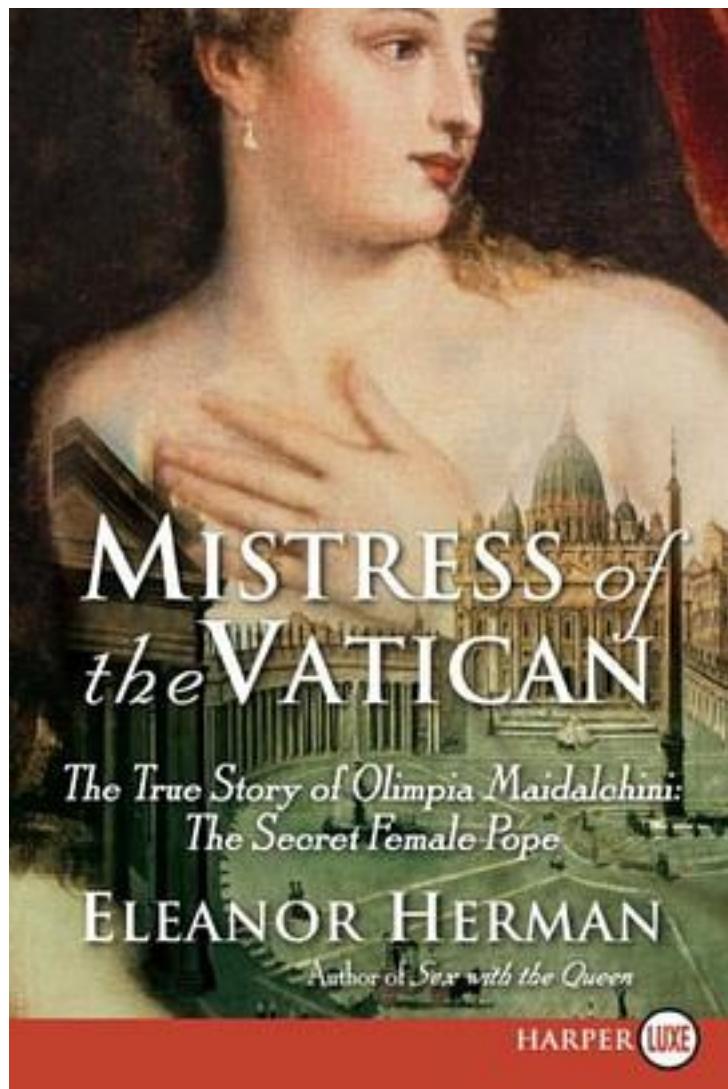


# Mistress of the Vatican LP



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著者:Herman, Eleanor

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"We have just elected a female pope."

—Cardinal Alessandro Bichi, 1644 Today's Roman Catholic Church firmly states that women must be excluded from church leadership positions, but they neglect to mention that for over a decade in the seventeenth century a woman unofficially, but openly, ran the Vatican. Now, Eleanor Herman, author of *Sex with the Queen*, exposes one of the church's deepest secrets, laying bare facts that have been concealed for 350 years. Beginning in 1644 and for eleven years after, Olimpia Maidalchini, sister-in-law and reputed mistress of the indecisive Pope Innocent X, directed Vatican business, appointed cardinals, negotiated with foreign ambassadors, and helped herself to a heaping portion of the Papal State's treasury. Unlike the ninth century's Pope Joan, whose life is shrouded in mystery, Olimpia's story is documented in thousands of letters, news sheets, and diplomatic dispatches. Knowing of Pope Innocent's absolute dependence on his sister-in-law, Cardinal Alessandro Bichi angrily declared on the day of Innocent's election, "We have just elected a female pope." Mischievous Romans hung banners in churches calling her Pope Olimpia I. Cardinal Sforza Pallavicino bewailed the "monstrous power of a woman in the Vatican." One contemporary wrote that women might as well become priests, since one of them was already pope. Born in modest circumstances, Olimpia was almost forced into a convent at the age of fifteen due to the lack of a dowry. She used deceit to escape, and vowed never to be poor and powerless again. Throughout her life, Olimpia exacted excruciating vengeance on anyone who tried to lock her up or curb her power. But her grisly revenge on the pope who loved her would be reserved for after his death. . . . Seventeenth-century Rome boasted the world's most glorious art and glittering pageants but also suffered from famine, floods, swarms of locusts, and bubonic plague. Olimpia's world was kleptocratic; everyone from the lowliest servant up to the pope's august relatives unblushingly stole as much as they possibly could. Nepotism was rampant, and popes gave away huge sums and principalities to their nephews instead of helping the poor. Dead pontiffs were left naked on the Vatican floor because their servants had pilfered the bed and stripped the corpse. Mistress of the Vatican brings to life not only a woman, and a church, but an entire civilization in all its greatness . . . and all its ignominy.

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