



# Pope Alexander VI and his Court

*John Burchard*

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“My dear Son:— We have learned that your Worthiness, forgetful of the high office with which you are invested, was present from the seventeenth to the twenty-second hour, four days ago, in the Gardens of John de Bichis, where there were several women of Siena, women wholly given over to worldly vanities. Your companion was one of your colleagues whom his years, if not the dignity of his office, ought to have reminded of his duty. We have heard that the dance was indulged in, in all wantonness. None of the allurements of love were lacking, and you conducted yourself in a wholly worldly manner. Shame forbids mention of all that took place, for not only the things themselves but their very names are unworthy of your rank. In order that your lust might be all the more unrestrained, the husbands, fathers, brothers and kinsmen of the young women and girls were not invited to be present. You and a few servants were the leaders and inspirers of this orgy. It is said that nothing is now talked of in Siena but your vanity which is the subject of universal ridicule. Certain it is that here at the baths, where churchmen and the laity are very numerous, your name is on every one’s tongue.”

The words are taken from an admonitory letter of Pope Pius II to Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia — better known to the world as Pope Alexander VI — written in June, 1460, when the young cardinal had not yet reached the thirties, and reproving him for having arranged a bacchanalian feast in Siena. No words could better characterize the personality of Alexander VI, for they show him as the man of the world he was as Cardinal Borgia and remained after he had become Pope Alexander.

The limelight of history has played in a rather oblique and unkind way on the Borgias. Pope Alexander’s personality has been distorted until he became a perfect monster; yet his greatest weakness was an easy freedom from moral scruples, and this might not have blurred his personal charm at all had he not become the tool of his son Cesare. More unjust still were most historians to his daughter Lucretia, who has been depicted as a kind of Messalina, although she was at the best the “*indifferente*” among the great women of her time, and at her worst a beauty without any will of her own. If it is the historian’s task to distribute praise and blame, some of the latter may fall on Alexander’s favorite son Cesare. Even if he was not such a perfect virtuoso of crime as he has been described, he certainly was not much better than some of the worst of his more prominent contemporaries.

Thus in considering the rise and fall of the Borgia family one ought to keep in mind that the Borgias were after all the creatures of an epoch, rich in extraordinary personalities as few others in human history have been. Before rendering judgment consideration must be given to the remarkably complex personalities of the Renaissance. The men and women of that epoch of transformation from the middle ages to modern times were so constituted that it was easily possible for them to turn from cruelty and crime and vice, from corruption and treachery, to religion with a fervid and impassioned sincerity. The Borgias, as will be seen, did not differ greatly from many of their contemporaries. To make them the scapegoats of their times shows, perhaps, a just indignation at their crimes, but little understanding of the conditions under which they lived...

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