

# THE IMAGE OF THE BORGIA IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the relevance of the Borgia family, a black legend has been attached to them for five hundred years. The vision of Rodrigo Borgia and his children, notably Cesare and Lucrezia, has tended to be negative in the various works inspired by their history. This work analyses three audio-visual products of different kinds (a film, a series and a video game) from the early twenty-first century to determine which conception of the Borgia family has been transmitted to the millions of people who have used them. This enables us to see if a new Borgia idea is offered or if the one given by their black legend is still maintained.

## KEYWORDS

Cinema, Borgia Family, Black Legend, TV Series, Video games.

## CAPITALIA VERBA

Cinematographia, Familia Borgia, Fabula nigra, Spectacula televisiva, Videoludi.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

One of the most powerful lineages from the Crown of Aragon during the Renaissance is undoubtedly the Borgias. The Valencian family<sup>2</sup> is recognised above all by the fact that it gave the Catholic Church two popes in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. These were Pope Callixtus III (1455-1458) and Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503), the names adopted by Alfonso Borgia and his nephew Rodrigo Borgia, respectively. The family's influence within the Church, however, was not limited to the two pontiffs, but numerous members of the Borgia line occupied different posts within the Roman Curia. For example, another of Pope Callixtus III's nephews, Luis Juan de Milá y Borgia, was a cardinal and bishop of Segorbe and Lleida,<sup>3</sup> while his cousin Pedro Luis de Borgia —Rodrigo's eldest brother— held the position of captain general of the Church and governor of the castle of Sant'Angelo, the most important fortress in Rome.<sup>4</sup> For his part, Pope Alexander VI appointed seven cardinals of his own lineage: his nephew Juan Borgia the Elder (1492), his son Cesare (1493); the brothers Juan Borgia the Younger (1493) and Pedro Luis Borgia y Lanzol de Romaní (1500), who were grandchildren of a sister of Rodrigo; Francisco Borgia (1500); Juan Castellar y Borgia (1503), cousin of Juan Borgia the Elder and Francisco Lloris y Borgia (1503), nephew of Juan Borgia the Elder.<sup>5</sup> Family successes surpassed even the pontificate of Popes Borgia: one of Pope Alexander VI's great grandchildren, Francisco Borgia, was superior general of the Jesuits between 1565 and 1572, and was canonised in 1671.<sup>6</sup>

Despite —or due to— their success, a black legend<sup>7</sup> has followed the Borgias since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. According to Roig Matoses, this would have begun in a timeframe

1. This work is part of the project “El poder vivido en la Baja Edad Media: percepción, representación y expresividad en la gestión y la recepción del poder” (PID2019-104085GB-I00), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. Abbreviations used: BAV, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana; Vat. lat, Vaticani Latini. I would like to thank my brother Joan for his help, without which I would not have been able to prepare this work.

2. On the origins of the Borgia family, see: Navarro Sorní, Miguel. *Alfonso de Borja, papa Calixto III. En la perspectiva de sus relaciones con Alfonso el Magnánimo*. Valencia: Institució Alfons el Magnànim, 2008: 24-31.

3. About this character, see: Fernández de Córdoba Miralles, Álvaro. “Vida y empresas del cardenal Lluís Juan del Milá: promoción eclesiástica y mecenazgo entre Italia y la Corona de Aragón”. *Aragón en la Edad Media*, 24 (2013): 191-223.

4. The significance of this fortress remains clear from the fact that the College of Cardinals repeatedly claimed that the castle should always be governed by a clergyman who was not related to the pope, with a mandate limited to only two years. Cassanyes Roig, Albert. *Antoni Cerdà (c. 1390-1459). Poder polític i promoció eclesiàstica a mitjans del segle XV*. Lleida: Universitat de Lleida (PhD Dissertation), 2018: 343.

5. Eubel, Konrad. *Hierarchia Catholica Medii Aevi*. Munster: Sumptibus et Typis Librariae Regensbergianae, 1914: II, 21-25.

6. A review of his life in Pizarro Llorente, Hernando. “De duque de Gandía a santo: la transformación de san Francisco de Borja a través de sus biografías”. *Chronica Nova*, 43 (2017): 53-84.

7. On this concept, see: Cobarsí Morales, Josep. “Controversial ‘Black Legend’ Concept as Misinformation or Disinformation Related to History: Where Do We Go from Here in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Information Field?”, *Information for a Better World: Shaping the Global Future. 17<sup>th</sup> International Conference, iConference 2022. Virtual Event, February 28-March 4, 2022. Proceedings*, Malte Smits, ed. Berlin-Heidelberg: Springer Cham, 2022: I, 21-32.



between 1458 —death of Pope Callixtus III— and 1492 —Rodrigo's access to the papal throne— and always before the latter event.<sup>8</sup> However, there were already precedents for propaganda against them during the pontificate of Pope Callixtus III. For example, numerous humanists —including such prominent authors as Francesco Filelfo, Vespasiano da Bisticci and Poggio Bracciolini— accused the first Borgia pope of being a medieval figure who opposed the new cultural currents.<sup>9</sup> He was also denounced for a supposed dismantling of the Vatican Library founded by his predecessor Nicholas V,<sup>10</sup> although it has been shown that Pope Callixtus III not only did not damage the library, but also ordered Cosme de Montserrat to draw up the first catalogue of the institution.<sup>11</sup> Equally, Italian lamentations that the pontificate of Pope Callixtus III involved the massive arrival of people from the Crown of Aragon to occupy positions in the Roman Curia must not be forgotten.<sup>12</sup>

There were several fundamental elements of the Borgian black legend. Firstly, the nepotism of Pope Alexander VI involved the appointment of numerous members of his family to hold various offices of the Church. Secondly, the Borgias were ambitious, which would result in reprehensible practices, such as simony or the murder of political rivals. This relates to the third element, the family's wealth, which some people did not hesitate to claim was the result of a pact with the Devil.<sup>13</sup> Fourthly, Pope Alexander VI was placed at the head of a depraved lineage, in which he shared prominence with his children, Cesare, Giovanni (to a lesser extent) and, above all, Lucrezia, who, it was said, had incestuous relations with her father and her own brothers.<sup>14</sup> A last element was the supposed convert origins of the Borgia family, a rumour that had been spread since 1493, but was popularised by Widmann in the edition of 1599 of *Faust*.<sup>15</sup>

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8. Roig Matoses, Joan Emili. "La introducció de la llegenda negra dels Borja a la Península: Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Jerónimo Zurita". *Revista Borja. Revista de l'Institut Internacional d'Estudis Borgians*, 5 (2015-2016): 3.

9. Navarro Sorní, Miguel. *Alfonso de Borja...*: 13-14.

10. Among the accusations were that he had sent numerous volumes of the library to Barcelona and Vic and had given them to different Catalan lords. Pastor, Ludwig von. *Historia de los papas desde fines de la Edad Media*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, editor, 1911: II, 338-341.

11. Manfredi, Antonio. "La nascita della Vaticana in età umanistica da Niccolò V a Sisto IV", *Storia della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. Volume I. Le origini della Biblioteca Vaticana tra Umanesimo e Rinascimento (1447-1534)*, Antonio Manfredi, ed. Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2010: 182-189.

12. This argument was put forward by Enea Silvio Piccolomini in the conclave that elected him pope to avoid the election of the French Cardinal Guillaume d'Estouteville. BAV. Vat. Lat., 12182, f. 20r: [...] *Calisto ci può fare accorti di ciò, nel suo pontificato i catalani occuporno il tutto* ("Callixtus can give warning of this, during his papacy the Catalans hogged everything"). See: Cassanyes Roig, Albert. *Antoni Cerdà. En la cruïlla dels poders medievals*. Lleida: Pagès Editors, 2022: 164-166.

13. Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. "La família Borja: historiografia, llegenda, tema literari". *Catalan Historical Review*, 1 (2008): 216; Roig Matoses, Joan Emili. "La introducció de la llegenda negra...": 3.

14. Roig Matoses, Joan Emili. "La introducció de la llegenda negra...": 3-4.

15. Hillgarth, Jocelyn N. "La imatge dels Borja fora de la península Ibèrica i a Europa durant els segles xvi i xvii", *L'Europa renaixentista. Simposi internacional sobre els Borja (València, 25-29 d'octubre de 1994)*. Gandia: Centre d'Estudis i Investigacions Comarcals Alfons el Vell-Edicions Tres i Quatre, 1998: 337; Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. "La família Borja...": 218.



In any case, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, there have been authors —such as Ludwig von Pastor, Ferdinand Gregorovius, and Peter de Roo— who have wanted to purge the bad image of the Borgia family and contrast the legend with the sources in the archives.<sup>16</sup> However, this new perception did not reach the general public, which continued with the legendary view of the Borgias, enlarged by Victor Hugo's novel and Donizetti's opera.<sup>17</sup> Since the beginning of the third millennium, there have been efforts to clean up the image of the Borgia family. An opportunity to achieve this was the commemoration of the fifth centenary of Pope Alexander VI's pontificate, which took place between 1992 and 2003. Within the framework of the ephemeris, numerous scientific congresses were convened around his figure, both in Spain and Italy.<sup>18</sup> The Institut Internacional d'Estudis Borgians, based in Valencia, was one of the main results of that effervescence of research into the Borgia family and, in part, is the main institution in the former Crown of Aragon that keeps alive interest in this important family. Additionally, several historians, mostly Valencian, have sought to use documentary sources to dispel the black legend.<sup>19</sup>

Dissemination of historical research is one of the pending subjects of historiography, so new studies on the Borgia family have tended not to reach the general public. Although more than five hundred years separate Rodrigo Borgia and his children from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the bad image of the Valencian saga still persists today, spread in part by literature, the performing arts and audio-visual media.<sup>20</sup> These products, which transmit messages and ideas to a broad spectrum of society, are consumed by the general public, who assume the point of view they are given.<sup>21</sup> The Borgias are not alien to this phenomenon; Adéla Kotátková states that “*els Borgia estan esdevenint [...] per a la ficció històrica, una d'aquelles nissagues —juntament amb els Medici, per exemple— que personifiquen la transició entre l'edat mitjana i l'edat*

16. Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. “La família Borja...”: 215.

