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PART ONE:
PRE-UNIFICATION ITALIAN IDENTITY AND “ITALIANNESSE”

Renaissance Visions of a Unified Italy: Pope Julius II's Coins and Portrait Medals

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Few, if anyone, in the Renaissance would have characterized Italy as unified. The politically fragmented peninsula was controlled by an array of princes while foreign powers occupied significant territories. Although the list of rulers is too long to review in full, it is worth noting that for much of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Kingdom of Naples was controlled by the Spanish and the State of Milan by the French. Florence slipped in and out of the hands of the Medici while Venice remained an independent republic until conquered by Napoleon in 1797.¹ Despite the divided nature of the political landscape, one sixteenth-century figure had a vision of Italian unity, albeit under ecclesiastical leadership.

Pope Julius II Della Rovere, who reigned from 1503-1513, was an ambitious monarch, who was not only the leader of Western Christianity, but also ruler of the Papal States. Throughout his war-torn pontificate the pope's primary goals were to expel foreign forces from Italy and create a Universal Church with wide-reaching temporal and religious authority. This paper will explore how Pope Julius II used coins and portrait medals to communicate his vision of papal dominion in order to cast himself as a unifying figure and as the legitimate ruler of Italy.

As leader of the Church, the pontiff filled a unique religious and political role, which was accompanied by a specific set of cultural and ideological conventions. According to tradition, the pope was the successor to St. Peter, the first pontiff, and upon his election he became the Vicar of Christ on Earth.² As such, he had broad spiritual dominion over the whole of Western Christianity. The pope's authority was based on Scripture, among other sources. In Matthew 16: 17-19, Jesus says, "You are Peter, the Rock; and on his rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall never conquer it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."³

The pope was also the temporal ruler of the Papal States, which encompassed vast portions of central Italy, extending south from Rome into the Campagna and north into the Romagna. Positioned at the nexus of religion and politics like no other European ruler, the pontiff was quick to exploit portrait medals and coins in order to articulate and assert both his secular and spiritual authority. A few points about these genres must be clarified before addressing the specifics of Julius' commissions.

A portrait medal is a small, round, double-sided, object with a profile portrait on the obverse and emblematic imagery on the reverse, with the images on each side typically circumscribed by Latin inscriptions. Medals were commissioned by rulers and other wealthy patrons in order to commemorate significant events as well as to ensure the survival of their legacies. Portrait medals were usually bronze, but could be made of gold or silver, and they could either be struck using engraved steel dies or cast from models made of wax, wood, or stone. Cast medals were typically larger and in higher relief, while struck medals were more coin-like in appearance. Both processes allowed for the production of multiple medals, which enabled the patron to distribute copies to nobles and important diplomats, often with propagandistic intentions.⁴

The genre of portrait medals was developed by Pisanello between 1438 and 1439. It was at the Council of Ferrara and Florence, a meeting between the leaders of the Greek and Roman Churches, that the artist cast what is argued to be the first Renaissance medal. The work depicted the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Palaeologus, who was a descendant of the Roman emperors of the Eastern Empire.⁵ Pisanello's medal and the ensuing genre developed out of the near universal admiration for, and extreme interest in, ancient Roman coins.

The currency of antiquity included portraits of rulers on the obverses, while the reverses often featured images of divinities and architecture, among other subjects (fig. 1).⁶ Roman coins were collected by princes, humanists, and artists throughout the Renaissance and were valued for the insight they provided into the lives of ancient rulers.⁷ The format of the Renaissance portrait medal was intentionally evocative of ancient coins. Although medals are undoubtedly coin-like, they are quite distinct from coinage. Medals could be commissioned by anyone, whereas coins were produced by governing authorities and used as currency.⁸ As such, coins were subject to strict compositional standards, while portrait medals, on the other hand, were not regulated with regards to size, weight, or



Fig. 1: Brass Dupondius, Portrait of Emperor Vespasian on obverse and Victory on reverse, c. 72-73AD.

