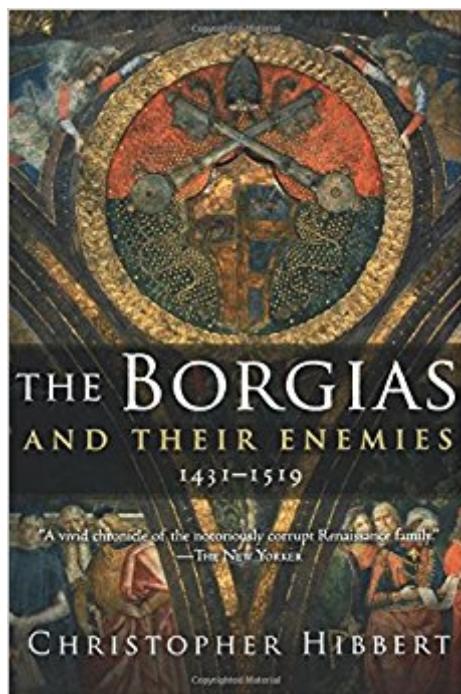


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# The Borgias And Their Enemies: 1431-1519



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; 1 edition (September 16, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0547247818

ISBN-13: 978-0547247816

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 102 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #330,919 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #73 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Italy #350 in Books > History > Europe > Italy #8601 in Books > History > Military

## Customer Reviews

Acclaimed British historian Hibbert's latest work focuses on three members of the notorious Borgia family of Spain, who came to power in Rome with the election of Alfonso de Borgia (1378–c.1458), the scholarly bishop of Valencia, to the papacy as Calixtus III. Calixtus's nephew Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia (1431–c.1503) was known for decadence as well as keen administrative skills. Cardinal Rodrigo played a key role in electing Pope Sixtus IV, had a lucrative career as vice chancellor under five popes, fathered several children and bribed his way to becoming pope himself, as Alexander VI, in 1492. His children were infamous, including the

unscrupulous military leader and politician Cesare (1475–1507), who inspired Machiavelli's *The Prince* and murdered his own brother and brother-in-law to achieve his goals, while his daughter Lucrezia (1480–1519) overcame an incestuous reputation to become a respected patron of the arts as duchess of Ferrara. The book is a heavily researched and generally engrossing account of a famous dynasty, but readers may wish Hibbert (*The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici*) had used a more assertive and analytical voice to accompany the detailed descriptions of Renaissance life. (Oct.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

PRAISE FOR CHRISTOPHER HIBBERT  
"A superbly scrupulous and sympathetic interpreter." •The Boston Globe "Simply unputdown-able." •The New York Times Book Review

This book is a treasure for any enthusiast of the political struggles that were a signature of the Italian Renaissance. Much like the Greek city-states during antiquity, Italian history during this time was dominated by the economics and political dynamics of Florence, Milan and Italian states ruled by their own established political dynasties. Florence had the de' Medici, Milan had the Sforza: given this backdrop, the book shows how the Borgia family, rising from Spanish roots, made their way into Italian history. Instance after instance, I enjoyed how the author managed to balance fact with legend, tracing historical trajectory while using sources to tell us how the scholars and public perceived the driving personalities. Instead of jumping straight into the career of Pope Alexander VI, who became cardinal at 25, we're given a summary of then-recent Papal history to give context to the realities that Rodrigo Borgia exploited to navigate his way into the papacy. Horse-trading amongst cardinals, promises of posts and land were not unusual and Borgia merely mastered the art. The way he is described is not far removed from what is expected from popular depictions, "he well knew how to dominate, how to shine in conversation and how to impose his will on other men..." Instead of taking the oft-taken one-sided stance of dismissing his entire tenure as corrupt, Hibbert is more realistic: "...guilty as he may well have been of simony, bribery and sexual incontinence, Alexander VI was both conscientious and competent in the discharge of his duties. Approachable, affable and good-natured...". Given the giant mish-mash that is family politics, with family disputes, political alliances and marriages - the author captures a single dimension at a time so that the reader doesn't get overwhelmed or lost in the trivialities of learning family trees. The chapters are short so that the book doesn't read like a drag-on history book littered by facts and

