CESARE BORGIA

THE PRINCE OF DISSIMULATION

Written by LLA



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CHAPTER I
SON OF SINS: THE YOUNGHOOD OF CESARE (1475-1492)

Whilst there is little doubt about Cesare Borgia's date of birth, the place of his birth is uncertain. Some suggest Subbiaco, others Rignano (the more likely possibility);[1] some even point to Valencia, in Spain. Having ruled out this last possibility, it can be said that Cesare was born in the very region where he lived and fought for the rest of his life: central Italy. He was the son of the then ambitious Spanish Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia (or Borja, as in the original form), who would later go down in history under his papal name of Alexander VI, and his Mantuan lover Vannozza Cattanei. The illicit nature of his parents' union was considered so little of a scandal in the Church of the late XV century that Cesare was recognised almost immediately by his father, who took charge of organising his education with the intention of setting him on a path to the priesthood (the military career had already been taken by his elder half-brother, Pier Luigi).

His education, which had to be of the very highest standard to meet the requirements of the upper echelons of the clergy, began at a very early age and was guided by the finest teachers in Rome at the time, including Spannolio of Majorca, a member of the Roman Academy. Rodrigo was the most far-sighted father in the world, and his determination to introduce his son to political and cultural circles at an early age was clear from the outset: by the age of six, Cesare was already accumulating ecclesiastical offices, becoming a canon of Valencia Cathedral, archdeacon of the collegiate church of Jativa (his father's birthplace), treasurer of Mallorca Cathedral, archdeacon of Tarragona Cathedral and various other titles.[2] Obviously, the child had no control whatsoever over the aforementioned administrations, whose substantial financial resources were, however, absorbed by the Borgia family and by his father in particular. At the age of thirteen, the humanist Paolo Pompilio presented him with a copy of his philological work on the metre of Christian literature, a gesture which, however much it may have been motivated by a pathetic desire to flatter the Borgias, might confirm that Cesare had already acquired some knowledge of the work's subject matter, at least in broad terms.

(Fluid Intelligence: Learning Ability-Crystallized Intelligence: Knowledge)

In 1489, at the age of just fourteen, Cesare was enrolled at the University of Perugia to study canon law. The boy who arrived there was far removed from the typical ambition of his family and came across instead as a devout, reserved and modest young man, more inclined to listen than to speak. His brief spell in Perugia, lasting less than two years, was cut short when he was informed of his appointment as bishop. At the age of just fifteen, Cesare was indeed made Bishop of Pamplona by Pope Innocent VIII at the request of Rodrigo Borgia, who had become for some years the influential vice-chancellor of the papal court. This yet another office, disproportionate to his young age, was intended to secure a further windfall for the Borgia coffers, but it also had the even more important task of establishing the authority and status of the very young Cesare. By presenting himself as a bishop, he officially began his political career.

In the wake of his episcopal appointment, the young man wrote a letter to the clergy of Pamplona described as a masterpiece of modesty, in which he named the treasurer of Toledo as his vicar and the administrator to whom they should turn.[3] In effect, he was telling Pamplona that he would never see them in person.

(Fluid Intelligence: Learning Ability-Crystallized Intelligence: Knowledge/Knowledge Application-Deception: Sophystry)

The time had not yet come to set his political rise in motion, and Cesare had to continue his university studies, this time at the Faculty of Law in Pisa, within Medici's territory. The move to a different university had been a decision made by his father, driven by the hope — which came to fruition — that in Pisa Cesare might befriend the scion of the de' Medici family, his contemporary Giovanni (the future Leo X, one of the most important popes of the Renaissance). A profound transformation in Cesare's character had characterised the period of his move to Tuscany, to the extent that the Perugian image of a mild-mannered and pensive young man was replaced by that of a worldly gentleman, already ambitious and eager to excel. Even his friendship with Giovanni de' Medici concealed a spirit of rivalry, in which Cesare emerged victorious in the academic sphere (he graduated earlier with excellent grades),[4] despite the Florentine's great intelligence. Not only, but also socially Cesare appeared more brilliant compared to the son of Lorenzo. Banquets, parties and various entertainments filled the days of Borgia and his ever-growing court, as he was now keen to establish himself and demonstrate his imperious nature.

(Crystallized Intelligence: Knowledge-Social Engineering: Influence Building/Charisma)

A trait that would continue to define him in the future, even as a sixteen-year-old Caesar built up his own private retinue by combining a handful of trusted and capable men with a rabble of petty scoundrels, swordsmen, swindlers, gamblers and loose women. The reason he did this was not merely for the pleasure of surrounding himself with riff-raff, but rather his desire to always stand out from the crowd when appearing in public. By gathering insignificant people around him, Caesar could thus shine all the brighter, whilst behind the scenes he forged more significant alliances.[4]

(Social Engineering: Influence Building/Charisma-Reasoning: Abductive)

However, matters of greater importance than the degree in Pisa were looming in 1492. Granada, the last Arab stronghold in Spain, had fallen, and Columbus's ships were preparing to set sail for the New World. The death of Lorenzo de' Medici (whom Cesare met at least on an occasion), Giovanni's father, was not the only event to destabilise the Italian peninsula: in Rome, Innocent VIII passed away in July. A month later, Rodrigo Borgia won the election of the College of Cardinals and presented himself to the Roman people as Pope Alexander VI. For the Borgia family, this obviously changed everything.

Cesare was in Siena when news reached him that his father had been elected Bishop of Rome. He was gambling at the horse races and had just secured a victory by cheating: he had in fact ordered his jockey to let go of the reins in the final stretch so that the horse would lighten its load and run faster.[6]

(Tactics: Creativity/Timing)
Alexander didn't wait much to start his nepotistic politics: just two weeks after his election Cesare was nominated Archbishop of Valenza, making him *de facto* co-patriarch of Spain even if he was not even eighteen at that moment. Three weeks later Cesare finally reached Rome, filled with ambition and desire for greatness.
(Emotional Intelligence: Engagement)

Bibliography:
[1] C. FUSERO, *Cesare Borgia*, Edizioni Ghibli, Milano 2025, p.52
[2] *Ibi*, p.53
[3] *Ibi*, p.55
[4] *Ibi*, p.57
[5] *Ibi*, pp. 58-59
[6] *Ibi*, p.61

CHAPTER II
THE IMPRISONED CARDINAL: WILL OF POWER UNDER THE CHURCH (1493-1498)

Having arrived in Rome to serve his father, Cesare took up residence in what would later become the Palazzo of the Penitenziari. Here, in March 1493, he had a brief meeting with Andrea Boccaccio, Bishop of Modena and ambassador of the Este court in Rome, who had perhaps come there to try to obtain precious information from the Pope's son. This meeting, which was quick because Cesare was about to set off on a hunting trip, is of particular interest to us because it provides a clear and comprehensive portrait of the young Archbishop of Valencia, who was just eighteen years old at that time. Boccaccio describes Cesare as a handsome young man, full of cheerfulness and charm, extremely modest, permeated by nobility and in possession of a high intellect. He also notes the swiftness of his movements whilst riding his horse, the result of the long, intensive training sessions he undertook as an outlet for his energy (Cesare was highly skilled not only in hunting, but also in fencing and the handling of all kinds of weapons). Finally, the very young bishop is compared with his elder half-brother, the Duke of Guida, and Boccaccio has no doubt that he is superior to him in affability and character, even though Giovanni Borgia was older and already active as a military leader.[1]

(Adversity Capacity: Discipline-Deception: Acting Skills-Social Engineering: Charisma)

In the months that followed, Cesare's political activity was limited and he mostly appeared in public as the Pope's shadow: he attended his sister Lucrezia's wedding (the first of many), accompanied the Spanish ambassadors in Rome and attended his father's political meetings, content to remain a listener. In short, he kept quiet, absorbed important information, and began to acclimatise to the political environment.

(Field Crafting: Info Gathering-Thinking: Analytic)

Cesare did not care for the ecclesiastical life he had been forced into, and indeed he would free himself from it as soon as he could, but his father was determined to advance his son's clerical career as far as possible. In September 1493, evidently feeling strong enough, Alexander VI appointed his son a cardinal. This move sparked fierce criticism not only for its clear nepotistic motive (which was, in fact, the norm), but also because Cesare was universally known to be the son of an illegitimate, indeed scandalous, relationship, and therefore theoretically could not have been granted the cardinal's red hat. In his papal bull, Rodrigo presented him as the son of his mistress Cattanei and her then lawful husband, but in a secret bull addressed to Cesare himself, he documented the true details regarding the young man's paternity. Giuliano della Rovere, the future Julius II and bitter enemy of the Borgias, threatened to resign from the College of Cardinals in the face of such an affront, but the Pope stood his ground and, in the end, the majority of the cardinals sided with him.

