 Reading time: 9 min.

On the first anniversary of Don Bosco's death his Past Pupils wanted to continue to celebrate the Feast of Recognition, as they had done every year on 24 June, organising it for the new Rector Major, Fr Rua.

On 23 June 1889, after placing a memorial stone in the Crypt at Valsalice where Don Bosco was buried, they celebrated Fr Rua at Valdocco on the 24th.

Professor Alessandro Fabre, a past pupil from 1858-66, took the floor and said among other things:

"You will not be disappointed to know, dear Fr Rua, that we have decided to add as an appendix the inauguration on 15 August next of another plaque, the commission for which has already been given and the design is reproduced here. *We will place it on the house where our dear Don Bosco was born and lived for many years,* so that the place where the heart of that great man who was later to fill Europe and the world with his name, his virtues and his admirable institutions might remain a signpost for contemporaries and posterity will remain a place where it first beat for God and for mankind."

As can be seen, the Past Pupils' intention was to place a plaque on the *Casetta* at the Becchi, which everyone believed was Don Bosco's birthplace, because he had always indicated it as *his home*. But then, finding the Casetta in ruins, they were encouraged to redo the inscription and place the plaque on Joseph's house nearby, with the following wording dictated by Prof. Fabre himself:

On 11 August, a few days before Don Bosco's birthday, the Past Pupils went to the Becchi to unveil the plaque. Felice Reviglio, Parish Priest at St Augustine's, and one of Don Bosco's very first pupils, gave the speech on the occasion. Talking about the Casetta he said: "The very house near here where he was born, which is almost completely ruined…" is "a true monument of Don Bosco's evangelical poverty."

The "completely ruined" Casetta had already been mentioned in the Salesian Bulletin in March 1887 (BS 1887, March, p. 31), and Fr Reviglio and the inscription on the plaque ("a house now demolished") were evidently speaking of this situation. The inscription covered the unfortunate fact that the Casetta, not yet Salesian property, now seemed inexorably lost.

But Fr Rua did not give up and in 1901 offered to restore it at the Salesians' expense in the hope of later obtaining it from the heirs of Antonio and Giuseppe Bosco, as happened in 1919 and 1926 respectively.

When the work was completed a plaque was placed on the Casetta with the following inscription: IN THIS HUMBLE COTTAGE, NOW PIOUSLY RESTORED, FATHER

Then also the inscription on Joseph's house was corrected as follows: "*Born here in a house now restored*… etc.", and the plaque was replaced.

Then, when the centenary of Don Bosco's birth was celebrated in 1915, the Bulletin published the photo of the Casetta, specifying: "It is the one where the Venerable John Bosco was born on 16 August 1815. It was saved from the ruin to which time had condemned it, with a general repair in the year 1901."

In the 1970s, archival research carried out by Commendatore Secondo Caselle convinced the Salesians that Don Bosco had indeed lived from 1817 to 1831 at the Casetta purchased by his father, his home, as he had always said, but he had been born at the Biglione farmstead, where his father was a share farmer and lived with his family until his death on 11 May 1817, at the top of the hill where the Church to St. John Bosco now stands.

The plaque on Joseph's house had been changed, while the one on the Casetta was replaced by the current marble inscription: THIS IS MY HOUSE DON BOSCO

The Past Pupils' opinion in 1889, with the words "Born near here in a house now demolished" now took on another meaning; it did not mean the Caasetta at the Becchi.

The place names at Becchi

Did the Bosco family live at Cascina Biglione when John was born?

Some have said that this is in doubt, because they almost certainly lived in another house owned by Biglione at "Meinito". Proof of this would be Francesco Bosco's Will, drawn up by notary C. G. Montalenti on 8 May 1817, where we read: "… *in the house of Signor Biglione inhabited by the testator in the region of the Monastero borgata [hamlet] at Meinito…"*. (S. CASELLE, *Cascinali e Contadini del Monferrato: i Bosco di Chieri nel secolo XVIII*, Rome, LAS, 1975, p. 94).

