Guillaume Apollinaire, not to mention musicians such as Gaetano Donizetti, who amongst other pieces composed a famous opera with the name of the daughter of Alexander VI: *Lucrezia Borgia*. The cinema has also found in this family—and especially in Lucrezia—a world full of suggestive ideas worthy of the silver screen. Without meaning to be exhaustive, there is Richard Oswald's *Lucrezia Borgia* (1992), Abel Gance's *Lucrece Borgia* (1935), Mitchell Leisen's *Bride of Vengeance* (1949) and Christian-Jaque's *Lucrece Borgia* (1953).

Only Lucrezia, then, was saved from the wholesale wreck of the rest of the family, and her court became the refuge for several members of her dynasty, amongst them some of Cesare's bas-



DECORATIVE CERAMICS, PALAU DUCAL. GANDIA

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tard sons. For his part, Jofré, one of Lucrezia's younger brothers, and Roderic, a son from her second marriage, retired to the kingdom of Naples, where they held the titles respectively of Prince of Squillace and Duke of Bisceglie. Cesare's only legitimate daughter, Lluïsa, stayed in France and married into the famous Bourbon-Busset family. In this way the power of a family which only a short time before had seemed destined to rule over the whole of Italy came to an end.

The life of the Roman Borjas has given rise to an extraordinary number of controversial writings. The romantic movement adopted the view their enemies had given of them, portraying them as a demoniac family of poisoners, sex maniacs and cruel and cunning monsters. Contrasting with this clearly negative view, the well-known "black legend of the Borgias", a separate branch of writers have come out in their favour, want-

ing to defend their name. The truth, though, probably lies half-way between these two extremes. The Borgias could well have been as bad as they appear in certain accounts accusing them of corruption and greed. But even so, they would have been no more than just another Roman Renaissance family, neither better nor worse than other families that vied with them for power in a fight to the death.

There are three things that might have given them their evil reputation. One is the fact that they were finally defeated by their political enemies, who were able to rain down condemnations on them which no-one would have dared to utter against a clan with power and influence in Rome. Another, perhaps the most important, is that they were foreigners who challenged the Italian monopoly in the Papal court. This is borne out by the fact that following the deaths of Calixtus III and Alexander VI the

outburst of Roman hatred was addressed explicitly against "the Catalans", as they were commonly known in the eternal city. Finally, we have to remember that many historians have been tempted to overdo the human dimension of Pope Alexander VI and his children, thinking that in this way they were diverting criticism from the Italian society of the time and the Church itself as an institution. But this strategy fails to stand up to analysis. The activities of the Borjas can only be explained in terms of the situation within the Church at the beginning of the sixteenth century, of the political tensions affecting Italy at that time and of the profound moral decadence of the Roman society of the period.

These newcomers from the lesser Valencian nobility were in fact the victims rather than the instigators of a state of affairs which existed long before they ever appeared in Italy and which continued after their eclipse. ■