

EGYPTIAN OBELISKS AND THEIR TEETH OF TIME

Obelisk. That is a Greek term meaning "meat skewer." The ancient Egyptians called them **Tekhenu**. And they made still smaller monuments called **Stelae**.

The great Assyrian King Ashurbanipal boasted about being the first to steal an obelisk from Egypt in 663 B.C. "Two tall pillars made out of bright zahalu-metal which weighed out at 2,500 talents." But he was in the business of bragging. They were not the big ones.

Ashurbanipal built his magnificent capital, Nineveh, near Mosul in what is now Iraq. That is a long way off from Egypt. He was a collector of information, a warrior librarian of sorts. He may have wanted the hieroglyphic data for his famous library. More likely, he took back two small stelae, coveting the precious metal that covered them.

Zahalu could have been that lost ancient ore, aurichalcum, or some other mixture of copper and gold and silver. If it was gold, 2,500 talents would be worth many millions of dollars today.

Back to the obelisks. They were principally made of granite quarried whole upriver near Aswan. An unfinished one still lies in the rock there. It is almost 140 feet long, and weighs 1,200 tons. These things are big and heavy. That is why they stood, or lay where they fell, for thousands of years. Until the Roman engineers came.

Depending on how you count, twenty-eight Egyptian obelisks still stand upright somewhere in the world. Only six are left in Egypt. Fifteen are in Rome, six of which were quarried by Roman emperors. New York and London each have one. They are misnamed "Cleopatra's Needles." They were first raised by Pharaoh Thutmose III—Egypt's Napoleon

of Pharaohs—in Heliopolis in 1468 B.C. They stood tall there for almost fifteen hundred years. Then Caesar Augustus moved them to Alexandria in 10 B.C., where one fell during an earthquake in 1301 A.D. In the 1800s, that one was sailed to the Thames Embankment in London, and the other to Central Park in New York City. In Arabic, they were called "Misalah," or the "Pharaoh's big needles." But we still call them "Cleopatra's Needles." Strange, but understandable perhaps. At least by the men who took them.

Of the seven obelisks that Thutmose III erected, five were at Thebes in the Egyptian Temple of Amun at Karnak. Only two survive. One is called the "Lateran Obelisk," and was taken to Rome. Another, the "Obelisk of Theodosius," was taken to Constantinople.

Ramesses II was another, later Pharaoh. A great warrior who expanded Egypt's influence in the Levant. He raised two mighty, red granite obelisks at Luxor—Thebes again—before the pylons of the Temple of Amenhotep III. One of those still remains, standing as a single tooth in an old man's otherwise proud, smiling, toothless jaw. The other—the "Luxor Obelisk"—was taken down by the French and re-erected in the Place de la Concorde in Paris in 1836. Its principal attraction now is the terrible traffic spinning around the span crossing the Seine at that spot.

These many obelisks salved the ego of the Egyptian Pharaoh erecting them. But they were related to old pyramid-shaped temples first raised in Egypt almost 5,000 years ago. They were built in a shape to represent the Creator God, Atum, and the mound he formed as the rocky ridge that rose up from within the watery world of Nu. The "Benben Stone." The earliest pyramidal form.

There was great significance given to the tipped top of this Benben Stone, and to the great obelisks upon which it would later be copied and crowned. They were called the

"pyramidion" and represented mankind's reach up to the power of God's sunlight. Is that not why you reach out toward the beach?

The pyramidia on top of Egyptian obelisks were covered in precious metals to flash brightly against the sun and signify the restorative strength of the Sun God. Some were capped with copper, which caused staining in running rainwater. Later, they were plated at the top with gold or silver. Others were certainly covered with that mysterious metal, "electrum," a natural alloy of gold and one-fifth silver. Thutmose III rode into battle on the plains of Megiddo in an electrum-covered chariot.

Beautiful objects, obelisks. Egyptian pillars bringing together strength, mythology, and mystery. They seem to hint at some significance beyond life, something after death. Maybe that is why you see so many miniature versions in cemeteries today.

And for new nations seeking long life, maybe an obelisk is a hopeful omen. Is that part of the reason for the 550 foot Washington Monument, the tallest obelisk in the world? It was the tallest monument, too, until topped by the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

Fitting, if you remember the French supporting us at the Battle of Yorktown. More so still considering further French gifts. Not a guillotine—George Washington refused that one. Not a tower like the Eiffel—we have the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and the Seattle Space Needle. What the French gave us, honors us in a different way. For they gave us the Statue of Liberty.

And that is more meaningful than any Pharaoh's obelisk!