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Obelisks and the Power of Monument

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INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that the architectural landscape of the United States Capitol takes quite a bit of inspiration from its Greco-Roman predecessors. The Jefferson Memorial (1943) sits scenically on the Potomac's Tidal Basin as a near-one-to-one recreation of the Pantheon of Agrippa (c. 126 CE) in Rome. Placed in even higher prominence, at the western end of the National Mall, is the Lincoln Memorial (1922), whose inspirations stem from the likes of Greece's Temple of Zeus in Olympia (c. 463 BCE) and the famous Parthenon of Athens (c. 432 BCE). Then, on the opposite end of the mall, sits the U.S. Capitol building itself (1800), which consists of three Parthenon-style facades mashed together with an impressive, Roman-style colonnaded dome on top. There is no mistaking the Classical influence seen in the generations of architects who contributed to Washington D.C.'s distinctive and timeless look.

What then, is one to make of the monument to America's most important founder: the Washington Monument? The structure is wholly unique amongst its Classically inspired counterparts, bearing no columns, no arches, no pediments, no Greco-Roman flourishes of any kind. The monument stands in the middle of the National Mall as a 555-foot spire consisting of over 36,000 colossal marble bricks.[1] It is simple in shape: four austere faces eventually joining together in pyramid-like apex, devoid of ornate details throughout. The Washington Monument is an obelisk, an architectural design form which is ancient Egyptian in origin, not Greco-Roman. However, despite its Egyptian origin, it became a staple of the Classical, and by extension, early modern architectural landscapes.

[1] "Washington Monument (U.S. National Park Service)." National Parks Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2021, https://www.nps.gov/wamo/index.htm.

To understand why this is the case, one need only look to Rome itself. Today, the city contains thirteen authentic Egyptian obelisks, acting as the centerpieces of several highly-touristed piazzas, including St. Peter's Square. Meanwhile, only five standing obelisks remain in their native Egypt. This was due to the actions of Augustus Caesar, the first emperor of Rome, following his conquest of Egypt. In 13 BCE, the newly self-appointed emperor discovered two ancient obelisks that had since fallen into disrepair and been largely forgotten. Thousands of years after the construction of these monoliths, at the behest of long-dead pharaohs, Augustus sought to utilize their original Egyptian symbolism—evoking the sun, kingship, and divinity—for his own political gain. To achieve this, Augustus launched an ambitious excavation and subsequent transportation of these hundred-foot/near-hundred-ton granite spires into the heart of Rome. An act that he expected to help legitimize, and even deify, his new seat of power, much the same way the pharaohs once did. In short, it worked. Not only was Augustus made a god upon his death, but his actions began a trend amongst succeeding emperors. From the likes of Caligula to Constantine, emperors transported obelisk after obelisk from the land of the Nile to Rome in a bid to secure power and divinity. Soon, the obelisk's prominence within the Roman architectural landscape cemented it as a fixture of the Classical style, with later political figures co-opting its symbolism as well. In this essay, I not only seek to explain the intricacies of how this came to be, but I also argue that the obelisks' original Egyptian symbolism has not wholly changed throughout their storied history: from their transportation to Rome, usage in the early modern period, up until and including the construction of the Washington Monument.

CHAPTER I

The Advent of the Obelisk: Egyptian Divinity & Kingship

The stability of Egyptian society and their perceived cosmos was dependent on the preservation of kingship. Kingship was integral to their religious tradition and, so far as scholars can tell, had been present there from the start. However, over time, as Egypt began to further centralize its power, the king's rising importance in society was reflected in his rising importance in the religious tradition. The king's importance and preservation were perceived through his connection to the creator god Ra and his personification, the sun. This connection eventually led to the advent of obelisks, a symbol of both the god and king's power. Obelisks, while first used to venerate the sun god, became inextricably conflated with the king and his own divine power. The king and the monument became so tied that, even after the fall of Egypt and their subsequent conquest via Rome, the Romans began to use the obelisks in much the same way. Instead of touting them as merely a show of imperial plunder, the Romans, namely Augustus, sought to carry the obelisk and all its Egyptian symbolic baggage across the Mediterranean as well, so that he could use it to legitimize his newly established position of emperor.

Obelisks, while not present at the beginnings of Egyptian society, ultimately descended from the vast religious and mythological framework that arose in the region which served to set gods and kings, jointly, at the forefront of Egyptian thought. In Egyptian cosmology, the base form of the universe was nothing but a perpetual chaos, called *isft*, an endless, formless void in desperate need of orderly structure. Eventually, at a point before earth's existence or even time itself, came a demiurge. The divine being of light emerged from the darkness and by his will the material world in which we live, and every other realm in which we do not, was born. This creator god would

come to be known by many names, but there were three elements of his being that remained constant throughout ancient Egyptian history and beyond: he was king, he was the sun, and he created order or *ma'at* in unordered universe.

As the historian Byron Shafer surmises, "*ma'at* was truth, justice, cosmic order, and the well-ordered state."[2] Yet, despite its nature, *ma'at* itself was not wholly stable. The universe forever hung in a delicate balance that could easily slip back into the primordial state of *isft*. This would, in turn, spell doom for both earth and the heavens alike. After the demiurge, Atum-Ra by most accounts, preformed his act of creation and brought *ma'at* into the world, he handed it down to mankind. Specifically, he handed it down to those worthy of it, the people of the Nile. Thus, the Egyptians became a divinely-chosen people. It was this gift of *ma'at* that made Egyptians Egyptian, it was what distinguished them from all other beings, animals and outsiders alike.[3] However, *ma'at* was less of a divine blessing than it was a divinely ordained blueprint. By following this blueprint, the Egyptian people could maintain *ma'at*, pleasing the gods and ensuring their mutually preserved existence.

As Shafer writes, "*Ma'at* was custom, or tradition, or traditional values, or even culture itself."[4] The Egyptians had a duty to uphold their sociocultural status quo. This is the reason why Egyptian culture was so relatively 'unchanging' and long lasting: "Progress—involving divergence or digression from an existing path—was viewed as decline, for Egyptians believed the world ought essentially to stay always the same."[5] One need only look to the examples found in Egyptian art and architecture. Most would be hard pressed to discern the difference between an ornamental wall

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[2] Shafer, Byron E; Arnold, Dieter, *The New kingdom Divine Temple: the Example of Luxor*, 128.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

of the Old and New Kingdoms, despite the two periods existing thousands of years apart from each other. It is a far cry from the art of ancient Greece which managed to change and evolve rapidly between the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Periods, all in a much shorter timeframe compared to the long history of Egypt. The Egyptians' resistance to change was not so much motivated by ethnic or national pride or strong-armed government supremacy; rather, it was motivated, for the most part, by a culturally instilled fear of a divine doomsday.

Key to the maintenance of creation and the exercise of *ma'at* was kingship. In fact, the king was not only required to maintain *ma'at*, but he was a prerequisite to its very existence.[6] Ra was the first god, but, perhaps more importantly, he was the first king. It was by the *royal* will of a god that the universe came into being, and through this same royal power, the universe was maintained. Thusly, it is impossible to have order within Egypt, and the cosmos as a whole, without an established king. Monarchy was baked into the Egyptian understanding of the cosmos and there was virtually no separating the idea from their culture, lest it spawn dire, cosmic-level consequences.

In tandem with Ra's creation of *ma'at*, came the means by which to maintain it, a spiritual concept called *ka*. The royal *ka* was a universal, spiritual force that symbolized the king's divine right to rule.[7] *Ka* gave the king not only a powerful, but a wholly unique role within Egyptian society. It allowed him to possess a dual nature in life, part mortal, part divine. *Ka* intrinsically tied him to the creator, Ra. He was the living incarnation of the deity on earth, both mortal and divine.[8] The exact nature of this incarnation will be examined later, but for now, it must be

[6] Brisch, Nicole, et al. *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the ancient World and Beyond*, 47.

[7] Shafer, 139.

[8] Ibid, 128.

understood that *ka* was not only a divine gift, but the key to accessing divinity itself. The king's divinity, or *ka*, was revealed through his acts of kingship.[9] While simply ascending to the throne and being king granted him a form of divinity, it was truly the king's acts and deeds during his reign that cemented his legitimacy and secured his rightful seat after death.

The station of king granted the sovereign unmatched temporal and spiritual power, the likes of which no other Egyptian citizen could have hoped to achieve.[10] Yet, this power was not a tool for the king's own selfish ends, or at least, it was not supposed to be. *Ka* came with it power, yes, but also responsibility and even humility. The king, being as close to the gods as he was through his dual nature, acted as an intermediary between divinity and humanity. He was the bridge between their two realms, a bridge that, if broken, would cause the collapse of both worlds. As Baines states in his chapter from *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*: "[the king] is marginal to the world of the gods, yet through him they rely on this world and on human efforts to sustain them and the cosmos."[11] This created a symbiotic relationship between the king and the gods. They truly needed him and likewise, he would not be in such a valued position without them. Despite this rich, cosmological power, the king was not to be mistaken as a god himself, at least, not in his human form. In royal inscriptions, the king's name often followed the epithet "son of," or "beloved of" a given deity, usually the creator god, Ra/Amun/Amun-Ra/Atum/Atum-Ra. This clearly places the king in a position of subordination or dependance.[12] Even in death, the power of the king was checked by the gods. Upon death, the king appeared to remain in his subordinate position relative to the gods.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Shafer, 139.

[11] Brill, E.J. *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*, 11.

[12] Ibid.

This served as a humble reminder to the king that, while he may be close to the gods, he was not one of them. Egyptians, therefore, never worshiped him as a "god-king."[13]

The 19th Dynasty king, Seti I, dedicated a temple to his late father, the pharaoh Ramesses I. The inscriptions within the temple serve to venerate Ramesses as well as legitimize Seti as his successor. One such scene is a piece of legal fiction that depicts Ramesses convening with the gods of Egypt and establishing that the 'deed' of the kingdom shall be rightfully passed down to his son. They agree, and it is by their divine power that Seti is officially granted dominion over the whole of Egypt.[14] In other words, the king gains permission to rule via the gods. This again establishes the two levels of divinity that were fundamental to the Egyptian understanding of the cosmos: the established Egyptian pantheon, who were the divine arbiters of the natural world, and the semi-divine kings, who ruled over that which the gods had created. While the hierarchy was clear, it was still a give-and-take relationship between king and god.[15] All of this, of course, was in service to *ma'at*. If one side were to grow more powerful than natural law demanded, then the system would be thrown out of balance and the universe—the earth, and the heavens alike—would be plunged back into the primordial chaos of *isft*. This is what fundamentally sets the Egyptian view of divine kingship apart from the Hellenistic and Roman versions of the concept. While the cosmos does rely on the institute of kingship, that power is checked by the fact that the king is without a doubt always subservient to the gods and not a god himself.

However, not unlike the Hellenistic monarchs and especially the later Roman emperors, the Egyptian king served as the chief ritualist of the state, operating in this position under the aegis of

[13] Brill, 11.

[14] Brisch, 63.

[15] Ibid.

divinely ordained power. The king was responsible for the construction of temples and the maintenance of the cult within. Of course, the actual performance of ritual would be delegated to the priests, but to the Egyptian eye, they were merely acting on behalf of the king's will. For this reason, the construction of temples and monuments became one of the king's most important duties.[16] For the most part, many pharaoh's reigns, and successes therein, can be gleaned by their building of public works. For example, during the reign of Ramesses II, the pharaoh embarked on several ambitious building projects, all which helped serve to dub him 'Ramesses the Great.' One of which was the monumental temples of Abu Simbel, located far to the south in the newly conquered lands of Nubia. There Ramesses sought to display his kingly power and further Egyptianize the people of Nubia through the massive temples he built dedicated to himself and his wife.[17] Additionally, as was proper for any sovereign, the king was responsible for all foreign relations, particularly matters of war.[18] For example, a successor of Ramesses II, Ramesses III in around 1175 BCE found himself defending a horde of mysterious foreign invaders, often called the 'Sea Peoples.' A relief from the mortuary temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu depicts the pharaoh prominently defending Egypt from the invaders (fig. 1). In the relief, Ramesses is presented much larger than the rest of the Egyptian warriors and is credited solely for the victory. The recording of the battle via the temple reliefs is the only evidence we have pertaining to this event.[19]

All these activities of the kingship, as one may have guessed, were heavily ritualized. It was to the point where describing such events as building temples and waging wars became so routine

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[16] Ibid, 47.

[17] Frood, Elizabeth. *Biographical Texts From Ramessid Egypt*, 13

[18] Brisch, 48.

[19] Drews, Robert. *The End of the Bronze Age: Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe ca. 1200 BC*, 51.

within ritual settings that they became canonized into ritual depictions of kings. Some temple inscriptions even depict "victory in battles never fought, and royal participation in rituals never performed."[20] Therein lies the struggle with discerning the actual actions of kings in Egypt, for all of their deeds only came to be "refracted through what was perceived as the norms of kingship."[21] Additionally, what was perceived as the norms of kingship changed depending on the era of ancient Egyptian history. Fortunately, much of the complexity regarding kingship and its depictions can be better understood through a further exploration of the royal *ka*.

Ka was representative of the divinity of the king; as such, it's been heavily mythologized. Rather than the king as a person being divine and warranting worship, it was instead the royal *ka* which resided within his soul that was routinely venerated by the Egyptian people. As Bell states: "Even though the *ka* imparted some portion of holiness to the physical beings it occupied, a king was adored not in his human, mortal form but only in his divine aspect."[22] This is yet another difference when compared to the deified rulers of the Hellenistic empires and Rome. Whereas figures like Alexander and Caesar (upon his death) were attributed as semi- or wholly divine status because of their supposed lineage in combination with their great deeds in life, Egyptian kings owed their divinity fully to their *ka*. As such, unlike in Hellenistic empires and Rome, Egyptian kings also held this divinity upon birth. Divinity was not conferred on the king after assuming kingship; instead, it had always been tied to their very being, even if the king in question did not end up amounting to anything. Such was the power of kingship in Egypt. It truly transcended the bounds of the physical human life, so much so, that *ka* allowed for the king's triumph over

[20] Brisch, 48.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Shafer, 140.

mortality. Just as the institute of kingship was poised to last forever, so was the king who headed it.

For ancient Egyptians there was a clear distinction between beings and aspects of nature that participated in the standard, linear 'secular time' as opposed to infinite, cyclical 'sacred time.' Secular time is what humans and most living things experienced. It brought these things in a straight line from birth all the way to death, where they ended indefinitely. Sacred time, on the other hand, followed an unending cycle of rising and falling, coming and going, death and rebirth. In nature, sacred time was attributed, as Shafer states, to the "succession of day and night, the phases of the moon, the rotation of the seasons, the mating behavior of animals, and the migrations of fish and birds; especially striking to them was the annual flooding of the Nile."[23]

Thanks to the divinity of the royal *ka*, kingship too was constructed to occur within sacred time instead of secular time.[24] In the ancient world the defining characteristic of divinity was immortality. Despite how divine a king claimed to be, he was human and would inevitably fall victim to mortal demise. To combat this, the Egyptians' conception of the royal *ka* included the ability for it to be transferable. While the kings as individuals came and went, the *ka* remained undying, entering the physical form of the next king who rose to power.[25] This process of transfer became widely understood as the king participating in sacred time, his divine self being caught in an eternal cycle of death and rebirth. This is the primary characteristic that set kings apart from the world of mortals and cemented their place firmly beside the gods, who too experienced the universe through sacred time.[26] The idea of kingship as a cycle was a further reason why the royal

[23] Shafer, 129.

[24] Ibid, 130.

[25] Shafer, 139.

[26] Ibid, 130.

ka of the king was worshiped as opposed to the individual himself. While this institution of royalty may have robbed kings of personal glory, it ensured that the office of kingship never died. It was to this the overwhelming longevity of the Egyptian monarchical system owed.

This system spawned the rather unique idea that each and every Egyptian king was effectively being the same exact person, to the point where kings would refer to themselves by the titles of their predecessors or stake claim to the past achievements in which they never participated. However, this process does not appear to have been done with any self-serving intent; rather, it was simply because individual kings were seen as fundamentally interchangeable and, for all intents and purposes, identical.[27] This concept is most clearly displayed through the many depictions of the king throughout the various dynasties of Egypt. Queen Hatshepsut of the 18th Dynasty used the 'sameness' of the king to her advantage in order to legitimize her rule. She would often present herself a male in statuary and followed the pharaonic motifs of the medium. For example, in the ten over-life sized portrait statues found in her temple at Deir el-Bahri, she's depicted with a male body and androgynous face. She also wears a man's kilt, the white crown of Upper Egypt and false beard, all common attributes in the standard depictions of Egyptian kings (fig. 2).[28] Hatshepsut was likely not trying to trick anybody with this depiction of herself, as there are other depictions of her where she appears more feminine. Rather, she depicted herself as the stereotypical pharaoh that had been established in the Egyptian canon, as every king had done before her, no matter their actual appearance. This inaccurate identification was then always justified because, according to tradition, every king was essentially the same person. For the kings all shared the same royal *ka* and it was that divine essence that let them assume the incarnation of

[27] Ibid, 139.

[28] *Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut*, 1479–1458 BCE, MET, 29.3.1.

a god in life and death. However, the identity of that god, the arbiter of the king's divine power, was not so evident. Who the god was depended heavily on the current station and attitudes of the kingship at any given period in ancient Egyptian history.

Up until this point I have referred to the creator god of Egypt as Ra; however, the identity of the demiurge was ever shifting. When dealing with a cosmological tradition that spans thousands of years and pertains to dozens of differing ruling dynasties, the specifics of iconography and ritual tend to change. However, when major changes did take place, they were always in response to, and placed in relation to, the evolving identity of kingship. Creation myths in most ancient societies, and particularly in Egypt, vary wildly depending on the time and, more importantly for this case, the place. For example, the creation myth observed in the city of Hermopolis consisted of a group of eight gods who embodied the inherent qualities of the primeval waters of the pre-creation universe. This generation of gods, called the *Ogdoad*, differed greatly from the relatively more established Egyptian canon. They also tended not to appear as characters in other mythological tales.[29] Then there was the creation myth of Thebes which appeared to borrow greatly from Hermopolis early on, but eventually branched out into its own unique tradition with a heavy emphasis on a god above the *Ogdoad* called Amun. Amun was all-powerful and more akin to the singular gods from monotheistic traditions.[30] During certain periods of ancient Egyptian history, often during reigns of specific kings or dynasties, a favored mythological tradition would take precedent. In the case of the Theban tradition, its primary deity, Amun, was almost exclusively worshiped, with considerable modifications, during the reign of Akhenaten, the tenth ruler of the 18th Dynasty (1351-1334 BCE).

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[29] Pinch Geradine. *Egyptian Mythology : A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt*, 60-61.

[30] Ibid.

Most of the time, however, rulers were not as strict as Akhenaten and allowed for a wide variety of worship with an ever expanding and constantly synchronizing cast of deities. Despite this, one creation myth in particular was able to rise to prominence due to its close association with kingship. This myth was the relatively new mythological/religious tradition that could trace its origins back to the city of Heliopolis, meaning "the city of the sun" in Greek. The creator god of the Heliopolitan tradition was first known as Atum. In the beginning, despite the name of the city, he did not yet possess many solar connotations – those would come later with the introduction of his counterpart, Ra.[31] The inception of Atum likely arose out of the Theban perception of Amun; in fact, they're likely one and the same since both were later synchronized with Ra where they then took on those aforementioned solar qualities. Atum, much like Amun, is presented similarly to a monotheistic deity with his ability to mold the primordial chaos into order through the introduction of *ma'at*, which further shapes the natural world, and by extension, Egyptian society.[32] One of Atum's most revered feats was the separation of the sexes. Atum himself, despite being referred to as male, was not wholly such. In temple art he was often depicted as either sex, both at the same time, or neither. It was not until the birth of his son Shu and his daughter Tefnut that the sexes were firmly established. In addition to being the first male and female deities, the siblings, according to Coffin Text spell 80, each represented a vitally important aspect of creation. Shu came to embody life, while Tefnut embodied *ma'at*. It's also said that Atum passed on these aspects to his children via the transfer of his *ka* onto them.[33]

[31] Ibid, 63.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid, 64.

With the creation of the sexes came the advent of reproduction. Through the union of Shu and Tefnut came the birth of Geb and Nut. Geb was the god who embodied the earth, while Nut was the goddess who embodied the sky. These two gods were inseparable, so much so, that they did not leave a space between earth and sky within which their children could be born into. So, their father, Shu, took it upon himself to separate the two deities and breathe life down onto the earth. There, alongside the newly sprung life on earth, the children of Geb and Nut were finally born. Their most famous offspring, and most pivotal to the wider Egyptian mythological tradition, were the brothers Osiris and Seth, and their sisters, Isis and Nephthys.[34] This collection of gods, Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Seth, Isis, and Nephthys, were dubbed the '*Ennead* of Heliopolis' or the 'Great *Ennead*.' Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, was often left out of the nine *Ennead* gods because he was seen as a manifestation of Atum-Ra, his ancestor.[35] They, for all intents and purposes, became the relative Egyptian 'canon' because of the growing importance of Heliopolis and its strong connection to kingship, which only solidified further over time.

Outside of Heliopolis, the continued story of the *Ennead* became very popular and had its own explanation for the divinity of kingship that is likely even older than the stories of Ra, with most dating back to early Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts. The myth revolves around Osiris as the first king of Egypt and Horus as his successor. Ra still may have been a distant king in this imagining and possible creator-deity, but his role was downplayed significantly. The primary focus of the myth, rather than the origins and nature of kingship, was instead to explain the burial practices of the Egyptians. It was said that the heirs to the creator's reign over Egypt, and by proxy the cosmos, Shu and Geb, both withdrew from the mortal plain, leaving Geb's eldest son, Osiris to take the

[34] Ibid, 65.

[35] Ibid, 66.

throne.[36] Unlike Ra, Osiris seemed to have ruled Egypt as entirely mortal. In fact, Greek writers did not even see Osiris as one of the Egyptian gods, but closer to a great "culture hero" who taught agriculture and crafts, and established law and religion.[37] These creation acts are of civilization, not nature, unlike Atum-Ra. Of course, the Egyptians saw this all as Osiris' duty in maintaining *ma'at*, rather than seeing all these creations as fully his own.[38]

At its core the myth tells of brotherly conflict, which is a motif that comes up often in the ancient world through the likes of Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus, and others. However, this may well be one of the first instances of it. Osiris' brother Seth, whose exact motives were unclear, vowed to take revenge on the king. Seth's motives varied, with later sources linking it to his jealousy of Osiris regarding his wife, Isis. While earlier sources are vaguer, one such reasoning from Pyramid Text spell 477 stated that Seth was retaliating after Osiris had given his brother a kick.[39] Nevertheless, Osiris was killed by Seth either by a violent animal attack or drowning in the Nile. Osiris died and was cast down into the "land of silence." To make matters worse, Seth decided to cut up Osiris' body and scatter the pieces across Egypt, leaving Isis to find them. Once Isis eventually collected all the missing pieces of Osiris, she put them back together through the process of mummification. She then properly entombed him so that he would be allowed to be revivificated in death.[40] This was seen as the one of the first instances of proper burial rites in Egypt and served as an origin for the practice. Although this was the primary etiological purpose of the myth, it also provided an origin for the divinity of the kingship as well. According to the

[36] Ibid, 77.

[37] Ibid, 78.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid, 80.

Book of the Dead, spell 175, Atum spoke to Osiris in the afterlife, telling him that he'd been granted this eternal kingdom as his own where he'd rule for eternity, while his son, Horus, would become the perpetual ruler in the land of the living.[41] Pharaohs would then take this to mean that they were an incarnation of Horus as they lived and became an incarnation of Osiris once they had passed on to the afterlife. Consequently, the king was always divine because he was Horus, but the king as his mortal form was allowed to die and reincarnate.[42]

Meanwhile, back in Heliopolis, a different tradition had arisen. There, Atum became more than just a creator god; he became a king as well. Early on he became syncretized with the sun god Ra. Ra had likely not started as a creator god himself, but his identity as a king was undisputed. A loosely connected Heliopolitan *Ennead*-adjacent myth tells the tale of a golden age of Egypt where the Nile was ruled by its first king, the divine Ra, embodiment of the sun.[43] Many ancient cultures processed a 'golden age' myth, where their societies prospered under an oft-divine ruler. For example, the Greeks, according to Hesiod, told of a literal golden age of men where they lived in peace and harmony beneath the rule of the Titan-king of the gods, Cronos. Similarly, this myth from the Middle Kingdom, which became one of the primary tales of Ra, was one where he assumed the position of the golden age 'first ruler.' This 'first reign' of Ra must have been confusing to the Egyptians themselves, considering the existence of Osiris and Horus who were already seen as the first kings. Additionally, Ra alone was rarely ever mentioned as part of the *Ennead* in the early Pyramid Texts; whenever he was, he'd already been synchronized with Atum. As such, the subject of the golden age myth revolves around the secret 'true name of Ra,' which

[41] Ibid, 78.

[42] Shafer, 139.

[43] Ibid, 68.

could be an allusion to his rather confusing identity. Nevertheless, with the rise of his patron city, Heliopolis, the "True Name of Ra" hymn became widely popular by the New Kingdom and was often used in conjunction with other healing spells.[44]

The myth revolved around the goddess Isis seeking to use her divine wisdom to trick Ra into revealing his true name, for it was said that whoever knew his true name would hold power over him.[45] His name was supposedly "concealed deep within his stomach,"[46] which could be an allusion to the nature of the name truly being a metaphor for his royal *ka*, his kingly lifeforce. Interestingly, this myth also presents Ra as showing signs of old age. He drools, allowing for Isis to steal his saliva and create a snake that has the power to inflict harm onto him.[47] This could again be an allusion to actual Egyptian kingship, showing that even Ra ruled Egypt in a mortal body, just as his successors would continue to do. This, of course, was being used as a means to justify the inherent mortality of the Egyptian kings despite their claim to divinity. Isis went on to poison Ra with the snake she'd created from his spit. She then promised to heal him only if he revealed to her his name, a condition with which he eventually complied.[48] No sources reveal to us what Ra whispered to Isis, only that he told her to share it with the son that she would bear, Horus. This would then ensure that the kingship would pass on to him once Ra passed and became fully divine once again.[49] This could be yet another allusion to the transfer of the royal *ka* from one king to another.

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[44] Ibid, 69.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid, 70.

[48] Ibid, 71.

[49] Ibid.

These two myths, Osiris and Horus, and Ra and Isis, present different origins for divine kingship, and further call into question the true nature the divinity of kingship itself. Was the pharaoh a manifestation of Horus in life and Osiris in death? Or was he forever and always a manifestation of Atum-Ra, the sun, and the hand of creation? Naturally, to give the office of kingship more power, kings and their administrations tended to prefer the later Heliopolitan tradition of Ra. The myth of Osiris, however, was central to Egyptian culture due to its strong connection to burial rites, so his character could not be wholly discarded—thus kings had to subtly shift the focus of kingship away from Osiris and over to Ra. Therefore, Osiris remained a prominent figure, still ruling the land of the dead. However, his duty regarding the king was now to simply take on his ritually reintegrated body, not be his incarnation. Instead, while Osiris took on the physical, mortal sides of the kings, their royal *ka* would return to the heavens and rejoin with Ra who'd originally given it. There, the *ka* could continue to be worshiped via worship to the sun god.[50] This new solar identity of the king worked naturally with his participation in the cyclical, sacred time of the cosmos. He, like Ra, followed in the footsteps of the sun god by journeying with him across the sky in life, to then set and 'die' beneath the earth. Though unlike Osiris, the king did not fully die there, instead, like Ra, he underwent a form of regeneration in the *Duat*, or afterlife, only to then emerge anew within a different physical body, but with the same royal *ka*. This, of course, was meant to simulate Ra's spiritual death and rebirth every dusk and dawn.[51]

Meanwhile, Horus remained relatively prominent. He was seen as the first king after Ra, and as such, he began the cycle of kings being a manifestation of him. While Ra was blatantly substituted for Osiris, Horus began to take on more solar qualities to link him closer to Ra.[52] It

[50] Ibid, 144.

[51] Brill, xix

came to the point where Horus began to be seen more as the son of Ra, rather than the son of Osiris. The epithet, 'Son of Ra' then became a prominent title used by kings to solidify this connection between themselves, Horus, and Ra.[53]

At long last, the with the cosmological and societal traditions having been constructed in such way over thousands of years, the stage had been set for obelisk to begin playing a major role in the presentation and preservation of these traditions, namely through the tangible connection these monuments symbolized between divinity and kingship. By the early New Kingdom, the connection between the king and Ra was abundantly clear through the extensive use of these obelisks. However, the beginnings of this transition could be seen as early as the 5th Dynasty through the many sun temples built at the time. These temples used solar imagery in accordance with secular time to make the ideas of kingship, god, and the sun, inseparable. Egyptian temples and burial monuments had always been a place where kings sought to display not only their power, but their divinity. As early as the creation of the great Pyramid of Giza by the pharaoh Khufu in the Old Kingdom, they came to symbolize the king's apotheosis.[54] Originally, pyramids were meant to represent the primordial mount, 'the *benben*,' from which, according to the etiological myths, the earth had been created. Later, pyramids also came to symbolize a ray of Ra's divine light, an idea that would be prioritized further with the advent of obelisks.[55]

The *benben*, along with is more solar implications, likely first appeared in an early temple of Atum-Ra in Heliopolis. The centerpiece of the temple was the *benben* stone itself which was a

[52] Shafer, 139.

[53] Brill, 9.

[54] Nuzzolo, Massimiliano. *Sun Temples and Kingship in the Ancient Egyptian Kingdom*, 3.

[55] Curran, Brian A., Antony Grafton, Pamela O. Long, Benjamin Weiss. *Obelisk: A History*, 14.

small stone pillar with a pyramidion.[56] *Ben* as a word, meant 'top,' so *benben* refers to 'the very top.'[57] Hence the *benben* took on what would become the iconic pyramid-shape, four sides reaching their apex at a single point, which, in turn, led to the shape's prominence within the Egyptian architectural landscape. However, this very stone at Heliopolis was thought to have been the origin point from which demiurge created the universe, not a replica. As such, it also marked the spot where the sun's rays first touched the earth, this beginning the origins of the link between creation and the sun. [58] This sacred place was also linked to the cult of the phoenix, or *Benu*-bird, possibly roping in early notions of rebirth into this symbolic mix. All these concepts—creation, the sun, and rebirth—would all later be linked to kingship. However, at the time, the cult of the sun at Heliopolis had little to do with the seat of power in Old Kingdom Egypt. It was not until the aforementioned sun temples of the 5th Dynasty emerged were these solar-affiliated concepts brought into the limelight and used specifically by kings for the very first time.

Likely having run out of resources to commit to emulating the great pyramid-style tombs of the pervious dynasty, the pharaohs of the 5th Dynasty looked to other temple styles that fulfilled similar symbolic needs. They chose the sun temple of Heliopolis and kept many of its core components, namely the central prominence of the *benben*, while also adding elements once at home in pyramid tombs to introduce symbols of kingship. Two prominent sun temples of the time were constructed by the kings Userkaf and Niuserra.[59] Both temples were situated in the areas of Abu Sir and Saqqara respectively and were part of the extensive 'pyramid field' just north of

[56] Sorek, Susan. *The Emperors' Needles: Egyptian Obelisks and Rome*, 9.

[57] Shafer, 9.

[58] Curran, 14.

[59] Nuzzolo, 3

Giza.[60] Their placements, so close to the Great Pyramids, was likely because the kings were trying to functionally replace them with these new sun temples. Unlike the pyramids, however, they took on more than just funerary purposes and became a place of cultic worship of the kingship, effectively giving the king a personal, and highly accessible, temple to himself.[61] As historian Massimiliano Nuzzolo states, "[the 5th Dynasty sun temples] accomplished a variegated set of cult demands, linked as much to the after worldly as to the worldly aspect of the celebration of kingship."[62] One of the main rituals preformed here was that of the king's power renewal during the *Sed* festival, during which he was worshiped along side Ra and made to emulate the sun god's mythical journey of death and rebirth across the sky.[63] The festival would represent this, quite literally, as the 'dead' king was thought to have entered the temple under the guise of Horus before fulfilling his duties and gaining access to Ra in the innermost room of the mortuary temple, where the *benben* resided. Shortly after, his body would be placed inside the tomb, in which it was thought that the king would then shed his physical form, leaving his mortal half to Osiris in the *Duat*, while his godly side begun its ascension. Outside the temple, five boat-pits were made so that once the king had ascended, he'd be able to use the boats to take his rightful place beside Ra in his journey across the ocean of the sky.[64] This was one of the first instances where the king was actively conflated with Ra.

Likewise, the *benben* itself was beginning to be used to the same effect. However, these sun temples innovated upon the original in Heliopolis by transforming the relatively small *benben*

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[60] Curran, 20.

[61] Nuzzolo, Massimiliano. *The Sun Temples of the Vth Dynasty: A Reassessment*, 217.

[62] Ibid, 217-218.

[63] Nuzzolo, Massimiliano. *Sun Temples and Kingship in the Ancient Egyptian Kingdom*, 3.

[64] Ibid, 4.

stone into a fully fleshed out monument in and of itself. These proto-obelisks were the centerpieces of the temples and also found themselves positioned outside, often in pairs, contrasting the singular *benben* in Heliopolis.[65] The obelisks-like monuments of the 5th Dynasty sun temples cannot be considered 'real obelisks' due to the fact that were fashioned not from a single chiseled piece of stone, as they would later come to be made, but of multiple, laid together bricks in the same manner pyramids were built at the time, but on a much smaller scale (fig. 3).[66] Additionally, these proto-obelisks, while bigger than the original *benben* stone, were still usually no more than ten feet in height.[67] Nevertheless, this was the first instance of the king explicitly using the monument to represent himself and as a tool to connect himself to Ra. It would appear that, in adopting the sun temples from Heliopolis, the wider Egyptian power structure was start with beginning to adopt the notion of the king as an incarnation of Ra, rather than Osiris. The use of the proto-obelisk found within was symbolic of that change. This adoption, however, would be cut short after the construction of sun temples fell out of favor after the 5th Dynasty and would not reappear again until the New Kingdom, specifically during the 18th and 19th Dynasties, over a thousand years later. With their reemergence, came the advent of obelisks proper.

A new age of Egypt dawned upon the founding of the 18th Dynasty by King Ahmose I in 1570 BCE, who established Thebes as the new Egyptian capital. There, succeeding kings such as Amenhotep III, made a concerted effort to instate the Theban god Amun as the principal deity of the state by syncretizing him into Heliopolitan Atum-Ra, allowing Amun to take on their solar and kingly aspects.[68] From then on out (for the most part) Amun represented the rising sun and Atum

[65] Curran, 20.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Tyldesley, Joyce. *Egypt's Golden Empire: The Age of the New Kingdom*, 18–19.

the setting, while Ra represented the sun broadly.[69] All three gods had become one in the same, but in some respects still unique, acting almost like the Catholic faith's Holy Trinity. Nonetheless, the god was once again used to demonstrate kingliness, divinity, and the sun, as he had back in the 5th Dynasty. This was of course, best demonstrated by the return of the *benben*, now in the form of the obelisk proper.

The word obelisk derives from the Greek *obeliskos*, meaning "little spit" or "skewer." In Egyptian, they came to be called *tekhen*, from a verb meaning "to pierce."[70] These names indicated the stark contrast between the obelisk and the original *benben* stone. Where the *benben* was relatively short and more pyramid-like, the obelisks were tall and thin. They were made like this to evoke a literal piercing of the sky, symbolically connecting the earth to realm of the sun god,[71] serving as a representation of the king's role as an intermediary between the mortal and the divine.[72] The later Roman historian, Pliny the Elder, hypothesized that the monument had eventually become a more simplified symbolic representation of a single ray of Ra's divine light. As such, like the *benben*, obelisks were characterized by their pyramidion top, which was often sheathed in bronze, gold, or electrum, so that it may easily catch the sun's rays and shine in its divine light.[73]

Obelisks began to be used outside a funerary context with their reintroduction into the Egyptian architectural landscape beginning at the temple complex of Karnak along the eastern bank of the

[69] Sorek, 14

[70] Curran, 14.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid, 18.

[73] Ibid, 14.

Nile.[74] The western bank, across from Thebes and Karnak, was a barren land reserved for tombs and became known as the Valley of the Kings which was where the funerary architecture of kings resided. Meanwhile, Karnak became the religious center of Thebes and canvas for which 18th and 19th Dynasty kings could display their power through monumental architecture, namely by incorporating obelisks into their grand temple complexes to the gods but, by proxy, also to themselves. Later, Ramesside kings of the 20th Dynasty would use obelisks in much the same way in their new capital of Tanis on the Delta.[75] And throughout each dynasty, dozens of additional obelisks were erected back at the origin point of the sun cult; Heliopolis.[76]

The exact technique that the Egyptians employed to quarry, transport, and erect these massive, single-stone monoliths, some of which reaching over 90 feet in height and weighing well over 100 tons, is not fully understood.[77] They were often made of a single piece of mottled-pink granite, chiseled from a quarry in Aswan (fig. 4). Aswan was located along the first cataract of the Nile, nearly a 125 miles away from Karnak and five hundred and sixty miles south of Cairo. The place was often understood as residing at the bounds of the Egyptian kingdom's territory.[78] Standard transportation of segmented stones from the Aswan quarries down the Nile is not a difficult task alone, but the fact that the obelisks had to be a single cut of stone added tremendous difficulty to the quarrying, transportation, and erection efforts. The reason behind why obelisks had to be made this way is unclear. However, pharaohs often mentioned the fact that they were in their inscriptions. The base inscription of one of Queen Hatshepsut's obelisks in Karnak reads (fig. 5):

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[74] Sorek, 14.

[75] Ibid, 15.

[76] Curran, 21.

[77] Ibid, 24.

[78] Ibid.

> So as regards these two great obelisks,
> Wrought with electrum by my majesty for my father Amun,
> In order that may name endure this temple,
> For eternity and everlastingness,
> They are each made of one block of hard granite,
> Without seam, without joining together![79]

Here, it appears that Hatshepsut was attributing the importance of the 'single stone' as symbolic of the everlasting, unbroken nature of kingship and the king's divine identity alongside undying Amun-Ra. While this may have been the reasoning symbolically, in practice, the fact that the obelisk was a single piece of unwieldy granite acted as a reminder of the pharaoh's earthly might.[80] Only he, a being of divine essence, could perform the impossible feat that was the erection of an obelisk. Additionally, the erection of a single obelisk could take years to accomplish, meaning that kings whose reigns were long and successful were made known via the number of obelisks they erected in their name during their rule.[81]

Hatshepsut erected four obelisks during her reign, which, for the time, was an impressive number. Two flanked the entrance of her massive temple at Karnak and she erected two more at Heliopolis.[82] This remarkable feat was likely done to further legitimize her rule, as her kingship—and by proxy her divinity—as likely being called into question due to her gender. There was no better way to put to ease her detractors by performing what only a true king of Egypt could do, the erection of obelisks. In a similar vein, Hatshepsut's stepson, and successor, Tutmose III erected seven obelisks at Karnak and two more at Heliopolis.[83] Tutmose III, who'd initiated a kingdom-

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[79] Ibid, 16.

[80] Ibid, 17.

[81] Ibid, 23.

[82] Ibid, 21.

[83] Ibid.

wide defacing of Hatshepsut's image and denigration of her work as pharaoh, likely prioritized getting up as many obelisks he could to outdo his stepmother, lest he appear lesser than the *woman* who preceded him. Obelisks had become the new architectural language of royal power in Egypt and kings would stop at nothing to be associated with as many of them as possible.

I'd be remiss not to mention the 'reigning champion' of obelisks, the 19th Dynasty pharaoh, Ramesses II, often touted as the most celebrated and powerful king of the New Kingdom period. His father, Seti I, had only partially begun the carving of the single obelisk to his name. However, most of the work had been done as it had been fully quarried and since carried upriver to Heliopolis. However, before the inscriptions were complete, