

# The Sword of Cesar Borgia: A Re-dating through an Examination of His Personal Iconography

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Cesar Borgia was one of the four more famous children born to Pope Alexander VI. As was dictated by his standing as the second male, he dedicated much of his life to the Church. In 1493, at the age of twenty-two, he attained the rank of Cardinal, no doubt due to the fact that his father was the reigning pontiff; but through the tragic death of his brother, the secular aspirations of the Borgia were left without a conduit, so just five years later, in 1498, Cesar would put off the purple to marry and cement the standing of his family in European power politics.

Borgia left Italy for a French wife, returning to the peninsula with King Louis XII's invasion of Milan in 1499. Just months later as a lieutenant general in the French army, Cesar began his military subjugation of the northern city-states of the Italian Romagna. Upon his return to Rome in 1500, Alexander VI made him Captain General of the Papal Army. He died on March 11, 1507, four days shy of the Ides of March. Charging alone onto the field of battle, Cesar would die a death no less epic than his namesake. Yet he derived much more than just his name from the life of Julius Caesar; he built from the deeds of the Roman Emperor his personal iconography. The engravings on the blade of a sword once belonging to Cesar provide the foremost manifestation of his chosen propagandistic narrative (Figure 1).

Following an examination of these iconographic representations, pertinent conclusions will be used to offer a revision in the date regularly given for the fabrication of the etchings which decorate the sword. The date is often derived from an inscription on the hilt of the sword in which Borgia is referred to by the title of Cardinal. This citation dates the fabrication of the hilt, and most likely of the blade, to between 1493 and 1498, the years of Cesar's service to the Roman Church under that title. Previous scholarship on the sword has operated under the assumption that the sword and the etchings are dated to the same time period. That is not necessarily the case. This research will suggest the strong possibility that this sword, found today in the Fondazione Camillo Caetani in Rome, in its foundational state had belonged to Cesar during his life as a Cardinal, but was later prepared with engravings for presentation as the Blessed Sword of 1500.

The form taken by Cesar's sword is of a *cinquedea*, marked by a dramatically curved cross guard and a broad, double-edged blade. The hilt is comprised of a circular pommel, grip, and cross, all of which are gold-gilt and elaborately decorated with filigree work and diversely colored enamel. Like the hilt, the first third of the blade is also gilt in gold and detailed, but unlike the purely ornamental work on the hilt the decorative program executed here is both narrative and complex. This section of the blade is, on both sides, divided through designed etching into four separate scenes. Of these eight framed compartments, one holds the name CESAR, constructed as a multi-layered monogram; another displays two winged putti supporting the caduceus. The remaining six comprise the core of the decorative program: images of the Classical world.

The story told on the face of the blade begins with a representation of the Sacrifice or Worship of a Bull (Figure 2). The animal stands on an architectural base, functioning in this case as an altar. It is surrounded by figures bearing symbols of the offering. The inscription CVM NVMINE CESARIS OMEN transcribes the intentions of the scene—"a favorable omen with Caesar's divine will." Moving up the blade, the next composition is Cesar's monogram. It is important to note that although modern scholars spell his name with an 'e' on the end, for the majority of his life, with very few exceptions, Cesar always used the Spanish spelling which was without the terminal 'e.' That is the case here.

Above this ornamental section, Julius Caesar crosses the Rubicon. This depiction of Julius Caesar's famous journey is taken from the description of this event in Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.<sup>1</sup> The inscription that runs across the bottom of the scene is also taken from Suetonius: IACTA EST ALEA, translating to "the die is cast," the words Caesar was said to have spoken at this very moment.<sup>2</sup>

The final etching on the face of the blade is a depiction of The Worship of Love. A figure representing cupid or a personification of love is shown blindfolded, standing on a pedestal.

As the blade is turned over, the decoration opens with the Triumph of Julius Caesar and the word BENEMERENT—"to the well deserving," (Figure 3). Among a parade of figures

<sup>1</sup> Charles Yrairte, *Autour des Borgia* (Paris: J. Rothschild, 1891), 153-154.

<sup>2</sup> Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, trans. Catharine Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17.

and horses carrying the standards and arms of Rome, Caesar sits on a horse-drawn chariot, crowned by laurels and holding an olive branch. The following frame is another ornamental band, which houses decorative foliage and two winged bulls. In a central oval, two winged figures support a caduceus.

Next is the Worship of Faith and the inscription FIDES. PREVALENT. ARMIS—"faith is more prevalent than arms." Faith is depicted as a shrouded woman, seated as if a statue in an architectural niche. She is surrounded by nude figures that appear to be paying homage.

