



*Foto Belzoni... con la apparenza di Sadler...*

GIOVANNI BELZONI

BOTH SIDES of THE LEBOLD/  
BELZONI CONTROVERSY (+ SACT)

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# STRONG MAN EGYPTOLOGIST

*Being the dramatized story of*

GIOVANNI BELZONI

By

COLIN CLAIR

OLDBOURNE

1957

## RETURN TO CAIRO

HAVING successfully accomplished his mission for Bankes, Belzoni returned overland to Thebes and took up his old quarters at the tombs in Biban el Moluk, where he found his wife, who had returned from Palestine. It was then Christmas, and the pair 'passed the solemnity of that blessed day in the solitude of those recesses, undisturbed by the folly of mankind'.

But the ensuing days were to prove no season of peace and goodwill as far as Belzoni was concerned. On Christmas Eve the boat with the obelisk on board had stopped at Luxor to pick up a few articles before proceeding to Rosetta. Drovetti's men working in the neighbourhood could not fail to see it; they felt that salt, in more senses than one, was being rubbed into their wounds, and their one desire was to get even with Belzoni.

Matters soon came to a head. When Belzoni had left Cairo at the end of April he had come to an arrangement with Salt as to which spots, among those marked out for the English Consul at Karnak, he should be allowed to excavate. On St. Stephen's Day he made his way on a donkey to one of the sites in question, accompanied by his Greek servant and two Arabs. The first thing he saw as he drew near was a number of men, labourers of Drovetti, working where, according to the tacit and understood convention, they should not have been.

The Greek made an observation to that effect, but Belzoni, scenting trouble, told him not to worry about it but to pass them by without taking any notice. They went on their way and only stopped when they reached the north side of the ruins, about a quarter of a mile farther on, where Belzoni spent some time examining the ground. On his return, as he was nearing the great propylon he saw a group of people running towards them: about thirty Arabs headed by two of Drovetti's agents, Lebolo and Rossignano, both of them Piedmontese. What happened then is graphically told in Belzoni's own narration.

Lebolo began his address to me by asking what business I had to take away an obelisk that did not belong to me; and that I had done so many things of this kind to him that I should not do any more. Meanwhile he seized the bridle of my donkey with one hand, and with the other laid hold of my waistcoat and stopped me from proceeding any farther; he had also a large stick hung to his wrist by a string. By this time my servant was assailed by a number of Arabs. At the same moment, the renegado Rossignano reached within four yards of me, and with all the rage of a ruffian, levelled a double-barrelled gun at my breast, loading me with all the imprecations that a villain could invent; by this time my servant was disarmed and overpowered by numbers, and in spite of his efforts, took his pistols from his belt. (The Italian's knowledge of English grammar was, at times, shaky.)

The two gallant knights before me, I mean Lebolo and Rossignano, escorted by the two other Arabian servants of Mr. Drovetti, both armed with pistols, and many others armed with sticks, continued their

clamorous imprecations against me, and the brave Rossignano, still keeping the gun pointed at my breast, said that it was time that I should pay for all that I had done to them. The courageous Lebolo said, with all the emphasis of an enraged man, that he was to have one-third of the profit derived from the selling of that obelisk, when in Europe, according to a promise from Mr. Drovetti, had I not stolen it from the island of Philae.

'My situation was not pleasant, surrounded by a band of ruffians like those, and I have no doubt that if I had attempted to dismount, the cowards would have dispatched me on the ground, and said that they did it in defence of their lives, as I had been the aggressor. I thought the best way was to keep on my donkey, and look at the villains with contempt.'

It rather strains one's credibility to imagine that this powerfully built giant, who had so recently been a professional strong man, would behave so meekly in the face of such provocation. Burton gives quite another story, without, unfortunately, mentioning his authority for the statement. 'Belzoni defended himself,' he says, 'in a characteristic way, by knocking down an assailant, seizing his ankles, and using him as a club upon the foemen's heads. This novel weapon, in the Samson style, gained a ready victory.' Whichever account is the true one, we have a graphic description of the extraordinary conditions under which excavation was carried out in those early days of Egyptian archæology.

Moreover, as James Baikie points out, 'the gentlemen whom we see here raving and cursing at one another before the pylon of Luxor are specimens, not of the worst, but of the best work that was being done in

BURTON  
 HED  
 DEY  
 1807  
 LIZARD  
 'GEMAS



Egypt in 1818'. Italy owes one of its finest collections of Egyptian monuments to the same Drovetti whose followers seemed inclined to stick at nothing in their search for relics, while England owes many a treasure to the industrious, if temperamental Belzoni, 'whose character,' said Baikie, 'one would like to have heard from the point of view of Messrs. Lebolo and Rossignano'.

