

## SARAH BELZONI (1783-1870)

Women who were active in the early days of modern archaeology are sometimes known or recognized only through the exploits of their husbands or male associates. This has certainly been the case with Sarah Belzoni. The history and accomplishments of Giovanni Belzoni(1778-1823), the Italian theatrical performer turned adventurer, are well known and have been the subject of extensive publication. Colorful, eccentric, determined and resourceful, he made his mark among the early 19th century collectors and excavators in Egypt, working principally in the employ of Henry Salt, the British Consul-general. Belzoni is more often cited for using a battering ram to open a tomb rather than for the real accomplishments that are to his credit. He discovered the tomb of Seti I in the Valley of the Kings and the entrance to the pyramid of Chephren at Giza. In his travels throughout Egypt he cleared the entrance to the large temple at Abu Simbel, was one of the first Europeans to visit the Siwa oasis and he identified the ruins of ancient Berenice on the Red Sea. As he gained experience in the country he became sensitive to the importance of the antiquities he collected. The record of his work, published in 1820, was the *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries Within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia*, a personal account of his exploits and adventures.

Sarah Belzoni was Giovanni's devoted wife for twenty years. Little information is available concerning her life before she married and even her family name is not certainly known. There is some doubt or confusion as to whether she was of

English or Irish origin, although in one instance she refers to herself as having an "English stomach", a reference to local food disagreeing with her, which may suggest only a generic use of the term. What is clearly stated in her husband's narrative is that he met her and they were married soon after his arrival in England in 1803. She accompanied him on his voyage to Egypt in 1815, shared the difficulties of life and travel in that country common during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and outlived him by almost fifty years. She was his only support and confidant in his Egyptian exploits. To make her travels easier as a woman she often dressed in the costume of a Mamluk youth when accompanied by Giovanni or on excursions on her own. Her role in his exploration and excavation seems often to have been to remain in residence at Cairo, Luxor or Aswan or at some other base camp while her husband was making repeated forages in search of antiquities. In recalling one instance when she remained in Aswan and Giovanni had returned to Abu Simbel to undertake the first clearance of the entrance of the temple, she wrote: "Had I been there, I would have helped to remove the sand as well as them, as far as my strength would have allowed one on such an occasion, and claimed as much merit." This comment was in a context in which she deplores the fact that other travelers were being given the credit for her husband's accomplishment as the first European to enter the temple in modern times.

Sarah was described by Charles Dickens as "a pretty, delicate-looking, young woman". who participated in Giovanni's early theatrical performances. She is not remembered because Giovanni included her contributions to the work in his

Narrative, indeed she is seldom mentioned. Her unique claim to the attention of historians of archaeology and travel is a chapter of forty-two pages she contributed to that publication. Titled "Short Account of the Women of Egypt, Nubia and Syria", for the early nineteenth century it includes a rare and personal woman's view of native life in Egypt and Palestine. When she was separated from her husband, Sarah took advantage of the time and opportunity to visit with the local women, usually the wives of local officials. She describes these contacts in simple detail and renders an impression of Egyptians and Nubians in their first contacts with westerners. "Having heard so much of Turks and Arabs, I took the opportunity, while in Egypt, to observe the manners of the women in that country. During my stay in Soubra, I had many occasions to remark them; but as it was my lot to ascend the Nile, I contrived to see the various modes of living among these half wild people...." She managed with a limited Arabic vocabulary to gain the interior of houses barred to male travelers and to establish a rapport with women with which she could hardly communicate. Needless to say, they were as interested in her as an example of foreign womanhood as she was in them,

One of the most important parts of her chapter is her account of a visit to the Holy Land, as she explains "It was that idea only that had brought me first into Egypt,," She left Cairo in January of 1818, stayed two months in Damietta, and arrived in Jaffa in March and then to Jerusalem just in time to witness the ceremonies of Holy Week. In May she began a journey on mule back, accompanied by only a driver, that took her to the Jordan and to the valley of

Jericho. Her description of the hordes of pilgrims she encountered give a rare picture of travel in the Middle East at the time.

She went to Mount Zion and to Bethlehem. She returned to Jerusalem in preparation for the trip to “that sink of vice and wickedness, Grand Cairo” but, for a Christian foreigner traveling alone, she had the almost unparalleled opportunity for another dangerous adventure. In her disguise as a Turkish youth she climbed the Temple Mount but she only managed to look into the Dome of the Rock.

She describes on one occasion how Giovanni settled her in Rosetta in the house of an English merchant while he made an excursion to Libya. Since she was confined to the house by threat of plague she amused herself by collecting chameleons. Her description of their variety and the methods of capturing and preserving them displays a naive charm that must have been an attractive attribute of this unlettered young woman. During the stay in Rosetta, Sarah also contrived to obtain Bibles from the British consul in Alexandria so that she might distribute them to the locals in an effort to bring the knowledge of Christianity to the “heathen”. She laments the fact that people totally misunderstood her altruistic motives and somehow believed she was engaging in trade for profit.

On his return to England from Egypt Giovanni mounted a successful exhibition in the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, principally devoted to casts, drawings and models of the tomb of Seti I, but also including mummies and other antiquities. At the time it met with considerable success but after her husband's death on an expedition to Benin in 1823, Sarah took it upon herself to continue to show some of the results

of their work. She opened an exhibition in London in 1825 which met with so little success that the exhibition material, casts and models were eventually seized and Sarah was described as being left destitute. As recognition for the work of her husband an appeal to the government for aid was launched by her friends and for years she continued to petition Parliament for help but it was not until 1851 that she was granted a civil list pension of one hundred pounds a year. She lived the latter years of her life in Brussels and in the Channel Islands, dying in Jersey at the age of 87. She and Giovanni had no children and left no other heirs.

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#### Bibliography

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