

VOYAGE OF THE EGYPTIAN OBELISK

The ancient Egyptian obelisks that today decorate many European cities, among them Paris and London, were mostly transported during the nineteenth century when the desirability of preserving ancient sites was less well appreciated than it is today and when Egypt's rulers, not always particularly interested in the country's heritage, found themselves casting round for suitable gifts to press upon their European neighbors.

As a result, while at the beginning of the nineteenth century only Rome, among European cities, had a significant population of obelisks, most of them having been transported by the Romans in antiquity, by the century's end London and Paris each boasted particularly fine examples. The London obelisk, carved during the reign of the 18th Dynasty pharaoh Tuthmosis III, was re-erected on the Thames embankment in 1878, and the Paris one, dating from the reign of the 19th Dynasty pharaoh Ramses II, was set up in the more

splendid location of the Place de la Concorde in 1836.

New York gained its obelisk in 1881, when the Egyptian khedive, surrendering to arguments that if Paris and London were to have obelisks than New York should have one too, presented the twin of the 18th Dynasty London obelisk to the city. It now stands in New York's Central Park a short distance away from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Cleopatra obelisk, Central Park- New York

While Egypt did not have a very extensive supply of obelisks – there are more of them in Rome today than there are in the whole of Egypt – it did have enough to make magnificent presents abroad. Many people would now frown upon the idea of such “obelisk diplomacy,” though in the case of the London and New York obelisks at least these had already been moved from their

original contexts by the Romans. The presence of obelisks in some of the world's most important cities also undoubtedly adds to the international visibility of ancient Egyptian culture and, with it, the visibility of modern Egypt.

The Paris obelisk in particular, originally from outside the Luxor Temple in Upper Egypt where its twin still stands today, was given a splendid new location in the centre of the Place de la Concorde, the former Place Louis XV, on the spot where Louis XVI was guillotined during the French Revolution. Other

obelisks have been given even more splendid locations, notably the obelisk that stands in the centre of St Peter's Square in Rome, originally brought to the city from Egypt by the Roman emperor Caligula in 40 CE, and the obelisk in front of the same city's Lateran Palace, brought to Rome by the emperor Constantius II in 357 CE.

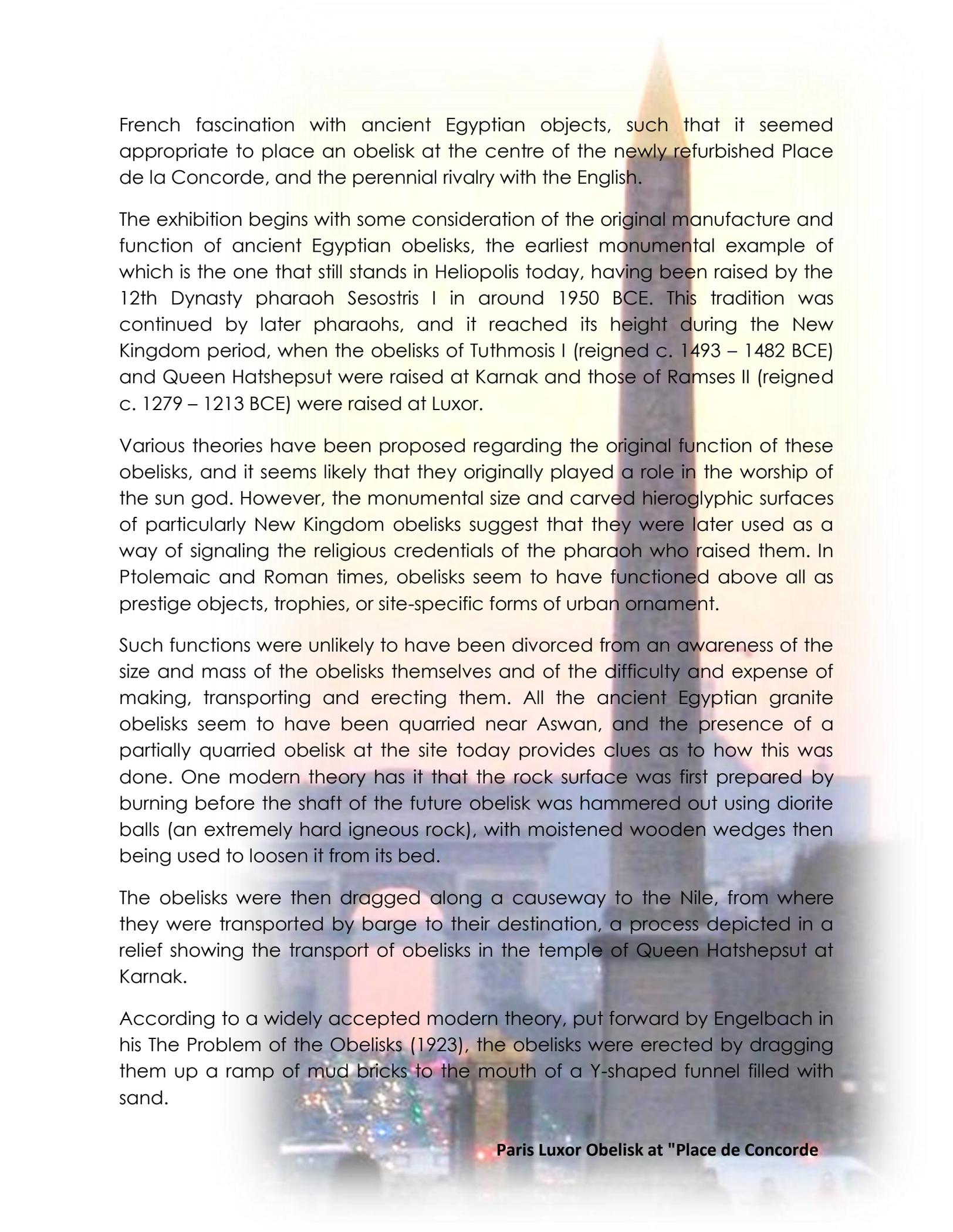
Visitors to Rome and other European cities have become so used to the presence of these monumental ancient Egyptian objects in public squares and thoroughfares that they are perhaps seen today as simply superior pieces of street furniture or striking focal points in otherwise largely empty spaces. Yet, while obelisks are now often seen as natural parts of the urban landscape, they were unknown in Europe outside Rome until the erection of the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde in the 1830s.

THE STORY OF THE OBELISK:

The story of how the Paris obelisk came to be in the place that it did is the subject of a current exhibition, *Le Voyage de l'obélisque*, at the Musée de la Marine in Paris.

It turns out that while taking the obelisk down from its original location in Luxor, transporting it up the Nile to Alexandria and then by sea to France, and re-erecting it in the Place de la Concorde in the heart of Paris presented formidable technical difficulties, main reasons for the move included both





French fascination with ancient Egyptian objects, such that it seemed appropriate to place an obelisk at the centre of the newly refurbished Place de la Concorde, and the perennial rivalry with the English.

The exhibition begins with some consideration of the original manufacture and function of ancient Egyptian obelisks, the earliest monumental example of which is the one that still stands in Heliopolis today, having been raised by the 12th Dynasty pharaoh Sesostris I in around 1950 BCE. This tradition was continued by later pharaohs, and it reached its height during the New Kingdom period, when the obelisks of Tuthmosis I (reigned c. 1493 – 1482 BCE) and Queen Hatshepsut were raised at Karnak and those of Ramses II (reigned c. 1279 – 1213 BCE) were raised at Luxor.

Various theories have been proposed regarding the original function of these obelisks, and it seems likely that they originally played a role in the worship of the sun god. However, the monumental size and carved hieroglyphic surfaces of particularly New Kingdom obelisks suggest that they were later used as a way of signaling the religious credentials of the pharaoh who raised them. In Ptolemaic and Roman times, obelisks seem to have functioned above all as prestige objects, trophies, or site-specific forms of urban ornament.

Such functions were unlikely to have been divorced from an awareness of the size and mass of the obelisks themselves and of the difficulty and expense of making, transporting and erecting them. All the ancient Egyptian granite obelisks seem to have been quarried near Aswan, and the presence of a partially quarried obelisk at the site today provides clues as to how this was done. One modern theory has it that the rock surface was first prepared by burning before the shaft of the future obelisk was hammered out using diorite balls (an extremely hard igneous rock), with moistened wooden wedges then being used to loosen it from its bed.