Cesare's appointment as Prince of the Church had already drawn Europe's attention to him. A few weeks after the appointment, King Charles VIII of France contacted him. Annoyed that Alexander VI had not appointed a single French cardinal in his bull, the French monarch asked the very young Borgia to intercede with the Supreme Pontiff, in exchange for guaranteed future support for any of his objectives in France.[2] Cesare, however, being a keen observer, knows that one must be cautious when dealing with Carlo, given that in the preceding months he had even attempted to exert pressure in Rome to secure recognition of his claims to the Kingdom of Naples. After all, the French invasion and the outbreak of the Italian Wars are just around the corner.

(Thinking: Linear/Critical-Reasoning: Inductive-Social Engineering: Influence Building)

In 1494, in fact, the situation deteriorated further and the tension between Rome and Paris became seriously dangerous. Alexander VI rejected the House of Anjou's claims to the Neapolitan throne and, indeed, sent his nephew Giovanni to Naples to crown the new Aragonese heir. Not only that, but he arranged for one of his very young sons, the twelve-year-old Goffredo, to marry the daughter of the new King of Naples. The outrage was immense, and Charles VIII threatened to convene an ecumenical council to depose him, to incite the French clergy against him and eventually to invade the papal territories. The Borgia Pope, however, was not deterred; on the contrary, he remained firmly entrenched in Rome, whilst Giuliano della Rovere gave his full support to the French, as the Duchy of Milan would soon do as well. Even the Republic of Venice urged the King of France to teach the new, arrogant, Bishop of Rome and his Spanish allies in Southern Italy a resounding lesson.

In these troubled times, the Pope needed capable advisers and executors more than ever, and Cesare soon became one of his most trusted men. He was sent to Naples as ambassador to negotiate an alliance with the new King Alfonso II, achieving a diplomatic success, as he wrote personally to his brother Giovanni. In July 1494, he took part in the conference at Vicovaro to organise defences against the now imminent French invasion. In any case, these were crucial weeks and months for Cardinal Borgia, who worked with great determination and stood out amongst his brothers and cousins, drawing ever closer to his father and becoming his right-hand man.[3] Whilst he is certainly not the one devising the grand strategy of the papal court (Rodrigo's experience and political acumen are far too great for him to need such support), it is nonetheless true that the nineteen-year old Cesare is already, at this stage, his father's inspirer and, at times, his instigator, and is also the most energetic hand through which his decisions are carried out.

(Emotional Intelligence: Engagement-Adversity Capacity: Perseverance-Strategy: Building-Adaptability: Environmental-Social Engineering: Influence Building/Leadership)

Events, however, unfolded rapidly. The defence plan organised by Alexander VI and Alfonso II, which included an attempted coup in Genoa, failed. Not only had the Duke of Milan, Ludovico il Moro, allied himself with Charles VIII, but other Italian princes had laid down their arms peacefully and allowed the French army to pass through their territories. Finally, the Medici regime in Florence, which was close to the Borgias, had fallen. As if that were not enough, as Charles VIII drew nearer, more and more Roman families and members of the clergy sided with

the pro-French faction. In a short time, the invading army reached Ostia and cut off Rome's supply lines. It was futile for the papal army to attempt to engage in battle, given the enemy's overwhelming numerical superiority. However, the Pope did not surrender, not even when the French entered the Holy City. Alexander barricaded himself with Cesare and other trusted men in Castel Sant'Angelo, determined to put up a strenuous defence until his adversaries agreed to negotiate. The King of France threatened to bombard the castle, but the Pope displayed sacred relics on the walls and stood upon them in his papal vestments, and so no one dared to fire. Difficult peace negotiations began, aided in part by the growing rift between the Duchy of Milan and France, in which Cesare also took part. In the end, terms of peace were agreed upon which, whilst harsh, were more favourable to the Borgias than to Charles, given the starting point: the Pope undertook to guarantee the passage of French troops through his territories, pardoned the cardinals who had betrayed him, and handed Cesare over as a legate (in reality, as a hostage) to the King of France for six months. Alexander VI had, however, secured two key points: he was not obliged to grant papal investiture to Charles on the throne of Naples (and thus did not legitimise him), and he had thwarted the plan of Giuliano della Rovere, who sought to persuade Charles VIII to convene an ecumenical council to depose the Pope.

The experience of the French occupation of Rome, however negative, had presented two opportunities, one for Alexander and one for Cesare: the former had observed that some Italian states were now beginning to worry about French dominance on the peninsula (and consequently began to plot in secret to form an anti-French league), whilst the latter had noted with interest the growing sentiment of hatred among the Romans towards the invaders, finally perceiving a change in the usual inertia of the Italian people, which his father had complained about.[4] This pseudo-patriotic sentiment would serve him well later on.

(Emotional Intelligence: Perception/Realization-Thinking: Analytic)

Surrendering to the French and being held hostage had not dimmed the young cardinal's brilliance; on the contrary, he appeared as gallant and carefree as ever during the journey to Naples (where Charles's army was heading). Whilst maintaining his affable demeanour, however, Cesare was secretly plotting a small trick against the French: under one pretext or another, he had halted and sent back two of the seventeen carts he was taking as personal baggage, and into those very carts he had secretly loaded most of the precious goods with which he had departed from Rome.[5]

(Emotional Intelligence: Management-Adversity Capacity: Stress Tolerance-Deception: Acting Skills/Concealment)

A second move, however, had to be played on Charles VIII, this time an even bolder one. The French contingent arrived in Velletri, in Lazio, where the king and his entourage stopped to spend the night in the bishop's palace. Cesare accompanied Charles to his rooms, stayed to chat with him, and then retired to his own room. Shortly afterwards, disguised as a groom, he left the bishop's palace, slipped through the town and reached a stable where his squire had prepared a horse for him. By the dawn Cesare Borgia had already arrived in Rome, leaving in his bed in Velletri only the red cardinal dress.

(Deception: Acting Skills/Unpredictability-Planning: Formulation/Process)
However, to avoid putting his father Cesare in a difficult position, he did not go straight to the Vatican, but went into hiding at the home of Antonio Feres, a lawyer at the Sacred Rota and a friend of his. He stayed there just long enough to get his bearings and inform his father of his escape, after which he left Rome — which remained a dangerous place — to take refuge in Spoleto.
(Foresight: Accuracy-Counteraction: Trap Evasion-Reasoning: Deductive)
Charles VIII flew into a rage when he discovered he had been deceived and threatened to put Velletri to the sword and set it ablaze. Having learnt that Cesare was in Spoleto, he sent an ultimatum to the city demanding his surrender, but before it even reached its destination, Cesare had already left the city and was nowhere to be found. The king's protests to the Pope were to no avail: Alexander turned a deaf ear. After all, Charles was not in a position to interrupt a military campaign simply to search for a man with his army, as Cesare knew.
(Strategy: Castling-Foresight: Accuracy-Reasoning: Deductive-Thinking: Critical/Speed)
Having vanished without a trace for several weeks, Cesare reappeared only in March 1495, this time to exact a bloody revenge. During their occupation of Rome, the French had in fact ransacked his mother's house and other properties of Borgia's allies. Some bands of Swiss mercenaries in the service of Charles VIII and a few groups of French gentlemen had remained in Rome, perhaps awaiting the outcome of their king's expedition against Naples, perhaps intending to return to their homeland. In any case, on 1 April, units of Spanish men suddenly attacked these groups and massacred them, wreaking havoc. With that act the Cardinal Borgia, having ordered the assault, had avenged both the plundering of his mother's home and the humiliations he had endured as a hostage and borne with great difficulty.[6] Thanks to the distance from Naples and above all the worsening of the French situation Cesare was able to commit such a crime knowing that he wouldn't have to pay for its consequences. The attack led to the elimination of French influence in the city.
(Emotional Intelligence: Engagement-Deception: Unpredictability-Planning: Formulation/Process/Coverage-Field Crafting: Risks Calculations-Psychological Warfare: Inducement)
Things indeed were no better for Charles VIII, who had made a triumphant entry into Naples, but whose army had been struck by a plague and, above all, who now had to contend with a powerful anti-French alliance forged by Alexander VI. Just as swiftly as he had descended upon Italy, so swiftly he attempted to flee away. He tried to secure an audience with the Pope, but the latter ensured that this did not happen, and as the king made his way up the peninsula, the allied army defeated him, making his retreat even more difficult.
With the French threat repelled and their presence in Rome eliminated, the Borgias now set their sights on taking revenge on those Roman barons who had colluded with the invaders and were still resisting Vatican authority. Among these, the Orsini family and their military wing, led by the skilled commander Bartolomeo d'Aviano, certainly stood out. The Holy See's military operations were led by Giovanni Borgia, the Duke of Gandia and Cesare's brother, who achieved

mediocre results and was forced to accept a modest peace with the Roman nobles. For a year and a half, the roles within the papal family remained firmly as planned by Alexander VI: he as the supreme mind, Cesare as the Church's controlling arm and his clerical successor, Giovanni as the armed and political arm, and Lucrezia and the other siblings as useful pawns to be exploited through strategic marriages.

In June 1497, Alexander VI convened a secret council of cardinals to deliberate on the coronation of the new King of Naples, Frederick II. In exchange for the Vatican's sacred investiture of the throne, the Pope had demanded control of the city of Benevento, which was to become a duchy under the authority of the Church. The most delicate aspect of Rodrigo's decision, however, was that it was Giovanni Borgia who was to obtain that duchy, which would become hereditary. Some elderly cardinals tried in vain to protest yet another desecration of canon law: corruption and threats had forced the majority of the college to acquiesce, and in the end they accepted the Pope's decision. As the second item on the agenda, Alexander also informed them that Cardinal Cesare Borgia would be the one to crown Frederick II King of Naples, in his capacity as papal legate. The plans of the head of the Borgia family were, however, soon to change: a week later, Giovanni Borgia was assassinated during a night-time ride. Many people, particularly those hostile to the Borgia family, have attempted to accuse Cesare of ordering his brother's murder, citing political rivalry as the motive; however, the lack of evidence, the bias of the rumourmongers, and the apparently good relationship he had with Giovanni cast doubt on this theory.

(Adversity Capacity: Mental Fortitude)

Further troubles plagued the Borgias in the months that followed. Lucrezia had begun an affair with Pedro Caldes, Alexander VI's chamberlain, and it seems she had even become pregnant. Cesare did not let the matter go unpunished: in October 1497, Pedro Caldes's body was found in the Tiber (ironically, in the same way that Giovanni Borgia's had been found), perhaps killed directly by Cardinal Borgia's own hands.[7]

(Deception: Concealment)

The murder of the overly eager servant was one of the final acts of Cesare's brief career as a cardinal. Indeed, his brother's death could only lead to his own replacement by Cesare, the eldest of the surviving Borgia brothers and undoubtedly the most suitable to become the family's right-hand man. After all, Alexander VI had already created his nephew, Juan, a cardinal, and he could take on the role previously fulfilled by Cesare within the Church. The news that the Pope's son was about to renounce the cardinal's hat had been circulating in the Italian courts since the end of August 1497, creating uncertainty and fear amongst the princes of the peninsula.[8]

(Psychological Warfare: Abusing Insecurities-Social Engineering: Charisma)

For Alexander and Cesare, it was unthinkable that Cesare's political career should start from scratch, like any ordinary mercenary captain. Cesare had to set out already possessing his own territory and an established position, and it was with this in mind that the idea arose to have him marry the daughter of Frederick II, Princess (who was, incidentally, also a bastard) Charlotte of Naples. Such a move would have further strengthened ties between the Borgias and southern

Italy (and thus the Aragonese), and placed them in a position of confrontation with the French, who were still laying claim to the throne of Naples (possibly even making Cesare heir of the kingdom).
Charles VIII had just died and Louis XII had been crowned in his place; he was more than eager to divorce his wife and needed the Pope to obtain a dispensation from the marriage. Alexander and Cesare thus devised a grand matrimonial strategy. In exchange for the annulment of his marriage and the Vatican's withdrawal from the anti-French alliance that Alexander himself had forged, Louis undertook not only to exert pressure on Frederick II to grant his daughter's hand in marriage (Charlotte was living in the French court by that time), but also promised to make Cesare Duke of Valentinois and Count of Diois, to provide military support for his future actions, to grant him a substantial income and to open the doors of his court to him.
(Strategy: Building/Castling/Adaptability-Social Engineering: Influence Building/Communication)
The agreement was accepted, and a few weeks later Cesare Borgia appeared at his final consistory, where he delivered a speech in which he stated that it was his wish to relinquish his ecclesiastical role for two reasons: he was no longer able to fulfil the sacred duties of a prelate, and it was solely out of a sense of duty to His Holiness that he had accepted a position that was not natural to him. He added, finally, that new investigations had confirmed that he was an only child and therefore not entitled to hold the cardinalate. In short, he presented his departure from the ecclesiastical life as a matter of moral justice rather than a decision dictated by personal ambition and political calculation. The following day, 19th September 1498, Rodrigo formalised Cesare's return to the lay state.
(Deception: Sophystry/Acting Skills)

Bibliography:
[1] C. Fusero, *Cesare Borgia*, Edizioni Ghibli, Milano 2025, pp. 67-69
[2] *Ibi*, p.76
[3] *Ibi*, pp. 80-81
[4] *Ibi*, p.88
[5] *Ibi*, p.89
[6] *Ibi*, p.91
[7] *Ibi*, pp. 132-133
[8] *Ibi*, p.135

CHAPTER III
AUT CAESAR AUT NIHIL: THE LEGEND OF MACHIAVELLI'S PRINCE (1498-1503)

YEAR 1498: WINDS OF MARRIAGE

On 1 October, Cesare set sail for France to celebrate his wedding, as Charlotte of Naples was living at the court of Louis XII. His arrival in Marseille caused quite a stir among the chroniclers, as did his subsequent journeys to Lyon and Turenne. The splendour displayed by the new Duke Valentino was so extraordinary that it even overshadowed the sovereign himself: banquets with endless courses, exquisitely elegant and supremely fine garments, and a retinue of ladies, knights, horses and ships in his wake. The whole of southern and central France was in an uproar at the appearance of the Pope's son. The gates of the French societies were already open for him. Caesar's charisma captivated the hearts of both the masses and the French nobility. An anonymous chronicler, as the Roman procession passed by, remarked that he had seen 'the most handsome man of the century'. Even Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, who was living in Avignon at the time, had welcomed him with a friendly demeanour and had, for the moment, buried the hatchet with the Borgias.[1]

(Psychological Warfare: Reinforcements-Social Engineering: Influence Building/Charisma)

The only person in the whole of France who was not captivated by Cesare was the very one who ought to have been: Charlotte of Naples had no intention whatsoever of marrying the Duke, having already pledged herself to a French gentleman with whom she was deeply in love. Despite pressure from King Louis, who feared that the failure of the marriage proposal might cause the Borgias to change their minds and return to the arms of the Aragonese, and despite the international tension sparked by her sheer stubbornness, the girl did not give in. Frederick II, on the other hand, supported his daughter's decision, fearing that Cesare might seek to depose him from the throne, even though the former cardinal had promised to place his sword at his disposal for the defence of Naples. Ultimately, they had to yield to the princess's whims; one could certainly not force the daughter of another king — and a guest at that — into a marriage against her will. Louis XII, however, was quick to present another suitable match to Cesare: Charlotte of Albret, his niece and the sister of the King of Navarre. She did not bring the same prospects as her Neapolitan namesake, but with the initial plan having fallen through, Cesare agreed that she was the best option left in France. He gritted his teeth and swallowed his pride, just so he could finally get down to business. Eventually, the union between the two would become a happy, although short, marriage.

(Emotional Intelligence: Management/Engagement-Strategy: Adaptability)

YEAR 1499: THE CLASH WITH THE LIONESS OF FORLÌ

In the aftermath of the wedding, which took place in May 1499, the winds of war were driving the French armies towards Italy. The agreement between the Borgias and Louis XII was clear: for Cesare, a marriage of distinction and noble titles; for France, support in the invasion of the Duchy of Milan and, perhaps, in the reconquest of Naples. Neither ally, however, trusted the other; Louis, in particular, doubted the good faith of the Pope's family. And he was not wrong at all. The secret strategy of the Pope and Cesare was to exploit the king's military support to secure the creation of a kingdom for the Duke Valentino, and then to reconstitute an anti-French league to drive the invaders out from the peninsula as soon as possible. The double-dealing planned by Alexander VI was brilliantly put into practice at the French court by his son.

(Manipulation: Logical/Direct-Deception: Acting Skills/Bluffing/Sophystry)

Indeed, a letter dated 5 August 1499, written by Cesare to the Duke of Milan, Ludovico il Moro, shows that the Borgia was prepared to abandon the French side at an early stage if the military campaign should fail.[2]

(Planning: Contingencies-Deception: Unpredictability)

There was no need for that, however. In addition to the Pope, Louis XII had also formed an alliance with the Republic of Venice, thus closing in on the Duchy of Milan from both sides. The advance of the French army, led by Cesare among others, had gone smoothly, and on 6 October 1499 Milan opened its city gates whilst Duke Ludovico fled to seek refuge with Emperor Maximilian.

