



## Introduction

**A**N OBELISK seems an awkward souvenir of a trip to Egypt. Obelisks are large. They are heavy. They cannot be disassembled, since, by definition, an obelisk is made of a single stone. Until the most recent of times they fit in only the very biggest of ships, specially designed for the purpose of transporting obelisks. They are not made of a precious material – most are granite – and despite their size obelisks are fragile and prone to cracking. They serve no practical function, and for much of history their inscriptions, in Egyptian hieroglyphs, were completely inscrutable. Yet over the centuries dozens of obelisks have made the voyage from Egypt. They have gone to Rome, Constantinople, and Florence; Paris, London, and New York. Every empire worthy of the name – from ancient Rome to the United States – has sought an Egyptian obelisk to place in the center of a ceremonial space. Obelisks, everyone seems to sense, connote some very special sort of power.

It is an obvious association. After all, who but the most important of states and rulers could cause such large, ungainly rocks to move over such large distances? But the simple association of obelisks with political might is too simple. For though they have always been associated with power, obelisks have not always represented the same sort of power or represented power in the same way. Partly because they are so inscrutable, partly because

The obelisk at Heliopolis.

they serve no practical purpose, obelisks have served as a sort of Rorschach test for civilizations. In each place and time they have taken on new meanings and new associations. To the Egyptians, who invented the form, the obelisk was a symbol of the pharaoh's right to rule and his (occasionally her) connection to the divine. In ancient Rome, obelisks were the embodiment of Rome's coming of age as an empire. In the Rome of the Renaissance, they became a symbol of the ultimate weakness of pagan religion in the face of Christianity. To a citizen of nineteenth-century Paris, the obelisk was a symbol both of French engineering and scholarly prowess and a reminder of the complications of French politics. To a nineteenth-century New Yorker, the obelisk in Central Park played a double, and perhaps inconsistent, role as testament both to the unstoppable growth and immense reach of the United States, and the country's rejection of the trappings of imperialism just as it was itself beginning to acquire imperial power. And so on, and so on.

This book traces the story of the fate and many meanings of obelisks across nearly forty centuries. It is a story of technical achievement, imperial triumph, Christian piety, Christian triumphalism, egotism, scholarly brilliance, antiquarian obsessiveness, political hubris, bureaucratic indifference, bigoted nationalism, democratic self-assurance (and self-doubt), Modernist austerity, and Hollywood kitsch – in short, the story of Western civilization.

THE FIRST BOOK devoted exclusively to obelisks was published at Rome in 1589. Since then there have been dozens, focusing on every aspect of the history of obelisks: from why they were first made, to the problem of how to move and set them up again, to their purported supernatural powers. One of those books, *Moving the Obelisks*, was written by Bern Dibner, the founder of the Burndy Library, a special collection dedicated to the history of science and technology. Dibner was fascinated with obelisks, and for his Library – the publisher both of that book and this – he gathered one of the finest and most complete collections of “obeliskiana” in the world. The books in that collection range from flimsy tourist pamphlets to enormous folio volumes. Dibner used Burndy's collection as his primary source when he was writing *Moving the Obelisks*, and it has been the essential source for this book as well. It is testament to the depth and range of the collection assembled by Dibner and the librarians and curators who followed him

that all but a few of the images reproduced here are from Burndy's own holdings.

It is similar testament to the richness of the subject that it could inspire two such very different books. *Moving the Obelisks* is devoted to just that. Bern Dibner was an engineer and was entranced by the range of solutions different societies have invented for the problem of moving and setting up such peculiar monuments as obelisks. Although now out of print, *Moving the Obelisks* is easily available, so the authors of this book have decided not to duplicate work already well done. Instead, most of this book examines how people have thought about obelisks in the long periods when they were standing, or lying, still.

The book as it exists in your hands is very much a collaborative effort. The four scholars who came together to write it, Brian Curran, Anthony Grafton, Pamela O. Long, and Benjamin Weiss, have each come to the subject from different backgrounds and with different questions – different directions that reflect the wide-ranging history of obelisks themselves. At one point we considered trying to sublimate our styles and our personalities to a single voice. We quickly realized that was both impossible and, given the long and complicated history of the subject, inappropriate. The result is a book with a multiplicity of voices. Chapters 1 and 2 are the collaboration of Pam and Brian, with a heavy admixture of Ben. Chapters 3 and 4 belong largely to Brian and Tony. Chapter 5 is the fruit of Pam's long efforts in the Vatican Library and the Roman archives. Chapters 6 and 7 are largely the work of Tony, with interventions from Brian. Chapters 8 and 9 are a three-way collaboration, with equal parts Ben, Brian, and Tony. Chapters 10 and 11 are Ben's. Chapter 12, the epilogue, belongs to all of us. But this is truly collaborative work. Every chapter has been read, critiqued, and reworked by every member of the team. The whole has been immensely satisfying for us to write; we hope it is just as satisfying for you to read.