The obelisks were then dragged along a causeway to the Nile, from where they were transported by barge to their destination, a process depicted in a relief showing the transport of obelisks in the temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Karnak.

According to a widely accepted modern theory, put forward by Engelbach in his *The Problem of the Obelisks* (1923), the obelisks were erected by dragging them up a ramp of mud bricks to the mouth of a Y-shaped funnel filled with sand.

The base of the obelisk was allowed to rest on the sand, which was then released from openings at the bottom of the funnel, allowing the obelisk to slide down under its own weight and eventually come to rest.

This latter theory is supported by the present exhibition, which goes on to explain that while the French engineers given the task of moving the Luxor obelisk to Paris in the early 1830s did not have the benefit of modern lifting equipment they were able to construct an ingenious system of pulleys that allowed them to lower the obelisk to the ground without breaking it. Once this



Paris Luxor Obelisk at "Place de Concorde

had been done, it was a relatively simple matter to drag the fallen obelisk, weighing some 230 tons and now encased in a kind of wooden box, along a wooden track to the Nile with the help of approximately 200 men.

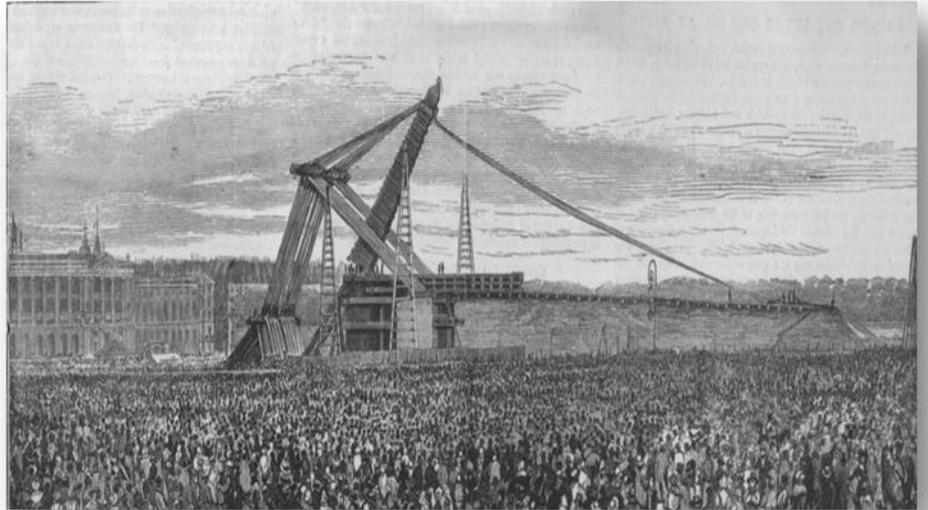
Here, a wooden barge, the Luxor, stood ready for it, waiting to take the obelisk up the Nile to Alexandria and from there across the Mediterranean to Toulon and eventually to Cherbourg on the Atlantic coast and down the Seine to Paris. As the exhibition points out, no one since the Romans had attempted to move an obelisk across the Mediterranean, and the Luxor had to be specially designed as a result. It also had to meet an unusually wide range of technical requirements, since while the Luxor, a sort of flat-bottomed

barge 42 metres long and nine metres wide, had to be used on the Nile, meaning that it had to have no more than a two-metre draught, it also had to be stable when used on the open sea and not only in the Mediterranean but also in the Atlantic.

In the event, the Another ship, the Sphinx, the first ocean-going steamship to be operated by the French navy, was used to tow the Luxor and its precious cargo northwards across the Mediterranean to France.

According to the exhibition, this early example of an ocean-going steamship was cutting edge technology at the time, using hybrid wind and steam power and having a wooden hull. A few years later, the introduction of iron hulls and screw propulsion led to a revolution in shipping and opened Egypt up to mass European tourism. However, in 1833 the Sphinx was still an exotic means of transport. It arrived in Toulon on 10 May after a month's voyage, leaving for Cherbourg in June, the Luxor still in tow.

