

The Podocataro Family © RIPRODUZIONE RISERVATA

1499-1565

In the midst of the Sistine Ward, in the historic wing of the *Ospedale di Santo Spirito in Sassia*, is the famous *Sala Baglivi*, which houses some of the fifty frescoes dedicated to the hospital's history, and most importantly, glorifies the work of Sixtus IV, known as the "great builder."

In one of these frescoes, the deposed Queen Charlotte Lusignan of Cyprus is depicted kneeling before Sixtus IV as he blesses her, having been presented to His Holiness on June 8, 1475, by Ludovico Podocataro, even before he became a cardinal. Ludovico, prominently placed in the fresco attributed to the school of Melozzo da Forlì, dominates the scene.

Ludovico Podocataro, physician and personal secretary to Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, the future Pope Alexander VI, was connected to Queen Charlotte by a longstanding family tie. Ludovico's father belonged to an illustrious Greek family closely related to the Lusignans. This blood connection, combined with the political influence Ludovico already enjoyed, convinced Queen Charlotte that he was the right person to win over Pope Sixtus IV in her difficult struggle to reclaim the throne usurped by her half-brother, James, known as "the Bastard."

Below the fresco is an inscription by Platina, a humanist and culinary expert to Pius II, and the first prefect of the Vatican Library, which reads: "*Karlota Cipri Regina Regno Fortunisq Spoliata Ad Sistum IIII Supplex Confuiens Ab Eodem Summa Benignitate Et Munificentia Suscipitor*" (Queen Charlotte of Cyprus, deprived of her kingdom and wealth, humbly sought refuge with Sixtus IV, and was received with the utmost kindness and generosity). In the painting, from right to left before the Pope, are Queen Charlotte, Cristoforo della Rovere, Castellan of Castel Sant'Angelo, Ludovico Podocataro in the foreground, Domenico della Rovere, the Pope's private chamberlain (in a black hat), Hugo de Langlois, chamberlain to the deposed queen (standing behind Podocataro), and an

unidentified woman. Next to the pontiff, behind the throne, are Cardinal Raffaele Riario della Rovere, a friend of Podocataro and a great collector of antiquities like him, a courtesan, and two children.

Queen Charlotte of Cyprus died on July 16, 1487, at the age of only 43, and by the will of Pope Innocent VIII, she was buried in the Vatican Grottoes, where she still rests alongside the tombs of Matilda of Canossa and Christina of Sweden.

Ludovico Podocataro, depicted in the fresco of the school of Melozzo, already held an important role in the Roman Curia in 1475. He had arrived in Rome after studying humanities in Ferrara under Guarino Guarini and medicine under Mattiolo Mattioli in Padua, where, in 1460, due to his exceptional abilities, he was appointed rector of the Faculty of Medicine and Arts. Upon reaching Rome at an undetermined date, he practiced medicine and pursued an ecclesiastical career. In this dual role, he was hired by Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia (nephew of Pope Callixtus III), then Chancellor of the Holy See, a position he held in his palace on Via del Pellegrino, later known as the *Cancelleria Vecchia* (Old Chancellery), now Palazzo Cesarini Sforza, just fifty meters from Via di Monserrato. In 1479, Sixtus IV promoted him to *Abbreviator Apostolic* and four years later, on November 14, 1483, appointed him Bishop of Capaccio.

Upon Sixtus IV's death, his successor, Innocent VIII, confirmed Ludovico as the pope's personal physician (*archiatra pontificio*), exceptionally allowing him to continue treating Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia as well. This dual patronage greatly boosted Podocataro's ecclesiastical career, reaching its peak with the election of Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia to the papal throne, his distinguished patient and staunch admirer. Pope Borgia, elected thanks to the crucial votes of the Sforza, Colonna, Orsini, and Savelli cardinals, generously rewarded them: to Sforza, he gave the family palace and the office of Vice Chancellor, to the Colonna, the town of Subiaco and nearby castles, to Cardinal Orsini, the estates of Soriano nel Cimino and Ponticelli, and to Cardinal Savelli, only Civitacastellana. These clearly prearranged gifts branded the election as an act of simony.

Ludovico Podocataro, confirmed as *archiatra*, rapidly rose under Pope Borgia, undertaking intense diplomatic activity that placed him on the international stage of the time. Among his achievements was the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, and he was also involved in King Louis XII's divorce and, most notably, was part of the commission for Church reform.

With his increased visibility and the scent of a cardinal's hat drawing closer, the cautious Podocataro decided to acquire a more fitting residence than the two small houses he shared with his cultured secretary, Tommaso "Fedra" Inghirami, "...near Sant'Aurea, between San Giovanni in Ayno and Via Giulia," as located by scholar Lorenzo Finocchi Ghersi. Ghersi deserves credit for discovering in the Vatican Secret Archives the purchase deed of a third part of the buildings on which Palazzo Podocataro would be built. The notarial act, dated 1499, preceded by a year Ludovico's elevation to Cardinal. Faithful to the simplicity and frugality that always guided his choices, Ludovico ordered that the palace be built using as much of the existing medieval structures as possible. This decision was likely driven by financial reasons (Podocataro had to pay a substantial 550 gold scudi for the properties and additional sums "invested" in his cardinalship), but more importantly, it reflected his deep appreciation for the preservation of antiquity and beauty, which characterized the original houses. It's worth noting that the cardinal was already a collector of numerous Roman statues and inscriptions.

Thus, rather than a new construction, the project involved a robust renovation, a kind of enlightened consolidation, which today we would call *conservative restoration*. Essentially, the cardinal *in pectore* (Ludovico, anticipating his elevation) took the opportunity to create a house more for his ancient artifacts and his vast library than for himself, so he directed a targeted renovation that centered the entire structure around the inner courtyard and secret garden, turning the palace into a small, cultured museum.

This choice, while sacrificing some internal spaces, left future generations and the city one of the few examples of architecture where Medieval and Renaissance styles blend with

surprising harmony. Unlike many cardinal's palaces with vast reception halls, Ludovico's palace did not conform to the usual grandeur of the Curia. The palace's sober rooms and modest salons were not suited for feasts and ceremonies but seemed designed for the pursuit of knowledge.

The Jubilee Year of 1500 brought the cardinal's hat to the Bishop of Capaccio, and the new cardinal celebrated his investiture in the Arenula Region palace with his closest friends: his secretary Inghirami, his nephews Livio and Cesare, and the master of ceremonies Johannes Burkard, known as Burcardo, along with Paride Grassi. Among the guests were likely many illustrious figures from Pope Borgia's entourage, perhaps even the Farnese family, neighbors who had replaced Vannozza Cattanei in the pope's affections. Certainly, Cardinal Raffaele Riario, a friend of Podocataro and a fellow fervent collector of ancient statues, would have been present. It is also possible that Michelangelo Buonarroti, who would later visit the Podocataro house on several occasions, was there.

Michelangelo, Unwittingly Involved in a Scam

Michelangelo would later be unknowingly involved in a scam against Cardinal Riario. Some swindlers, after burying and poorly "antiquing" his *Sleeping Cupid*, sold it to the cardinal, passing it off as an ancient statue. In any case, Cardinal Riario's collection was enriched with one of Michelangelo's many fine pieces, the artist having just completed his famous *Pietà* the previous year, in 1499.

The cardinal's guests, besides appreciating the house, the secret garden still under construction, the statues, and the ancient marbles, would have also admired the learned library, rich with manuscripts and incunabula. Among these were, most notably, a manuscript of Horace's *Odes* once belonging to Francesco Petrarca, and one of the earliest printed editions of the *Divine Comedy*, with commentary by Cristoforo Landino.

Three years later, Ludovico Podocataro lost his highest protector. Pope Alexander VI died on August 18, 1503, officially from a malaria attack, but unofficially, according to

Guicciardini, from a tragic mistake: he drank a glass of poisoned wine that was meant for Cardinal Adriano Castellesi of Corneto. In the conclave that led to the election of Pope Pius III Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini, Cardinal Podocataro, with the support of the Spanish faction, secured as many as 14 votes.

Ludovico Podocataro's Death

Cardinal Ludovico Podocataro died on August 25, 1504, one year and seven days after Pope Borgia. Per his expressed wishes, he was buried in *Santa Maria del Popolo*, where, not far away, Vannozza Cattanei, who bore four children to Pope Borgia—Cesare, Giovanni, Lucrezia, and Goffredo Borgia—would be laid to rest in 1518.

