

Maria Elenonora Boncompagni Borghese

(1642-1695)



Eleonora and her twin brother Gregorio were born in 1642 to Ugo Boncompagni (1614-1676, Duke of Sora from 1628) and Maria Ruffo di Bagnara (1620-1705), who had married the previous year. Eleven siblings would follow. On 22 October 1658, Eleonora married the Prince of Sulmona, Giovanni Battista Borghese, at the age of sixteen. Her new husband was three years her senior.

The connections and wealth of the newlywed couple were extraordinary. The young Borghese prince had close family links to Popes Paul V Borghese (1605-1621) and Gregory XV Ludovisi (1621-1623), a more distant tie to Sixtus V (1585-1590), and a stepfather who was a nephew of Innocent X Pamphili (1644-1655). Giovanni Battista also was the sole heir of the extensive Borghese properties in the Papal States and in the Kingdom of Naples. This inheritance made him the richest of the Roman aristocracy, and one of the richest men in Europe.

Eleonora had significant family wealth and property. She also enjoyed a wholly unique status among the established Papal aristocracy: Eleonora was great-great-granddaughter of Pope Gregory XIII Boncompagni (reigned 1572-1585). The pair would have four children, born in rapid succession, each of whom lived to adulthood:

Marcantonio (1660), Anna Camilla (1662), Paolo (1663), and Scipione (1666).

The Princess Borghese, like many wealthy women of her era—chief among them her husband's grandmother **Camilla Orsini Borghese** (1603-1685)—energetically participated in religious and artistic patronage. Eleonora was passionate about supporting several different convents, and had a particularly deep connection to the nuns of the Tor De' Specchi, at the base of the Campidoglio in Rome. She formed many deep friendships in this centrally-located and socially prestigious convent, and often spent her free time and holidays there. But what especially marked Eleonora was her free-spirited and independent nature, remarkable for a woman of her time and lofty social station.

In March 1692, Eleonora's youngest child, Scipione, passed away unexpectedly at age 26. She was overwhelmed with grief, and the tragedy strained her relationship with her husband. Haunted by memories of her son in the Palazzo Borghese in Rome, Eleonora separated from her husband Giovanni Battista. She relocated successively in two convents in Rome, first at the monastery of the Sette Dolori in Trastevere, then in that of the Turchine at Santa Maria Maggiore. In truth, at this point, the Princess's relationships with most of her family were far from cordial. Additionally, Eleonora was struggling physically. She suffered from muscular pain and circulatory problems.

In the summer of 1692, the sick princess, still at the convent of the Turchine, asked her husband for a change of accommodations. She hoped to move to a well-aired section of the Palazzo Borghese or into one of the family's country villas. However, her husband wanted her to return to her designated space in the Palazzo. Eleonora was against this proposition. She felt her rooms in the palace were too exposed to the summer heat and would worsen her condition.

What eventually happened shocked contemporary sensibilities. Before she received official permission from the Vatican and without the consent of her husband, Eleonora abruptly departed from the convent of the Turchine. The Princess exited in a procession of five carriages accompanied by a staff of over 20. At first, she stayed in the home of her twin brother and his wife (as of 1681) **Ippolita Ludovisi**—the Villa Ludovisi in Rome—and then elsewhere in the historical city center. Eleonora was never to be fully forgiven by her husband.

Eleonora died on 29 September 1695, at 53 years old, far from the Borghese palace. In her will, the Discalced Carmelite nuns of Corpus Domini—with their church of S Lucia dei Ginnasi on Via delle Botteghe Oscure— were named Eleonora's principal heirs. Why? Perhaps because her husband's grandmother, Camilla Orsini Borghese, had decamped to this convent, also against family wishes, almost 30 years previous, and taken religious vows. In her final will, Eleonora was explicit in her wish to be buried in the Carmelites' church, and not the Borghese family chapel in the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. For their part, the nuns commissioned a magnificent tomb monument for their patron, executed in the church's "Chapel of the Crucifix" by the architect **Giovanni Battista Contini** (a pupil of Bernini) and the sculptor **Andrea Fucigna** in the years 1702-1705.

Her monument was moved to the Basilica of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio in 1936 from the demolished church of Santa Lucia alle Botteghe Oscure. It wasn't until 1938 that her remains were discovered in the old church. On 21 February 1938 the bones of Eleonora, now encased in a new lead box, were deposited beneath the pavement of S Alessio.

Sources:

"Recovering the remains of a princess: the search in Fascist Rome for the body of Eleonora Boncompagni Borghese" from [Villa Ludovisi web site](#)

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