

## 22. FRA' DIAVOLO: BRIGAND OR HERO?

Who was Fra' Diavolo? A fierce “brigand”, as eminent historians of the time, as well as the French, referred to him, or a brave hero? It is not the question mark hanging over him that has made the man a legend but his life-story, which is set in 1799 and the French decade and which saw him as head of the **Bourbonophile and anti-french guerrilla war..**

He was small, dark and thin and was also clever and agile. He was born on 7 April 1771 in Itri and was christened **Michele Arcangelo Pezza**. His strange nickname was given to him when he fell seriously ill at the age of 5 and his mother prayed to Saint Francis of Assisi, promising that she would dress her son in a cassock if he would cure him. Michele got better and his mother kept her promise, hence the name “**Fra' Michele**” or Brother Michael. His schoolteacher changed it to Fra' Diavolo because he was such a lively little boy.

Once he grew up, Michele was sent to work at the local saddlers. During one of their arguments, Michele **killed the saddler** with one of the large needles they used to sew the saddles. He later killed the saddler's brother when he threatened revenge.

He went into hiding for years but once the French army invaded Italy making it necessary for the Italian army to recruit more troops, Michele's family managed to commute his sentence into 13 years of military service. Pezza was assigned to the Montagna Fusilliers Corps, but actually went to fight with the Bourbon frontier regiment. At this time real guerrilla warfare broke out against the French army and Michele became more and more popular. In 1779, King Ferdinando promoted him first to Captain, then Colonel and then Duke of Cassano, though historians do not believe he was really given the Dukedom. Michele's technique was to strike the enemy and then separate into small groups to escape, each with their own “Fra' Diavolo” so that anyone trying to catch the real Pezza would be confused and frustrated.

Once the Bourbon monarchy had been restored, his family started to appreciate him more. The portrait that descendants of his family still preserve today dates back to that period and it shows him looking sturdier and no longer pale and thin. In 1809 the French made a new incursion into the Kingdom of Naples. The Bourbon troops were defeated and Fra' Diavolo was captured in Baronissi by Colonel **Sigismond Hugo**, the father of the great write, Victor, thanks to information passed on by the village pharmacist.

Once he was captured he was held first in the Arechi castle in Salerno and then taken to Naples for a “**spectacular**” **execution** despite a request for clemency from the English. Thus on **11 November 1806**, at the age of 35, he was hanged in **Piazza Mercato** wearing a Bourbon army brigadier uniform. His body was left hanging there for hours to make sure everybody knew he was dead.

From then on, legends about Fra' Diavolo's life were embellished with details about how greatly he was admired by his enemies (as well as by the English and the Bourbon Royal family) and the offers he received (and refused) to go over to the French side as Colonel of the Gendarmeria.

Stories about the unpredictable Fra' Diavolo spread thanks to **books** (the first was written by Victor Hugo himself when Fra' Diavolo was still alive), the **theatre** (the 1830 operetta *Fra' Diavolo, ou L'hôtellerie de Terracine* by Daniel Auber, in which Michele Pezza is portrayed as a gentleman-brigand) the **radio**, the **television** (with *Intervista impossibile* in 1962 by Osvaldo Bevilacqua) and the cinema with the very famous and funny 1933 **Laurel and Hardy** film called *Fra' Diavolo*.