metallurgic content. Following Pisanello's invention of the portrait medal, the new and exciting medium spread rapidly throughout the courts of Northern Italy and had made its way to Rome by the middle of the fifteenth century.⁹

From the start of his pontificate Julius focused his resources on reasserting the Church's dominion over the Papal States since control of its territories had diminished over the course of the Quattrocento and early Cinquecento. In the words of papal historian Ludwig Pastor, upon Julius' election, "the States of the Church were hardly anything more than a name."¹⁰ Venetian forces were encroaching on the Church's lands in the Romagna while Perugia and Bologna, two of the largest cities in the Papal State, had fallen into the hands of Baglioni and Bentivoglio families respectively. The Baglioni were a threat, as they were *condottieri* by trade and operated semi-autonomously from the Papacy, while the Bentivoglio regime was backed by the French.¹¹

In order to reestablish control over papal lands, Julius summoned trouble-makers from numerous towns to Rome and seized financial control from communal councils. Such tactics pacified some small towns in the region, but Perugia and Bologna required military action.¹² In 1506 the pope gathered several thousand troops for a campaign which was to wind through towns and cities from Rome, through Perugia, all the way to Bologna. Not only did Julius accompany the soldiers on the journey, but he also forced every able-bodied cardinal, twenty-six in all, to join him for the trek.¹³ He truly mobilized the Church hierarchy to action as no one had previously done in order to assert the authority of the Holy See. Consequently, he successfully recaptured the two important cities that had previously eluded his grasp.

It was in this context that the pope and his advisers attempted to communicate his message of Italian unity using portrait medals, among other media. These were distributed to allies in Rome and other Italian courts. One such medal was cast in 1506, according to the inscription, and is attributed to the artist, Caradosso Foppa.¹⁴ The obverse features a portrait of Julius wearing a cope and mace, and the reverse includes an image of a shepherd gathering his flock. The shepherd is seated under a tree, the intertwining branches of which strongly suggest the oak of the Della Rovere family crest (fig. 2). Encircling the image is an inscription that reads, "I lead the sheep that have been saved to rest using a shepherd's crook."¹⁵ The occasion for which the medal was commissioned is unknown. Based on the date and subject matter, however, it was presumably intended to commemorate the massive expedition of Church officials and soldiers that Julius required to join him as he made his way through the Papal States in 1506. With Julius' portrait on the obverse and a shepherd on the reverse, the work symbolized the task of tending to the territories that had strayed away from papal control. Copies of it could have been distributed to cardinals when the expedition was officially announced, and other copies could have been given to allies along the way to Bologna.¹⁶



Fig. 2: Della Rovere Family Crest above window in the Stanza Della Segnatura. Left of the crest is an inscription that reads, “Julius II the Ligurian Pontifex Maximus” and to the right is an inscription with the date stated as “Year of Christ 1511, Eighth Year of the Pontificate.”

Two later medals, both struck between 1508 and 1513 by Pier Maria Serbaldi, also featured shepherds on the reverses, along with the terse inscription TVTELA, meaning “protection” or “guardianship.” During this period Julius faced constant military struggles with Venice and France over disputed territories, including Rimini, Ravenna, Ferrara, and Bologna.¹⁷ His authority was also challenged by the Council of Pisa, which the council convened from 1511 to 1512 at the behest of King Louis XII, with the goal of deposing the pope.¹⁸ These medals may have been struck as a response to the schismatic council orchestrated by the French crown, or they may have been intended to express the papacy’s general policy of protectionism towards its territorial possessions.

