



EDDA BRESCIANI

Illustration: Forbes

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## “Lady of the Fayum”

(1930-2020)

**E**dda Bresciani was born into an open-minded, cultured, well-to-do family in the small, still partially walled, medieval city of Lucca in Tuscany, Italy, on September 23, 1930. Her father was a landowner, her mother a teacher. After graduating from the Liceo Classico Machiavelli in Lucca, she enrolled in the Facoltà di Lettere (Faculty of Humanities) at the University of Pisa. She was often quoted as having remarked, *“Its program was the only one considered suitable for young women, because not intellectually demanding; but I rebelled, transgressed this social prejudice, and wrote my thesis on a subject that was almost unknown in Italy in the mid-1950s [“Egypt: A Persian Satrapy”]. Egyptology, at the time was considered more a curiosity than a ‘science.’ In those days there were only two professorships in Egyptology in all of Italy, both non-tenured: one in Milan and one in Pisa, which wasn’t even paid. Sergio Donadoni (1914-2015) held both. He was my professor, thesis advisor and mentor.”*

Following her graduation in 1955, Bresciani, the very first Italian with a degree in Egyptology, followed in the footsteps of Donadoni and spent the next three years abroad in Paris, Copenhagen and Cairo, broadening her knowledge of Egyptology, by studying related subjects like archaeology, epigraphy, philology and the civilizations geographically close to Egypt, as well as ancient Hieratic, Demotic, Coptic and Aramaic. She also read and spoke English, French and German. Those three years abroad, she often said, were fundamental to her lifetime interdisciplinary approach to Egyptology: a synthesis of philology, archaeology and history.

In 1968, when a teaching position in Pisa was established specifically for her, Bresciani became the first female tenured professor of Egyptology in Italy. Ever-energetic and with an sense of humor, she was devoted to the University of Pisa and to teaching until her retirement in 2005; but she frequently confessed that she felt most fulfilled as a field archaeologist. Her first experience dated to 1965, when, with Sergio Donadoni, she took part in UNESCO’s campaigns to save the monuments in ancient Nubia, which otherwise would have been submerged by the construction of the great Aswan Dam. *“It was an unforgettable experience, one of human enrichment because I was collaborating with extraordinary Egyptian colleagues, but also one of positive character building. It made me no longer afraid of the unknown and of physical discomfort. Instead it en-*





**Edda Bresciani through the years.**



*couraged me to work hard.*” For the rest of her career, Bresciani took to heart a proverb of her workers, which in English translates “*the hoe knows*,” meaning one has to excavate, to dig, in order to learn and then know.

Not surprisingly, a year later she was appointed the head archaeologist of excavations in the Fayum, at Medinet Madi, where the Milanese papyrologist Achille Vogliano (1881-1953) had excavated in the 1930s, discovering between 1935-39 the Middle Kingdom temple consecrated to the cobra goddess Renenutet. It had never happened before that a woman, much less a young one, directed an excavation. Bresciani delighted in telling the story that there is no word in Arabic for a woman director so her workers invented one: *mudira* from the masculine title for director, *mudir*. Her nickname was “Lady of the Fayum,” for she excavated in that region until her retirement as an archaeologist in 2011. At Medinet Madi in 1988, she uncovered a temple dating to the Ptolemaic Period dedicated to “Two Crocodiles,” as well as a structure next door, a sort of nursery for baby crocodiles destined to be mummified and offered to Sobek by pilgrims.

Here over the years Bresciani also excavated a large number of other monuments at the southern area of Medinet Madi. Her most spectacular finds were two pairs of lioness statues with Greek inscriptions, hence Ptolemaic, and another lioness, probably dating to the Roman period, with a lion’s mane but nursing two cubs.

During her some forty years as a field archaeologist in Egypt, besides Nubia and her beloved Medinet Madi, Bresciani also worked at Aswan in 1977 (where she excavated the Ptolemaic Temple of Isis), at Sakkara and at the Luxor west bank Temple of Thutmose IV. In 1974 she obtained for the University of Pisa the concession to excavate in the Sakkara necropolis, specifically the Twenty-sixth Dynasty Tomb of Bakenrenef, vizier of Psamtik I. The burial chamber of the tomb, used for many generations by the vizier’s family, had been plundered in the early 1800s, its wall paintings detached and sold to American and French museums and French antiquarians. Nonetheless, Bresciani’s team discovered remarkable wall paintings and objects in other rooms. Considering it the highlight discovery (1975) of her career, she was particularly emotional about a burial shroud from the Bakenrenef tomb painted in tempera, special for its unusual juxtaposition of the colors green, pink and violet. It dates to the First Century AD and is now on display in the Cairo Egyptian Museum.

In 1978, while she was directing several excavations at Gurna on the Luxor west bank, to show their appreciation, the workers gave her a faience statuette, depicting Bresciani as a pharaoh, with her name in hieroglyphs. That was the same year she founded the interdisciplinary philology, archaeology and history journal about Egypt and other Mediterranean civilizations, *Egitto e Vicino Oriente (EVO)*, which she directed until her death on November 29, 2020. Her lifetime literary output included over 400 articles and books.

Following her retirement Bresciani directed the ISSSEM project for the University of Pisa, a program of international co-operation, in collaboration with Egypt’s Supreme Council of Antiquities, providing technical and scientific support monitoring and administering Egyptian archaeological sites.

Bresciani was the recipient of numerous awards and honors during her later years. In her acceptance speech for one, she said that, although 100 percent from Lucca, over time she had become a bit Pisan and a bit Egyptian. **Lucy Gordan-Rastelli**