17. Gomar Calatayud, Marc. “La Lucrezia Borja de ficció en el drama d'Hugo i els seus derivats”. *SCRIPTA. Revista Internacional de Literatura i Cultura Medieval i Moderna*, 6 (2015): 100-119.

18. Many of the results of these scientific encounters have been published. See, for example Frova, Carla; Nico Ottaviani, Maria Grazia, eds. *Alessandro VI e lo Stato della Chiesa. Atti del convegno (Perugia, 13-15 marzo 2000)*. Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2003; Capitani, Ovidio; Chiabò, Maria; De Matteis, Maria Consiglia; Oliva, Anna Maria, eds. *La fortuna dei Borgia. Atti del convegno (Bologna, 29-31 ottobre 2000)*. Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2005; Iradiel Murugarren, Paulino; Cruselles Gómez, José María, coords. *De València a Roma a través dels Borja. Congrés commemoratiu del 500 aniversari de l'any jubilar d'Alexandre VI (València, 23-26 de febrer de 2000)*. Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana, 2006. See also Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. “La família Borja...”: 215-216.

19. See: Roig Matoses, Joan Emili. “Itàlia i la configuració de la llegenda negra borgiana”. *SCRIPTA. Revista internacional de literatura i cultura medieval i moderna*, 5 (2015): 207-228.

20. Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. “La família Borja...”: 218-219. For a study of the Borgias in film and television, see: Cortés Escrivà, Josepa. “La imatge dels Borja al cinema”. *Revista Borja. Revista de l'Institut Internacional d'Estudis Borgians*, 5 (2015-2016): 1-25 (with a list of different titles at 15-21); Sanz Ferreruela, Fernando. “Presencia y tratamiento de la familia Borja en la ficción cinematográfica y televisiva españolas (1945-2015)”. *Revista Borja. Revista de l'Institut Internacional d'Estudis Borgians*, 5 (2015-2016): 2-6; Díaz Alché, Kevin. “Legado envenenado: la perduración de distorsiones históricas en la lúdica digital”. *Quaderns de Cine*, 12 (2017): 35-49.

21. Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco. “Videogames and the Middle Ages”. *Imago Temporis. Medium Aevum*, 3 (2009): 312.



*moderna, uns grans impulsors del Renaixement*".<sup>22</sup> However, this same historical fiction has not hesitated to cling to controversial Borgian stories for producing audio-visual products that aim to achieve the highest possible audience.<sup>23</sup> Conjugating historical reality with fiction is a difficult task and often not without controversy. As Josepa Cortés explains:

*Cinema i història són una parella polèmica, per la desconfiança mútua entre historiadors i productors cinematogràfics. Alguns historiadors [...] pensen que les pel·lícules no poden reflectir els fets històrics i falsifiquen la història. Al seu torn, els productors cinematogràfics consideren que tenen tot el dret a donar la seva pròpia visió de la història, la seva pròpia interpretació.*<sup>24</sup>

In this work, it is intended to see what is shown about the family of Rodrigo Borgia<sup>25</sup> in the audio-visual media of the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To achieve this objective, three audio-visual products of different types are analysed, all of them with the Borgia family as the central element. The first of these products is the feature film *Los Borgia* (2006), directed by Antonio Hernández, with the script by Pietro Bodrato and produced by Antena 3 Televisión, Ensueño Films SL and DAP Italy SPA. The film lasts 139 minutes and chronicles the pontificate of Pope Alexander VI, although it focuses on nepotism and the family's ambitions. For this reason, the main roles lie with Cesare Borgia and, to a lesser extent, Lucrezia. The second audio-visual product is two video games,<sup>26</sup> the second and third instalments in the successful *Assassin's Creed* series, titled *Assassin's Creed II* (2009) and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (2010), developed by Ubisoft Montreale, a French subsidiary of

22. "The Borgias are becoming [...] for the historical fiction, one of those lineages —together with the Medicis, for example— who personify the transition between the Middle Ages and the Early-modern Period, one of the great promoters of the Renaissance". Kotátková, Adéla. "Malaltia, guerra, identitats en una (altra) sèrie de televisió sobre els Borgia". *Mirabilia*, 30/1 (2020): 230.

23. Kotátková, Adéla. "Malaltia, guerra, identitats...": 229-230.

24. "Cinema and history are a polemical couple, due to the mutual mistrust between historians and film producers. Some historians [...] think that films cannot reflect the historic events and forge history. Film producers, in turn, consider that they have the right to give their own view of history, their own interpretation". Cortés Escrivà, Josepa. "La imatge dels Borgia...": 3.

25. Unlike Rodrigo Borgia and his children, there have been no notable audiovisual products featuring Pope Callixtus III. Similarly, the first Borgia pope is ignored in most audiovisual products. Only in the 2006 film *Rodrigo* makes a brief reference just after his pontifical election: *hoy comienza un tiempo nuevo para nuestra familia, un tiempo que vuestro padre esperaba desde hace treinta años, cuando Calixto III, mi tío y entonces papa, me trajo de Xàtiva* ("Today a new time starts for our family, a time that your father has been waiting for for thirty years, when Pope Callixtus III, my uncle and the then pope, brought me from Xàtiva"). This sentence, although very significant, is not very precise in the years, as Rodrigo Borgia was taken to Rome in 1455 and his papal election did not take place until 1492, that is, almost forty years later.

26. See the old, but still valid, game definition and its evolution in Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco. "Videogames and the Middle Ages...": 315-325. An update to this definition can be found in Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco. "La historia vista a través de los videojuegos", *Juego y ocio en la historia*, María Pilar Suárez, María Isabel Gascón Uceda, Luis Alonso Álvarez, Juan Francisco Jiménez Alcázar. Valladolid: Ediciones Universidad de Valladolid, 2018: 147-156.



Ubisoft. In the two historical video games,<sup>27</sup> set in Renaissance Italy, the player embodies Ezio Auditore, a member of the assassin sect, who is in perpetual war with the Templars.<sup>28</sup> The Borgias play a pivotal role in these games, as they are the antagonists of the two instalments.<sup>29</sup> The last of these products is the series *The Borgias* (2011-2013), created by Neil Jordan and produced by Showtime, Take 5 Productions and Octagon Films, based in the United States and Canada. The series consists of twenty-nine episodes, each nearly an hour in length, split into three seasons. A fourth season was planned, but was cancelled for financial reasons. Like the 2006 film, *The Borgias* recounts the pontificate of Pope Alexander VI, and mixes issues of papal power with family relationships.<sup>30</sup>

For the analysis of the three audio-visual products mentioned,<sup>31</sup> the three main characters in each, and who are common to all three, were studied: Rodrigo Borgia/Pope Alexander VI and his children, Cesare and Lucrezia. As they are the main representatives of the Borgia black legend, this article analyses how the three are depicted, together with the relationships between them, in the film, the series and the video game. The data were compared to traditional accounts of the black legend to determine which aspects are maintained and which are modified, and, in this case, for what reason. This made it possible to pinpoint the image that the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century mass media have conveyed to millions of people around the world.

## 2. Pope Alexander VI and Lust for Power

As Roig Matoses points out, Rodrigo Borgia's life as a cardinal is not very well known.<sup>32</sup> Most likely this is why almost all the audio-visual products analysed begin at the time of his election to the papal throne as Pope Alexander VI.<sup>33</sup> The only product in which Rodrigo Borgia appears long before becoming pope is the video

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27. Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco. "Videogames and the Middle Ages...": 337-363 (especially 360-362).

28. Assassins and Templars struggle to obtain the fragments of Eden, a set of artifacts created by the First Civilization and which have the ability to control human minds.

29. There are some studies of the Borgia image in this saga. See: Pérez Casas, Asís. "Los límites de la ficción: narrativa y estética de los Borja en el videojuego *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*". *Revista Borja. Revista de l'Institut Internacional d'Estudis Borgians*, 5 (2015-2016): 1-10; Madden, Amanda. "Requiescat in Pace: The Afterlife of the Borgia in *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*", *The Borgia family. Rumor and representation*, Jennifer Mara DeSilva, ed. London: Routledge, 2019: 276-295.

30. Another series, *Borgia*, produced by the French Atlantique Productions, along with German EOS Entertainment, which aired between 2011 and 2014, is set aside. This series has been analyzed by Kotátková, Adéla. "Malaltia, guerra, identitats...": 228-250.