It must be pointed out that depictions of shepherds were unprecedented in portrait medals, and to my knowledge no coins, ancient or modern, had used this iconography either. With wide-reaching temporal and religious authority, the pontiff was unlike any other ruler in Europe, and the unique nature of this position was reflected in the images paired with the sitter.¹⁹ Furthermore, the genre of the medal was charged with imperial significance. Numerous princes prior to Julius had used medals in order to project regal images of themselves based largely on numismatic portraits of ancient emperors. By having his likeness depicted in this context, the pontiff knowingly played on these well-established monarchical associations. He did so in order to portray himself as the legitimate territorial ruler of the Papal States while at the same time invoking the notion that the pontiff ruled above all Christian princes.²⁰

The papacy was viewed by many as an inherently Italian position during the Renaissance. In 1458, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, the Sieneese cardinal and future Pope Pius II, stated, “to elect a French pope would mean betraying your country, Italy.”²¹ A portrait of the pope conjoined to an image of a shepherd would cast Julius as a Christ-like protector, and therefore distinct from the many despots throughout Italy. References to the Lord as shepherd are used more than a dozen times throughout the Old and New Testaments.²² These emblems underscored

the divine nature of the pope's role and linked it to the scriptural basis on which his power was based. Coupled with the inscription, "Guardianship," the medals highlighted the pope's unifying role as leader of Western Christianity and appealed to other Italian rulers to join him in suppressing the French challenge to his power.

The pontiff used not only images but language to cast himself as a unifying figure. Many of the pope's portrait medals featured the inscription IVLIVS LIGVR, or "Julius the Ligurian." Scholars have failed to analyze these inscriptions, but I assert that the reference to the pope's Ligurian heritage was an attempt by Julius and his advisers to highlight his Italian origins in the face of foreign threats. Early in his reign the phrase may have been employed to contrast Julius with his Spanish predecessor, Pope Alexander VI Borgia, for whom he harbored extreme animosity. The practice, however, persisted late into his pontificate, presumably because the French occupied portions of Italy and expanded their influence within lands claimed by the papacy.²³

Continuing use of the LIGVR inscription appears to have been an attempt to stimulate patriotic sentiment and support for Julius in order to encourage the people of Italy and various Italian princes to unite behind the pope. Although Italy was not a proper nation-state until 1861, the need for unification was acknowledged centuries prior. In the final chapter of *The Prince*, "Exhortation to liberate Italy from the barbarian yoke," Niccolò Machiavelli lamented domination by foreigners, and called for a powerful ruler to step forward and guide the leaderless peninsula.²⁴ Written shortly after Julius' death in 1513, Machiavelli's treatise addressed the Medici family, but his words reflected beliefs that were widely held for much of the sixteenth-century.²⁵

The LIGVR inscription was also used on a number of the pope's coins, indicating that the message was meant for a wide viewership well beyond the limited courtly audience of portrait medals. Coins were struck in significantly larger quantities than were medals. Although it is impossible to determine the exact numbers produced, scholars estimate that only a few dozen copies of each medal were made, while thousands or even tens of thousands of coins were struck from each die.²⁶ Furthermore, coinage was circulated in commercial use rather than preserved and displayed in private settings, as was the case with portrait medals. Coins were thus intended to be viewed by vast segments of the population, including merchants and traders, who were not part of the upper echelons of society.

While an inscription naming the pope's region of origin was relatively rare in the medallic context, prior to Julius it had never been used in circulating papal coinage.²⁷ Diverging from the practice of his predecessors, Julius employed the legend on six different coin types.²⁸ An audience composed of people from a variety of social classes, such as those handling his coins, would have understood the inscription as identifying the pope as an Italian. Unlike many inscriptions on

portrait medals that featured text and images intelligible only to viewers with knowledge of Ancient literature and abstruse imperial principles, the LIGVR inscription was a clear statement of the pope's origins that could be read by a broad viewership, thereby garnering Julius popular support.

In the case of a particular denomination of papal coinage, the 1/3 Giulio, it would have been difficult to miss the message, as it was emblazoned on the reverse without any accompanying image to distract the eye (fig. 3). Set against a plain field and written horizontally rather than along the circumference, the coin would have contrasted greatly with the intricate forms and crowded spaces of the vast majority of papal currency. In other words, rather than accompanying a subject, the LIGVR inscription was itself the subject of the coin reverse. It appears that Julius and his advisers were attempting to cast him as an Italian. The coin linked his heritage and personal identity to the eminently Roman and apostolic roots of the papacy by pairing the LIGVR inscription on the reverse with classicizing images of Sts. Peter and Paul on the coin's obverse.



