



Classical Art and Archaeology: Teaching Latin and the Humanities with the Monuments of Rome with Karen Moore

Lecture 2: Obelisks:
Symbols of Power from
Egypt to Rome

Outline:

“For the Romans, the Egyptian obelisk served as an imperial prize, a sign of the wealth, power, and dominion of the Roman Empire. As you walk through the city of Rome, you are reminded of that power and the way that Rome conquered the world, even Egypt.”

Introduction

In this lesson, Karen Moore reflects on the obelisk as a symbol of power and prestige for both Egyptians and Romans.

- The obelisk served as a monument for the Egyptians, symbolizing the power of the Pharaoh and his devotion to Ra, the God of the sun.
- For the Romans, the Egyptian obelisk represented an imperial prize, showcasing the wealth, power, and dominion of the Roman Empire.
- As you walk through Rome, you are reminded of the city's power and its historical conquests, including Egypt.

Pliny the Elder's Discourse on Geology

- The history of the obelisks and their arrival in Rome is documented by Pliny the Elder in [Book 36.14 of his "Natural History."](#)
 - Note: This version has been adapted for intermediate readers in *Latin Alive* Book 2.
- Pliny discusses various types of stone, including feldspar, hornblende, and quartz, noting their transitions and similarities to granite.
- This leads him to discuss the great obelisks of Egypt cut from these stones.
- Pliny writes,



- *Trabes ex eo fecere reges quodam certamine, obeliscos vocantes Solis numini sacros. radiorum eius argumentum in effigie est...primus omnium id instituit Mesppheres, qui regnabat in Solis urbe, somnio iussus...Rhamsesis autem, quo regante Ilium captum est, CXXXX cubitorum.*
- Translation: In a kind of contest, pharaohs made beams from that type of stone, calling the obelisks sacred to the divinity of the Sun. The mark of its rays is on the symbol...Mesppheres, who reigned in the City of the Sun, was the first who erected one of these obelisks...Rhamsesis, 190 too, who was reigning at the time of the capture of Troy, erected one, a hundred and forty cubits high.

Famous Pharaohs and their Obelisks

- Pharaohs created obelisks from stone, dedicating them to the divinity of the sun, with the obelisk symbolizing the sun's rays.
- Mesppheres was the first Pharaoh to set up obelisks in Heliopolis, the City of the Sun.
- Ramses II, associated with the capture of Troy, erected a 140-cubit obelisk.
- This Pharaoh is believed to be connected to Moses and the Exodus, and is portrayed in the 1956 film "The Ten Commandments."

The Flaminius and Solaris Obelisks in Rome

- Pliny's writings help identify two notable obelisks in Rome, brought by Augustus from Heliopolis in 10 BC: the Flaminius and Solaris.
- Pliny writes first about the Flaminius Obelisk:
 - *is autem obeliscus, quem divus Augustus in circo magno statuit, excisus est a rege Somisartheo, quo regnante Pythagoras in Aegypto fuit*
 - Translation: However that obelisk which the divine Augustus stood in the Circus Maximus was cut out by Somisartheo in whose reign Pythagoras was in Egypt.
- The Flaminius Obelisk is therefore dated to around 535 BC, when Pythagoras was in Egypt.
- Pliny writes about the Solaris Obelisk a few lines later:



- *Ei, qui est in campo, divus Augustus addidit mirabilem usum ad deprendendas solis umbras dierumque ac noctium horas...*
- Translation: This obelisk, which is in the Campus Martius, the divine Augustus added a wonderful use: to observe the shadows of the sun and of the hours of the days and the nights.
- In other words, the Solaris Obelisk was used as a *horologium*, or sundial.
- Details about the Obelisk Flaminius (Flaminio):
 - Measures 67 feet high.
 - Brought to Rome in 10 B.C. after the Battle of Actium, and symbolized Rome's victory over Antony and Cleopatra.
 - It was set up as one of 2 obelisks on the *spina* of the Circus Maximus racecourse.
 - In 1587, it was discovered in three pieces, was reassembled, and now stands in the Piazza del Popolo in Rome.
 - Inscriptions on the obelisk include the names of Seti I and Ramses II, with Seti promising to fill Heliopolis with obelisks, and his son Ramses II completing it.
- On the base of the Flaminius is an inscription by Augustus using epigraphy, a kind of ancient writing using abbreviations.
 - IMP CAESAR DIVI AUGUSTUS/ PONTIFEX MAXIMUS/ IMP XII COX XI TRIB POT XIV/ AEGYPTO IN POTESTATEM/ POPULI ROMANI REDACT[A]/ SOLI DONUM DEDIT
 - Translation: The Emperor Augustus, son of the Divine Caesar, Pontifex Maximus, acclaimed emperor for the twelfth time, and Consul for the eleventh, vested with the power of the Tribune (Tribuncia potestate), for the fourteenth, upon the subjection of Egypt to the power of the Roman people, gave this as a gift to the sun.
- Augustus' patron deity was Apollo, the sun god, so he sees these obelisks as monuments to the god he particularly worships.

Modern Era and Church Influence

- The obelisk in the Piazza del Popolo is topped by a cross, added by Pope Sixtus V, representing the Church's power over Rome and Christendom.
- Its inscription reads,



- *SIXTUS V PONT MAX/ OBELISCUM NUNC/ A CAES AVG SOLI/ IN CIRCO MAX RITU/ DICATUM IMPIO/ MISERANDA RUINA/ FRACTUM OBRVTGMQ/ ERVI TRANSFERRI/ [F]ORMAE SUAE REDDI/[C]RVCIQ INVICTISS/[D]EDICARI IUSSIT/[A M] D LXXXIX PONT I[V]*
- Translation: Sixtus V, Pontifex Maximus, bade this obelisk, consecrated in the Circus Maximus by Caesar Augustus in unholy rite to the sun, broken and buried in pitiable ruin, to be dug out, moved and restored to its beauty, and dedicated to the Cross most invincible in the year 1589, the fourth of his pontificate.

The Obelisk of Montecitorio (the Solaris)

- The second obelisk, known as the Obelisk of Solaris (or Montecitorio), was used as a giant *horologium* on the Campus Martius, opposite the Ara Pacis.
- It is topped with a globe symbolizing Roman imperium, placed by Facundus Novius (astronomer and mathematician).
- Lines at the base of the obelisk were used to mark days, months, and seasons as the obelisk's shadow progressed.
- Most significantly, the obelisk's shadow used to rest on the Altar of Peace (the Ara Pacis) on Augustus's birthday on September 23rd. (It now stands in front of the Italian Chamber of Deputies.)
- Inscriptions on the obelisk reference Augustus as the divine son of Caesar and Pontifex Maximus (title of the highest priest).
 - IMP. CAESAR DIVI F./ AUGUSTUS/ PONTIFEX MAXIMUS/ IMP. XII COS. XI TRIB. POT. XIV/ AEGYPTO IN POTESTATEM/ POPULI ROMANI REDACTA/ SOLI DONUM DEDIT
 - The Emperor Augustus, son of the Divine Caesar, Pontifex Maximus, acclaimed emperor for the twelfth time, and Consul for the eleventh, vested with the power of the Tribune (Tribuncia potestate), for the fourteenth, upon the subjection of Egypt to the power of the Roman people, gave this as a gift to the sun.



Roman Pedestals and Later Additions

- Romans placed obelisks on pedestals with Latin inscriptions, showcasing them as symbols of imperial conquest and might.
- In later centuries, the Church added crosses and Christian symbols, representing a new regime's power.

In the next lesson, we will look at Augustus's use of the Obelisk Solaris that points to his dynasty and power as Roman emperor.