31. A first approach to the Borgia image in these products in Díaz Alché, Kevin. "Legado envenenado...": 35-49.

32. Roig Matoses, Joan Emili. "Itàlia i la configuració...": 210.

33. The series *The Borgias* begins with the death of Innocent VIII, although Rodrigo Borgia is elected pope during the first episode.



game *Assassin's Creed II*. In this, the plot starts in 1476 and ends in 1492, shortly after Borgia accedes to the seat of Saint Peter. This is not an impediment for, years before the enthronement of the second Borgia pope, Mario Auditore to tell his nephew Ezio that Rodrigo is "*uno de los hombres más poderosos de Europa*".<sup>34</sup> The fact is that, in the decade before his pontifical election, Rodrigo held various positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which gave him great ascendancy within the Roman Curia. He was vice-chancellor of the Apostolic Chancellery from his nomination by his uncle Pope Callixtus III in 1457 until his own pontifical election. From 1471, he was Cardinal-Bishop—first of Albano (1471-1476) and then of Porto-Santa Rufina (1476-1492)—, and in 1483 he acceded to the dignity of Dean of the College of Cardinals. On a diocesan scale, he succeeded his uncle in the bishopric of Valencia (1458) and was the first archbishop of Valencia after the diocese was elevated to an archdiocese in 1492.<sup>35</sup> This Episcopal title added to the administration of the dioceses of Girona (1457-1458), Cartagena (1482-1492) and Mallorca (1489-1492).<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, as usual, Rodrigo Borgia brought together various ecclesiastical benefits, chaplaincies and minor prebends. He was therefore a very relevant figure in the Church in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, although Mario Auditore's words seem exaggerated. However, the objective of the video game in this respect is clear: to demonstrate the great power held by Borgia and, thus, to create an attractive antagonist to help develop the plot and keep the players' interest alive.

If there is a common element in all the audio-visual productions analysed in relation to Rodrigo Borgia, it is his ambition. The second Borgia pope is always presented as pursuing personal and family power, which would explain his obsession with reaching the seat of Saint Peter.<sup>37</sup> In fact, his election serves to allow the audio-visual products insert doubts about simony and question the motivations behind his appointment as Pope Alexander VI. A fact recorded in the 2006 film may serve as an example: when the new pope tells his children that he has received the support of Cardinal Ascannio Sforza, the latter asserts, reverentially, "*siempre al servicio de nuestra madre Iglesia*", to which Borgia responds, with some irony, "*claro, claro*".<sup>38</sup> This response leads the spectator to think that the election was out of interests, as is reinforced shortly afterwards, when Pope Alexander VI indicates, not without a certain contempt, that he has had to appoint Ascannio vice-chancellor and grant him the city of Nemi to win his support. In the case of the series, *The Borgias*, the plot line of the first season starts with the accusations of simony that Cardinal Giuliano

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34. "one of the most powerful men in Europe".

35. In 1492, after his papal election, Rodrigo appointed his son, Cesare Borgia, archbishop of Valencia. It was common for new popes to distribute their previous benefits among their collaborators. Navarro Sorní, Miguel. *Alfonso de Borja...*: 244.

36. Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. "La família Borja...": 212.

37. This is demonstrated by phrases such as "*Llevo toda la vida esperando este momento*" ("I have been waiting all my life for this moment"), pronounced by Rodrigo Borgia in the first episode of the series.

38. "Always at the service of our Mother Church" "Of course, of course".



della Rovere —Rodrigo Borgia's rival—<sup>39</sup> launches against the pope, allegations that lead to a campaign by King Charles VIII of France to depose him. While the film is more subtle, the series shows these practices: during the conclave, and despite the ban, Rodrigo Borgia communicates with his son Cesare by messenger pigeon and tells him to which families he has to hand over treasuries or prebends to the “*diócesis, abadías e iglesias de los Borgia*”.<sup>40</sup> In any case, and despite some opponents of the Borgia seeing simony in Rodrigo's arrival in the pontificate, negotiations within the framework of the conclaves are well known.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the supposed simony, the character of Rodrigo Borgia in the series is a man who fears God, and often appears praying or entrusting himself to the deity. He also fasts assiduously and imposes Lenten abstinence on the cardinals, and occasionally makes penance to atone for sins and win divine favour—for example, after the defeat of the papal armies before the walls of Forlì. In addition, as pontiff, he is concerned about the people.<sup>42</sup> The film does not show the pope's personal piety as much, except in some moments of danger or serious turmoil, such as Giovanni's death.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, the religiosity of the second Borgia pope is disputed by the video games. Thus, in the context of a struggle between the newly elected Pope Alexander VI and Ezio Auditore at the end of *Assassin's Creed II*, the pontiff even stated that he did not take any Bible words seriously, which he came to describe as “*ridículo libro*”.<sup>44</sup> In parallel, the moral limits of Rodrigo Borgia also vary depending on the product. In the film, he uses any means to achieve his ends. In the series,

39. In the series, Cardinal Giuliano Della Rovere becomes an enemy of Pope Alexander VI. While he first attempts to dismiss him with accusations of simony and breaking celibacy, he then does not hesitate to attempt to poison him with *cantarella*, which was considered the ultimate weapon of the Borgias. See: Cobb, Cathy. “The Case Against the Borgias: Motive, Opportunity, and Means”, *Toxicology in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Philip Wexler, ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2017: 53-62.

40. “dioceses, abbeys and churches of the Borgias”. The series refers to several possessions that the Borgias had in Romagna. In fact, Romagna was one of the constituent territories of the Papal States, placed under the rule of the pope, although there were numerous lords and cities occupying intermediate power. The Borgia family had no possessions in this territory before acceding to the pontifical throne. In 1500, Pope Alexander VI granted his son, Cesare, the title of Duke of Romagna to reward him for his successful campaign to recover this papal territory. See: Angiolini, Enrico. “La politica dei Borgia in Romagna”. *Alessandro VI e lo Stato della Chiesa. Atti del convegno (Perugia, 13-15 marzo 2000)*, Carla Frova, Maria Grazia Nico Ottaviani, cur. Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2003: 147-174; Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. “La família Borja...”: 213.

41. The arguments of those accusing Rodrigo Borgia of simony are countered by Roig Matoses, Joan Emili. “Itàlia i la configuració...”: 214-227.

42. For example, the pope insists that all men have a soul and even disguises himself to visit the streets of Rome and know the situation of its inhabitants. As a result of his walk, he decides to have Giulia Farnese review the accounts of the Public Works Office, which is headed by Cardinal Versucci. Both the office and the cardinal that runs it are fictional.

43. Both the film and the series reveal the trauma that led to Rodrigo Borgia Giovanni's death. This impact is well documented. Burchardi, Johannis. *Diarium sive rerum urbanarum commentarii (1483-1509)*. Paris: Ernest Leroux, ed., 1884: II, 390-391; Marías Martínez, Clara. “The Hispanic *Ballad of the Death of the Duke of Gandía*: Propaganda against or Sympathy for the Borgias?”. *The Borgia family. Rumor and representation*, Jennifer Mara DeSilva, ed. London: Routledge, 2019, p. 165. The episode of Giovanni's death is narrated by Pastor, Ludwig von. *Historia de los papas...: V*, 473-480.

44. “ridiculous book”.





however, he is more prudent, and warns that “*no cruzaremos la línea del crimen*”;<sup>45</sup> Cesare often urges him to do so. Rodrigo Borgia is unscrupulous in *Assassins Creed II*, so he resembles more the character presented by the film.

This scant, or even null, religiosity and morality complements well the aforementioned ambition: the papal tiara would be nothing more than an instrument for achieving power, both personal and family. One of the elements in which this ambition would materialise would be nepotism. The most significant case is that of his own son Cesare Borgia —according to the series, Pope Alexander VI appointed Cesare as cardinal to succeed him as pope—, but, as mentioned above, numerous people linked to Pope Alexander VI were given the *capello* cardinal.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, Rodrigo's other son, Giovanni, was put in charge of the papal armies as captain-general and gonfalonier of the Church.<sup>47</sup> Also, Lucrezia had some power within the Holy See: on one occasion, she was appointed as a surrogate of the pope, with the capacity to gather the College of Cardinals.<sup>48</sup> This nepotist policy is noted in both the film and the series, which echo the appointment of the pope's own children to hold office in the administration of the Church. The personages are outraged by these practices, which appear as strange and reprehensible, although they were actually quite common in the Roman Curia.<sup>49</sup> The video game also mentions the nepotism of the Borgias —e.g., with the appearance of Cardinal Juan Borgia the Elder— but this is not as central as it is in the other products. Regardless of this family ambition, both in the film and, above all, in the series, Rodrigo Borgia is presented as a loving person with his relatives, especially Lucrezia and her illegitimate son, Giovanni,<sup>50</sup> who is sometimes held in the pope's arms in the papal audiences.

The ambitious nature of the second Borgia pope also manifests itself in the matrimonial policy of his children<sup>51</sup> —especially Lucrezia, who was married three

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45. “we will not traverse the crime line”.

46. Pope Alexander VI increased the College of Cardinals from 24 to 45 members, of whom only 60 percent were Italians. Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. “La família Borja...”: 212.

47. Pope Callixtus III himself gave the cardinalate to Rodrigo Borgia and the office of captain-general of the Church to his brother, Pedro Luis. Cassanyes Roig, Albert. *Antoni Cerdà (c. 1390-1459)...*: 371-372.

48. Martínez García, M. Julia; Vázquez de Ágredos Pascual, M. Luisa. “Tradicón y renovación en la imagen de Lucrezia Borgia: un análisis desde las fuentes visuales”. *Revista Borja. Revista de l'Institut Internacional d'Estudis Borgians*, 5 (2015-2016): 2.

49. Carocci, Sandro. *El nepotismo en la Edad Media. Papas, cardenales y familias nobles*. Granada-Valencia: Universidad de Granada-Universitat de València, 2007: 47-90.