What can be said about this opinion?

Today, "Meinito" (or "Mainito") is merely the site of a farmstead located south of Colle Don Bosco, beyond the provincial road that goes from Castelnuovo towards Capriglio, but at one time it indicated a more extensive territory, contiguous to one called *Sbaraneo* (or *Sbaruau*). And *Sbaraneo* was none other than the valley to the east of the Colle.

"*Monastery*", then, did not only correspond to the current wooded area close to Mainito, but covered a vast area, from Mainito to Barosca, so much so that the Casetta at the Becchi was recorded in 1817 as "region of Cavallo, Monastero" (S. CASELLE, op. cit., p. 96).

At a time when there were not yet any maps with numbered plots, farmsteads and estates were identified on the basis of place names or toponyms, derived from surnames of ancient families or geographical and historical features.

They served as landmarks, but did not correspond to today's meaning of "region" or "hamlet" except very roughly, and were used with much freedom of choice by notaries.

The oldest map of the Castelnovese, preserved in the municipal archives and kindly made available to us, dates back to 1742 and is called the "Napoleonic Map", probably because of its greater use during the French occupation. An extract of this map, edited in 1978 with photographic elaboration of the original text by Mr Polato and Mr Occhiena, who compared the archive documents with the lots numbered on the Napoleonic Map, gives an indication of all the land owned by the Biglione family since 1773 and worked by the Bosco family from 1793 to 1817. From this "Extract" it appears that the Biglione family did not own any land or houses at Mainito. And on the other hand, no other document can be found so far that proves the contrary.

So what meaning can the words "in Mr Biglione's house… in the Monastero region of the hamlet of Meinito" have?

First of all, it is good to know that only nine days later, the same notary who drew up Francesco Bosco's will, wrote in the inventory of his inheritance: "… in the house of Signor Giacinto Biglione inhabited by the unnamed pupils [Francesco's sons] in the region of Meinito…". (S. CASELLE, op. cit., p. 96), thus promoting Mainito from "borgata" to "regione" in just a few days. And then it is curious to note that even the Cascina Biglione proper, in different documents appears as *Sbaconatto*, in *Sbaraneo* or *Monastero*, in *Castellero*, and so on and so forth.

So where are we at? Taking everything into account, it is not difficult to realise that it is always the same area, *the Monastero*, which at its centre had Sbaconatto and Castellerò, to the east the Sbaraneo, and to the south the Mainito. Notary Montalenti chose "Meinito" as others chose "Sbaraneo" or 2Sbaconatto" or "Castellero". But the site and the house were always the same!

We know, moreover, that Mr and Mrs Damevino, owners of Cascina Biglione from 1845 to 1929, also owned other farmsteads, at Scajota and Barosca; but, as local elders assure us, they never owned houses at Mainito. Yet they had bought the properties that the Biglione family had sold to Mr Giuseppe Chiardi in 1818.

All that remains is to conclude that the document drawn up by notary Montalenti on 8 May 1817, even if it contains no errors, refers to the Cascina Biglione proper, where Don Bosco was born on 16 August 1815, his father died on 11 May 1817 and the grandiose Temple to St John Bosco was built in our days.

The existence, finally, of a fictitious Biglione house inhabited by the Bosco family at Mainito and then demolished whenever or by whoever before 1889, as some have speculated, has (at least so far) no real evidence in its favour. When the Past Pupils the words “Born here at…” in Becchi (see our January article) they certainly could not have been referring to Mainito, which is over a kilometre from Joseph’s house!