While this was going on, another band of Arabs came running up with Drovetti himself close behind them. A considerable argument ensued, during which the Piedmontese accused Belzoni of preventing his men from working and reproving him yet again for having taken away the obelisk. Belzoni replied that he had put up with repeated attacks by Drovetti's agents, but that these had now reached such a pitch that he realized it was high time for him to quit the country. With that he returned to his quarters in Biban el Moluk.

Now Giuseppe Rosignano (to give his name its correct spelling) had incurred the enmity of Belzoni over a matter to which the latter makes no allusion in his published narrative, and it would have remained entirely unknown but for the researches made by Professor Giovanni Marro, the first volume of whose *Il Corpo Epistolare di Bernardino Drovetti* was published in 1940. Among this correspondence he found four letters from Belzoni to Drovetti, written from Biban el Moluk during the month of October 1818, just after the Italian had returned from his trip to Berenice.

They refer, as Professor Marro says, to one of those rumours which, more or less false and malignant, are spread about in Egypt, even today, on the occasion of an important discovery. Whilst the explorer affirms that

- BAIKIE WOULD LIKE TO HAVE  
HEARD LEBOLO'S SIDE OF THE STORY

he has made the discovery on his own initiative, others, with malicious intent, insinuate that the indications have been supplied by the natives.

On his return from the journey to the Red Sea, Belzoni found that Rosignano had been spreading abroad a story to the effect that he, Rosignano, had been offered the secret of the whereabouts of the tomb of Apis (as it was then called) by a native of Kurneh for the sum of 100 piastres, and that when he refused, the secret was transmitted to Belzoni for that sum. The story does not sound very credible, for one cannot imagine one of Drovetti's agents refusing, without further investigation, such an opportunity of acquiring further trophies, but the imputation angered Belzoni to such a point that he wrote four letters to Drovetti in six days, in an attempt to stifle these calumnies, offering to pay 500 piastres if the native could be produced who was said to have sold him the secret of the tomb.

There is little doubt that the bitterness engendered by this and other incidents which were the outcome of the feud between the two parties, came to a head in the violent scene we have described, the discord having been intensified by the quarrel over the Philae obelisk. Professor Marro declares that the analysis of several other unpublished documents from the same source will enable new light to be thrown on this last controversy, giving a version differing from Belzoni's published account, and proving that this important monument, had it not been for the scrupulously correct attitude of Drovetti, could still have been taken from the English when it had already reached Alexandria.

As volume 2 of Professor Marro's

published no conclusion can be reached on this matter. In the absence of any written record of his researches in Egypt by Bernardino Drovetti himself,\* it is difficult to check the veracity of Belzoni's narrative in every particular. In general, with regard to his discoveries and journeys, his printed account is reliable and is corroborated by those who were associated with him in his enterprises. But with regard to his personal relationships, whether with Salt or Drovetti, his somewhat vain and intensely jealous temperament led him to suppress anything which would show him otherwise than to his advantage. His jealousy towards his benefactor, Salt, did him little credit; his animosity towards Drovetti, who had also befriended him on his arrival in Egypt, probably sprang from a similar psychosis.

On his return to Biban el Moluk, Belzoni at once wrote to Salt complaining of the outrage he had suffered at the hands of the French party. Writing to his friend William Hamilton a short while after, the Consul referred to the affair in the following terms: '. . . Belzoni has, I observe, made himself very conspicuous by taking to himself all the merit of the late discoveries. A great deal is undoubtedly due to him; but all this will find its proper level. There has lately been a great fracas between him and Drovetti's agents, the former having been attacked by them at Karnak, with an intent, as he has declared in an affidavit, to take away his life. He wrote to me officially on the matter, and I ordered affidavits to be taken and laid before the French Consul-general. This has put Drovetti in a raging passion, he being in some degree implicated in the cause. . . . It is not very likely that Belzoni will get much redress here,

\* With the exception of his *Journey to the Oasis.*



as Consular Courts are bad tribunals for criminal cases.' Nor did he. The Court held that as the two accused, Lebolo and Rosignano, were not French subjects but Piedmontese, if Belzoni wanted redress he would have to go to Turin for it.

As the boat with the obelisk aboard was still at Luxor, Belzoni decided to embark his possessions in it and return at once to Cairo. After having placed on board all the models and drawings made in the tomb, as well as the various antiquities he had collected on his own account, he then supervised the extraction and embarkation of the magnificent sarcophagus, which was placed in a strong case and very gently conveyed on rollers to the waterside, nearly three miles from the valley in which it was found.

'I must confess,' he writes, 'that I felt no small degree of sorrow to quit a place which was become so familiar to me, and where, in no other part of the world, I could find so many objects of inquiry so congenial to my inclination.' And we may well believe him, for his own account of his travels and researches shows that, personal vexations set aside, he had indeed found Egypt congenial, and if at the outset his quest for antiquities had been no more than a way of gaining a livelihood, little by little he developed a passion for the work and became so absorbed in it that he managed to derive considerable profit, and not merely a pecuniary one, from his discoveries.