Even before the agreement of 1498, the Borgias had identified the territory in which Cesare was to establish his kingdom: Romagna. This coastal region was formally under the control of the Church, but for decades the local lords (de iure vassals of the Pope) had ceased to pay taxes and to enforce submission to Rome. Romagna had thus become the land of bandits par excellence: each city was ruled by a different noble family, fighting one another in a state of constant chaos. Some of these cities had come under the protection of the Republic of Venice and had distanced themselves further from papal authority, protected as they were by Venetian power. For this reason, under normal circumstances a war of conquest in Romagna would have been arduous, but with the French militias in Milan and the common alliance between Venice, the Papacy and France, Cesare and Alexander VI had anticipated any action on the part of the Serenissima Republic. Venice would not have been able to block their military initiative if it were supported by Louis XII.

(Planning: Intricacies/Coverage-Strategy: Building/Castling/Foresight

The states of Central Italy grew alarmed; Florence listened attentively to the pleas for help from Caterina Sforza, the Lady of Forlì, who rightly feared she would be one of Cesare's first targets. The Florentine republican government, however, was held in check by the Borgias' threats against Pisa, Tuscany's main port, and was forced to remain neutral. The principalities of Romagna and the northern Marche were thus left isolated.[3]

(Strategy: Castling-Counteraction: Tactical Response-Psychological Warfare: Abusing Insecurities)

After authorising Cesare's conquests, Louis XII entrusted him with four thousand three hundred soldiers. Others were recruited by the Duke in Cesena, the only town in Romagna loyal to the Church, and yet others came from the papal army of Alexander VI. In total, the Duke of Valentino could count on some fifteen thousand men, a sizable army for the time.[4]

(Strategy: Logistics)

In November, Caesar set his army in motion and reached Emilia swiftly, but suddenly had to halt his advance for a few days and rushed furiously to Rome. The reason for this diversion was extremely serious: he had been informed of an attempt to poison the Pope via a poisoned letter, likely orchestrated by Caterina Sforza. The Pope had, however, recovered within a few days and Cesare was able to return to his army to resume the advance. According to some historians, the poisoning of Rodrigo Borgia was a fabrication of his own propaganda to legitimize his son's actions against the Lady of Forlì. If this were the case, Cesare would have played the part of the vengeful and furious son perfectly.

(Manipulation: Mass-Deception: Acting Skills/Sophystry)

The clash that was looming was between the Lioness of Forlì, the most resolute woman of her time, and Duke Valentino. Cesare's army arrived in Imola, the second main city under Caterina's control, massive and mighty, and the population opened the gates to him peacefully, allowing him a triumphant entry as a liberator. The town castle, an impregnable fortress loyal to Madama Sforza, however, turned its artillery on the citizens to punish them for their betrayal and challenged the Borgia to try and besiege it.

Cesare was careful not to waste his precious men, given that he was only at the start of the campaign, and so opted for a non-aggressive siege approach. His commanders predicted it would take a year to capture the fortress, but by 9 December, the Valentino's artillery had already breached one of the outer walls, and the subsequent assault (led personally by the Duke) forced the besieged to request a three-day truce. If no reinforcements arrived from Forlì within that time, the fortress promised to surrender. Since Caterina sent no troops, the fortress of Imola raised the white flag and submitted to Cesare.

(Strategy: Adaptability/Logistics-Tactics: Execution)

Ten days later, Forlì followed Imola's example and threw open its city gates to the invading army, whilst Caterina Sforza barricaded herself inside the city castle with two thousand men. The bombardment by the artillery of the combined besieging force weakened the defences, and on 12 January Cesare gave the order for a general assault. The ensuing battle, in which even the Lioness of Forlì took part, was bloody, but in the end Caterina was forced to surrender. The fall of the city raised a new question: whose prisoner was Lady Sforza now, Cesare's or Louis XII's? The woman tried to push for the second option, because French laws of war forbade the imprisonment of women, but Cesare had his way and took her for himself (perhaps in more ways than one, given that three chronicles report that he also used her sexually, although there is no evidence).

(Tactics: Execution)

Cesare's first, short, military campaign had ended in success. He had indeed won, albeit with a larger army, but one made up of four different nationalities (Italians, French, Swiss and Spanish mercenaries), who were interested in the war only for the spoils and were not linked to him; moreover, his staff were distrustful of their Duke, as they considered him too young for the role he held.[5] It was only Cesare's strong leadership and charisma that held the army he commanded together.

(Social Engineering: Leadership)

However, the situation for the new conqueror was set to worsen. Shortly after Christmas 1499, he received news that his cousin, Cardinal Giovanni Borgia, had died of an illness, just as he was about to join him in Forlì. It was yet another bitter blow for the Borgia family, and for Cesare, who had been a close friend of Giovanni.

(Adversity Capacity: Mental Fortitude)

A few days later, his mercenary troops, complaining about the meagre spoils obtained and the limited freedom to plunder granted by Borgia, caused a riot in the garrison. On the same day, a French high officer, Antoine Bessay, returns to vehemently demand the handover of Caterina Sforza to the French authority. Cesare confronts him in a private meeting and, on the spot, devises a strategy to extricate himself from the problematic situation and kill two birds with one stone. He gives a modest assent to Antoine's demands and hands over Caterina, but also orders a drill in the public square to line up all the troops for two days' time. On that occasion, he has the rebellious mercenaries positioned between the Spanish and French royal troops — who are more loyal to him — trapping them between the ranks. Afterwards, he addresses the army on horseback and delivers a thunderous speech to the rioters, threatening to cancel any pay rises unless discipline is restored and promising terrible punishments for those who continue their treacherous actions.

Having done so, he turns to Antoine Bessay and publicly orders him to hand them back to Caterina Sforza. The Frenchman insults him and refuses to do so, whereupon Cesare addresses the people of Forlì, who were watching the military parade. He shouts, asking what these treacherous and faithless officers want; do they perhaps want the people of Forlì, who are already suffering the violence of the invaders, to tear them to pieces and avenge the raids they have endured? The people of Forlì, incited, become agitated; Antoine is frightened, fearing he will be trapped between a confused army and an enraged crowd. At that point, another French officer appears, loyal to Cesare: Ives d'Allegre. As instructed by Valentino, he acts as a mediator and convinces Antoine that it is pointless to resist the orders he has received and that he must hand Caterina over to Cesare once and for all. Trapped, he gives in, whilst the crowds chants the name of Borgia as their protector.[6] In a masterstroke, Caesar not only obtained his precious political hostage, not only he trapped the soldiers who had caused the unrest, but also demonstrated to his army that they had no control over him, for he could turn the furious crowd against them and their arrogant officers. At the same time, he consolidated his hold on the people of a city he intended to govern.

(Emotional Intelligence: Realization/Perception/Facilitation-Manipulation: Direct/Indirect/Mass/Emotional-Deception: Acting Skills/Bluffing/Sophystry-Planning:Formulation/Process/Intricacies/Coverage-Tactics: Execution-Field Crafting: Setting Traps/Risks Calculations-Thinking: Speed-Social Engineering: Leadership/Charisma/Influence Building)

YEAR 1500: THE NEW DUKE OF ROMAGNA

At that point, Cesare was aiming to conquer the next town, Pesaro, but a sudden order from Louis XII forced him to halt: Ludovico il Moro had returned in Italy with a mercenary army and was preparing to regain control of Milan; consequently, the mercenary troops assigned to Valentino had to return to Lombardy to fight the Duke Sforza. Cesare had to grudgingly accept the royal orders, and he felt that attacking Pesaro with his remaining troops might result in too many casualties and jeopardise the continuation of the campaign. It was better to wait and restock his army over the winter, and so he returned to Rome.

(Field Crafting: Risks Calculations)

In the Eternal City, Cesare was given a triumphal entry and grand celebrations, as well as being appointed by his father as Captain General of the Papal Army and Standard-Bearer of the Church. He handed Caterina Sforza over to Alexander, who had her imprisoned in Castel Sant'Angelo.

His break from war, however, did not distance him from political intrigues, which centred on his new brother-in-law, Alfonso of Aragon, Lucrezia Borgia's second husband. Alfonso was a cousin of the King of Naples and had been married to the Pope's daughter during the months when attempts were being made to arrange a marriage between Cesare and Charlotte of Aragon. With that plan having fallen through, and indeed as the Borgias drew closer to the French crown, his presence in Rome within the papal family had become rather inconvenient. Alfonso must have sensed trouble brewing even whilst Cesare was away on his campaign in Romagna, given that he had left Rome for several months and found refuge on the estates of the Colonna, a most noble Roman family. He had, however, returned to the Vatican for the birth of his second son, fathered by Lucrezia, just as Cesare was returning to the Holy City. In March 1500, whilst on his way to St Peter's Basilica, the neapolitan prince was surrounded by a band of hooded assassins. He and two of his bodyguards defended themselves valiantly, but Alfonso was nevertheless struck on the head by a halberd, which partially fractured his skull.

