

Obelisks, and the Obelisk Family

by James King

An obelisk is a single upright stone with four sides slightly inclined towards each other. It generally stands upon a square base or pedestal, also a single stone. The pedestal itself is often supported upon two broad, deep steps. The top of the obelisk resembles a small pyramid, called a pyramidion, the sides of which are generally inclined at an angle of sixty degrees. The obelisks of the Pharaohs are made of red granite called Syenite.

In the quarries at Syene may yet be seen an unfinished obelisk, still adhering to the native rock, with traces of the workmen's tools so clearly seen on its surface, that one might suppose they had been suddenly called away, and intended soon to return to finish their work. This unfinished obelisk shows the mode in which the ancients separated these immense monoliths from the native rock. In a sharply cut groove marking the boundary of the stone are holes, evidently designed for wooden wedges. After these had been firmly driven into the holes, the groove was filled with water. The wedges gradually absorbing the water, swelled, and cracked the granite throughout the length of the groove.

The block once detached from the rock, was pushed forwards upon rollers made of the stems of palm-trees, from the quarries to the edge of the Nile, where it was surrounded by a large timber raft. It lay by the riverside until the next inundation of the Nile, when the rising waters floated the raft and conveyed the obelisk down the stream to the city where it was to be set up. Thousands of willing hands pushed it on rollers up an inclined plane to the front of the temple where it was designed to stand. The pedestal had previously been placed in position, and a firm causeway of sand covered with planks led to the top of it. Then, by means of rollers, levers, and ropes made of the date-palm, the obelisk was gradually hoisted into an upright position. It speaks much for the mechanical accuracy of the Egyptian masons, that so true was the level of the top of the base and the bottom of the long shaft, that in no single instance has the obelisk been found to be out of the true perpendicular.

There has not yet been found on the bas-reliefs or paintings any representation of the transport of an obelisk, although there is sufficient external evidence to prove that the foregoing mode was the usual one. In a grotto at El Bersheh, however, is a well-known representation of the transportation of a colossal figure from the quarries. The colossus is mounted on a huge sledge, and as a man is represented pouring oil in front of the sledge, it would appear that on the road prepared for its transport there was a sliding groove along which the colossus was propelled. Four long rows of men, urged on in their work by taskmasters, are dragging the figure by means of ropes.

The Syenite granite was very hard, and capable of taking a high polish. The carving is very beautifully executed, and the hieroglyphs rise from a sunken surface, in a style known as "incavo relievo." In this mode of carving the figures never project beyond the surface of the stone, and consequently are not so liable to be chipped off as they would have been had they projected in "high relief." The hieroglyphs are always arranged on the obelisks with great taste, in long vertical columns, and these were always carved after the obelisk was placed in its permanent position.

The hewing, transport, hoisting, and carving of such a monolith was a gigantic undertaking, and we are not therefore surprised to learn that "the giant of the obelisk race," now in front of St. John Lateran, Rome, occupied the workmen thirty-six years in its elaboration.

The chief obelisks known, taking them in chronological order, are as follows:—Three were erected by Userthesen I., a monarch of the XIIth dynasty, who lived about 1750 B.C. He is thought by some to be the Pharaoh that promoted Joseph. Of these three obelisks one still stands at Heliopolis in its original position, and from its great age it has been called “the father of obelisks.” It is sixty-seven and a-half feet high, and is therefore about a foot shorter than the London obelisk. Its companion is missing, and probably lies buried amid the ruins of the sacred city. The third is at Biggig, in the Fyoom, and, unfortunately, is broken into two parts. Its shape is peculiar, and on that account Bonomi and others say that it cannot with propriety be classed among the obelisks.

After the XIIth dynasty Egypt was ruled for many centuries by monarchs of Asiatic origin, called the Hykshos or “Shepherd Kings.” During the rule of those foreigners it does not appear that any obelisks were erected.

Thothmes I., of the XVIIIth dynasty, erected two in front of the Osiris temple at Karnak. One of these is still standing, the other lies buried by its side. Hatasu, daughter of Thothmes I., and queen of Egypt, erected two obelisks inside the Osiris temple of Karnak, in honour of her father. One, still standing, is about one hundred feet high, and is the second highest obelisk in the world. Its companion has fallen to the ground. According to Mariette Bey, Hatasu erected two other obelisks in front of her own temple on the western bank of the Nile. These, however, have been destroyed, although the pedestals still remain.