Fig. 3: Silver 1/3 Giulio coin of Pope Julius II with jugate image of St. Peter and St. Paul on obverse, IVLIVS LIGVR II PONT M on reverse, 1506-1513.

Proclamation of the pope's Italianicity was not limited to the widely dispersed, albeit diminutive, medium of coinage. Julius was identified as Italian through architectural inscriptions located in public and private settings. Both the floor and window frame in the *Stanza Della Segnatura* featured the LIGVR inscription, the latter accompanied by the date 1512, indicating that the epigram was still in use at the end of the pope's reign (figs. 2 and 4). Made famous by Raphael's frescoes, the room functioned as the pope's library and would have been viewed by a relatively small, elite audience composed of humanists and courtiers.²⁹

The naming device, however, was used publicly as an architectural inscription on the exterior of both the Vatican *Sala Regia* and the fortress

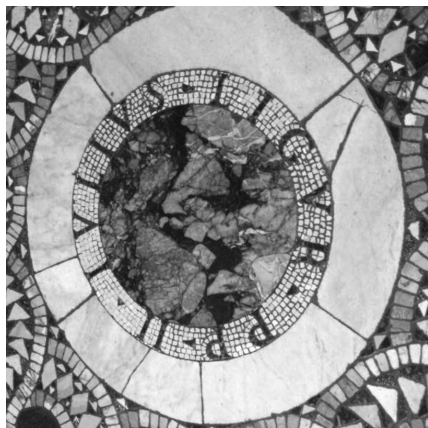


Fig. 4: Mosaic inscription on floor of Stanza Della Segnatura that reads, "Julius II the Ligurian, Father of Fathers."

at Civitavecchia (figs. 5 and 6).³⁰ The fortress was commissioned by Julius to function as the primary pontifical naval base on the Tyrrhenian Sea, and the inscription would have been visible to anyone at the busy commercial port approximately 40 miles from Rome.³¹



Fig. 5: Exterior of Sala Regia at the Vatican Palace that reads, "Julius II the Ligurian, Father of Fathers."

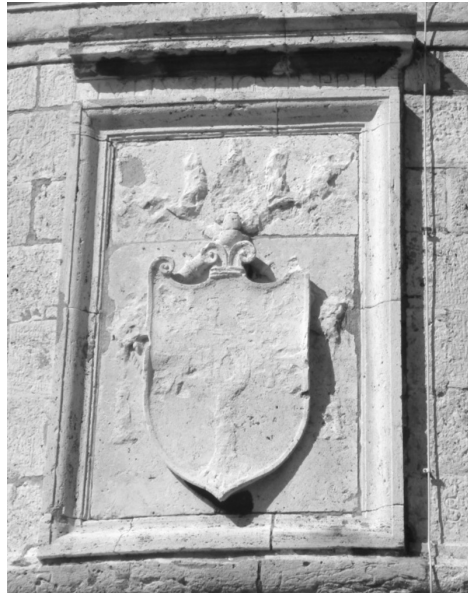


Fig. 6: Inscription on exterior of Fortress at Civitavecchia that reads, "Julius II the Ligurian, Father of Fathers," above a worn and damaged Della Rovere family crest.

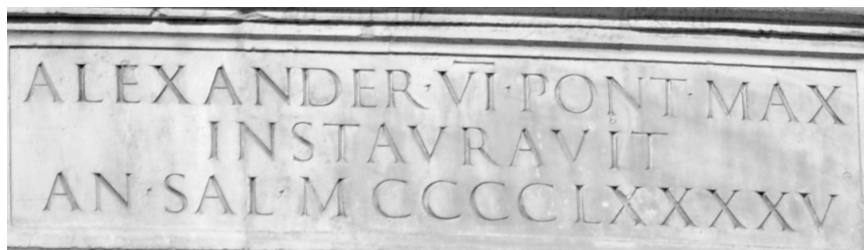


Fig. 7: Inscription on Exterior of Castel Sant'Angelo that reads, "Alexander VI Pontifex Maximus Restored this in the Year of Salvation 1495."