50. This Giovanni is the so-called Roman child, whose parents are unclear. Two documents from 1501 make him the son of Cesare and Rodrigo Borgia. Some rumours claimed that he was the son of Lucrezia. See: Miglio, Massimo. “L'infant romà”. *Revista Borja. Revista de l'Institut Internacional d'Estudis Borgians*, 2 (2008-2009): 39-53. The series makes Giovanni's paternity very clear: son of Lucrezia and Paolo, Giovanni Sforza's stable boy. In the film, the child (called Rodrigo) was the son of Lucrezia and Perotto.

51. For example, Juan married María Enríquez de Luna. In the series, Rodrigo says it is a *alianza natural* (“natural alliance”) because she was Hispanic. There is no reference to the fact that María Enríquez de Luna had been betrothed to Pedro Luis Borgia, natural son of Rodrigo Borgia himself. Mizumoto-Gitter, Alex. “From Rome to Gandía: Family Networks in the Early Modern Mediterranean World”, *Royal Studies Journal*, 7/1 (2020): 60-61.



times, as a result of her father's changes in interests.<sup>52</sup> Audio-visual products have found a plot thread in this element, and, along with amorous and sexual matters, Italian politics, though simplified, also play a fundamental role in the film and television series. This is not the case in the *Assassin's Creed* saga, in which Rodrigo's ambition lies within the aforementioned battles between Assassins and Templars; Rodrigo's participation in the Pazzi conspiracy of 1478 or in a plot against the Venetian Doge, Giovanni Mocenigo, has no other purpose than to place Templars at the head of the major Italian cities. In fact, the Valencian cardinal is the head of the Templars, who always refer to him as *maestre* or with the epithet *el Español*.<sup>53</sup>

In any case, one of the aspects highlighted in the various audio-visual products is the struggles between Roman families and the importance of relationships with them. Certainly, the main Italian lineages (Colonna, Orsini, Sforza, Della Rovere, etc.) struggled to control both the city of Rome and the Holy See itself.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, the scene of the series in which, after Pope Alexander VI has been poisoned by a Dominican friar named Antonello, the cardinals begin to conclude a deal with a view to the conclave and agree the appointment of an Italian pope is a good summary of the situation in the Holy See during the pontificate of the second Borgia pope. In the audio-visual products, the Borgias are always portrayed as enemies of the Orsinis, with whom they have numerous clashes.<sup>55</sup> In *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, it is an Orsini, Fabio, who provides the Assassins with a former storehouse on Tiber Island to serve as a hideaway and safe place in Rome. Fabio Orsini regrets that his men have to fight with the Borgias but hopes that they will soon be freed. This same fact appears in the film, when the Orsinis reluctantly put their men in Cesare's service in order to avoid a confrontation.<sup>56</sup> In the end, however, Paolo and Francesco Orsini

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52. In the series, when Pope Alexander VI is informed of the death of Alfonso II of Naples, the pope comments that *hubiera sido un buen esposo para Lucrezia* ("he would have been a good spouse for Lucrezia"). It is a demonstration of the pragmatic nature of the pontiff.

53. "grand master" "the Spanish". The use of the term Spanish to refer to Borgias is a constant in the different audiovisual products. See an analysis of the use of the term Spanish in the Borgias series by Kotátková, Adéla. "Malaltia, guerra, identitats...": 244-248; his considerations can be perfectly applicable to all other productions. Only this series refers to the Catalan origin of the Borgias: Giovanni comments that *éramos españoles, catalanes* ("we were Spanish, Catalan"), as well as that they have *sangre catalana* ("Catalan blood"). About the Catalan character of the Borgias, see: Sabaté i Curull, Flocel. *Percepció i identificació dels catalans a l'edat mitjana*. Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2016: 82-97 (especialment 93-97); Anna Maria Oliva. "I catalani a Roma nei xv-xvii secoli", *Ciutats mediterrànies: la mobilitat i el desplaçament de persones*, Flocel Sabaté, ed. Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2021: 143-144.

54. Navarro Sorní, Miguel. *Alfonso de Borja...*: 213-216; Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. "La família Borja...": 212; De Vincentiis, Amedeo. "Guerre e paci dei baroni romani (1417-1484): la prospettiva curiale", *Congjure e conflitti. L'affermazione della signoria pontificia su Roma nel Rinascimento: politica, economia e cultura. Atti del convegno internazionale, Roma, 3-5 dicembre 2013*, Maria Chiabò, ed. Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2014: 217-245.

55. Shaw, Christine. "Pope Alexander VI, Cesare Borgia and the Orsini". *European Studies Review*, 11 (1981): 1-23; Villarroel González, Óscar. *Los Borgia. Iglesia y poder entre los siglos xv y xvi*. Madrid: Sílex, 2005: 63-74.

56. Cardinal Orsini states that *"hay que estar al lado del enemigo; ninguna posición es tan cómoda para, llegado el caso, poder asestarles el golpe mortal"* ("we must be beside our enemies; no position is as comfortable to be able to deal the mortal blow to them when the time comes").



revolt against Cesare and are arrested. Their uncle, Cardinal Orsini, confronts the pope with the sentence “*los Orsini han servido fielmente a la Iglesia mucho antes de que un Borgia pisara estas tierras*”,<sup>57</sup> which recalls the condition of the Borgias as interlopers. In the end, he is also arrested for taking part in a conspiracy against Pope Alexander VI and executed. The same facts appear in the series: Pope Alexander VI dismisses Cardinal Orsini, whom he accuses of plotting against him. The Cardinal asks him to confess, and tries to murder the pontiff, who manages to apprehend him and kill him. Similarly, the Orsinis join Cesare, pressured by the presence of the French army he commands, but they do not betray him. The fact that the series is unfinished means it is not known how this relationship evolved. Instead, the series emphasises the struggle between the Borgias and the Sforzas. Although Cardinal Ascanio Sforza is the Vice-Chancellor of Pope Alexander VI, his cousins, Giovanni Sforza—Lucrezia’s first husband—and, above all, Caterina Sforza<sup>58</sup> conspire over two seasons to end the pope and his ambitions. In fact, it is Caterina Sforza who proposes an alliance of all Italian families against the common enemy represented by the Borgia lineage.

Ultimately, both the film and the series highlight the bad relations between the Borgias and the powerful Italian families. Cesare offers to “*doblegar la arrogancia de las familias romanas*”<sup>59</sup> and make the cardinals—representatives of the Italian families within the Church—feel the pressure of the Borgias, while Giovanni remembers that “*no nos expulsarán de Roma*”.<sup>60</sup> According to Rodrigo, the Italian families, especially the Orsinis, Caetanis and Colonnas, “*nos repudiaban por extranjeros*”.<sup>61</sup> Certainly, the Italian families—but also the people of Rome—rejected the foreign popes,<sup>62</sup> because this might imply that they were pushed out of the offices of the Roman Curia or this might even be transferred somewhere else. Pope Callixtus III had been accused of surrounding himself with collaborators from the Crown of Aragon and of favouring

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57. “The Orsini family has faithfully served the Church since long before a Borgia stepped on these lands”.

58. The figure of Caterina Sforza deserves its own analysis. In the film, Caterina only appears when she is imprisoned in the castle of Sant’Angelo; Cesare provokes her and eventually frees her, but her story is not developed. In *Assassin’s Creed*, Caterina Sforza is a strong woman, allied with the Assassins, so Cesare imprisons her in the castle of Sant’Angelo, although Ezio Auditore releases her shortly afterwards. The series details the character of Caterina, who is said to be *una mujer libre en un mundo de hombres* (“a free woman in a men’s world”). On the character, see the classic work by Pasolini, Pier Desiderio. *Caterina Sforza*. Rome: Ermanno Loescher, 1893, 3 vols.; also Breisach, Ernst. *Caterina Sforza: A Renaissance Virago*. Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

59. “to vanquish the Roman families’ arrogance”.

60. “they will not expel us from Rome”.

61. “they repudiated us because we are foreigners”.

62. This is perfectly perceived in the conclave of 1503, which elected Rodrigo’s successor. Pastor, Ludwig von. *Historia de los papas...* VI, 130-132.



a Catalan invasion of Rome.<sup>63</sup> The pontificate of Alexander VI also implied a strong influx of subjects from the Crown of Aragon to the Holy See.<sup>64</sup>

The black legend also echoes the purported Jewish origin of the Borgia family. Only the series makes some reference to this rumour: Cardinal Orsini refers to Rodrigo with the term “*morisco español*”<sup>65</sup> —a term, by the way, incorrect—, and Prince Alfonso of Naples says that the Borgias are *marranos*. A Jew also comments on rumours circulating in Rome that Jewish blood flows through Borgia veins. On the other hand, Rodrigo Borgia states that he is of no Jewish descent, but is sympathetic to the Jews expelled from the Hispanic Monarchy—he considers that Isabella was hasty to expel them—and opens the gates of Rome to them.<sup>66</sup> He also exonerates the Jews from Constantinople from paying for the right to trade, although in exchange for their services in the struggle against the pope’s enemies—the Turks and the Sforzas. In any case, the question of the possible Hebrew origins of Pope Alexander VI is not an element to which the series gives much prominence.

On the other hand, it does attach great importance to the carnal nature of the second Borgia pope, one of the fundamental elements of the film and television series. The film emphasises the accusation, from the black legend, that Alexander VI had numerous concubines and that he had sexual relations within the Apostolic Palace itself. In fact, one of the first measures that Rodrigo dictates to his secretary—actually, master of ceremonies—<sup>67</sup>, Abbot Johann Burckardt, is to allow Giulia Farnese access to his chamber whenever he wishes.<sup>68</sup> The encounters between Alexander VI and Giulia Farnese are also recurrent in the series. During the first season, and unlike the film, the relationship between the pope and Giulia is kept in secret, because the pontiff fears being removed if it is discovered.<sup>69</sup> However, during

63. Gregorovius, Ferdinand. *Storia della città di Roma nel Medio Evo*. Rome: G. Romagna & C., 1912: III, 780; Pastor, Ludwig von. *Historia de los papas...*: II, 333-336; Vicens Vives, Jaume. *Els Trastàmars (segle xv)*. Barcelona: Vicens Vives, 1956: 138-139; Cassanyes Roig, Albert. *Antoni Cerdà (c. 1390-1459)...*: 369-372.

64. Sanfilippo, Matteo. “Roma nel Rinascimento: una città di immigrati”, *Le forme del testo e l’immaginario della metropoli*, Benedetta Bini, Valerio Viviano, eds. Viterbo: Sette Città, 2009: 76-77; Anna Maria Oliva. “I catalani a Roma...”: 150-152.

65. “Spanish morisco”.

66. The arrival of Castilian Jews in Rome after 1492 is well documented, but Pope Alexander VI chose an ambiguous policy. Foa, Anna. “La prospettiva spagnola: il Papa e gli ebrei nell’età di Carlo V”, *L’Italia di Carlo V. Guerra, religione e politica nel primo Cinquecento*, Francesca Cantù, Maria Antonietta Visceglia, coords. Rome: Viella, 2003: 511-515. See also: Esposito, Anna. “Le comunità sefardite nella Roma del Primo Cinquecento”. *Imago Temporis. Medium Aevum*, 1 (2007): 177-185.

67. DeSilva, Jennifer Mara. “‘Personal’ Rituals: The Office of Ceremonies and Papal Weddings, 1483-1521”, *Premodern Europe: Italy and Beyond*, Jacqueline Murray, ed. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012: 51.

68. See: Luiten, Loek. “Sexuality, agency, and honor in the connections between the Borgia and Farnese families in Renaissance Rome”, *The Borgia family. Rumor and representation*, Jennifer Mara DeSilva, ed. London: Routledge, 2019: 34-54.

69. Much of the first season of the series is based on Cardinal Giuliano Della Rovere’s attempts to have the pope removed. Some authors consider that the cardinal encouraged King Charles VIII of France to convene a council with the aim of removing the pope. Alvisi, Edoardo. *Cesare Borgia. Duca di Romagna. Notizie e documenti*. Imola: Tip. d’Ignazio Galeati e figlio, 1878: 23.



the second season, no mention is made of this discretion, and in practice Pope Alexander VI maintains encounters with both “*la bella Farnese*” and other ladies, such as Bianca, wife of Francesco Gonzaga of Mantua.<sup>70</sup>

The famous Borgia parties, in which nude women abound, are a common resort to demonstrate Pope Alexander’s lust in audio-visual products. They appear with some assiduity in the 2006 film. Furthermore, this almost perverted character is not exclusive to the pope, but extends to the entire family, even to secondary characters. So, in *Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood*, one of Ezio Auditore’s missions is to assassinate Cardinal Juan Borgia the Elder during an orgy in Trastevere in honour of Cesare’s victories. However, the series does not highlight this libertine aspect.<sup>71</sup> It is true that Alexander VI orders a feast to be held in which a large bull—the heraldic figure of the Borgias—is burned. In any case, this party of excesses, during which a masked dance is held, is not noted for its immodesty. However, this is present in the so-called *Banquet of Chestnuts*, which was, according to the black legend, a great orgy in which the Borgias and many of the members of the College of Cardinals took part.<sup>72</sup> In this case, however, it is converted into a stratagem by Giulia Farnese to embarrass the cardinals, and none of the Borgias participates.

The death of Pope Alexander VI is different in the various products. In the 2006 film, the beginning of the Pope’s agony takes place after a dinner at the home of Cardinal Della Rovere and a sequence showing a woman preparing the wine. Although the spectator may think of poisoning, the doctor claims that it does not seem to be the case. The fact is that the doubt persists, especially as Cesare Borgia—who was also at the party—is equally ill.<sup>73</sup> In the end, Pope Alexander VI ends up dying in his Vatican rooms. In *Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood*, the end of Rodrigo Borgia is radically different: he is killed by Cesare Borgia in a room in the castle of Sant’Angelo. Cesare asphyxiates him with an apple that the pope himself had poisoned to kill his own son. The veracity of this version is null, and is not based on any literary tradition. It is a scriptwriter’s licence to highlight Cesare’s evil nature. As for *The Borgias*, the third season ends without the death of the pontiff, so it is not possible to know which version the writers would have preferred.

In any case, one aspect that is quite satisfactory in the audio-visual media is the collapse of the papal family after the death of a pope. When a pontiff died, his

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70. Bianca’s character is fictional: Francesco II of Mantua married Isabella of Este. See: Cockram, Sarah D. P. *Isabella d’Este and Francesco Gonzaga. Power Sharing at the Italian Renaissance Court*. London: Routledge, 2016.

71. Although not shown on screen, it is noted that the Vatican’s finances are in a sorry state because of expenses made at the Borgias’ parties.

72. The narration of the banquet at Burckardi, Johannis. *Liber Notarum ab anno MCCCLXXXIII usque ad annum MDVI*, ed. Enrico Celani. Città di Castello: coi tipi della casa editrice S. Lapi, 1911: II, 303.

73. Johann Burckardt noted in his journals that the pope had been poisoned. Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. “La família Borja...”: 217. However, some historians consider that Pope Alexander VI died of malaria, which would also have been contracted by Cesare Borgia, although he survived the disease. See Hillgarth, Jocelyn N. “The Image of Pope Alexander VI and Cesare Borgia in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries”. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 59 (1996): 124-125; Bradford, Sarah. *Lucrezia Borgia: Life, Love, and Death in Renaissance Italy*. London: Viking, 2004: 240.



family —that is, all his collaborators and servants— was in a delicate position, and it was common for some of its leading members to leave Rome.<sup>74</sup> This is reflected in the film: while Alexander VI is dying, Rome enters a state of chaos, with riots at the gates of the Apostolic Palace. In fact, Abbot Burckardt, secretary to Pope Alexander VI, states that “*sin Rodrigo moriremos todos*”,<sup>75</sup> a sentence that perfectly sums up the uncertainty of the papal family when a pontificate came to an end. Also in the series, the Borgias are concerned about what may happen to them if Alexander VI dies, and indeed one of the first measures they take when the pope is poisoned is to hide Lucrezia’s natural son in a villa. This is therefore a touch of plausibility about the Vicar of Christ’s last hours on earth.

### 3. Cesare Borgia: Blood and Death

Cesare Borgia is one of the characters most affected by the black legend,<sup>76</sup> and, for this reason, becomes the real protagonist of the various audio-visual products. This can be seen, above all, in the 2006 film *Los Borgia* and the video game *Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood*. He is presented as impulsive, aggressive and violent, and thus ideal for becoming the central character on which the weight of the narrative rests. The film is perhaps the one that shows the impulsive character attributed to him the most, with such acts as violence as cutting out the tongue to Filippo Brancaccio —a friend of Giovanni Sforza— for insulting the Borgia family.<sup>77</sup> The video game also insists on this headstrong character resulting from unbridled ambition. In the series, however, Cesare Borgia is calmer and cooler, a strategist.<sup>78</sup> In fact, he is the one who leads the family strategy and who plots against their enemies, usually with the help of Micheletto Corella.<sup>79</sup> However, sometimes he has outbursts of anger attacks that end with deaths, as in the case of the murder of Giovanni Sforza in Forlì castle

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74. Paravicini Bagliani, Agostino. *Morte e elezioni dei papi. Norme, riti e conflitti*. Rome: Viella, 2013: 211-214 i 249-250; Cassanyes Roig, Albert. *Antoni Cerdà. En la cruïlla...: 180*.

75. “without Rodrigo we will all die”.

76. While Protestant authors focused on attacking the pope, Catholic writers chose to more vividly attack Cesare. Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. “La família Borja...”: 218.

77. There is no historical evidence for this episode.

78. In the series, Cesare Borgia maintains fairly continuous contact with Machiavelli, who takes him as a model for his treatise *The Prince*. It does not fail to draw attention to the fact that, in the video games, Machiavelli is an ally of Ezio Auditore in his fight against the Borgias, although he also admires Cesare. About Cesare Borgia in Machiavelli’s work, see: Najemy, Juan M. “Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia: A Reconsideration of Chapter 7 of *The Prince*”. *The Review of Politics*, 75/4 (2013): 539-556; McCormick, Juan P. *Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018: 21-44.