Nearly three years had thus elapsed before the obelisk finally arrived in Paris in December 1833, its having completed the final portion of the voyage by being towed down the Seine by barge.



An old image for raising the obelisk in Concord square

Having reached Paris, there was the question of where the obelisk was to be re-erected, with arguments being made for placing it at the Invalides in front of the famous military academy or in the Place de la Bastille, among other locations. However, finally the decision was taken to re-erect the obelisk in the centre of the newly refurbished Place de la Concorde, according to the exhibition on the instructions of king Louis-Philippe. The idea was to create a new identity for the Place as no longer “the symbol of the beheadings of the Revolution.”

On 25 October 1836, the obelisk was re-erected in the centre of the Place using a system of pulleys similar to the one used to lower it in Luxor and with the aid of 350 members of the French artillery. King Louis-Philippe and 200,000 Paris residents were on hand to watch the ceremony as an orchestra played Mozart's *The Mysteries of Isis*, a hodge-podge of extracts from *The Magic Flute* and other operas.

As the exhibition puts it, “the wood cracked, the cables stretched to breaking point, and the procedure was stopped to check the system of pulleys before restarting. Contrary to legend, no sailor in the mass of people watching called

out 'wet the ropes,' which in any case would not have had the slightest effect. At 2:30 in the afternoon, after various problems had been resolved, the obelisk was on its pedestal. The national flag was hoisted to the top of the obelisk. Louis-Philippe [watching from the balcony of the Hotel de la Marine overlooking the Place] gave the signal to applaud to the crowds, which up to now had stood watching in awed silence."

SOUVENIRS OF EGYPT:

Today, the obelisk of Ramses II in the Place de la Concorde is one of the best-known sites in Paris. It also complements other Egyptian elements in the surrounding district, most famously the glass pyramid built in the centre of the main courtyard of the Musée du Louvre by the Chinese-American architect I.M. Pei in 1989.

In its final section, the exhibition refers to the presence of these quintessentially ancient Egyptian objects in other world cities, providing photographs of those in Rome, London and New York, as well as of the only surviving example in Istanbul. This was originally set up by the pharaoh Tuthmosis III at Karnak before being moved to Constantinople by the Roman emperor Theodosius at the end of the fourth century CE.

However, the exhibition perhaps misses an opportunity by not saying more about the technical means

used by the Romans to move obelisks overseas, before the French in the 1830s the only people to have done so. This would have been particularly valuable given the sheer number of obelisks that can be seen in Rome today, eight of which were transported from Egypt by the Romans in antiquity. Transporting



Brought from Heliopolis to Rome by August Caesar in 10 BC.

the Luxor obelisk was a considerable technical achievement even using the technology available in the 1830s, which raises questions as to how the Romans had earlier done it.

According to German archaeologist Armin Wirsching writing in the *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, the answer lies in the Roman adoption of ancient Egyptian technology. The Romans had no experience of transporting “stones 22 metres in length and weighing 250 tons” across the open sea, but they had observed the methods used by the Egyptians in transporting obelisks on the Nile. “Because Cleopatra had had an obelisk brought to Alexandria immediately before Egypt’s annexation [by Octavian] in 30 BCE, the know-how of the specialists became available to the conquerors,” he writes, with the Romans employing Egyptian engineers to assist them in loading and transporting obelisks to Rome in order to beautify the city.



Transfer obelisk inside the Ship cavity

Wirsching's conclusion is that the Romans used “double ships” to transport the obelisks, a system of parallel barges with the obelisk suspended between them and hanging in the water. They did so, he says, because they had seen a similar technology being used by the Egyptians, and he rejects the idea that the obelisks were directly loaded on barges. A similar system, he says, was used to transport the obelisks across the Mediterranean, with the cargo suspended in the water between two parallel ships behind a third containing some 300 oarsmen.

“The impression that the obelisk-ship made on the observer was enormous: it was the most amazing thing that had ever been seen at sea... The size alone cannot account for such emotions. Only the hypothetical [obelisk-carrying] double ship can explain the astonishment.”