The pope's identification as Ligurian, and therefore as Italian, was apparently well received: it was used so widely throughout his reign that it became an essential part of his public persona. This contrasts sharply with Pope Alexander VI, whose Roman patronage rarely, and only privately, advertised his Spanish nationality. A stone inscription above a doorway within the Borgia apartments in the Vatican identifies him as "Alexander VI Borgia of Valencia."³² References to the pope's Spanish heritage are conspicuously absent, however, in a massive inscription on the exterior of the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome (fig. 7). Measuring several feet across and clearly visible from the Ponte Sant'Angelo, the inscription omits any mention of his Spanish roots.³³ The pope was unwilling to advertise his foreign identity in a public setting since the papacy was viewed as an Italian institution, while the Spanish population of Rome was quite unpopular during this period.³⁴ Through the proclamation of his Ligurian heritage, Julius exploited the Italian xenophobic sentiment in order to garner support from both the people of Rome and other Italian rulers in the face of foreign threats.

In conclusion, the struggle for unification was a convoluted affair that spanned many centuries. Pope Julius II's commissions illustrate that Italian identity was a galvanizing force even in the Renaissance. Although the papacy was ultimately excluded from the first iteration of the nineteenth-century Italian nation-state, the institution functioned as a unifying force and touchstone of Italian culture in a period during which Christianity dominated all aspects of life. Using the portable and reproducible formats of coins and portrait medals, among other media, Julius was able to communicate his political messages to vast and diverse audiences. While he was ultimately unable to expel all occupying foreign powers and unite the peninsula under ecclesiastical rule, he put the papacy on a trajectory of expansion, thereby shaping the political landscape for the following centuries.

Notes

1. Lisa Kaborycha, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2011), 184-97.
2. Joanna Woods-Marsden, "One Artist, Two Sitters, One Role: Raphael's Papal Portraits," in *Cambridge Companion to Raphael*, ed. Marcia Hall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 120-140, 120, 124. Paolo Prodi, *The Papal Prince*, trans. Susan Haskins (New York: Cambridge University Press 1987), 6-17.
3. *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1970), Matthew 16: 17-19.
4. Stephen Scher, ed., *The Currency of Fame: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 13-18. John Graham Pollard, *Renaissance Medals: Volume One, Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), XXVII-XXXVI.
5. Scher, *Currency*, 13-21. Luke Syson and Dillian Gordon, *Pisanello: Painter to the Renaissance Court* (London: National Gallery Company, 2001), 114-16.
6. R.A.G. Carson, *Coins of the Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1990), passim.
7. John Cunnally, *Images of the Illustrious: Numismatic Presence in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 25.
8. Stephen Scher, "An Introduction to the Renaissance Portrait Medal," in *Perspectives on the Renaissance Medal*, ed. Stephen Scher (New York, Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), 1-25, 1-2.
9. George Francis Hill, *A Corpus of Italian Medals of the Renaissance Before Cellini, Volume 1* (London: British Museum, 1930, reprinted, Florence: SPES, 1984), cats. 737-44.
10. Ludwig Pastor, *History of the Popes, Vol. VI*, trans. Frederick Antrobus (London: Butler & Tanner, 1923), 232.
11. Christine Shaw, *Julius II: The Warrior Pope* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 127-59, 209.
12. *Ibid.*, 146-47.
13. *Ibid.*, 151-52.
14. Hill, *Corpus*, cat. 661. An image of the medal is available at http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectid=945958&partid=1&searchText=pope+julius+caradosso&fromADBC=ad&toADBC=ad&numpages=10&orig=%2fresearch%2fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx¤tPage=1.
15. In Latin the inscription is PEDO SERVATAS OVESADREQVIEMAGO. *Ibid.*, cat. 661.
16. Shaw, *Warrior Pope*, 149-52.
17. *Ibid.*, 235-36, 240-45.
18. Nelson Minnich, "The Image of Julius II in the ACTA of the Councils of Pisa-Milan-Asti-Lyons (1511-12) and Lateran V (1512-17)," in *Giulio II: Papa, Politico, Mecenate* (Genova: De Ferrari & Devega, 2005), 79-90, 79-82. D. S. Chambers, *Popes, Cardinals and*

