

## European Corner

# Giovanni Belzoni: Strongman Archaeologist

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There has been an unbroken thread from the athletes of Greece and the gladiators of Rome, through the circus and stage strongmen of the Golden Age of Strength at the turn of the last century to the gifted TV competitors vying for the big cash prizes in strength athletics today. This inspiring story is now recorded in seven large files, the basis for a very comprehensive book I've been writing on the subject, but this issue a brief review traces through this EUROPEAN CORNER of the globe the part played by one of our most interesting strongmen.

Some of the professional entertainers who wove this continuing thread through the centuries were strength athletes and few, if any, lived a more interesting life than the wonderful Italian strongman, Giovanni Belzoni. Italy has produced many marvellous professionals but they all, including Belzoni, seem to be the best kept secret since the killing of Cock Robin. One of the greatest problems in producing a definitive work on old time strongmen is the imbalance created by physical culture writers. Systematic research reveals that specialists in our field have mainly rehashed material from earlier journals in their own language and have not ventured far in their search. The earliest physical culture magazines contain much about the Saxons, Sandow has been done to death and Inch's exploits have covered reams of paper; yet very little is known in our field about the exceptional life lived by Belzoni from the time he was born in Padua on the 15th of November 1778 until he died in 1823 en route to the almost legendary Timbuctu.

Living in the Regency period when there was virtually an epidemic of romanticism, the flamboyant Italian stood out in any company. Anybody over six feet in height at that time was considered very large indeed, so when this magnificently proportioned strongman, some 6' 7" tall, mounted the stage his appearance alone created a sensation. [Ed. note: There is some question about Belzoni's exact height. Our own files reveal sources for heights of 6'6", 6'7" and 6'8".]

When Napoleon invaded Italy in 1796, Belzoni, who had studied hydraulics and who may or not have been a priest, set off to travel through Europe. In Germany he encountered a troupe of travelling showpeople which included a strongman who was the base for human pyramids. The strongman also put his head on one chair, his feet on another and held an anvil on his unsupported stomach while two assistants forged a horseshoe, beating it with hammers. Belzoni, with his terrific natural size and strength, realized that he could be successful as a professional performer. Soon he became a fully fledged mountebank known as Gio Batta and with his brother Francesco, who was also a big man, he arrived in London in 1803 with a reasonably polished strength act. Belzoni displayed his enormous strength in the streets and in fair booths before moving upmarket to the famous Sadler Wells.



On Easter Monday, 1803, Belzoni featured prominently as the Italian Goliath in "Jack and the Giant Killer\*", or "Fee, Faw, Fum", a pantomime still known to every British child. He also performed his own specialty act billed as follows: "Signor Giovanni Battista Belzoni, the Patagonian Samson, will present most extraordinary specimens of the Gymnastic Art perfectly foreign to any former exhibition (his first appearance in England)." [Ed. note: Belzoni was billed as a "Patagonian" because early explorers to the southern tip of South America reported that the area was inhabited by a tribe of giants.]

This act included carrying and walking with 11 people on an iron-framed harness, itself weighing 127 pounds. There are several excellent accounts of Belzoni's feats and exploits in theaters such as the Drury Lane, at the ancient Bartholomews Fair (first held in 1133) and also in Vauxhall Gardens.

His act usually began with weightlifting and concluded with his carrying feat. An illustrated broadsheet from the period said "He is in every way so perfectly formed that he is considered by artists as the finest model ever seen." After appearing for years throughout Britain, Belzoni left to show his strength in Portugal, Spain, Gibraltar and other parts of Europe in the years 1813-14.

Soon he tired of life on the stage and his adventurous spirit led him to embark on a voyage which was to change his life. The trip began on the island of Malta and ended, for a time, in Alexandria. The year was 1815 and the giant Italian had a chance encounter with Henry Salt, the English consul general of Egypt, who was under orders to collect antiquities for Britain. Together, they decided that Belzoni would travel up the Nile to the site of an ancient temple near Thebes and use his mechanical prowess to lift and load onto a boat for shipment to England a giant stone head, carved from granite. The head was approximately 6' by 8' and weighed over seven tons, but Belzoni's talents were equal to the task and soon the head was on its way to the British museum.

On the basis of his success with the great stone head, Belzoni began a career as an explorer and Egyptologist, defying the curses of the Pharaohs and acquiring priceless treasures which he shipped back to Britain, his adopted home. Another adventure took 18 months of his life, the time required to move, load and then get the bust of Rameses II back to London. During this adventure, much of which took place in temperatures of over 120 degrees, Belzoni's strength and courage saved him on many occasions. Once, when he was attacked by a mob of Arabs, he is said to have grabbed one of his assailants by the ankles as Samson had done and swung him in circles like a club, thus foiling the opposition who, after several abortive rallies, lost heart and backed off.

The former professional strongman made many dramatic discoveries, including the passageway into the second pyramid at Giza, one of Egypt's greatest pyramids. He was a careful taker of notes and his watercolor sketches of his discoveries have helped to preserve his name in the field of Egyptology for all time. Those who would like to read further about Belzoni should consult the readings at the end of this article. Belzoni died as he lived, searching for adventure on a voyage of exploration to the headwaters of the Niger river. Worn down by his years of deprivation in Egypt, he was unable to overcome the amoebic dysentery which finally took his life and he died in Gwato on December 3, 1823, at the age of 45.

**Readings:**

Belzoni, G., *Narrative of the operations and recent discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs and Excavations in Egypt and Nubia*, (By the author. 1820).

Hamblin, D., Behold the amazing, the spectacular, Giovanni Belzoni, *Smithsonian* (June 1988) pp. 80-87.

Clair, Colin, *Strong Man Egyptologist*, (Norwich: Jarrod and Sons, n.d.).

Beston, H., Belzoni, in *The Book of Surprises*, (NY:Harper and Row, 1965).