79. Micheletto’s character has little importance in either the film or video games. Instead, he is a central figure in the series as a murderer in the service of Cesare Borgia, although much of his story is invented. For example, in the series he is an homosexual man, and is said to be born in Forlì., when he was actually born in Valencia. Benavent, Júlia; Navarro, Andrés. “La necesidad de un ejército en el estado moderno: Niccolò Machiavelli y Miquelet de Corella”. *Las órdenes militares: realidad e imaginario*, María



for describing the pope as a “*cerdo que viste con tiara papal*”,<sup>80</sup> or when he storms the Dominican convent for having helped Cardinal Della Rovere poison the pope.<sup>81</sup>

The difficulties and disputes between Cesare Borgia and his father are exploited in the various audio-visual products. The most prominent episode of this concerns Cesare’s appointment as a cardinal, while his brother, Giovanni, is appointed *gonfalonier* and captain-general of the Church and thus head of the papal armies. In the film, Cesare constantly states that “*no estoy hecho para la oración*”.<sup>82</sup> For its part, the series features Cesare fearless of God and who sometimes mocks the same Church institution. He is not a churchman, but a soldier, and the pope often has to rein him in and remind him of his religious function, especially after Cesare organises a guerrilla group made up of criminals from Rome. Cesare usually appeals to his primogeniture to assert his rights to the military office. It is not clear that Cesare held the birthright, which some authors consider belonged to Giovanni.<sup>83</sup> Precisely the fact that Cesare was not Rodrigo Borgia’s first son would explain why he was destined for an ecclesiastical career even before his father’s access to the papal throne. Certainly, having studied theology, Cesare was appointed bishop of Pamplona in 1491, that is, one year before the election of Pope Alexander VI. This fact is only shown in the series, where Cesare appears in clerical dress prior to the conclave.

The truth is that the relationship between Cesare and his brother Giovanni is always tense in the audio-visual products where both characters appear. In the 2006 film, Giovanni Borgia is depicted as a minimally competent young man who sometimes seems to be Rodrigo’s favourite son. In the case of *The Borgias*, Giovanni is clearly a young man who is boastful, arrogant and violent, but also cowardly, a liar and little-versed in arms and the art of war, unlike Cesare, who always has the pontiff’s preference. However, the pope appointed Cesare cardinal, so he was jealous of Giovanni, who often flaunted his position as captain of the papal armies. For this reason, the struggles and competition between the two brothers are common throughout the series, showing them as two people who hate each other

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Dolores Burdeus, Elena Real, Juan Verdegel, eds. Castellón: Publicacions de la Universitat Jaume I, 2000: 368-370.

80. “pig that wears the papal tiara”. Actually, Giovanni Sforza (†1510) survived both Pope Alexander VI (†1503) and Cesare Borgia (†1507).

81. It is curious that Giuliano Della Rovere in the series seeks support among the Dominicans when he himself had professed to the Conventual Franciscan Order, which he favored by being elected pope. De Angelis, Silvia. *Il governo delle monache. I pontefici ed i monasteri femminili francescani e domenicani (1417-1585)*. Rome: Università degli Studi di Roma “La Sapienza” (PhD Dissertation), 2013: 57-58 and 66. It is likely that screenwriters wanted to approach him to Savonarola, whose confrontation with the Church is one of the axes of the second season of the series.

82. “I am not made to pray”.

83. Giovanni’s date of birth is unclear. According to Mariás, *Historians generally agree that the young Juan or Juan Borgia was the second son of Rodrigo Borgia*. Mariás Martínez, Clara. “The Hispanic *Ballad...*”: 162. Instead, Bemis states that Cesare was *the second male*. Bemis, Elizabeth. “The Sword of Cesar Borgia: A Re-dating through an Examination of His Personal Iconography”. *Athanon*, 30 (2012): 41.



and are willing to kill each other.<sup>84</sup> Lucrezia also hates her brother Giovanni, who murdered Paolo to avoid the shame of a Borgia being related to a commoner, and also threatened to throw the little Giovanni from a first floor. Thus, neither Cesare nor Lucrezia are saddened when Giovanni leaves for the Iberian Peninsula to marry.

The two brothers' bad relationship is manifested in the episode of the death of Giovanni. As is well known, the pope's son was murdered on the night of 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> June 1497, and his body was found in the waters of the Tiber shortly after.<sup>85</sup> This crime was never resolved, so many are suspected of having committed it. Among these is Cesare Borgia. The film hints at Cesare's involvement in the affair; he would be jealous of the attention Rodrigo pays Giovanni.<sup>86</sup> Instead, the series leaves no room for interpretation: Cesare stabs Giovanni and throws him into the river. It therefore echoes the rumours that circulated in Rome at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, highlighting Cesare's vileness, which even scared Micheletto himself. Also the video game *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* states that Giovanni's death was provoked by Cesare: Ezio comments that "*mató a su propio hermano para acaparar el poder*".<sup>87</sup> Cesare's fratricidal character is recognised by these products.

The role played by Cesare Borgia in the Church is not the only clash between him and his father, but they also have different views regarding the strategy to increase his power. This is well reflected in the series: Pope Alexander VI rejects any of Cesare's actions, such as the murder of Giovanni Sforza in Forlì or the delivery of Milan to the King of France —the pope states that "*entregas ciudades como si fuera un juego*"—<sup>88</sup> and, so, resists for a time appointing him captain-general of the Church after Giovanni's death.<sup>89</sup> The film does not have much time to develop this plot line, which is well summed up by a creeping Sancha of Aragon who claims that "*no tiene ningún poder sobre César*".<sup>90</sup> In the video game, Cesare accuses his father of interfering in his plans to control the Italian peninsula, and eventually murders him.

Linked to this strategy is the third reason for the confrontation between Rodrigo and Cesare: Lucrezia's marriages. In both the film and the series, Cesare shows a great concern —and attraction— for his sister, whom he protects with all his might. For example, in the film, Cesare rejects the pope's intention to marry Lucrezia off because he is jealous of his sister's future husbands (this question is discussed below). In any case, this care for his sister serves to reinforce the violent nature of the

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84. For example, Cesare does not report to Giovanni that Caterina Sforza expects reinforcements from Ludovico il Moro, Duke of Milan. This leads to the defeat of the papal armies and the humiliation of Giovanni, who flees the battlefield.

85. Marías Martínez, Clara. "The Hispanic *Ballad*...": 162.

86. The film indicates that Pope Alexander VI thinks that Cesare had been involved in the death of his brother, or at least has doubts. Later, Cesare states that he did not kill his brother, *pero lo habría hecho con gusto* ("but I would have done it with pleasure"). All this reinforces suspicion.

87. "he killed his own brother to hog the power".

88. "you entrusted cities as if it was a game".

89. The pope is aware of Cesare's participation in Giovanni's death, which has been implied by his own son when he asks him to release him from his cardinal votes.

90. "he has no power over Cesare".





character, already mentioned: Cesare kills Perotto with a sword for making Lucrezia pregnant. In regard to the series, Cesare worries about his sister's well-being: when the pope says that they must murder Djem to collect a reward from the sultan of Constantinople,<sup>91</sup> Cesare responds "*¿Qué hay de Lucrezia, de lo que siente?*"<sup>92</sup> Unlike in the film, Cesare is willing to accept that Lucrezia may have sincere amorous feelings towards other people, even though it is difficult for him to bear.

This does not prevent Cesare from having relations with other women. The film highlights his relationship with Sancha of Aragon, Gioffre's wife—which provokes the confrontation between the two Borgia brothers—and echoes an episode that is also part of the black legend.<sup>93</sup> In the series, Cesare falls in love with a fictional character named Ursula Bonadeo, who eventually enters the monastery of Santa Cecilia after realising that Cesare is her husband's murderer.<sup>94</sup> Most relevant is his relationship with Caterina Sforza. In the series, Cesare is sent to Forlì to demand that Caterina go to Rome to rever the pope; during his night in the castle, he has a sexual tryst with her. The film makes no mention of such an encounter, although Caterina is Cesare's prisoner. It is known that Cesare contracted syphilis from a Neapolitan prostitute, there being an epidemic of this disease which led to other members of the Borgia family, such as Rodrigo or Lucrezia, falling ill.<sup>95</sup> Only the 2006 film echoes Cesare's syphilis, doing so on two occasions. First, Giovanni Orsini indicates "*la sífilis lo vuelve loco*"<sup>96</sup>—although he is told that Cesare's barbarities are due to the blood of the Borgias. Secondly, at the end of the film, it is noted that Cesare Borgia always wears a mask to hide the ravages of the disease in his face. In the series, the only person with syphilis is Giovanni.

None of the audio-visual products analysed in this article develops Cesare Borgia story much after the pope's death. The 2006 film features a decaying Cesare holding the position of captain-general of the papal army until the election of Julius II.<sup>97</sup> According to the film, the new pope orders him to unite the papal troops to those of the Catholic Monarchs to fight the French, although he actually claims that Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba arrests Cesare on behalf of the Hispanic kings. In the video

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91. See: Thuasne, Louis. *Djem-Sultan, fils de Mohammed II, frère de Bayezid II (1459-1495), d'après les documents originaux en grande partie inédits*. Paris: Ernest Leroux, Éditeur, 1892; Jourdan, George Viviliers. "The Case of Prince Djem: A Curious Episode in European History". *The Irish Church Quarterly*, 8/32 (1915): 298-312.

92. "What happens with Lucrezia, with her feelings?".

93. Leti, Gregorio. *Vita di Cesare Borgia, detto il Duca Valentino*. Milan: Borroni e Scotti, 1853: 417. It should be noted that Leti was a Calvinist and was therefore interested in attacking the Church.

94. The series indicates that Cesare Borgia is the protector of the monastery of Santa Cecilia. There is no evidence of this supposed protective task.

95. On the treatment of syphilis, see: Arrizabalaga Valbuena, Jon. "Práctica y teoría en la medicina universitaria de finales del siglo xv: el tratamiento del mal francés en la corte papal de Alejandro VI Borgia". *Arbor*, 153/604-605 (1996): 127-160.

96. "Syphilis drives him mad".