The final scene etched on the blade is of the Pax Romana. An eagle spreads his wings as he sits atop a globe that is supported by a column. Musicians stand at the base, playing instruments.<sup>3</sup>

These images provide essential elements towards the dating of the sword. The triumphal chariot, the presence of a sacrificial bull, and the bearing of the spoils of war are customary components to the Triumphs of Julius Caesar. Here the bull is given particular attention due undoubtedly to the status of this animal as a chief emblem of the Borgia family, but the Crossing of the Rubicon is a unique scene uncommon to contemporary portraits of the military triumphs of the great Emperor. The inclusion of it here is revealing of the narrative iconography desired by the sword's owner. His repetition of it is telling of its personal significance.

Perhaps the most grandiose expression of Cesar's individualized visual representation is found in a parade held in his honor in February 1500. Here, on sumptuous display for the people of Rome, the Triumphs of Julius Caesar merged with Cesar Borgia's recent military victories, creating a memorable spectacle. In a parade that wound from the Piazza Navona to the Vatican and back again, twelve chariots showcased the Triumphs of Caesar. It was not an uncommon practice to represent the triumphs of ancient military leaders, but the very personal elements of Cesar that are present in this particular event should not be written off as immaterial. Eleven of the wagons were decorated with tableaux relative to recent events in the life of Cesar Borgia.<sup>4</sup> Among the scenes most notable to this discussion was the Crossing of the Rubicon.

As stated, this scene was not common in Renaissance depictions of the Triumphs of Caesar. The standard procession, both in art and life, followed a similar formula. It was a generalized pageant, mimicking the antique practice and style, but no particular scenes from the life of the leader were shown. Mantegna's *Triumphs of Caesar*, which he painted for the Dukes of Mantua, are an example of this formulaic picture.

What is important is the general nature of what is considered the Triumphs of Caesar and the stark absence

of any specific event from his life. This makes the parade of 1500 unique, and the representation of the Crossing of the Rubicon becomes a conspicuous addition of which the significance should not be overlooked. It must be assumed then that it was Cesar's desire to adopt this scene as part of his personal iconography, both on his sword and during the parade that honored his recent triumphs in northern Italy and his elevation to Captain General of the Papal Army. A connection must have been felt by Cesar between this moment in his own life and the past event in the life of the ancient general. The definitive moment where Julius Caesar could no longer turn back had symbolically become the line in the life of Cesar Borgia from which he desired to never return. He marked this association through the engravings on his sword and in the parade.

This study considers the sword and the parade together, presenting them as two key elements, one material and one ephemeral, in the development of Cesar's personal iconography. The close alignment found between this parade and the scenes on the sword suggests that they share a common date of execution.

It is known that Cesar was given the Blessed Sword in 1500.<sup>5</sup> The Blessed Sword was an annual gift presented by the pope to a secular ruler in honor of service in defense of the Church and its faith. It was a costly gift despite the fact that the blades were purchased ready-made.<sup>6</sup> The use of a pre-fabricated blade is interesting in the context of this discussion. Since this was already standard practice, the pontiff likely took a sword, one belonging to Cesar during his years as a Cardinal, and through the addition of the decorative etchings and the traditional blessing, created the Blessed Sword of 1500. Pinturicchio, who has long been considered the designer of these images, was working for both Cesar and his father during this time.

The elaborately worked leather scabbard, today in the Victoria and Albert Museum and originally intended for the Caetani sword, is a source of additional evidence towards this theory (Figure 4). Günter Gall, through stylistic comparison, dates the scabbard to the beginning of the sixteenth century. He further questions that the scabbard is contemporary to the fabrication of the sword, suggesting that a simple sheath was made at the time of the sword's manufacture and stating that the scabbard under examination here is a more elaborate "pomp-sheath" that was commissioned some time later.<sup>7</sup> If the sheath, matching the etchings in design and theme, was made some time after the fabrication of the sword, the logical conclusion to be drawn is that the etchings on the blade were added at a later date, coinciding not with the blade and hilt of the sword, but instead with the production of the scabbard.

<sup>3</sup> Yrairte, *Autour des Borgia*, 154-155.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Bradford, *Cesare Borgia* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 115-116.

<sup>5</sup> Eugène Müntz, *Les Arts à la Cour des Papes Innocent VIII, Alexander VI, Pie III (1484-1503)* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1898), 238.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Burns, *Golden Rose and Blessed Sword: Papal Gifts to Scottish Monarchs* (Glasgow: John S. Burns & Sons, 1970), 14n37.