The sudden arrival of a papal guard unit made the criminals flee, and Alfonso was placed under urgent medical care. For a week he hovered between life and death, attended by Rome's finest doctors. Just when it seemed he had escaped mortal danger, however, he was found dead. According to the official account, he had slipped from his bed and fractured his already severely injured skull. In reality, having Lucrezia and Alfonso's sister removed from the premises, the murder had been carried out by Michelotto Corella, Cesare's most trusted henchman. There were many reasons why the Valentino might have wanted to kill his brother-in-law: his death allowed the Borgias to remarry Lucrezia into a more useful new faction; it eliminated a potential

Aragonese spy who had already established ties with the Roman aristocracy hostile to the Borgias (rumour had it that Alfonso himself was plotting Cesare's assassination); it forced the Pope to sever ties with the Aragonese once and for all (whilst Rodrigo wished to keep a foot in both camps so as to switch sides as it suited him) in order to definitely side with the French; and finally, it served as solid proof of loyalty to Louis XII, perhaps in the hope of regaining the troops recalled to Lombardy ahead of schedule.[7] Although rumours were circulating among the foreign ambassadors in Rome that the murder was the work of the Pope's son, there was no evidence to implicate Cesare. Breaking the heart of his beloved sister, who was deeply in love with her husband, was a price worth paying to achieve his goals.

(Emotional Intelligence: Engagement-Adversity Capacity: Perseverance-Deception: Concealment/Sophystry-Planning: Coverage/Process-Strategy: Castling-Field Crafting: Setting Traps-Counteraction: Tactical Response/Trap Evasion)

Once the family drama was over, the Valentino's eyes once again burned with a thirst for war. As he made his way back to Romagna, he mapped out the sequence of his next targets: Cesena, Rimini, Pesaro and Faenza. In essence, this meant total control of the region, as well as an incursion into the Marche.

(Planning: Formulation/Aim)

Cesena fell easily, without the need for armed conflict. By the time Cesare arrived in the city, it had for years been torn apart by bloody, fratricidal strife between the Martinelli and Tiberti factions. The arrival of Borgia's army exposed the weaknesses of a wounded Cesena, and the Tiberti, who were then the lords of the town, surrendered meekly to the papal representative, just as the Martinelli laid down their arms, after having previously attempted — albeit unsuccessfully — to incite the people against Cesare.

Rimini and Faenza were under the protection of the Serenissima Republic. The Borgias had already worked to ensure that Venice was unable to act against Cesare's activities in Romagna, but now that the French had withdrawn their troops and concentrated their efforts in Tuscany (having entered into an alliance with the Republic of Florence against Pisa), the situation seemed to be changing. To resolve the problematic deadlock Alexander VI intervened: in exchange for the full support of the Holy See, and thus of all Christendom, against the Ottomans (who were causing serious problems for the Venetian fleets in the East), Venice was to give his son free rein to subjugate the territories of Romagna. The Venetians agreed, and Cesare was able to proceed with his plans.

Meanwhile, Cesare was making new secret arrangements with Louis XII, who had abandoned his fruitless attempts to aid Florence: in exchange for the arrival of two thousand three hundred men, Cesare undertook to assist in the future invasion of the Kingdom of Naples. At the same time, the young duke was busy bolstering his army with troops from the conquered cities and had reorganised his general staff, adding excellent commanders to its ranks. In total, the army at his disposal numbered around twelve thousand men.[8]

(Strategy: Logistics)

Caesar's fearsome reputation preceded him by dozens of kilometres, because barely a week after his men began their march, the lord of Rimini, Pandolfo Malatesta, surrendered even before the Valentino had knocked on his door. Malatesta knew he was deeply hated by his people and that his power rested solely on the protection Venice had afforded him up to that point. Now, however, with a great army, led by Italy's new rising star, drawing near, he was certain he would be killed by his own subjects even before said troops arrived. Cesare had offered him surrender a year earlier in exchange for his safety and an annual pension, and in the end Pandolfo contacted the Borgia's governors of Cesena to agree to the city's surrender. A few days later, the duke made a triumphant entry into Rimini.

(Psychological Warfare: Abusing Insecurities/Demoralization-Social Engineering: Charisma)

Pesaro, the next target, also fell within a week. Its lord, Giovanni Sforza, was hated by his people as much as, if not more than, Pandolfo Malatesta in Rimini, and like him had always survived only thanks to Venetian protection. Upon hearing news of Cesare's imminent arrival, his people had attempted to kill him, and realising that his rule had collapsed, he fled the city, leaving it to the Valentino.

(Psychological Warfare: Abusing Insecurities)

Rather than rest in the conquered Pesaro, Cesaro advanced toward Fano, and on the way razed to the ground a castle that had resisted the release of some prisoners he had ordered. His army was so feared in the Romagna region at that moment that letters arrived daily from all over promising him friendship and obedience.[9]

(Psychological Warfare: Abusing Insecurities/Inducement)

After confirming his control over Fano, which belonged to the lordship of Rimini, Cesare then finally arrived in Pesaro. Here he welcomed Pandolfo Collenuccio, ambassador of the Duke of Ferrara, upon whom he made a profound impression. Pandolfo wrote that the infant prodigy of Italian politics went to bed at dawn and woke early, never rested, and possessed a unique power of attraction.

(Adversity Capacity: Perseverance-Social Engineering: Charisma)

It is worth saying that however exceptionally fortunate these peaceful occupations had been for Cesare, he had aided in their occurrence by corrupting the guard corps of the fragile lordships, especially the castellans.[10]

(Strategy: Castling-Tactics: Timing)

This tactic failed to secure the conquest of Faenza, however, because the castellan bribed by Borgia was discovered and replaced before he could open the gates to his new lord. Faenza was under the rule of the fifteen-year-old Astore Manfredi, who, unlike the majority of the lords of Romagna, was extremely beloved by his people. Faenza was determined to fight to defend its young master. Before reaching the city, Cesare attacked and forced the surrender of all the castles in the surrounding countryside, completely isolating it.

(Strategy: Building/Castling)

He then ordered a tremendous bombardment of the enemy walls, which already crumbled the next day, unable to contain the overwhelming force of the artillery. When the breach was opened, Cesare's army rushed madly to sack the city, but Valentino fought his way through the crowd like a madman and, having managed to reach them, repelled his men's thirst for booty. He believed that the breach was too small, making it too risky for his men to penetrate the city, and he couldn't afford to lose any soldiers needlessly. Through persuasion alone, he silenced the army's cries of protest and forced them to return to camp.

(Emotional Intelligence: Facilitation-Adversity Capacity: Impulse Management/Stress Tolerance-Field Crafting: Risks Calculations-Reasoning: Deductive-Social Engineering: Leadership)

He had been right, because over the next ten days, the defenders demonstrated exceptional resistance, despite continuing to suffer bombardment. The drastically worsening winter weather, with heavy snowfall, made it difficult to maintain supply lines and the firearms, so Caesar decided to ease the siege. He gave orders to maintain the siege of the city, but to limit it to keeping it prisoner within the camp, without attempting new forays. The lack of supplies to the population in winter would have already weakened Faenza, making it easy prey come spring.

(Strategy: Adaptability-Psychological Warfare: Demoralization)

In April, Caesar returned to the walls of Faenza. It was perhaps the bloodiest of his conquests, as he lost five hundred men in less than a month. Despite bombarding the city with terrifying force (more than 1,600 bombs a day, a ferocity rare in the Renaissance) and ordering continuous attacks, the city was conquered only piecemeal, such was the heroic resistance of the population. Even women and young children fought to keep alive the freedom of the city and their lord. On April 25th, however, the last bastion of the besiegers was surrounded, and Caesar offered them favorable terms: freedom for young Manfred, respect for the rights of citizens and their property. The people of Faenza accepted, unaware that within a year their lord would be arrested and taken prisoner to Rome, where he would then be killed and thrown into the Tiber.

(Adversity Capacity: Perseverance-Deception: Sophystry-Tactics: Execution)

With the fall of Faenza, the entire Romagna was considered under the direct control of Cesare, who two days later was appointed Duke of Romagna by Alexander VI. The construction of the first nucleus of his kingdom was completed.