At the cardinal's death, the lack of suitable halls to accommodate the elaborate apparatus required for cardinal funerals was openly criticized by the master of ceremonies, Paride Grassi, who bluntly described the room chosen for the catafalque as "*Aula ejus domus breviscula fuit*", so small that not all attendees could be accommodated: "*Praelati non poterant esse in parva aula, sed iverunt ad aliam Cameram anteriorem*" (The prelates could not be in the small hall and had to go to another front room). The concurrent summer heat only worsened the situation, and the master of ceremonies, perhaps shifting blame away from himself, emphasized that out of the twenty torches intended for the catafalque, only four could be lit due to the heat and the cramped space: "*ex XX tortiae, qua erant ad latera lecticae solum quattuor accensae fuerunt propter calores, et propter angustiam loci*".

Enrico Parlato, in his esteemed study on Podocataro, writes about the funeral: "(...) both ceremonies agree that, once the vigils ended, with nine cardinals attending, they accompanied the deceased to *S. Maria del Popolo*, where he was interred. According to Grassi, the funeral procession, which likely set out at dusk, was led by members of the Archconfraternity of the Most Holy Savior at *Sancta Sanctorum*, followed by one hundred torches that preceded the body, creating a luminous aura. Behind them, the prelates and cardinals on horseback brought up the rear, dispersing in front of the church."

The Tumultuous Funeral Ceremony

The lively funeral ceremony did not end there. After the erudite oration by Tommaso “Fedra” Inghirami, the cardinal’s secretary, a fight broke out when it was time to set up the *lectica* (a kind of bed simulating the presence of the deceased). A scuffle ensued between the cardinal’s footmen and the Augustinians of Santa Maria del Popolo. *“Finito officio fuit altercatio, etiam verberalis, inter Frates et Parafrenieros Cardinalis defuncti, quia utrique dicebant ad se spectare lecticam, palearicium, capitale, et scabella quattuor, et qui plus potuit plud valuit”* (After the ceremony, there was a verbal and physical altercation between the monks and the cardinal’s footmen, as both claimed the *lectica*, straw bedding, pillow, and four stools belonged to them. Whoever had the most strength won out).

The criticisms surrounding Cardinal Ludovico’s funeral did not even cease when it came to the monumental setup of his tomb, located in the transept near the sacristy of *Santa Maria del Popolo*. This tomb, likely commissioned by the cardinal himself from Andrea Bregno, was described by Ghersi as an incomplete and poorly positioned work, to the point that he wrote: *“The decision to place his tomb near the family burial site of a pope for whom he had worked so hard (i.e., the tomb of Vannoꝝza Cattanei and her children Pietro, Ludovico, and Giovanni Borgia), and who had always held him in high esteem, must have been directly made by Cardinal Podocataro. It likely dates back to around 1500, coinciding with his elevation to the cardinalate, as there is already evidence from 1497 of a donation to S. Maria del Popolo, further proof of how dear this church was to the entire Borgia circle.”*

Livio and Cesare Podocataro’s Plans

Livio and Cesare, perhaps also dissatisfied with their uncle’s cumbersome tomb, preemptively decided to commission their own final resting place from a far more notable artist. Rather than choosing Rome, they opted for Venice, commissioning their tomb in the Church of *San Sebastiano dei Gerolamini*. The artist selected was Jacopo Tatti, known as Sansovino.

Livio, already appointed Bishop of Nicosia, together with his brother Cesare, who would succeed him in the same position in 1552, had already decided to leave Rome for Venice—

the city that first welcomed them when they fled their native Cyprus. This attachment was confirmed by their decision to donate all the family papers to the *Biblioteca Marciana* in Venice, with the exception of a few books and incunabula donated to the Vatican Library.

Livio Podocataro's Renovations

Livio Podocataro, an art lover and friend of the most accredited artists of the time, mindful of the criticisms raised during his uncle's funeral by the master of ceremonies Paride Grassi, undertook a robust reconfiguration of the internal spaces and the creation of the secret garden, to better showcase the external spaces already adorned with the valuable pieces of the inherited collection.

The keystone of this masterful renovation was the intervention of Perin del Vaga, "who was a close friend of his," as Vasari attests. Together, they planned a series of frescoes with many scenes of "Bacchantes, satyrs, fauns, and wild things," in homage to an ancient statue of Bacchus seated beside a tiger. These frescoes were accompanied by poems explaining the scenes—in short, a graphic novel, a 16th-century comic book on the mythological life of the most indulgent of the gods.