<sup>7</sup> Günter Gall, *Leder Im Europäischen Kunsthandwerk* (Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann Braunschweig, 1965), 163.

The decorative program of the scabbard is in dialogue with the personal iconography displayed so prominently on the blade of the sword. Venus, as more than just a reference to the Worship of Love on the blade, here on the scabbard is an illustration of the Venus Genetrix, the Universal Mother aspect of the Roman goddess and the mythical forbearer of the Gens Julia, the house of Julius Caesar (Figure 5).<sup>8</sup> Suetonius describes a dedication before the Temple of Venus Genetrix that takes place during a military campaign of the ancient emperor.<sup>9</sup> The consultation of Suetonius in both programs suggests that the etchings of Julius Caesar on the blade of the sword and this highly crafted scabbard were fashioned at the same time, according to Gall, during the sixteenth century.

A final clue regarding the date of the etchings can be found in perhaps the only other element of Cesar's personal adornment known to still exist. Inscribed in small black letters on a signet ring, is the phrase "fais ce que dois advenne que pourra" ("do what thou must, come what will").<sup>10</sup> These are the words spoken by Julius Caesar immediately following the utterance "the die is cast."<sup>11</sup> Through the use of this inscription on a personal item, it is all the more clear that Cesar was deeply connected to this historical moment in the life of the Roman general. The fact that the inscription is written in French is the most telling. Never would he have strayed so far from his native tongue until after he had quartered his arms with the lilies of France in 1499, giving great weight to the suggestion that it was only after he took up military arms that he could find self-definition in this moment of Caesar's life.

The question could be asked as to why the shifting of a few years makes a difference in our understanding of the work. To answer this, one must appreciate the profound and essential role that the category of arts—into which this sword falls, what we now refer to as decorative arts—played during this era. In the Medieval and Renaissance periods, these objects were esteemed not only for their material worth but also for their political power.<sup>12</sup> Visual arts grew to be important weapons in the game of cultural propaganda, and although all art objects generally provided some form of outward projection in regard to their owner, in this visual competition arms and armor were among the most highly prized items. Military costume expressed the virtues that all Renaissance statesmen desired to be associated with: prominent echelon; strength at arms; noble character; and the chivalric presence of honor. It was an exclusive art that

carried a political resonance of wealth, and served as an invaluable asset to an individual's iconographic alliance to the great figures of history. Allusions to the ancients were frequent in the decoration of these objects, seeking through this iconography to present the man who donned them as a new Hercules, Alexander, or Caesar.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly the sword of Cesar Borgia is also part of this display. The etchings are the perfect example of an individual deriving personal power from the adopted image of a historic icon. The parade held in 1500 is an absolute illustration of the outward propaganda intended to persuade the viewer to attribute Cesar with the characteristics of the ancient Roman whom the Renaissance considered to be the greatest general to ever live.

If one is to view the object as it was initially intended, as a representation of the self-fabricated image and personal iconography chosen by Cesar, it offers tremendous insight into his life and motivations. However, for this individual, life was spent in two very distinct phases. If the date commonly proposed for these etchings is correct, and Cesar had in the years 1493 to 1498 created a personal iconographic image modeled after Julius Caesar, the question must be asked as to why. It would be truly unnecessary for a Cardinal to define himself as possessing genius in warfare while confined to an ecclesiastical way of life that offered him little but an annual income and most certainly no outlet for strength of lordship or military supremacy.

If instead the other faction of his life is considered as spawning the iconography, a strong correspondence in context develops. As the new leader of the army of Rome, Caesar's army, Cesar Borgia had crossed his Rubicon to this long dreamt-of military position, one that is steeped in the politics of power. This is the moment when he aligned himself with the virtues of the ancient Caesar.

To prove conclusively that the etchings on the blade of the Caetani sword were completed in 1500 is an objective that may remain unattainable; it is entirely possible that the intimate nature of the participants negated the need for the kind of documents that would offer definitive proof. Nonetheless, the sword and the scabbard intended as its cover are critical to our understanding of the development of Cesar Borgia's personal iconography, and it is through this understanding that we gain insight into the man who, for a moment, held the awe of Renaissance Italy.

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<sup>8</sup> Claude Blair, "Cesare Borgia's Sword Scabbard," *Victoria and Albert Museum Bulletin* reprints 6, reprinted from the *Bulletin*, 2, no. 4 (October 1966):14n17.

