

Luisa Banti 1894-1978

By G. Camporeale

Luisa Banti was born in Florence, Italy into a bourgeois family in 1894, the eldest of six children. Guido Banti her father was a professor of Pathological Anatomy at the University of Florence and a highly respected doctor. As was customary in well-to-do Tuscan families at the turn of the century, children were guided along definite life paths. The males went to university and later entered a profession and the females studied classical music, learned the rudiments of home education and foreign languages (at home or at school but never abroad). This type of life ill-suited Luisa Banti's restless nature, for she was avid for knowledge, open to discussion, and already ready for new experiences.

Her happy relationship with her father, based on filial love and respect for the high social standing he had achieved as well as on real congeniality, in the literal sense of the term, had an even greater influence on her character. With unconcealed satisfaction she often declared that she had inherited her father's fondness for the concrete facts that constitute the reality surrounding us, a need for an in-depth understanding of things and consequently a propensity for analytical research.

Luisa Banti would find strength to detach herself from the world of bourgeois conformity that had been laid out for her and enroll in university when she was already in her thirties. In the Faculty of Arts of the University of Florence, where she studied philology and classical antiquity, she was fortunate to encounter professors who were scholars of high standing: the historian L. Pareti, who would become thesis director for her dissertation on Luni; the philologist G. Pasquali, who guided her in her post-doctoral thesis on the cult of the dead in archaic Rome; G. Devoto who would introduce her to the field of Etruscan and Italic studies and the archaeologist L. Pernier, who began to train her in the investigative field that would fully occupy her in future years. My familiarity with Luisa Banti resulted mostly from the fact that we both had been students of Professor Devoto, she, when he was a young professor and I when he was much older and introduced me to her the day after my dissertation defense and entrusted me to her care.

The students of classical antiquity at the University of Florence were a well chosen few in the 20s, and the female students even fewer. The dialogue outside the classroom was customary and profitable. Here is what Professor Devoto had to say about his student Luisa Banti:

...first educated in the study of words, then in the interpretation of texts, Luisa Banti ultimately became fascinated by things and acquired a passion for topography in the field of archaeology, a branch of the discipline that requires the possession of two very rare virtues today, modesty and the ability to walk.

This concise evaluation can be seconded by all who knew her. In the attempt to stress the positive effects of the topographical research to which Dr. Banti dedicated herself, Professor Devoto added: "Nature, with its surviving mountains and rivers, roads and settlements that both correct it and adapt to it, is the great frame within which monuments enclosed in their time are circumscribed, are associated with the image of living men and acquire meaning for us." This is the general discourse that corresponds to Luisa Banti the best. She always demonstrated great respect for nature and she considered this indispensable to a correct evaluation of the recovered work and artifacts of mankind.

During her student years, Luisa diligently frequented the library of the Museo Archeologico of Florence, which was located in very modest rooms at the time. There she broadened her outlook by reading various texts and became friends with young scholars like D. Diringer, F. Magi, P. Mingazzini, A. Neppi Modona who would later rise of prominence in the field of archaeology.

In the 1920s Florence was at the forefront of cultural initiatives in various sectors. One such initiative was the creation of the Comitato Permanente per l'Etruria (1925), which was transformed a few years later into the Istituto di Studi Etruschi (1932), and would involve Dr. Banti completely. The organizer of the initiative was the archaeologist and superintendent of Antiquities of Etruria, A. Minto. The first national convention on the Etruscans was organized in 1926 and given the great success of the undertaking was followed in 1928 by the First International Congress on Etruscans. The young students of archaeology in Florence, including Luisa Banti, participated in various ways, profiting from contacts with renowned foreign and Italian scholars. The first issue of the journal Studi Etruschi, the publication of the Comitato Permanente dell'Etruria came out in 1927 and has come out regularly every year since. In looking through the indices of the first years, it is clear that the possibility of collaborating with the journal was vast and open to various disciplines that dealt with themes and issues pertaining to the Etruscan and Italic worlds. This journal and others, edited by professors from the University of Florence, gathered together the writings of the above-mentioned young Florentine students of archaeology whose primary interest was Etruscan antiquity.

Luisa Banti's first published researches appeared in the same years. Most of these are centered on historical topography. In these writings she focused on problems related to her thesis on Luni, preliminary studies for her monograph on Luni, which was published in 1937 in the series entitled "Opere sulla civiltà etrusca," edited by the Istituto di Studi Etruschi. The topographical approach would remain a central focus of Luisa Banti's work for a long time. Her topographical studies put her in direct contact with findings or archaeological monuments in general, the examination of which led her to understand what people's contribution to this or that ancient site had been.

In the 1930s two new areas of investigation opened up for Banti. She found work in the Greek manuscript section of the Vatican Library. The desire for an in-depth knowledge of the world in which she lived and worked led her to an involvement in Humanist philology. She published some writings in this field which experts deemed of high caliber. She also now spent her summers on Crete with the Italian Archaeological

Mission, to which she had been introduced by the director L. Pernier. Her task was that of putting in order, classifying and studying the materials and archaeological monuments uncovered in the excavations carried out at Festos and at Haghia Triada in the first years of the 20th century, with the aim of preparing a museum exhibit and a publication of the aforesaid. The only help that was available were the notebooks with the excavation notes left behind by the archaeologists F. Halbherr, R. Paribeni and E. Stefani. The work called for both the interpretation of the notes as well as a hands-on approach to the finds preserved in the museum of Heraklion (then called Candia) and in the Pigorini Museum of Rome. Testing of the area was also necessary due to the many years that had elapsed since the first excavations and the altered archaeological situation following such natural phenomena as internment and erosion. It was not unusual for new and interesting elements of evaluation to emerge from these interventions.

The work was arduous. It is difficult enough to prepare a publication on one's own excavation even when only a short time has elapsed since the actual digging was undertaken. But interpreting the work of others is problematic and delicate, especially if this work was carried out decades prior to the publication. Banti demonstrated great courage in undertaking to do just this and the final result was exemplary. She often found it difficult to use the notes of those who had preceded her. In the preface to Il palazzo minoico di Festos, Rome 1951, she writes: "The work would have been much faster, and would have resulted more organic, had I written everything ex novo. But I tried to keep as much of Pernier's original text as possible, and the compensation and the changes were such that I could not...keep my additions separate from the original text as I had intended."

She was always ready to acknowledge the work of those who had drafted the notes she utilized. She also stated in the preface that [when] studying [Pernier's] excavation notes," I could not but admire his intuition as an excavator, the exact, clear and scrupulous detail of his notes. A good draughtsman...he accompanied his notes with floor plans of the rooms and sketches of the objects [he] found that made it possible to follow the progress of the dig on a daily basis and prevent errors or confusion as to which room or which layer the individual objects belonged to"...Pernier had foreseen modern excavating techniques. "It is thanks to his scrupulousness in taking note of certain details which must have seemed like useless minutiae and an unnecessary effort when digging began in 1900. On the contrary, these made many technical and stratigraphic deductions possible. I purposefully followed the method used by Pernier in the first volume (Il palazzo minoico di Festos I, Rome, 1935. In other words, I kept the description of the dig, which I tried to maintain as objective as possible, completely separate from my hypotheses and deductions. In this way, it will be easy for scholars to use the descriptive part without anxiously asking themselves if what they are reading is the description of a dig or a hypothesis of the person editing."

This is the criterion which Luisa Banti had already adopted in the publication of other Cretan excavations of the Italian Archaeological Mission, such as, "La grande tholos of Haghia Triada" or the preparatory work to the publication of the palace of Festos.

Even more arduous was the task of publishing the excavation of the “villa” and of the village of Haghia Triada, published in 1980, when the time that had elapsed between the excavation, carried out at the beginning of the century, and the reconstruction of data obtained from the notebooks of the excavators was several decades in the making. The respect for the ideas of those who had worked on the site, who could have disposed of some elements that had been left out of the notes, was a basic rule. In the preparation of the work, A. Di Vita declared as much: “she abided by her intention to leave the text as close as possible to the views and opinions of the excavators of those ancient times.” Thus it is thanks to Luisa Banti that Italian archaeology was able to pay what Di Vita called “a long overdue debt to the scientific world.”

Through her rigorous respect for monuments as documents, Luisa Banti made history and gave others, especially the scholars of future generations, the means with which to make history, to verify, and to revisit problems.

Her interest in Minoan religion emerged from a direct and frequent contact with Minoan materials and resulted in several articles, the latest of which appeared in English in the American Journal of Archaeology of 1954. She went on to re-elaborate excavation data, establishing methodological guidelines that would assume a guiding role in the reconstruction of Minoan civilization: “the Minoan age cannot be considered as a whole spanning from the primitive Minoan to the end of the Late Minoan as we have done up to now. In the almost 2000 years...of Minoan civilization, cults and divinities could not have remained stationary—they only seem that way to us because our investigation is superficial due to a scarcity of available data—but they must have changed, evolved, differentiated themselves in the succession of centuries, through contacts with other peoples and may be with the arrival of new races. Historians and archaeologists are inclined to accept [the hypothesis of] foreign invasion that, according to some, would separate the Late Minoan II from the Late Minoan III and to others the late Minoan III from the Geometric Age. The need to stratify cultic data arises to see if Minoan religion justified the proposed hypothesis or not.” After having analyzed and historically positioned the finds, she arrived at some definite conclusions: “there appears [to be] no clear separation between the cults of the various Minoan periods, nothing to indicate that the transfer of rule or a racial change [took place].” The fundamental result is the requalification of archaeological sources as historical sources which must be pointed out, occurred at the beginning of the Forties!

The experience acquired in the field of ancient religions allowed Luisa Banti to take on the post of assistant to the Chair of History of Religions at the University of Rome and, consequently, to meet and work with R. Pettazzoni. A contribution she made at the time, which is still often cited today, is her article, “Il culto del cosiddetto “tempio dell’Apollo” a Veii e il problema delle triadi etrusco-italiche, “1943, in which she dismantles both current and brilliant hypotheses with painstaking accuracy and suitable comparisons. For example she proposed the interpretation of a “water reservoir” previously connected with “medicinal waters” for a basin of the sanctuary of Portonaccio. Her interpretation was more realistic, as she argued, “temples needed water for their cults

and when there were no fountains or natural springs they had to make use of basins, cisterns or wells.” Furthermore, in support of her interpretation, she referred to similar situations already identified at other sanctuaries of Etruria (Belvedere and Cannicella at Orvieto; Scasato and Celle at Falerii). But her most insightful observations were those regarding the presumed Etruscan origin of the Capitoline triad in Rome. She pointed out that a corresponding Etruscan triad of “Tinia, Uni and Minerva” had not been documented on Etruscan soil. “Objections will be raised that written tradition, epigraphs and figured monuments do not constitute sufficient proof against, that these are facts e silentio, and that tomorrow a new dig or an unexpected find can bear witness to the existence of triads on Etruscan soil. In fact, I am careful not to deny their existence. I only confine myself to warning against current affirmations and to pointing out that for now the existence of the triad is doubtful and that hypotheses and deductions cannot be built upon it. One fact is sure: if Etruscan documents do not mention it and, most of all, if historical tradition knows nothing of it, it could not have had the same meaning and importance for Etruscan cults that it had for Rome.”

She paid constant attention to documentary sources, yet never overestimated them. On the contrary, total upheavals were to be expected in the light of new discoveries. Those who had the opportunity to sit in on Banti’s lectures can confirm that she was wont to repeat that all that archaeology needed to overturn consolidated traditions was a new fragment of pottery.

Luisa Banti had worked in different sectors. In the 1940s she had served as editorial assistant for the journal, Bollettino d’Arte, and wrote many book reviews for Studi Etruschi and Athenaeum, but to use academic jargon, she had spread herself thin. Therefore she came to her university chair rather late, but by the time she received this promotion she had acquired a vast background whose positive effects would emerge in her teachings and publications. After winning a competition in 1948, she was assigned the chair of Archaeology and History of Greek and Roman Art at the University of Pavia, and in 1942 was transferred to the Chair of Etruscan Studies and Italic Archaeology of the University of Florence. Her return to Florence, the city of her birth, also meant a return to her early interests in Etruscan Studies, which she obviously revisited at this time with a vast and diverse cultural background. Most of her contributions from this new phase came from research conducted in preparation for her courses at the university and basically focused on Etruscan archaism and are found in her publications of the 1950s and 60s. In these she not only analyzed and historically located famous works of Etruscan civilization, but examined problems and issues pertaining to Etruscan civilization, like dating the products of archaism, the antecedent Hellenic products of Etruscan art, the meaning of Greek myth in Etruria, and the relationship between coastal Etruria and inland Etruria. These problems would be later examined by various scholars, some of whom would accept and others reject the ideas proposed by Banti. What mattered was that she drew attention to these fundamental problems and that her message was always interlocutory in so far as it was related to monuments and could be amplified or corrected depending on what new research or discoveries emerged.

In Florence, Banti participated actively in the life of the Istituto di Studi Etruschi, serving as a member of the Board for many years and as its President from 1965 to 1972. In the 1950s and 60s she spent lengthy periods with the Italian Archaeological Mission on Crete, working on the previously mentioned monograph (published posthumously) of the “villa” and the village of Haghia Triada. She also spent two academic years in the United States, invited by Columbia University and the Institute for Advanced Studies of Princeton, where she could teach and work on this publication.

Without doubt, the problems of Etruscan Studies that Luisa Banti tackled in her years of teaching at Florence were more numerous than those treated in her earlier writings. A more comprehensive work first published in 1960 with a second edition coming out in 1969, was *Il mondo degli Etruschi*, which saw both English and German translations. The book begins with a description of the territory on which Etruscan civilization developed between the 9th and 1st centuries B.C. Rather than a schematic description, the book touches upon such problems as the difficulty of determining the northern boundaries of Etruria on the basis of contradictory historiographic sources. Of the many cities in Etruria highlighted, each dominated an area of smaller centers, farms and towns, which had never constituted a political or administrative unity. Arts and crafts varied from city to city and thus it is important to begin with the knowledge of individual cities. Thus she presented an overall view based on archaeological, historiographic, epigraphic and territorial evidence for each city. In so far as it adheres to reality, this way of presenting material has become model for various authors who have subsequently written general publications on the civilization of the Etruscans. In the attempt to understand Etruscan artistic phenomena, references are constantly made to the Greek world. For example, the design of the charioteer in the races painted on a wall of the tomb of the Olympics at Tarquinia (late 6th century B.C.) was attributed to the vivacity of the painter, but Banti suggested its precedents could be traced back to the Attic black-figure pottery of the early 5th century, and in the paintings of the tomb of Poggio al Moro in Chiusi of the first half of the 5th century B.C. In this way, a specific issue became a general one, in other words, it became a question of how artistic events in inland centers like Chiusi emerged at a much later time than in centers along the coast like Tarquinia.

Luisa Banti reconstructed the cultural framework of the various Etruscan cities on known data, but she never attributed a definitive value to this framework out of caution. Many things can change because of archaeological discoveries. This is what happened at Volterra. She wrote that the “wealth and prosperity [of the city]...can be seen as early as the 4th century,” while the recent discovery of the necropolis of the Ripaie dating from the Villanovan age allows us to trace this so-called wealth back to the 9th-8th centuries B.C. Examples like this are numerous.

Her book introduced readers to Etruscan civilization and raised general issues. In short, it is one of those books that, as G. Becatti wrote in his review, “every archaeologist will want to have...in his or her library.”

Luisa Banti worked primarily in the Minoan and Etruscan spheres. These did not avail themselves of a tradition of direct literary historiographic sources and therefore

archaeological documents are almost everything. Even if these documents are a primary source, they can be interpreted in various ways and can sometimes result in amateurish suggestions. Luisa Banti never ran this risk, however, for her judgments were always based on criticism and balance. This is what makes her legacy a most lively and instructive scientific lesson, which will remain as a model of professional ethics.

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