For the medieval loggia and cloister, Perin del Vaga designed and executed a series of grotesques, small figures, and numerous landscapes "colored with great grace and diligence," as Vasari notes, having personally seen the works during a visit to the palace, concluding with open praise for the patrons Livio and Cesare Podocataro: "*This work has always been, and will always be, held in great esteem by artists.*"

Palazzo Podocataro as a Cultural Hub

The palace, revitalized by Perin del Vaga's intervention and the redistribution of interior spaces decided by Livio, quickly became a gathering place for Italian and foreign artists and scholars. The Podocataro collection, with its highlight being the relief of the *Three Graces*, became a must-see, as did Perin del Vaga's frescoes in the secret garden—so exquisite that they drew the attention of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Jacob Fugger "the Rich" of

the famous German banking family. The Fuggers had established a branch at *Banchi Vecchi* and a palace between that street and the Church of the Florentines. Jacob “the Rich” was so captivated by the paintings in the secret garden of Palazzo Podocataro that he commissioned Perin del Vaga to paint the interior and exterior of his new palace.

The valuable Podocataro collection was extensively documented by Pierio Valeriano in his *Hieroglyphica* in 1567, and earlier by Iacopo Mazzocchi in his *Epigrammata antiquae Urbis* in 1521.

Notable Visitors to the Podocataro Palace

In the fifty years following Cardinal Ludovico’s death, Cesare, Livio, and their nephew Pietro welcomed many notable visitors to the palace, most prominently *Filippo Neri*, known as “Pippo buono” by the Romans, who would be beatified by Paul V and canonized in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV. As we will see later, Filippo Neri continued to visit the house until his death, where he met Ignatius of Loyola.

Another prominent figure of those years, the Florentine Giovanni Animuccia, considered on par with Pierluigi da Palestrina as one of the leading exponents of the Roman polyphonic school, frequented the Podocataro residence alongside the influential Antonio Maria Graziani, first secretary to Cardinal Commendone, and later a cultured and enlightened diplomat. Both men were closely tied to the young Pietro Podocataro. Due to these elective affinities, Livio often hosted the humanist writer and theologian Pierio Valeriano, and in his role as Valeriano’s secretary, the Viterbo-born humanist Fortunio Spira was naturally a familiar presence in the house.

In addition to occasional visitors and many friends connected to the world of culture, the Podocataro brothers also rented out parts of their palace to high-ranking prelates of the Roman Curia. Two such tenants were the Ardinghelli brothers, Niccolò (a cardinal) and Luigi (Bishop of Fossombrone), to whom the Podocataro family was so close that in 1565,

during the signing of the contract for the sale of the palace, Pietro insisted on inserting a clause that safeguarded Luigi Ardinghelli's lifelong right to rent.

For the buyers—three brothers named Costanzo, Ardicino, and Francesco della Porta—the clause was not a problem: the tenants present at the time of the sale, including Ardinghelli, could continue living in the palace, as the brothers had purchased it not to reside there themselves but to rent it out as a pure investment property.

Fortunately for future generations and the palace itself, stricter conditions were imposed on the buyers regarding the valuable artistic heritage of the Podocataro collection: the statues and Roman marbles were protected.

“In those days, the Archbishop of Cyprus in Rome, a man who greatly loved the arts, especially painting, had a house near the *Chiavica*, where he arranged a small garden with some statues and other antiquities, all very honorable and beautiful. Desiring to accompany them with some fitting adornment, he summoned Perino, who was his dear friend; and together, they decided that he should create on the walls of the garden many scenes of Bacchantes, satyrs, fauns, and wild things, in reference to an ancient statue of Bacchus seated next to a tiger. Thus, he decorated the space with various poems. Among other things, he made a small loggia with small figures, various grotesques, and many landscapes, all painted with great grace and diligence. This work has always been, and will always be, held in high esteem by artists, and it led to him becoming known to the Fuggers, German merchants (note: this refers to Jacob Fugger ‘the Rich’). Having seen Perino's work and liked it, since they had recently built a house near the *Banchi*, on the way to the Church of the Florentines, they had him create a courtyard, a loggia, and many figures there, all worthy of the praise given to his other works, which display a most beautiful style and a very graceful elegance.”

— Giorgio Vasari, from *“Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects”*.