Cascine, massari* and *mezzadri

Francesco Bosco, farmer at the Cascina Biglione, wishing to set up his own business, bought land and the Becchi house, but death took him suddenly on 11 May 1817 before he had been able to pay all his debts. In November, his widow, Margaret Occhiena, moved with her children and mother-in-law into the *Casetta*, which had been renovated for the purpose. Before then, the Casetta, already contracted by her husband since 1815 but not yet paid for, consisted only of “a croft and adjacent stable, covered with tiles, in poor condition” (S. CASELLE, *Cascinali e contadini* […], p. 96-97), and therefore uninhabitable for a family of five, with animals and tools. By February 1817 the notarial deed of sale had been drawn up, but the debt was still outstanding. Margaret had to resolve the situation as guardian of Anthony, Joseph and John Bosco, by then small owners at the Becchi.

It was not the first time that the Bosco family moved from the status of *massari* to becoming smallholders and vice versa. The late Comm. Secondo Caselle has given us ample documentation of this.

Don Bosco’s great-great-grandfather, Giovanni Pietro, formerly a *massaro* (sharecropper) at the Croce di Pane farmstead, between Chieri and Andezeno, owned by the Barnabite Fathers, in 1724 became a shrecropper at the Cascina di San Silvestro near Chieri, belonging to the Prevostura di San Giorgio. And the fact that he lived in the Cascina di San Silvestro with his family is recorded in the *Registri del Sale* of 1724. His nephew, Filippo Antonio, fatherless and taken in by Giovanni Pietro’s eldest son, Giovanni Francesco Bosco, was adopted by a great-uncle, from whom he inherited a house, garden and 2 hectares of land in Castelnuovo. But, due to the critical economic situation he found himself in, he had to sell the house and most of his land and move with his family to the hamlet of Morialdo, as a sharecropper of Cascina Biglione, where he died in 1802.

Paolo, his first-born son, thus became the head of the family and the farmer, as recorded in the 1804 census. But a few years later, he left the farmstead to his half-brother Francesco and went to settle in Castelnuovo after taking his share of the inheritance and buying and selling. It was then that Francesco Bosco, son of Filippo Antonio and Margherita Zucca, became a *massaro* of Cascina Biglione.

What was meant in those days by *cascina*, *massaro* and *mezzadro*?

The word *cascina* (in Piedmontese: *cassin-a*) indicates in itself a farmhouse or the whole of a farm; but in the places we are talking about, the emphasis was on the house, i.e. the farm building used partly as a dwelling and partly as a rustic house for livestock, etc. The *massaro* (in Piedmontese: *massé*) in itself is the tenant of the farmstead and the farms, while the *mezzadro* (in Piedmontese: *masoé*) is only the cultivator of a master's land with whom he shares the crops. But in practice in those places the *massaro* was also a sharecropper and vice versa, so that the word *massé* was not much used, while *masoé* generally indicated the *massaro* as well.

Mr and Mrs Damevino, owners of Cascina *Bion* or Biglione al Castellero from 1845 to 1929, also owned other farmsteads, at *Scajota* and *Barosca*, and, as Mr Angelo Agagliate assured us, they had five *massari* or sharecroppers, one at Cascina Biglione, two at Scajota and two at Barosca. Naturally, the various *massari* lived in their own farmstead.

Now, if a farmer was a farmer, e.g., at Cascina Scajota, owned by the Damevino family, he was not called "living in the Damevino house", but simply "alla Scajota". If Francesco Bosco had lived in the supposed Biglione house at Mainito, he would not, therefore, have been said to have lived "in Mr Biglione's house" even if this house had belonged to the Biglione family. If the notary wrote "In Signor Biglione's house inhabited by the testator below", it was a sign that Francesco lived with his family at Cascina Biglione proper.

And this is further confirmation of the previous articles that refute the hypothesis of Don Bosco's birth at Mainito "in a house now demolished".

In conclusion, one cannot give exclusive importance to the literal meaning of certain expressions, but must examine their true meaning in the local usage of the time. In studies of this kind, the work of the local researcher is complementary to that of the academic historian, and particularly important, because the former, aided by detailed knowledge of the area, can provide the latter with the material needed for general conclusions, and avoid erroneous interpretations.