The relationship between Caesar and Louis XII was now becoming more and more fraught with false friendship. On the one hand, the new Duke of Romagna was eager to be strong enough to free himself from the limited support of France (which in those days had prevented him from advancing his army to conquer Bologna, which had remained loyal to the Church and had relations with the king). Cesare didn’t like the French at all, and, like his father, his final goal, which was impossible to achieve yet for the moment, was to free Italy from all foreign powers. On the other hand, Louis was beginning to fear that his cousin-in-law was gaining too much autonomy. For this reason, he withdrew his troops from Valentino's army, sending them south to conquer Naples.

Tensions with Bologna, ruled by the Bentivoglio family, however, remained high, and Cesare at least obtained from the city the cession of the town of Castel Bolognese in exchange for peace. Their aversion to him, however, was such that the Bentivoglio family massacred the members of their own family who had favored the agreement after its signing.

YEAR 1502: THE DRAGON OF ITALY EATS HIS OWN PEOPLE

Given the real truth about Bologna, Cesare set his sights on Tuscany, a region he had already identified as a possible conquest. The newly formed Republic of Florence (where Niccolò Machiavelli, among others, operated) had just emerged exhausted from the war against the insurgent Pisa and, although it had obtained the support of the King of France, in those weeks it saw royal benevolence wane, as both Cesare and Louis XII had drawn closer to Giuliano de' Medici, the brother of the heir to the family that had ruled as lords of Florence until 1494. Valentino mobilized his army even without French troops, now that he could exploit the militias of the occupied cities in Romagna, and headed toward Piombino, in southern Tuscany.

(Planning: Aim/Formulation-Strategy: Logistics)

Louis vetoed this immediate military action and even Alexander VI ordered his son to leave Florence alone for the time being and return to Rome instead. Cesare, however, was too determined and perceived his prey as too vulnerable to be left alone. Only a few days earlier, Florence had sent him a letter apologizing for having dared to fortify the town of Fiorenzuola, such was the fear the Florentines harbored toward him.

(Adversity Capacity: Perseverance-Psychological Warfare: Abusing Insecurities)

Upon arriving in Tuscany, Caesar ordered the republican government to grant him military passage through Florentine territory. A few days later, three ambassadors were sent to him and accepted his request on three conditions: he was not to approach the fortified cities, he was not to bring former Florentine citizens with him, and he was not to use the main roads. Caesar responded with equally insolent conditions, designed to strike terror into the vulnerable Florentines: he demanded to be named condottiero of Florence, he ordered the city not to provide aid to Piombino, he requested the surrender of eight hostages and he even ordered the return of the city throne to the Medici or at least the creation of a new government more sympathetic to his demands. Caesar was bluffing; he knew he could advance no further than southern Tuscany (the day before, a second order from the Pope had ordered him to halt his march), but he wanted to exploit the situation by putting Florence in a state of fear and with its back to the wall. To demonstrate his words concretely, he resumed his march, changing course towards Florence. Every inch he advanced was a dangerous affront to the King of France and His Holiness, but in the end, the challenge was worth it: on May 15, 1501, Florence accepted the Duke of Romagna's humiliating demands. He was granted money, weapons and soldiers, and was promised that no one would interfere with his plans to occupy Piombino.[11]

(Emotional Intelligence: Facilitation/Perception-Adversity Capacity: Perseverance-Manipulation: Emotional-Deception: Bluffing/Misrediction-Strategy:

Building/Adaptability-Tactics: Boldness-Psychological Warfare: Abusing Insecurities-Social Engineering: Influence Building)

Just two days after the burdensome treaty, Caesar returned to knock on the Florentine door: he demanded an advance of nine thousand ducats and new artillery pieces. At that point, Florence, with a modicum of pride, raised objections. In response, Valentino ravaged the Tuscan countryside, causing looting, fires, and abuses. The additional money and weapons would come from frightened Pisa and Siena.

(Psychological Warfare: Inducement/Abusing Insecurities)

Piombino had little hope against Borgia's army, yet he took care to isolate it from the countryside and the supplies that could arrive from the island of Elba by occupying it. He then ordered his commanders to undertake the siege of Piombino and pushed further south to assist Louis XII in conquering the Kingdom of Naples, as agreed.

(Strategy: Building/Castling-Tactics: Execution)

Meanwhile, France and Spain had signed a secret treaty, known to the Pope, dividing the kingdom of Naples between them and decreeing the removal of the younger Aragonese branch from the throne of the city. Although Cesare and Alexander did not want foreign interference in Italian politics, they were actually setting a trap for the two factions: by pretending to bring the French and Spanish closer together, the Borgias were confident they would eventually spark a conflict between them, and at that point the wounded victor would have to contend with a greatly strengthened Cesare, lord of central Italy and beyond.

(Planning: Formulation-Field Crafting: Setting Traps-Foresight: Depth)

Cesare was tasked by the commander of the French forces with the siege of Capua, the most important fortress in the Kingdom of Naples, the very place where he himself had crowned Frederick II King of Naples just three years earlier. Cesare was eager to return to his conquests in central Italy and detested working for the French, perhaps for this reason he used extreme brutality to hasten victory. The bombardments on Capua were horrendous, and just a few days after the fighting began, Valentino's troops managed to penetrate the fortress, thanks to the corruption of the castellan made once again by Cesare. It was a terrible massacre; at least five thousand men were slaughtered by the savage French under Cesare's command, and he did nothing to calm the ferocity of his subjects. The fall of Capua marked the defeat of the entire kingdom, and Frederick Aragonese surrendered his territories and retired to France with a lifelong pension. Borgia was the first of the French leaders to enter Naples and was recognized as the principal architect of the victory. Also by virtue of this, Spain and France gave him forty thousand ducats, and after having collected them he galloped back towards his personal dominions.

(Tactics: Execution-Social Engineering: Influence Building)

For the next few months, Cesare was forced to put his military initiative on hold: rumors were circulating that Emperor Maximilian was planning an invasion of Italy to aid Florence, and Alexander VI's Vatican coffers, which he relied on, had been depleted by the support given to Venice for the war against the Turks. However, his ambitions were not dampened, and Tuscany

remained his next target. Meanwhile, the Borgias had also drawn closer to the Este family, the Dukes of Ferrara, through the marriage between Lucrezia and the heir to the throne, Alfonso. The winter of 1501-1502 and the first part of spring 1502 were thus spent by Valentino organizing the judiciary of his dominion in Romagna, bringing an efficient administrative system to the region for the first time in a long time. His brief reign was, in fact, a time of growth for the cities of Romagna, which for decades had been plagued by constant strife between rival families.
Finally, in May 1502, Cesare was able to resume his plans, comforted by the absence of the imperial forces in Italy. His goal was to tighten his grip on Florence and isolate it from the rest of Tuscany, and for this reason he continued his conquest project, starting from the territories he had already occupied in the south, from Piombino. He began to pressure Pisa, which considered voluntarily surrendering to the duke to avoid a bloody, but unsuccessful, resistance. Not everyone in the city agreed, however, and it was necessary to await the emperor's opinion on the matter (King Louis XII, meanwhile, had washed his hands of the matter). On June 6, however, the Pisan authorities, terrified, surrendered to Cesare without even waiting for imperial approval. Why? This had happened because a few days earlier in the Tuscan city of Arezzo, under the theoretical control of Florence, a pro-Medici revolt had broken out, inflaming the surrounding territory. The rebellion in Arezzo had alarmed all of Tuscany, and now the Pisans, fearing a return to Medici control, threw themselves into Valentino's arms. In reality, however, it was Valentino himself who had sparked the Arezzo revolt, stirring up the masses and then sending his leaders to calm the situation. Only King Louis (and, of course, the Pope) had been informed of the true plot behind the revolt, while the evidence incriminating Cesare had obviously disappeared.[12] With that coup, two key Tuscan cities had fallen under Borgia's control, and he now had no other thoughts than how to override the veto the King of France had placed on him over the conquest of Florence itself.

(Manipulation: Mass/Indirect/Emotional-Deception: Misrediction/Concealment/Fabrication-Planning: Formulation/Process/Coverage-Strategy: Building-Psychological Warfare: Abusing Insecurities/Inducement-Social Engineering: Influence Building)

Caesar never stood still. If Florence was untouchable for now, other lands would suffer the same fate of Romagna. Camerino, a small lordship in the Marche ruled by the Varano family, was chosen as the next conquest. To swell his army, Valentino imposed compulsory conscription throughout his territories: each family had to hand over one member to him as a soldier. This was the first conscription measure ever implemented in Europe.
Preparing for the expedition, he sent a letter to Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, the Duke of Urbino, with whom he had always had excellent relations and who was a loyal vassal of the Church. He asked him to deliver new artillery pieces for his campaign, and Guidobaldo, helpless, accepted the orders. The Borgia army thus set out and should have been near Camerino when, on the late afternoon of June 20, 1502, an emissary informed Guidobaldo that Valentino's forces were on the road to Urbino and in battle readiness. Just an hour later, a second messenger brought news that the city was about to be invaded. Shortly thereafter, a third messenger desperately reported that

Urbino was surrounded by Cesare's army. But why? The reason for the sudden change of course was presented by Cesare himself in a private letter to his father, Rodrigo, to whom he first apologized for having acted without informing him. He explained that while on the march, he had learned that Guidobaldo had sent aid to the Varano family of Camerino, and after capturing a secretary of the Duke of Urbino, he had his master's guilt confirmed.[13] If it had been a set-up (as was most likely), this action would demonstrate Cesare's independent decision-making, as he did not hesitate to lie even to the Pope in order to hasten the conquest of his Kingdom of Italy. Guidobaldo managed to escape from the city and attempted to appeal for help from the other Italian rulers and the King of France, while his unexpected enemy triumphantly entered Urbino, which had not even had time to consider opposing him. In a single day, Caesar's armies had traveled 75 kilometers[14] (an impressive feat if we remember that part of his army was composed of non-professional soldiers), taking the city completely by surprise and even managing to occupy the town of Cagli along the way. After that Cesare spread news all over Italy that Guidobaldo was expelled from his city by his own subjects.

(Manipulation: Mass/Direct-Deception: Sophistry/Concealment/Misrediction-Planning: Process/Intricacies/Versatility-Strategy: Adaptability-Tactics: Execution/Timing/Boldness)

The blow dealt to Urbino created a wave of unease throughout Italy, both because the territories under Caesar's control had now reached a considerable size, but above all because of the speed with which it had happened: in a single day, an almost one hundred-year-old Duchy had collapsed without firing a single cannon shot.

(Psychological Warfare: Inducement)

A month later Caesar sent his generals, led primarily by the Duke Francesco Orsini, to conquer Camerino, which surrendered after a brief battle. But it was precisely his generals who had become among the most fearful and doubtful of him: Guidobaldo di Montefeltro indeed was a colleague and acquaintance of theirs, who had also fought faithfully under the Borgia banner. Who would assure them that Cesare would not one day betray them too? Anti-Cesare sentiment thus began to rise among his own commanders, while he was busy negotiating again with Florence.

The discussions in question with the Florentines were conducted with two ambassadors: the bishop of Florence, Soderini, and Niccolò Machiavelli. This was the first meeting between the father of modern political theory and the main inspiration behind his most famous work. The reason for this meeting was that Louis XII would be arriving in Italy in just over a month, and Cesare could never lift a finger against Florence with the royal presence on the peninsula. In his discussions with the two ambassadors, he displayed diplomatic aggression and impassive determination: in his opinion Florence was guilty of not respecting their agreements. Furthermore, he declared he had nothing to do with the Arezzo revolt and refused to recall his general Vitellozzo Vitelli from the city. Ultimately, he demanded significant new sums of money and once again ordered the replacement of the Florentine government with one that would have been closer to him. Machiavelli and Soderini were impressed by Borgia's force of impact and intelligence in his discussions (Soderini wrote that he used his wit in every way he wanted), but

they gritted their teeth and tried to stall in every way possible. In the end, after twenty-five days, Valentino's threats had to be withdrawn because Louis had already reached Milan.

(Fluid Intelligence: Cognitive Capacity-Deception: Sophistry-Tactics: Boldness-Social Engineering: Charisma)

Moreover, a large group of ragged princes had flocked to the Lombard city to complain to the king about Borgia's misdeeds over the past year and a half. The Gonzagas, the Montefeltros, the Varanos, Giovanni Sforzas, and other victims of Cesare's conquests were there. They all gravitated like mosquitoes around Louis, demanding that the Duke of Romagna be recalled and his territories stripped away. Surprisingly, Cesare reached Milan on horseback within a few days, and, meeting again with Louis, he fully reaffirmed his alliance with him; indeed, the king seemed to trust him more than ever.

During his brief stop in Milan, Cesare convinced Louis XII to give him a free hand to conquer Bologna, the last city in Papal Emilia not yet under his control. The Bentivoglio family hoped that the cover of France would protect them as it had done until then, but in reality they had already been handed over as prizes to Valentino. In anticipation of the conquest campaign, Cesare established himself and his army in the city of Imola, from which he could launch his attack. The conquest of Bologna, which would have become the largest city under Caesar's control at that point, after Pisa, was the decisive step in breaking away from Louis XII's leadership. Indeed, already during his stay in Milan, Caesar had decided that he would reduce his dependence on others as much as possible, so as to finally be able to act with complete freedom.[15]

(Planning: Formulation/Aim)

His plans on Bologna, however, were thwarted by the revolt of his own generals. Prominent among these were Vitellozzo Vitelli (a bloodthirsty and uncouth man, who felt humiliated by Cesare's order to abandon occupied Arezzo), Gian Paolo Baglioni (lord of Perugia, drawn into the conspiracy by Vitellozzo and by fear), the two cousins Paolo and Francesco Orsini (members of a very noble Roman house allied with the Borgias, also driven to treason by fear of Cesare's expansion and Alexander VI's centralizing policy) and Oliverotto da Fermo (already a traitor and murderer of his own uncle and guardian). What drove them, in addition to their personal resentment for Cesare (like in the case Vitellozzo and partially the Orsini, who were not treated well by the Borgia during their support), was, as already mentioned, the fear that they themselves would be their own leader's next victims. They were not entirely wrong: Cesare had long been waiting for the opportunity to kill Vitellozzo, and the Orsini too felt his breathing down their necks. As Gian Paolo Baglioni wrote: "we must kill the great dragon before he devours us all."

In September 1502, as Cesare prepared to attack Bologna, the conspirators gathered in Todi, determined to launch their plans. However, Cesare, son of Alexander VI, had ears everywhere in Italy: a few days later, Gian Paolo Baglioni intercepted a letter from the Pope urging Cesare to crush his generals' attempted revolt. The Borgias were therefore already aware of the betrayal.

(Field Crafting: Info Gathering)

In early October, the group met again at Mangione, a castle owned by the Orsini family, and the Bentivoglio and what remained of the Montefeltro family joined in the organizational discussions. The Mangione conspiracy had begun.

It was during this period that Cesare fought the most important of his pitched battles: the Battle of Calmazzo. While leading around eight thousand men to reach central Emilia, he was intercepted by seven thousand men from the conspirators' league, led by Vitellozzo Vitelli. The battle initially favored Valentino, although he had been caught by surprise: he ordered a heavy infantry assault and with it routed Vitellozzo's vanguard, then occupied a high ground from which he gained a strategically superior position. The traitor then attacked in turn with his heavy infantry, which would have broken Borgia's defenses if he had not skillfully ordered his light infantry to launch a flank attack that took the enemy flank. Vitellozzo seemed on the verge of surrender when another five thousand troops, coming from the south, rushed to his support and surrounded Cesare's forces. At that point, he ordered a retreat, in which he lost many men.

(Tactics: Execution/Timing)

Cesare went back to his safe positions and his response then took three directions.

First, he tried to gain time, and to do so he had to slow down the enemy's action. He therefore sent Roberto Orsini, one of the few Orsini family members who had remained loyal to him and his father, to negotiate with the conspirators, promising them pay raises if they returned to his service. He also informed them that the intercepted letter from the Pope (which he evidently already knew about) was a forged document produced by the Pope's rivals in Rome.

(Deception: Misrediction/Sophistry-Planning: Formulation/Process/Coverage-Counteraction: Tactical Response-Thinking: Speed)

Secondly, in order to prevent the conspirators from allying themselves with Florence, he sent a proposal for a military alliance to the Republic and invited one of their ambassadors to discuss it.

(Counteraction: Trap Evasion)

Third point: arm yourself as much as possible. The fortresses in his dominions were strengthened and the recruitment of new soldiers increased.

(Strategy: Castling)

On October 6th, however, things seemed to be going badly for him. News reached him that Urbino had fallen due to the treachery of some pro-Montefeltro nobles, who had risen up and killed Caesar's envoys, also thanks to the conspirators' support. Within a short time, the Duchy of Urbino had fallen under his control, allowing his enemies to advance.

The Allied forces totaled over ten thousand men, perhaps twelve thousand. They were therefore numerically superior, and felt they were winning the battle. Bentivoglio troops invaded Caesar's fortifications in Romagna, while forces in the Duchy of Urbino cut off supply lines and prevented Caesar's soldiers from retreating. The conspirators' brilliant strategy had locked the Valentino in a vise.