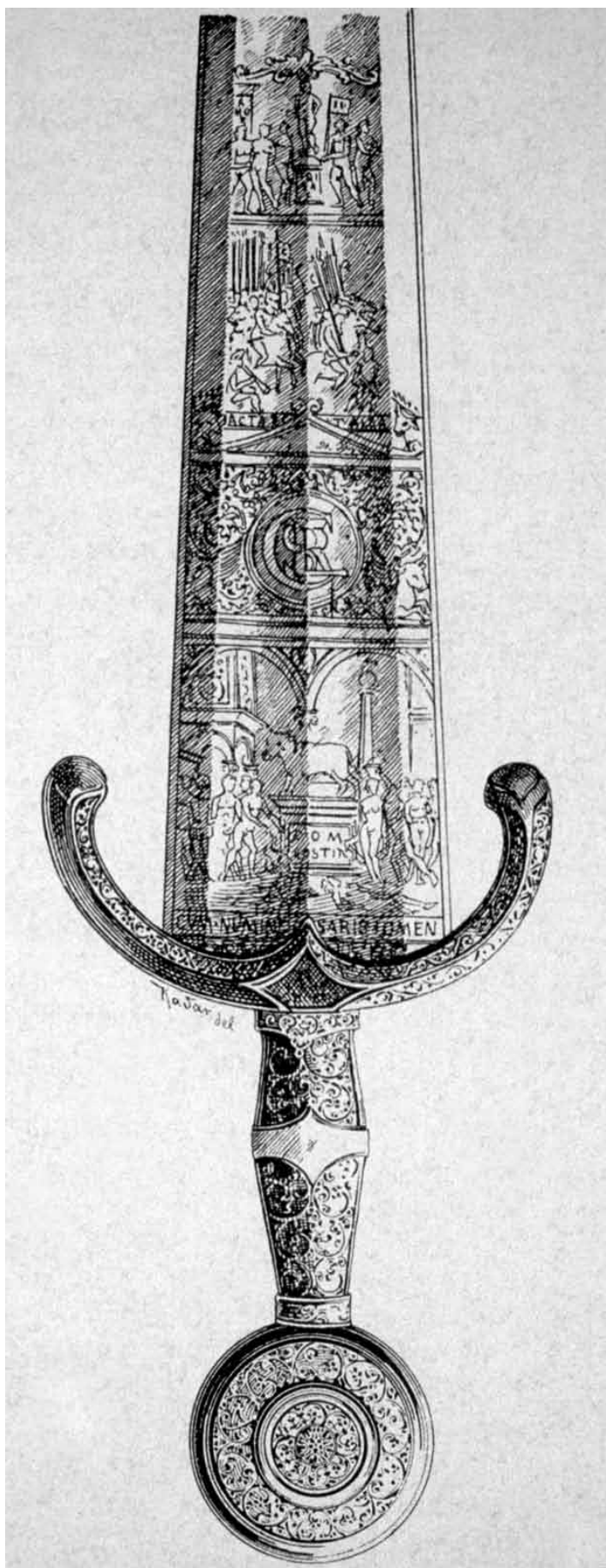
<sup>9</sup> Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> From the Notes and Queries section of *The Connoisseur* 18 (May-August 1907): 59. This is a response to a question posed in the Notes and Queries section of *The Connoisseur* 17 (January-April 1907): 116.

<sup>11</sup> Suetonius, *History of the Twelve Caesars*, trans. Philemon Holland (London: David Nutt, 1899), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Marina Belozerskaya, *Rethinking the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Marina Belozerskaya, *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 157.



[facing page, left] Figure 1. Sword of Cesar Borgia, c.1500, silver, enamel, gold, steel; blade is 40.5 inches. Image taken from *Autour des Borgia* (Paris: J. Rothschild, 1891), page 148.

[facing page, top right] Figure 2. Sword of Cesar Borgia (face), c.1500, silver, enamel, gold, steel; blade is 40.5 inches. Image taken from "Le Graveur d'Epees de César Borgia," *Les Lettres et les Arts*, vol. 1 (Jan., 1886), page 166.

[facing page, bottom right] Figure 3. Sword of Cesar Borgia (reverse), c.1500, silver, enamel, gold, steel; blade is 40.5 inches. Image taken from "Le Graveur d'Epees de César Borgia," *Les Lettres et les Arts*, vol. 1 (Jan., 1886), page 169.

[facing page, right] Figure 4. Scabbard of Cesar Borgia, c. 1498, tooled calf's leather, 83.5cm x 8.5cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

[facing page, far right] Figure 5. Detail of the Scabbard of Cesar Borgia, c. 1498, tooled calf's leather, 83.5cm x 8.5cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