dates, the commentary is what is given its due importance. The Rome the Borgias inherited was struck by poverty, far removed from the grandeur of Imperial Rome. Alexander VI managed to balance the papal budget using income from aluminum mines, on the political level he managed to escape the insecurity of the College of Cardinals calling council to dispose him and diplomatically, he gave a relatively minor concession to the French of allowing access through the papal states whilst avoiding an inevitable defeat had they gone to war against French canons. A good observer would notice the creation of the marks of Borgia opulence that lie to this date, decorated churches and palaces marked with great works of art. Cesare, unlike his father who, at least outside prided himself on following Christian rituals carried himself in "clothes that were the doublets and hose of a secular prince, not a man in holy orders". The book makes a swift turn from documenting the life of Rodrigo, his daughter Lucrezia (a chief tool in securing alliances through marriage) and Cesare's relatively incompetent brother Juan to Cesare's campaigns and successes. It is not difficult to notice that major parts of history are compressed into small paragraphs, such as the detailed histories of de' Medici, Sforza, the rise and fall of Savonarola - but the beauty of this book lies in this incompleteness. Firstly, the book avoids going on tangents, sticking to the facts that are relevant to Borgia history. Secondly, given that we are accustomed to dramatizations that fill in gaps where there is otherwise speculation and uncertainty, the relative dearth of information has the indirect effect of shocking us about the extent of creative license taken by authors and directors. The author does great service to Cesare's myth, while also bursting his aura of infallibility. From the Borgia nemeses Cardinal della Rovere, "the Duke is so endowed with prudence, ability and every virtue of mind and body that he has conquered everybody". The author wisely includes the famous assessments of Machiavelli in echoing the same views about his competence at realpolitik, giving weight to the view that Cesare was the person in mind when writing the Prince to reseek the favor of the Medici's. While Cesare fought "for the sake of glory of acquiring lands...acknowledging no fatigue or danger", the downside of this ability to annex lands in his campaign meant that he was "more eager to seize states than to administer them". To the author, history isn't a list of conquests but the ability to make good use of those conquests. At no point does the author seem to dive into describing campaigns without telling the reader about the monetary costs of the conflict and how the money was raised - giving a realistic and complete account of the nature of warfare as an economic enterprise, not merely a display of traditional heroism. Any Borgia fan would love the life-bringing descriptions of all dimensions of the family and their politics: Lucrezia and her three marriages, Cesare and his involvement with the French, Cesare's response to the Orsini revolt in Urbino, his diplomatic success with securing his French bride Charlotte d' Albert, the French claim to Naples as

a source of constant dilemma's to the Borgia's who were allied to Naples's incumbents. The romantic affair with Cesare's life ends with the failure of his contingency plan upon the death of his father owing to his own illness and his fatal and poorly calculated mistake of helping della Rovere be elected, foolishly thinking that he would forget his long-standing enmity against the Borgia family and keep him as the head of the papal armies and maintain his hold on the Romagna. Lucrezia's last moments at the court are also explored, living her life as an obsolete political commodity until her death. A glance at the primary and secondary sources in the book give a good idea of how much material is taken from sources that describe the Italian Renaissance in its totality and not Borgia history isolation. This perhaps gives the best example of the undeniable influence that the Borgia's had on art and culture. Anyone who liked this book should grab a book on the history of the de' Medici and Sforza to get a broader picture of intra-city state politics. The book presents itself almost as a live show, a great summary - but by no means a concise history. A gripping read.

This book gets 5 stars just for the continuous flow of material and the eloquent writing style. This is my first book by Hibbert and I think he did a great job. This is a wonderful tome of information concerning the Borgias in the illustrious Renaissance era. I will mention two books in the same time-frame: 1. 'The Cardinal's Hat', by Mary Hollingsworth - very slow detailed account of Renaissance life that mainly discussed food, and the cost of every detail imaginable. 2. 'The Pope's Daughter', by Caroline P. Murphy - riveting account of Pope Julius II and his daughter which read like a suspense thriller. I'm subsequently going to read her 2nd book as well. I put Hibbert's book right up there with Caroline P. Murphy. I think he's done a marvelous job as far including all the facts in a well document timeline of events. You don't lose interest for a minute and even more so, this paperback mentions all the juicy stuff you've been waiting for... Even after reading both of the books previously mentioned, 'The Borgias' is still able to bring some interesting points, events and accounts to life concerning Cardinal Ippolito, and Pope Julius II to which I was pleasantly surprised and satisfied. This is a great, insightful, and easy read to learn about the most famous time in the history of the Catholic Church. \*There really are some wild, unbelievable stories in here... Who's to say the Catholic Church wasn't the first mob? When you hear stories about Cardinals traveling with entourages, numerous sexual affairs, jealousy to the extent of putting 'murder contract's on other men, eyes being stabbed from their sockets, men being fished out of the Tiber River etc.... Don't believe me - read the book. There's much graphic / eye-opening material within these pages. Like I've always said, every organization, fraternity, government etc - they've all had their corrupt beginnings, some more than others.... Great book if you're even remotely interested in this genre...

A good start, but left me wanting much more. Even though this book provides an adequate amount of summarized detail, the writing-style is dry and a little uninteresting, making it difficult to retain. I was slightly disappointed to find instances in these pages where misguided Borgia slander is still presented as if it were fact. Sources are SO important when it comes to true Borgia history, and I didn't feel this book acknowledged that. If you have only a base interest in the Borgias, this book might suffice for a detailed, mostly-historic overview. If you're serious about this subject, seeking the truth behind the legend, as all history-buffs do, you can probably skip this book.

Hibbert's book is focused on the pope Alexander VI, and his children, Lucrezia and Cesare, during his reign in Rome. Mostly it is about intrigues in the papal court, Cesare's military campaigns and Lucrezia's marriages, described in letters and memoirs of this period. It's a small book, so there is almost no place for analysis, or descriptions of anything beyond the life of Borgias. Also a big part of the book is taken by lengthy descriptions of ceremonial processions, clothing, marriage contracts, various payments between involved persons etc, etc, which is, unfortunately a boring reading. On the positive side there is a lot citations from the sources and a lot of interesting details.

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