

BOLETIN

BOGIANEN IN ACTION

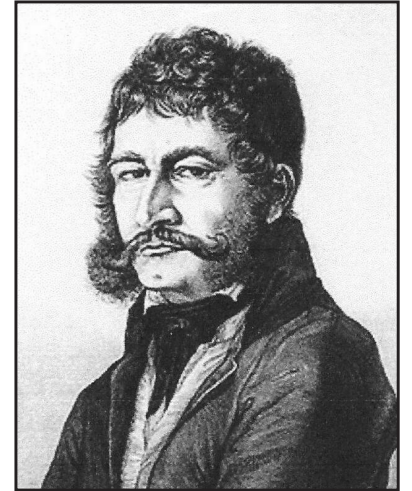
Andrew M. Canepa, *Editor*

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The 200th Anniversary of the Museo Egizio

Torino is a city of specialized museums. There's the automotive museum, the museum of the history of the cinema in the Mole Antonelliana, an Oriental art museum, and the Armeria Reale near the royal palace, which houses a centuries-old collection of arms and armor, including an actual chastity belt. But the one that is really world-famous is the Museo Egizio. Established in 1824, it was the first ever museum exclusively dedicated to Egyptian antiquities. According to *Wikipedia*, it is currently ranked fifth in the world behind those of Cairo, Giza, London and Berlin.

How did the collection come about? It was all due to a soldier, diplomat and amateur Egyptologist born in 1776 in the town of Barbania, about 25 kilometers north of Turin. Bernardino Drovetti first entered Egypt in 1798 as a 22-year-old officer in the French army.



Ritratto di Bernardino Drovetti

At this point, we must remember that (1) Piemonte fell under French domination in 1796 and was subsequently incorporated into the French Empire and that (2) Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 was accompanied by a phalanx of archeologists, epigraphers and artists, who produced a richly illustrated, multi-volume, monumental treatise on the country's antiquities that gave rise to a wave of "Egyptomania" in Europe and to the birth of modern Egyptology.

Now, back to Drovetti. After his military interlude, he was appointed consul of France to Ottoman Egypt and served in that position from 1806 to 1829, first under the Napoleonic Empire and then under the restored kings, Louis XVIII and Charles X. Drovetti was considered the most influential European at the court of Mehmet Ali. During his tenure, he amassed a treasure trove of antiquities, especially from the area of Thebes. He then sold the first tranche—I suppose the *crème de la crème*—to King Carlo Felice of Sardinia in 1824. Drovetti died in 1852 and is immortalized by a bust at the entrance of the Museo Egizio.

The noted contemporary Egyptologist, Francesco Tiradritti, director of the Italian Archeological Museum at Luxor, has posited that Turin's affinity with Egyptology is rooted in the belief that the city was founded in 1523 BC by an Egyptian prince. This is, of course, nonsense. We all know that Torino was founded by Extraterrestrials.

Note that in the Italian language there's a distinction between ancient Egyptians (Egizi) and modern Egyptians (Egiziani). That's why the museum is called the Museo Egizio.

Talking About Extraterrestrials...

It turns out that there's a special corner of Piemonte where UFO sightings are particularly frequent, both in intensity and in duration. That would be Monte Musinè in the Graian Alps overlooking Torino. Our Treasurer Nello Prato kindly pointed this out to me. You can view an extensive presentation by UFO aficionado Marcus Lowth by doing an internet search for *The Mount Musine UFO Encounters*.

Of Donkeys and Truffles

Every first Sunday in October there's a race in the cathedral square of Alba in the province of Cuneo. It pits the town's nine *borgate*, or boroughs, against each other with jockeys riding bareback astride donkeys. The contest provides much comic relief, because the beasts are strong-headed and not easily managed. In any case, the so-called Palio degli Asini is a great popular success, especially since it is accompanied by all sorts of medieval pageantry. You can watch previous editions free on *Youtube*.

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Donkeys and Truffles *Continued*

The word *palio* has come to mean a horse race, as in the famous Palio di Siena. Originally the prize was a precious cloth by that name. However, in Alba the donkey jockeys basically ride for the fun of it and the glory of winning.

Tradition has it that the first event of its kind dates to 1275. That year, the rival city of Asti made an incursion, devastating vineyards and ransacking a monastery on the outskirts of Alba. The Astigiani celebrated their victory by staging a horse race around the town walls, in what was the very first Palio d'Asti. The mayor of Alba retaliated by mocking their traditional rivals, who never breached the walls, by holding a donkey race.

The first modern Palio degli Asini was held in 1932, after riders from Alba, who kept on winning in the Asti race, were barred from participating. The donkey race was then held intermittently until 1967, when it was restarted on an annual basis. Since then, it has been the kick-off event for the town's International White Truffle Festival, which draws flocks of eager buyers from around the world.

Fé San Martin

Descendants of the numerous Piedmontese immigrants to the province of Córdoba, Argentina, use the phrase “hacer San Martín” to mean moving from one house to another. It's not, however, a reference to the famous South American hero, José de San Martín, who helped the Spaniards make the big move back to where they came from. No. It actually refers to Martinmas, November 11th, the feast of St. Martin, which was the traditional expiration date of tenants' leases in Piemonte and hence “moving day” par excellence. King Victor Emanuel II put the original phrase to good use during the battle of San Martino, a locality in Lombardy, on June 24, 1859. Inciting his troops on to victory, he harangued them as follows: “Coragi, fieuj, s'i pioma nen noi San Martin, j'Alman a fan fé San Martin a noi!” It's a wonderful play on words that loses in translation. An approximate version would be, “Come on, boys, if we don't take San Martino, the Germans will make *us* do a San Martino instead!—that is, clear out. Of course, what he really meant were the Austrians, since in the common parlance of the Risorgimento, *Tedeschi*, *Austriaci* and even *Croati* were used pretty much interchangeably to mean the enemy.

Some twenty-two years later, in 1870, when the king rode into Rome after the fall of the pope's temporal power, he is said to have exclaimed, “Finalment i soma!”—the unity of Italy completed in the Piedmontese language. It turns out that the first king of united Italy was at home speaking his first language, *piemontèis*, and his dynastic language, French. He never really spoke Italian with great fluency, or *disinvoltura*, nor with the “proper” accent. In fact, he *hated* to speak Italian. Victor Emanuel II was a mirror of the times and underscored on a linguistic level the late and incomplete nationalization of the peninsula. As Massimo d'Azeglio wrote, “Now that we've made Italy, we have to make Italians.” (Recycled from the Winter 2000 *Boletín*.)

Eating a Hat for Dessert

The Piedmontese word *bunèt* means a hat or a bonnet. It's also the word used to describe a traditional chocolate pudding made according to various recipes, some extremely convoluted and some totally inauthentic. The name of the dessert stems from the form of the copper pot that it used to be cooked in.

What follows on a separate sheet is a step-by-step guide to the *bunet* made by Gina Fassio for her husband Piero's storied restaurant in San Francisco, The Blue Fox. She based the recipe on her grandmother's in Asti, so we're talking about the middle of the 19th century. We received this version from our former president Gianni Fassio, son of Gina and Piero, who now resides in his father's home town of Isola d'Asti.

Of course, the use of Bourbon in Gina's recipe means America and the West. It can be substituted with rum, cognac or sweet Marsala wine. As for the *amaretti*, or almond macaroons, the ones from Saronno are readily available in the Bay Area, but the better ones from Sassello (Savona) and the exquisite *morbidi* from Mombaruzzo (Asti) are not to be found locally.