THE HISTORY OF OBELISKS demonstrates that even the largest and most ungainly of monuments move from one place to another with some regularity. Libraries are most certainly both large and ungainly, but they, too, move – far more often than their air of permanence would suggest. It seems fitting that this book was in preparation just as the Library that was its inspiration was itself preparing to move. The Burndy Library was founded

in Brooklyn, New York, in 1941, and was first housed in extra space at the factory of the Burndy Corporation, a manufacturer of electrical connectors. The Library soon moved to Norwalk, Connecticut, when the company moved its headquarters there during corporate America's great migration to the suburbs after the Second World War. The Library flourished in Norwalk, under the close eye of its founder, Bern Dibner, who commissioned Minoru Yamasaki to design an elegant jewel box to house its treasures.

After Bern Dibner died, in 1988, the Library moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; in 1992 it opened to scholars in a beautifully renovated building on the banks of the Charles River. Under the patronage of David Dibner, Bern's son, Burndy grew tremendously at MIT. But the arrangement was temporary, and in the Fall of 2006 the collection moved yet again, to a permanent home at the Henry E. Huntington Library, Art Gallery, and Botanical Gardens, in San Marino, California. There, it joins one of the world's great research libraries, housed in one of the most seductive settings for scholarship anywhere on earth. Over the decades since its founding, Burndy has been very fortunate in its homes. Depending on your perspective, *Obelisk: A History* can be seen either as the Burndy Library's last act in its old guise, or the first act in its new. In truth, it is both, and this book, which is, ultimately, about the complicated interplay of historical continuity and discontinuity, seems an appropriate way to bridge that transition. With discontinuity comes change, but Bern Dibner's vision of a great and comprehensive repository dedicated to the history of science and technology will endure, with some luck, as long as the obelisks themselves.

The obelisk outside Rome's San Giovanni in Laterano,  
rendered with very inventive hieroglyphs by Nicolaus van Aelst in 1589.

*Iam pia subiecti mundi regna rotas  
 Roma officia totae religiois amor  
 Cernendo, seque ignotis transiit ab oris  
 Coetibus, et egregia nobis decoribus orna  
 Sed post conditis totam miserranda, reuicis  
 Qualitatem opprobrium caeca retexit humas  
 Corpore confrauit toto, perisq; decoro  
 Reducit*

*Hadatas, nulli conspicionibus ora  
 Roma rousis fulgore roma sacra, rurs  
 Temporebus Sicuti peisiana Roma rella  
 Mota, ignis grates contendo ropendore ligras  
 Vides, et uices consuetudine mois  
 Semper ego Sicuti serabo nona in orbe  
 Semper ero Sicuti gloria, Semper horis.*

*Obeliskus abbas p...  
 1712*



SIXTUS V. PONT MAX CRVCI INVIC-  
 TISSIMAE AD BASILIC. SIO. IN LATERAN.

SIXTUS V. PONT MAX.

*Nicolaus van der Helst fecit aeneis  
 incis. auct. S. a. 1600.*

FL. CONSTANTINVS AVG. CONSTAN-  
 TINI AVG. OBELISQVM A PATRE  
 LOCO SVO MOTVM DIVO ALEX-  
 ANDRIE IACENTEM TRECENTO-  
 RVM REMICVM IMPOSITVM NAVI  
 MIRANDAE VASTITATIS PER MARE  
 TIBERICVM MAGNIS MOLIBVS ROMAM  
 CONVECTVM IN CIRCO MAX. PONEN-  
 DVM. S. P. Q. R. D. D.

SIXTUS V. PONT MAX. OBELISQVM HVNC SPECIE-  
 RIMIA TEMPORVM GALI-  
 MITATE FRACTVM CIRCVL-  
 MAXIMI RVINI. HVMO LI-  
 MOQ. ALTE DEMERSVM  
 MVLTA IMPENSA EXTRA-  
 XIT. HVNC IN LOCVM MA-  
 GNO LABORE TRANSV-  
 LIT. FORMAEQ. PRISTINAE  
 ACCVRATE RESTITVTVM  
 CRVCI INVICITISSIMAE.  
 DICAVIT AN. M. D. LXXXVIIII.  
 PONT IIII.

FL. CONSTANTINVS MAXIMVS  
 AVG. CHRISTIANAE FIDEI VIN-  
 DEXET ASSERTOR. OBELISQVM  
 AB AGYPTIO REGE IMPVRO  
 VOTO SOLI DEDICATVM SEDIB.  
 AVVLVSVM SVIS PER NILVM  
 TRANSFERRI ALEXANDRIAM  
 IVSIT. V. NOVAM ROMAM AB SE  
 TVNG. CONDITA E O DECORARI MONV-  
 MENTO.

CONSTANTINVS  
 PER CRVCEM  
 VICTOR  
 A S. SILVESTRO HIC  
 BAPTIZATVS  
 CRVCIS GLORIAM  
 PROPAGAVIT.