War: The Military Church in the Renaissance and Early Modern Europe (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 126. Shaw, *Warrior Pope*, 292.

19. In *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli highlighted the distinctive character of the papacy, devoting an entire chapter to ecclesiastical principalities in order to describe the rule of the Church. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chapter 11. David Peterson, "Machiavelli and the Petrine Succession," in *Florence and Beyond: Culture, Society and Politics in Renaissance Italy* (Toronto: Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 435-58, 443-45.

20. Prodi, *Papal Prince*, 11-13.

21. *Ibid.*, 171.

22. A search for "shepherd" in the Latinvulgate.com returned fifteen New Testament verses which included the term and dozens more from the Old Testament.

23. Shaw, *Warrior Pope*, 81-115, 245-47.

24. Machiavelli, *Prince*, Chapter 26.

25. Quentin Skinner, "Introduction," in *The Prince*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), X. The epithet describes Julius as Ligurian rather than Italian, but even during the Renaissance this region was viewed as a legitimate part of the peninsula which shared a common language and culture. According to the Florentine historian and statesman, Francesco Guicciardini, "some ecclesiastical writers add that Charles [Charlemagne] had donated to the Church Liguria up to the River Varo, the last frontier of Italy." Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, trans. Sidney Alexander (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 144.

26. Pollard, *Renaissance Medals*, XVI-XXI.

27. A gold five fiorini di camera coin has an obverse inscription ALEXANDER VI PONT MAX BORGIA VALENT, "Alexander VI Borgia Pontifex Maximus of Valencia." Francesco Muntoni, *Le Monete dei Papi e degli Stati Pontifici, Volume I* (Roma: P&P Santamaria, 1972), 93, cat. 1. This coin, however, was so large and likely struck in extremely small quantities that it was not intended for circulation. It functioned in a very similar manner to a portrait medal. Mark Jones stated that the distinction between a high-value coin and a medal was arbitrary if a medal was struck in a precious metal. He also described high-value coins as a way in which a ruler could "impress and discreetly bribe foreign visitors." Mark Jones, "Medals as Money," *Rivista Italiana Numismatica e Scienze Affini* Vol XCV (1993): 633-40, 636.

28. Muntoni, *Le Monete dei Papi*, 99, cat. 1, 100, cats. 4 and 6-7, 104, cats. 39-40.

29. Ingrid Rowland, "The Vatican Stanze," in *The Cambridge Companion to Raphael*, ed. Marica Hall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 95-119, 110-11.

30. Shaw, *Warrior Pope*, fig. 13 and 206-07. The inscriptions read IVLIVS LIGVR PP II which translates as "Julius II the Ligurian, Father of Fathers." "Father of Fathers" was a common title for the pope. Joseph Coffin, *Coins of the Popes* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1946), 103.

31. Construction began on the fortress in December 1508. Arnaldo Bruschi, *Bramante* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1977), 119-120.

32. The full inscription reads ALEXANDER BORGIA VALENTIN PP VI, "Alexander VI Borgia of Valencia Father of Fathers."

33. The inscription on the exterior of the Castel Sant'Angelo reads ALEXANDER VI PONT MAX INSTAVRAVIT AN SAL MCCCCLXXXV, "Alexander VI Pontifex Maximus Restored this in the Year of Salvation 1495."

34. The Spanish population of Rome was quite unpopular during this period, largely due to the public's hatred of Pope Alexander VI. Thomas James Dandeleit, *Spanish Rome: 1500-1700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 27-31.

