



Belzoni: The Giant Archaeologists Love to Hate

Ivor Noël Hume

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The Italian son of a barber. A failed hydraulic engineer. A giant who performed feats of strength and agility in the circus. Giovanni Belzoni (1778-1824) was all of these before going on to become one of the most controversial figures in the history of Egyptian archaeology. A man of exceptional size with an ego of comparable proportions, he procured for the British Museum some of its largest and still awe-inspiring treasures. Today, however, the typical museum visitor knows nothing of Belzoni, and many modern archaeologists dismiss him as an ignorant vandal.

In this captivating new biography, Ivor Noel Hume re-creates an early nineteenth century in which there was no established archaeological profession, only enormous opportunity. Belzoni landed in Egypt, where he was unsuccessful in selling a hydraulic machine of his own invention, and came under the patronage of diplomat Henry Salt, who convinced him to travel to Thebes in search of artifacts. Among the many treasures Belzoni would bring back was the seven-ton stone head of Ramesses II, the "Young Memnon."

The book includes gripping accounts of Belzoni's wildly productive, and physically brutal, expeditions, as well as an unforgettable portrait of his wife, Sarah, who suffered the hardships of the Egyptian deserts and later bore the brunt of the disillusionment that came with the declining popular perception of her husband. Including numerous illustrations, many in color, this volume brings one of archaeology's most fascinating figures vividly to life.

Belzoni: The Giant Archaeologists Love to Hate Details

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Adrian says

Giovanni Belzoni was one of the early Europeans who plundered Egypt of its classic antiquaries for its museums. In Belzoni's case it was the British Museum. The author details Belzoni's raiding career up and down the Nile river between 1816 and 1818. Long castigated for the damage he did to tombs and statuary, Hume rightly points out that Belzoni worked long before there was any such thing as modern archaeology and so couldn't be expected to hold up to a standard that didn't exist. Material is capably handled but I grew impatient with final chapters which sum up the lives of all the dramatis personae in the book. Don't like books that drag out endings.

Maggie says

A great take on a biography of the giant Belzoni. Though it gave the opinion that all archaeologists hate him, I came away with a more fond idea of him.

Liz De Coster says

Interesting in the abstract, but requires a high threshold for speculative commentary.

Yemoss says

Overall Hume keeps it interesting (and PG) moving things along with plenty of photos and drawings to accompany the adventurous and burly treasure hunter's story. It goes to show, in Egyptian antiquities, that one man's tomb is another's treasure - for centuries to come.

John Anthony Smith says

Belzoni was an excellent book, very interesting, very captivating. Belzoni was definitely an interesting character, a giant among his age, a show man, a strong man, a caviler for the pioneering of archeology. The author, Hume, did an excellent job keeping the story moving and interesting. So many books of this nature lack a competent author that can bring a book to life and make the mundane interesting, but Hume does that extremely well. Whether Belzoni is consider by modern day archeologist as a peer is irrelevant, he is the father of modern archeology, the one that paved the way for the insignificant modern day archeologist who seem to have their noses perpetrating an air of aristocrat-icy more than gratitude for their forefathers.

Leah Bender says

Maybe I just don't like biographies, but parts of it d-r-a-g-g-e-d and were rather repetitive.

Diane says

this popped up on a year-end best reads list. it's pretty good. interesting if you like archaeology at all.

Julian Walker says

An extraordinary character and an amazing insight into early archaeology (or the theft and destruction of property, as it appears to have been in those days).

Whilst you cannot condone the type of pillaging which went on, you have to admire the physical achievement of removing colossal artefacts and shipping them abroad. When you add into that story the devious politics, highly untrustworthy individuals and the conflicting independent ambitions of many of the characters involved, this is a very enjoyable read.

A window into the life of someone I had never heard of, but of whose 'work' I am aware.

Fascinating.