97. In the film *Los Borgia*, Pope Alexander VI's successor is Julius II. In fact, between them were the pontificate of Pius III, but this pope only occupied the pontifical throne for twenty-one days, so it is understandable that he was removed from it.



game *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, after the last mission to Rome, the main player accesses a diversity of screens in which Ezio Auditore encounters Cesare Borgia in different episodes that occur both in Rome —the assault on the door of Saint Pancracy— and in the Iberian Peninsula during the years following Alexander VI's death. The series, on the other hand, is unfinished, so there is nothing about Cesare's life after his father's death. Both the film and, to a lesser extent, the video game are based on actual events. After the death of Alexander VI, Cesare Borgia was imprisoned on the orders of Pope Julius II. He fled from his Roman prison to Naples, where he was arrested by the Great Captain, who sent him to the Iberian Peninsula. After passing through the prisons of Chinchilla and La Mota, he escaped again and moved to Navarre to enter the service of the Navarrese kings and fight in the war between the factions.<sup>98</sup>

Regarding Cesare Borgia's death, both the film and the video game place it near the Navarrese town of Viana. In the film, Cesare Borgia is a fugitive who throws himself, almost suicidally, at a group of mercenaries, who kill him by nagging half a dozen spades. In *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, Cesare is killed by Ezio Auditore, who, after wounding him, throws him from the walls of Viana. None of these scenes correspond to reality, as Cesare Borgia was killed in an ambush in a field called *la Barranca Salada*, near the municipal boundary between Mendavia and Viana. Recreations of Cesare's death, both in the film and in the video game, are much more dramatic and epic, in order to reinforce the character's image throughout the story.

#### 4. The Redemption of Lucrezia

Like her brother, Lucrezia Borgia is one of the central characters of the black legend, or rather of its recreation.<sup>99</sup> It is not necessary to insist on this one, which is based on elements such as having incestuous relations with her father or brother Cesare, or the use of poisons to get rid of her own adversaries, or her family enemies. However, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there have been attempts to recover Lucrezia's image. Ferdinand Gregorovius was the first to attempt to strip her of the accusations of the black legend. In fact, he presented Lucrezia as a victim of the intentions of her father and her brother, Cesare.<sup>100</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the biography by Maria Bellonci<sup>101</sup> implied an advance in the historical knowledge about Alexander VI's daughter, while Sarah Bradford's book,<sup>102</sup> in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, offers a modern view

98. Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. "La família Borja...": 213.

99. The image of Lucrezia was built by Victor Hugo and disseminated by the authors who followed him. Cortés Escrivà, Josepa. "La imatge dels Borja...": 4-7.

100. Gregorovius, Ferdinand. *Lucrezia Borgia*. Florence: Successori Le Monnier, 1874; Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. "La família Borja...": 214 and 215.

101. Bellonci, Maria. *Lucrezia Borgia. La sua vita e i suoi tempi*. Milan: Mondadori, 1939.

102. Bradford, Sarah. *Lucrezia Borgia...*



on her. These major works are among other publications that have helped restore the historical figure of Lucrezia.<sup>103</sup>

The image of a perfidious and evil person, given by the black legend, is significantly nuanced in the various audio-visual products. Thus, the Spanish film *Los Borgia* features Lucrezia Borgia as passive, a victim of her father's ambitions —“*un instrumento*”,<sup>104</sup> according to an Orsini—, a young wife who sees her husbands—who she ends up loving—and lovers being eliminated, one way or another, by Alexander VI and Cesare. In fact, in the film, Lucrezia opposes her father's efforts to annul her marriage to Giovanni Sforza and exhorts the latter to flee to avoid being murdered. Similar is the experience with her second husband, Alfonso of Aragon. Lucrezia objects to her father's call to kill him, and she takes care of him after he has been badly injured in an attack by the Borgias. Lucrezia even goes so far as to stay at his side to prevent him from being assassinated. Ultimately, she rebels against her family and refuses to let her husbands die. She even presents some feminist traits. When her father asks her if she is not happy with the annulment of her marriage, she replies: “*lo estaría si verdaderamente pudiera elegir yo a mi marido*”.<sup>105</sup> Another time, after her father and brother have had Alfonso of Aragon murdered, her mother tells her: “*deja de pensar por una vez en ti misma*”.<sup>106</sup> These scenes are intended to make the current audience empathise with the character, and lament the situation. In other words, they redeem her from accusations cast by traditional historiography.<sup>107</sup>

As for the series, Lucrezia Borgia is an innocent young woman who is also immersed in the Borgia family strategy. However, she is cunning and ingenious enough to develop a number of tools that help her survive and take revenge on those who hurt her. For example, Lucrezia does not love her first husband, Giovanni Sforza, who is a mature, rude and violent man—unlike the film, in which he is a shy young man—who treats her badly. Therefore, Lucrezia sets different traps to avoid this, and plots with a stable boy, Paolo—her lover—for Sforza to have an accident. She also actively collaborates in obtaining the nullity of her marriage, orchestrated by Cesare Borgia, alleging that it had not been consummated by Sforza's supposed impotence, leading to his public humiliation on the streets of Rome. After the nullity, Lucrezia resides in the Vatican palaces and expresses her desire not to remarry, but the pope only authorises her to investigate the suitors and choose one of them. This will mean that, at first, she wants to marry Raffaello Pallavicini of Genoa—an undocumented character—and that, after the failure of this operation,<sup>108</sup> chooses

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103. Cortés Escrivà, Josepa. “La imatge dels Borja...”: 5; Martínez García, M. Julia; Vázquez de Ágredos Pascual, M. Luisa. “Tradición y renovación...”: 1-2.

104. “a tool”.

105. “I would be if I really could choose my spouse”.

106. “stop thinking of yourself for once”.

107. See: Sanz Ferreruela, Fernando. “Presencia y tratamiento de la familia Borja...”: 5.

108. As in the film, Vanozza Cattanei advises Lucrezia on marriage issues. It is she who proposes to Lucrezia that she takes Raffaello as her lover and marry his brother, Calvino, the pope's choice. Note, then, how the matrimonial strategies come from other people, not from Lucrezia herself.



Alfonso of Aragon,<sup>109</sup> whom she loves. Similarly, Lucrezia encourages the death of King Ferdinand II of Naples, who has humiliated her and does not allow her to have Giovanni with her, and actively intervenes in the Neapolitan succession<sup>110</sup> and obtains from the pope the investiture of the kingdom for Frederick I.

Along with this more-strategic Lucrezia, the series presents another one who is kind and grateful, helps the needy and provides for the well-being of the people, even if they are humble. For example, she tells a maid of Giovanni Sforza that *“no habrá más palizas ahora que yo soy tu señora”*.<sup>111</sup> In addition, together with Giulia Farnese and Vanozza Cattanei, they take measures to benefit the poor of Rome. These include the rehabilitation of an aqueduct, the reform of a hospice, and the improvement of the health of brothels. A human and compassionate Lucrezia is drawn, one who sometimes comes to doubt the Church itself, which she goes so far as to say is a *“máquina de hacer dinero”*.<sup>112</sup> As in the film, Lucrezia expresses some modern-day opinions, such as *“nadie va a maltratarme”*.<sup>113</sup> As regards her opinion of marriage, she is well aware of being a tool of the pope to forge alliances, and she does so often throughout the series, for example, when she compares marriage to a market, with the particularity that, in this case, the sheep is a woman. In other words, Lucrezia expresses modern opinions in order to reach the current public and earn their favour.

This does not happen in the video game *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, in which Lucrezia is a rather evil character who lives in the castle of Sant'Angelo and mistreats Caterina Sforza —Ezio Auditore's ally and lover—, a prisoner of the Borgias. However, at the end of the game, when Lucrezia sees Cesare murdering his father, she positions herself against his brother and informs Ezio Auditore of where he can find him. In this way, a character who was initially an antagonist to the player becomes an ally. However, her role in the video game is entirely secondary, so her story is not developing much.

As has already been pointed out, one of the main accusations levelled at Lucrezia Borgia was that she had incestuous relations with her father and brother Cesare.<sup>114</sup> Despite the interest this element may have in the plot of audio-visual products, these have tended to ignore, or at least minimise, these supposed relationships. In the film, some characters echo these comments —which provoke Cesare's wrath— but the only thing that is explicitly shown are kisses on the mouth between Lucrezia and both Rodrigo and Cesare. According to her, these are nothing more

109. In the series, Alfonso of Aragon is a sweet, shy, and somewhat cowardly young man, which contrasts with the image given in the film.

110. According to the series, after the death of King Ferdinand II of Naples —assassinated by Micheletto, who threw him into a well filled with lampreys—, two pretenders are postulated to the throne of Naples: Frederick and Raffaello. This succession crisis is a fiction license.

111. “there will not be more beatings now that I am your lady”.

112. “machine for making money”.

113. “no one will mistreat me”.

114. News of the incest with his father was broadcast by Francesco Guicciardini. Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. “La família Borja...”: 217.



than normality between siblings. It is therefore implied that Cesare is to a certain degree in love with Lucrezia, but that she would interpret it as Cesare's fraternal love and innocent play between relatives. This has to do with the innocent, or even ingenuous, character Lucrezia presents in this product.

