

# ROME'S OBELISKS

## FROM WAR TROPHIES TO PILGRIM MARKERS

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

According to tradition Rome was founded in 753 BC. This Iron Age hamlet of shepherds became the capital of the Roman Empire, later of the Roman Catholic Church, and since 1870 the capital of modern Italy. No other city can claim to have been the “*caput mundi*” or head of the world for so many centuries.

Rome holds another unusual world record; it's home to more ancient Egyptian obelisks than anywhere else in the world including Egypt, which counts only a handful. In Rome today there are 13, although apparently there were 48 at the height of the Empire.

The word obelisk derives from the ancient Greek *obeliskos* meaning a spit or slender, pointed rod, because the four sides of this huge stone monolith gently taper into a pyramidion at the top. In fact, to be authentic an obelisk has to be a monolith or one piece of stone. The ancient Egyptians usually erected them in pairs, on either side of a temple entrance. In his *Natural History* the ancient Roman author Pliny the Elder (c.23-79) says obelisks (associated with sun worship) represented the rays of the sun, which increase in width as they reach the earth.

Down each of the monolith's four faces commonly ran a line of deeply-incised hieroglyphs, setting forth the names and titles of the reigning pharaoh as well as an inscription dedicated to the Sun-God. The *pyramidion*, or top point, was sometimes sheathed with metal, usually

copper, but occasionally brass or gold.

The majority of obelisks, including Rome's, date to the New Kingdom's XVII (c.1500 BC) and XIX (c.1340 BC) dynasties. Rome's were brought here during the Empire as war trophies by Augustus (27 BC-14 AD), Caligula (37-41 AD), Titus (79-81 AD), Domitian (81-96 AD), Hadrian (117-138 AD), and Constantine II (337-340 AD). Others were made-to-order in Egypt for Roman emperors, but their hieroglyphs were carved — if ever — after delivery in Rome.

One such obelisk stands in Piazza Trinità dei Monti at the top of the Spanish Steps. It was commissioned by Gaius Sallustius, an unscrupulous friend of Julius Caesar who'd made a fortune in Africa and was the only non-emperor to own an obelisk. He commissioned this imitation of the “Flaminian Obelisk”, which he'd seen in Egypt, and had its hieroglyphs carved in Rome. If you compare the two, you'll find that the Romans mis-copied the earlier inscription, so that it no longer makes any sense. The original “Flaminian Obelisk,” which gets its name from the ancient Roman Via Flaminia, was one of the first two obelisks to reach Rome under Augustus (the other currently stands in front of the Italian Parliament). Re-erected in Piazza del Popolo by Sixtus V, it was the first obelisk that pilgrims from Northern Europe would have seen upon arriving in Rome.

Often knocked down by earthquakes and left aban-



The obelisk at the top of the Spanish Steps commissioned by Gaius Sallustius and placed here under the pontificate of Pope Pius VI.



The Flaminian Obelisk, brought to Rome under the emperor Augustus (right). It was the first obelisk that pilgrims from Northern Europe would have seen.





The obelisk in St. Peter's Square was the first to be re-erected under the pontificate of Pope Sixtus V, the first to be re-erected in modern times.

Bottom, the obelisk mounted on Bernini's Fountain of Four Rivers in Piazza Navona, commissioned by Pope Innocent X.

done like most of the “Eternal City” during the Middle Ages, Rome’s obelisks were rediscovered and erected in new sites by the popes Julius II (r.1503-13), Sixtus V (r.1585-90), Innocent X (r.1644-55), Clement XI (r.1700-21), Benedict XIV (r.1740-58), Pius VI (r.1775-99) and Pius VII (r.1800-23) as markers for Christian pilgrims on their way to St. Peter’s. Thus, they stand just outside many of Rome’s famous monuments, including the Pantheon, the Italian Parliament, and the Quirinal Palace; squares, including Piazza Navona and Piazza del Popolo; churches, including St. Peter’s, St. John in Lateran (this is the most ancient obelisk as well as the last to reach Rome, in 357 AD; at 105.6 feet it’s the world’s tallest and the only single obelisk ever erected), Santa Maria Maggiore, Santa Maria sopra Minerva and Trinità dei Monti; and in parks, including Villa Borghese and Villa Celimontana, and they have the advantage of no entrance fees and long lines.

Several obelisks became integral parts of Renaissance or Baroque sculptures, like Bernini’s marble statue of Pope Leo X’s pet elephant Hanno. Near the Pantheon and outside Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Hanno balances a 6th-century BC obelisk,



Rome’s smallest, on his back. Another obelisk, dating to the reign of Ramses II (r.1279-1213 BC), was added to the fountain in front of the Pantheon in 1711 by Pope Clement XI; most famous of all is the obelisk mounted on Bernini’s Fountain of Four Rivers in Piazza Navona, commissioned by Pope Innocent X.

The story of the obelisk in St. Peter’s Square is the most dramatic. It’s Egyptian, but since it doesn’t have hieroglyphs (like the one outside Santa Maria Maggiore and the one designed by Michelangelo which stands in the Square outside the Quirinal Palace), it was probably another made-to-order during Roman times. We know that it was first erected by Augustus in Alexandria’s Roman Forum and then brought to Rome in 37 AD by Caligula to decorate a chariot-racing circus he was building on the present site of St. Peter’s. Unlike all the other obelisks in Rome, the obelisk in St. Peter’s was never broken or overturned, only moved. That’s undoubtedly because under Nero (37-68 AD), Caligula’s circus was the site of early Christian martyrdoms — likely including St. Peter’s — and thus the “eyewitness obelisk” was cherished.

Several real-life eyewitnesses describe the difficulties of moving



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the obelisk the short distance to the center of the Square in 1586. Because it weighs 312 tons and is all in one piece, the unsuccessful attempts to raise it went on for several months and required 44 winches, 900 men and 140 horses. It was the first obelisk to be re-erected in “modern times” under the direction of architect Domenico Fontana and Pope Sixtus V, whose city-planning projects put Rome back on the world map after 1,000 years of neglect. The Pope decreed that anyone who spoke and distracted his fellow-workers would be punished by death. But one day, as the men were tugging away, a sailor from San Remo passed by, whose nautically-trained eye saw that the ropes were so taut they were in danger of snapping. “Put some water on the ropes!” he shouted in Genoese dialect. His advice was taken, and since he saved the day and probably the obelisk as well, he wasn’t



The obelisk, in front of the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, mounted on the Bernini's marble statue of Pope Leo X's pet elephant Hanno.

punished. The grateful Pope ordered that henceforth all the Vatican's Palm Sunday fronds should come from Bordighera near San Remo (and they still do!). It had been believed that the gilt ball at the obelisk's top contained the ashes of Julius Caesar, but when Fontana opened it, he found it empty.

Besides those in Rome, other historic shafts carted off from Egypt are found in Florence, Istanbul, London, New York, Paris and Urbino. New York's is the only non-war spoil; it was purchased in 1880 for the then astronomical sum of \$100,000 to be located in Central Park just outside the then new Metropolitan Museum of Art.

For further information: *The Magic of Obelisks* by Peter Tompkins (New York, 1981) and *Obelisks of Egypt*; *Skyscrapers of the Past* by Labib Habachi (New York, 1977). ○