Meanwhile, Machiavelli reached Cesare as Florentine ambassador. His republic had in effect already decided how to proceed: it would not ally itself with the conspirators or the duke, but would simply wait and see the outcome of the battle. Machiavelli was surprised to see Cesare

remain calm and determined despite the worsening situation (even Venice was now facing the threatening situation, waiting for him to make a false move). While Cesare's confidence was partly a bluff, his determination was not. He declared himself certain of victory. Machiavelli perceived that not allying with him had been a mistake on the part of the Republic.

(Emotional Intelligence: Management-Adversity Capacity: Stress Tolerance/Mental Fortitude-Deception: Acting Skills-Social Engineering: Charisma)

Meanwhile, his army continued to grow. He hired mercenaries from Switzerland, recruited other men from his own territories, received troops from his brother-in-law d'Albert on behalf of the King of France, and obtained military aid from Pisa. Since these troops were strangers to him, Caesar did everything he could to befriend them and endear them to his cause: he spent time and trained with them. He also ordered the troops barricaded in indefensible positions to flee and try to reach him. In any case, he was already refining his plan to massacre the conspirators.[16]

(Planning: Formulation-Strategy: Logistics-Psychological Warfare: Reinforcements-Social Engineering: Leadership/Communication)

By this point, Cesare's army had grown so massive that the conspirators began to fear they could no longer face him in open battle. A new Colmazzo would have been disastrous for them, especially given the superior artillery Borgia had gained. For this reason, some of them began attempting to initiate peace negotiations with him. Cesare put a brave face on things and seemed to receive these proposals with lukewarm approval. In reality, he had already identified the most volatile member of the conspiracy with whom he could begin to put his plan into motion: Paolo Orsini. It was he who presented himself to Cesare on October 25, 1502, thanks to the mediation of his cousin Roberto Orsini. Cesare welcomed him with great friendship and smiles and proposed a peace agreement: his generals would regain all their titles and possessions, receive a raise, and be immune to his influence; he even offered the name of Louis XII as a guarantee. Paolo Orsini, enthusiastic about such favorable concessions, immediately signed the treaty and assured that his companions would do the same shortly.

(Manipulation: Direct-Deception: Misrediction/Acting Skills/Sophistry-Strategy: Building)

The agreement proposed by Valentino was, however, rejected by the other conspirators, who criticized the ease with which Paolo Orsini had been persuaded, and who resumed their attacks on the duke's positions. He then sent Paolo Orsini, his unwitting Trojan horse, new peace agreements, this time more binding on him. The King of France's guarantee was in fact of little use, given that he and Valentino were close friends. This move, too, was actually intended to divert the attention of the more intelligent traditors, who this time agreed to engage in discussions. Paolo Orsini was easy prey to persuade, but not Vitellozzo, and even more so Baglioni. The fake first proposal was intended precisely to make the second more palatable.

(Manipulation: Indirect/Logical/Mass-Deception: Misrediction/Bluffing-Planning: Intricacies/Coverage-Strategy: Castling/Adaptability-Reasoning: Abductive)

On November 9, the conspirators accepted the new, modified conditions. A month later, the Bentivoglio of Bologna secretly signed separate pacts, mediated by the Duke of Ferrara and the

Republic of Florence, with whom they allied themselves with Cesare in a subordinate position, allowing him the use of some of their garrisons.

(Planning: Process-Strategy: Building)

Thanks to the Montefeltros' isolation, engineered by Cesare within the conspirators' circle, Guidobaldo da Montefeltro was forced to abandon the reconquered Duchy of Urbino peacefully, without the Borgia having to fire a single shot. Indeed, it was his own former companions in treachery who had pressured him to swiftly carry out Valentino's orders. The same happened in Camerino with the Varano family. They were doing his own job, without knowing their fate would have been far worse.

(Manipulation: Indirect/Mass-Planning: Process/Versatility-Strategy: Adaptability)

At that time, Romagna was experiencing a food crisis due to speculation by some merchants, who had withdrawn basic foodstuffs to raise prices and profit. This was no simple mercantile organization, however: at the head of these economic operations was Ramiro de Luca, one of the most powerful officials in Cesare's administration. To further gain popular support, the duke had these merchants arrested and distributed grain at a ridiculously low price, earning him acclaim in many cities of Romagna. He then ordered Ramiro's arrest, took the evidence secretly gathered over months to the court and found him guilty of treason, having him publicly beheaded and quartered in Cesena.[17] The news of the execution of his former subordinate was spread directly by the Valentino to impress in all of Italy his fame of justice’s prince, when it was surely been some times that he knew about the unfair actions of Ramiro.

(Manipulation: Mass-Deception: Info Control-Strategy: Building-Psychological Warfare: Reinforcements-Social Engineering: Influence Building/Leadership)

While Ramiro's body still hung in the square in Cesena, Cesare ordered his generals, now returned to their ranks, to organize the occupation of Senigallia, a city under the control of the Della Rovere family. The only one who didn't answer his call was Baglioni, who was ill in Perugia. On December 28, Borgia, who was in Pesaro, received letters from Vitellozzo, the two Orsini, Oliveretto da Fermo, and other commanders informing him that Senigallia had already been taken except for the fortress. They therefore invited him to join them and settle in the city.

Was their invitation sincere, or were they, like their leader, plotting something? We can't know for sure, but Cesare believed they were up to something, and he recognized that this was the perfect moment to finally carry out the revenge he had already begun with his false promises a month earlier. The traitors had to die.

(Planning: Formulation-Counteraction: Trap Evasion)

Caesar arrived in Senigallia two days later. He gave the order to withdraw the troops from the occupied city and to close the city gates except the one he was to enter himself. Vitellozzo seemed worried at these orders, but Caesar's warm words and Paolo Orsini's belief in peace forestalled his escape.

(Deception: Sophistry-Strategy: Building-Counteraction: Tactical Response-Field Crafting: Setting Traps)

The meeting with the conspirators once again demonstrated the Duke's acting skills. He appeared affable and cheerful, embracing them. The previous evening, having gathered his eight most faithful companions, he had given them the orders they needed to carry out in eliminating the generals. When the company reached the city gates, the conspirators attempted to escape Caesar's presence, saying they had to return to their troops camped outside the city. If they had devised a plan to eliminate him, this was the moment they would reunite to deliver the final blow. Caesar, however, insisted that they accompany him into the city to discuss its administration. A moment of hesitation on their faces was fatal, because the drawbridge was quickly lowered, and they could no longer refuse to follow their master. They entered the city and followed him to the Bernardini palace. They passed through a courtyard, climbed some stairs, and once inside, eight men emerged from hiding places, declaring them the duke's prisoners. Not even an hour later, their troops camped outside the city were routed by Cesare himself, destroying the remains of the conspirator army.

(Manipulation: Direct-Deception: Acting Skills/Misrediction-Field Crafting: Setting Traps)

After brief discussions that were supposed to be a trial, the conspirators admitted their treasonous intentions and were killed one by one by Michelotto Corella. Machiavelli had just arrived in Senigallia when the massacre began. Compliments from all over Italy arrived to the Valentino for his brilliant deception.

Bibliography:

[1] C. Fusero, *Cesare Borgia*, Edizioni Ghibli, Milano 2025, pp. 150-152
[2] C. Borgia, *Letter to Ludovico il Moro*, Lyon 5 August 1499
[3] C. Fusero, *Cesare Borgia*, Edizioni Ghibli, Milano 2025, pp. 168-169
[4] *Ibidem*
[5] *Ibi*, p.179
[6] *Ibi*, pp. 181-182
[7] *Ibi*, pp. 191-197
[8] *Ibi*, p.206
[9] *Ibi*, p.212
[10] *Ibi*, p.214
[11] *Ibi*, pp. 236-238
[12] *Ibi*, pp. 254-256
[13] *Ibi*, pp. 261-162
[14] *Ibi*, p.264
[15] N. Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, Rizzoli, Milano 2025, p.90
[16] C. Fusero, *Cesare Borgia*, Edizioni Ghibli, Milano 2025, pp. 300-302
[17] *Ibi*, p.313

OTHERS FEATS

1. Cesare Borgia was a polyglot: he spoke Catalan (the family's language), Spanish, Italian (of which he was a native speaker), Latin and most likely also French. **(Fluid Intelligence: Learning Ability)**
2. Cesare was also a man of a lively and open intellect. In addition to his close relationship with Machiavelli, it is important to remember his collaboration with Leonardo da Vinci. Cesare had hired the Tuscan genius after the fall of the Duchy of Milan as a civil and military engineer, and they frequently discussed mathematics and military engineering with him. **(Crystallized Intelligence: Knowledge/Knowledge Application-Reasoning: Abstract)**