*The Borgias* series makes some changes to this perspective. It shows Cesare's affection for Lucrezia, which is, at first, strictly fraternal. However, Cesare soon reveals a certain infatuation—which he calls impossible—with Lucrezia, which manifests itself in jealousy towards Paolo, although he helps him spend a night with her. Cesare's attraction to his sister grows as time goes by, partly because Lucrezia plays at provoking him—for example, Cesare is astounded to see Lucrezia naked after she calls him to see her *wedding dress*. The series finally makes the incest between the two siblings explicit—expressed by Lucrezia with the words “*solo un Borgia amaría a otro Borgia*”—<sup>115</sup> so that she adopts, again, one of the fundamental elements of the Borgia black legend.<sup>116</sup> In this scene, it is Lucrezia who takes the initiative, so her innocence is questioned. In fact, the character's evolution leads to an increasingly less naïve Lucrezia as a result of her experiences and, in part, the influence of her family.

The situation changes if the video game *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* is analysed. From the outset, Lucrezia and Cesare have an intimate relationship, of which she is well aware. In fact, when Lucrezia feels abandoned by her brother, she takes revenge by having a relationship with an actor, Pietro Rossi, in order to make Cesare jealous. Be that as it may, the secondary character of Lucrezia and her superficiality do not allow her story to develop much, so only dialogues show the relationship between these two children of Pope Alexander VI.

Of the three main characters of the Borgia family, Lucrezia is the only one to survive in all audio-visual products. Leaving aside the unfinished series *The Borgias*, in the video game she remains in the castle of Sant'Angelo with her father's corpse when Ezio Auditore begins the pursuit of Cesare, and there is no further news of her. In the film, shortly before his death, Cesare reads a letter sent by Lucrezia, who became Duchess of Ferrara through her marriage to Alfonso d'Este. The letter brings nostalgia and sorrow, and the impression is given that Lucrezia is viewed with suspicion for belonging to the Borgia family. In reality, during her stay in Ferrara, Lucrezia took care of her children and stood out for her activity promoting art, in addition to her friendship—or even love relationship—with the humanist, Pietro Bembo.<sup>117</sup> In short, she had a quiet life that contrasted with that one she had had in Rome during her father's pontificate.

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115. “only a Borgia can love another Borgia”.

116. Lucrezia also indicates that *Ya rumorean de nosotros. ¿Por qué negarnos el placer del que ya somos acusados?* (“They already spread rumours about us. Why should we deny the pleasure of which we are already accused?”). It is possible that the rumour was spread by Giovanni Sforza after his marriage was annulled. Martínez García, M. Julia; Vázquez de Ágredos Pascual, M. Luisa. “Tradición y renovación...”: 1.

117. Duran i Grau, Eulàlia. “La família Borja...”: 214.



## 5. Conclusions

The last episode of *The Borgias* series was broadcasted ten years ago. Through this, more than a million people, only in the United States, learned the history of the Borgia family. Prior to this, the film, *Los Borgia*, had also been watched by about a million people a year after its release.<sup>118</sup> More than seventy-three million copies of the *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* video games have been sold worldwide.<sup>119</sup> There is no doubt that audio-visual products reach a massive audience that consumes them at leisure. The history of the Borgias has thus been known to millions of people through the film, video game and series filter.

These products are not designed to teach history, but at entertainment. For this reason, historical truth is not sought, but rather an attractive narrative is created for the user. Despite being based on historical events, numerous licenses have been taken. Thus, *Assassin's Creed* modifies the real facts to give to the game's protagonist, Ezio Auditore, a pivotal role in its development.<sup>120</sup> It is the product that takes by far the most licenses in the plot, but does so in order to improve the game experience. *The Borgias* series also does not hesitate to modify facts or alter dates to suit the needs of the story, which takes the pontificate of Pope Alexander VI as its central axis. For example, characters like Giovanni Sforza and Ludovico il Moro are killed by Cesare Borgia when they actually died after him. The aim of these alterations is to build an effective and attractive account. The film *Los Borgia* is possibly the product that takes fewest licenses, although it is also not blameless.

It should be noted that audio-visual products update the past to make it significant to the modern public. This means that efforts are made to take minorities into account as and that, as far as possible, comments or events that may be offensive are avoided. That would be the reason why only quick reference is made to the possible Semitic origin of the Borgias, although it would undoubtedly be one of the most important accusations that could be made against the family. There are also some discourses close to current political postulates and that are anachronistic for the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This is the case with some discourses with feminist elements, such as Lucrezia's dissertation on love and marriage in the film, or the defence of female sorority by Giulia Farnese in the series. Similarly, the fact that the series features a homosexual, Micheletto, could respond to a desire to give that group a certain presence in the plot and, in part, compensate for Savonarola's persecution of sodomites.

Broadly speaking, audio-visual products may be considered to have seized the black legend of the Borgias. The image they project of the family is still determined by

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118. Díaz Alché, Kevin. "Legado envenenado...": 41.

119. Díaz Alché, Kevin. "Legado envenenado...": 41.

120. However, the *Assassin's Creed* series is based on historical facts and the player interacts with historical characters, such as Machiavelli, Caterina Sforza, and the Borgia family. This allows the player to acquire some knowledge of history. Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco. "Videogames and the Middle Ages...": 330-331. Also Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco. "The Other Possible Past: Simulation of the Middle Ages in Videogames". *Imago Temporis. Medium Aevum*, 5 (2011): 326-327.



the negative view handed down over the centuries.<sup>121</sup> Although the film and series humanise the family members, they still imply some negative elements, especially regarding Cesare. In the case of the video game *Assassin's Creed*, this humanisation is practically non-existent. Audio-visual products therefore highlight the Borgias' ambition and use of violence —usually murder— to achieve their goals. Similarly, lust is manifested through a very active sex life, often with adulterous or incestuous practices. The most effective elements of the black legend therefore survive in the characterisation of these characters.

The image of Rodrigo Borgia that audio-visual products provide is quite different. He is the antagonist for the video game *Assassin's Creed II*, for which he is drawn as an evil person, partly because of the goals he pursues as leader of the Templars. The film and the series, for their part, essentially highlight his personal and family ambition, leading to a particular political strategy. In any case, both products show a human Rodrigo, with some weaknesses —as manifested in the episode of the death of his son, Giovanni. The series is the product which most shows the pope's humanity, religious and compassionate. Indeed, as the season progresses, Rodrigo gradually loses his grip on the political strategy in favour of Cesare.

Cesare Borgia is represented according to the black legend. He is born for war, someone who enjoys military life. Even as a cardinal, he kills his enemies and orders violence to help his family. He is the antagonist of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, opposed to Ezio Auditore, and escapes the control of his own father, whom he murders. The film is also based on a violent and proud Cesare, who puts the family above all else. Only the series, which is the longest audio-visual product, features a more human Cesare. In a conversation with Vanozza, Cesare is honest and admits to having many fears. Therefore, the character's psych is given more depth and a view not only focusing on his warlike tendency is shown. However, the violence so prominent in the black legend is also present in the character. In fact, the series explicitly shows the murder of Giovanni at Cesare's hand, as well as his incestuous relations with Lucrezia, which also constitute one of the key elements of black legend. In the film, however, Giovanni's death and relations with Lucrezia are insinuated, but not explicit. Note that the film is a Hispano-Italian production, so some of the more fraught elements of the black legend could have been set aside to mitigate the bad image of the Borgias.

As far as Lucrezia Borgia is concerned, she is the one who has undergone the most changes to her image. In fact, there is a certain willingness today to redeem her from the bad reputation that has accompanied her for half a millennium. She has therefore gone from being evil and incestuous to being a victim of her father's policy and her brother's manipulation, and, in the case of the series, to developing survival techniques as a result of her experiences. In the film, Lucrezia is an innocent and naïve girl; in the series, she learns to defend herself from a world that is hostile to her. In the video game *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, Lucrezia is a cruel person who maintains incestuous relations with Cesare, but ultimately distances herself from

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121. Cortés Escrivà, Josepa. "La imatge dels Borja...": 2.



him. This image is undoubtedly the result of a review of Lucrezia's biography, a dispassionate reading of the sources and a new historiography that has reclaimed the role of women. In fact, all three audio-visual products promote female figures, especially the series: Lucrezia is not the only strong woman, but characters like Giulia Farnese, Caterina Sforza or Vanozza Cattanei have fundamental roles in the evolution of events and mark the plotline deeply with their manoeuvres and cunning.

Generally, the products take Rodrigo, Cesare, and Lucrezia as the representatives of the Borgia family. The presence of the other siblings is minor, especially in the *Assassin's Creed* video games, where they do not appear directly. In the film and series, however, they do make some incursion, although the only one to have a prominent role is Giovanni Borgia, who is against Cesare. While Giovanni does not carry much weight in the film, in the series he is a recurring character, with a rather negative characterisation that generates animosity in the viewers. In any case, the episode of his murder makes it possible to reinforce Cesare's evil. As for Gioffre, his presence is marginal and anecdotal. While he is a small child in the series, in the film he is a young man with alcohol problems who constantly regrets that he is left out of the family. In both cases, his input is null.

The black legend of the Borgias is still present in audio-visual products. Ambition, violence and sex are three concepts that viewers will easily link to the family of Valencian origin. The subtitles of the film —*Ambición. Pasión. Poder*— and the series —*The original Crime Family*— are already statements of intent. Statements such as these do not help to free the Borgias from the yoke of the black legend that has accompanied them for five hundred years. The account was initially constructed by Italians, and was then taken advantage of by those, such as the Protestants, who sought to discredit the Catholic Church. As Lucrezia writes to Cesare at the end of the film: "*nadie quiere oír nuestro nombre; se avergüenzan de nosotros, y nos niegan un lugar en la historia de Roma*".<sup>122</sup>

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122. "nobody wants to hear our name; they are embarrassed of us, and they deny us a place in the history of Rome".