Circumstances had deprived him of education, and he was fully conscious of his own lack of culture. In the preface to his book he apologizes for his presumption in making certain observations on historical points, but, as he says, 'I had become so familiar with the sight of

temples, tombs and pyramids, that I could not help forming some speculation on their origin and construction.' Even scholars and learned travellers, he points out, do not always agree on these matters.

'On January 27th, 1819, he gazed for the last time at what Rose Macaulay terms 'the massive, magnificent sprawl' of Thebes, and three weeks later he and his wife arrived in Cairo. There he stayed only a few days before continuing his voyage to Rosetta, where he landed to see many objects that he had collected, including the red granite cover of the sarcophagus of Rameses III.

Having re-embarked all these articles on a djerm, a craft used mainly for cargo, Belzoni went on to Alexandria, with the firm intention of leaving for Europe at the earliest opportunity. But there he found that Saïd was away in Upper Egypt and had left word advising him to stay until his case against Lebolo and Rosignani had been heard, since a deposition of the affidavits had already taken place. He learned also that an offer had been made to the British Museum to remain in Egypt and collect for them had been declined by the Trustees.

It was clear that some time would elapse before Saïd returned, and Belzoni, who could never stay for long in one place with nothing to do, decided that he could best fill in the time by making a trip into the western desert. He knew that the temple of Jupiter Ammon had been sought by more than one traveller, and he considered that as the province of Fayum had been little explored he would make an excursion in that region and from there proceed to the western desert. Leaving Mansour Belzoni at the house of an English merchant residing in Alexandria (whom we may presume was Mr. Briggs) he took a small boat and set off up-stream once again.

He arrived at Benisuef on April 29th, accompanied by a Sicilian servant he had hired in Alexandria, and a Moorish *hajji*, who had been on a pilgrimage to Mecca and had begged to be taken on board. At Benisuef they procured donkeys and provisions and set off into the Fayum. At the chief town of the province, Medinet el-Fayum, they obtained a *firman* for their trip and Belzoni was given a soldier to act as guide to Lake Moeris.

After examining the ruins of ancient Arsinoe (later named by the Greeks Crocodilopolis from the fact that it was the centre of the worship of the crocodile-headed water-god Sobk), he paid a call on Hussuff Bey, the governor of the province, a Circassian who, bought as a slave by the Pasha, was eventually made governor of what was one of the finest provinces of Egypt.

Upon asking for a Beduin guide to lead him through the desert, Belzoni was told that the Beduins were encamped about ten miles away, in a part of the country subject to his old friend Khalil Bey. On the morning of the 13th, they made a singular encounter. Awakened by the Moorish pilgrim, who told him that a strange person was approaching, Belzoni seized his pistol, but soon put it down when he found that the stranger was an English clergyman, the Rev. Mr. Slowman, who, in spite of his sixty-two years, had a passion for following in the tracks of celebrated travellers, but never boasted to his friends of his arduous task.

He had the courage, Belzoni informs us, to go through all the lands in Syria, without an interpreter, although he knew not a word of Arabic, encountering and overcoming every difficulty. He suffered much, but never complained, except of the ill treatment he received from other travellers, who were ashamed that a venerable old

man of sixty-two should silently follow all their steps, and think nothing of what he had undergone.' A singular character!

Khalil Bey, now commander of the province of Benisuef, was delighted to meet the Italian once more, and gladly offered to provide him with a Sheik who would conduct him to the western oasis. There was some little difficulty at first, as the guide in question, Sheik Grunmar, was afraid of the consequences if he took them to the Oasis, where, he assured Belzoni, no European had yet been. But these objections were overruled in the customary manner.

On May 25th the party reached the Oasis of El-wah el-Kasr, the smaller oasis, which Belzoni was the first European to visit. He found a valley fertile in dates and apricots, figs, almonds, plums and grapes, surrounded by high rocks. On reaching the village of Zaboo, they found the inhabitants at first rather hostile, for though some of them had seen Turks, none had ever set eyes on a Frank or a Christian.

Opinions seemed divided as to the wisdom of admitting these strangers into their midst, but Belzoni, outwardly unperturbed, dealt with the situation in his customary adroit manner when dealing with any but his Piedmontese enemies. When the village chiefs inquired what he wanted, he told them that he had come to visit that place hoping to find some stones belonging to the holy mosque of his ancestors. Then, sending the guide to fetch the camels on which they had made the latter part of their journey, he ordered coffee to be made and spread out by the side of the wall a good mat and a new carpet he had brought with him. He invited the Sheiks to come and sit near him, offered to buy a sheep and