Thothmes III., the greatest of Egyptian monarchs, and brother of Hatasu, erected four obelisks at Heliopolis, and probably others in different parts of Egypt. These four have been named “The Needles”—two of them “Pharaoh’s Needles,” and two “Cleopatra’s Needles.” The former pair were removed from Heliopolis to Alexandria by Constantine the Great. Thence one was taken, according to some Egyptologists, to Constantinople, where it now stands at the Atmeidan. It is only fifty feet high, but it is thought that the lower part has been broken off, and that the part remaining is only the upper half of the original obelisk.

The other was conveyed to Rome, and now stands in front of the church of St. John Lateran, and from its great magnitude it is regarded as “the giant of the obelisk family.”

Amenophis II., of the XVIIIth dynasty, set up a small obelisk, of Syenite granite, about nine feet high. It was found amid the ruins of a village of the Thebaid, and presented to the late Duke of Northumberland, then Lord Prudhoe.

Amenophis III., of the XVIIIth dynasty, erected two obelisks in front of his temple at Karnak; but the temple is in ruins, and the obelisks have entirely disappeared.

Seti I. set up two; one, known as the Flaminian obelisk, now stands at the Porta del Popolo, Rome, and the other at Trinita de Monti, in the same city.

Rameses II. was, next to Thothmes III., the mightiest king of Egypt; and in the erection of obelisks he surpassed all other monarchs. He set up two obelisks before the temple of Luxor; one is still standing, but the other was transported to Paris about forty years ago. The latter is seventy-six feet high, and seven and a-half feet higher than the London one. Two obelisks, bearing the name of Rameses II., are at Rome, one in front of the Pantheon, the other on the Cœlian Hill.

Ten obelisks, the work of the same monarch, lie buried at Tanis, the ancient Zoan.

Menephtah, son and successor of Rameses, set up the obelisk which now stands in front of St. Peter's, Rome. It is about ninety feet high, and as regards magnitude is the third obelisk in the world.

Psammeticus I., of the XXVIth dynasty, set up an obelisk at Heliopolis in the year 665 B.C. It now stands at Rome on the Monte Citorio. Psammeticus II., about the same time that Solomon's temple was destroyed, erected an obelisk which now stands at Rome, on the back of an elephant. Nectanebo I. made two small obelisks of black basalt. They are now in the British Museum, and, according to Dr. Birch, were dedicated to Thoth, the Egyptian god of letters. They were found at Cairo, built into the walls of some houses. One was used as a door-sill, the other as a window-sill. They came into possession of the English when the French in Egypt capitulated to the British, and were presented to the British Museum by King George III. in 1801. They are only eight feet high.

Nectanebo II., of the XXXth dynasty, who lived about four centuries before the Christian era, set up two obelisks. One hundred years afterwards they were placed by Ptolemy Philadelphus in front of the tomb of his wife Arsinoë. They were taken to Rome, and set up before the mausoleum of Augustus, where they stood till the destruction of the city in 450 A.D. They lay buried amid the *débris* of Rome for many hundreds of years, but about a century ago they were dug out. One now stands behind the Church of St. Maria Maggiore, the other in the Piazza Quirinale. Each is about fifty feet high.

Two large obelisks were transported from Egypt to Nineveh in 664 B.C. by Assurbanipal. These two monoliths probably lie buried amid the ruins of that ancient city. The above include the chief obelisks erected by the Pharaohs; but several others were erected by the Roman Emperors. Domitian set up one thirty-four feet high, which now stands in the Piazza Navona, in front of the Church of St. Agnes. Domitian and Titus erected a small obelisk of red granite nine feet high, which now stands in the cathedral square of Benevento. Hadrian and Sabina set up two obelisks, one of which, thirty feet high, now stands on Monte Pincio. An obelisk twenty-two feet high, of Syenite granite, was brought by Mr. Banks from Philæ to England, and now stands in front of Kingston Lacy Hall, Wimborne.

Among obelisks of obscure origin is one of sandstone nine feet high at Alnwick; two in the town of Florence, and one sixty feet high, in the city of Arles, made of grey granite from the neighbouring quarries of Mont Esterel. The total number of existing obelisks is fifty-five. Of these thirty-three are standing, and twenty-two lie prostrate on the ground or are buried amid rubbish. Of those standing, twenty-seven are made of Syenite granite.

Source:

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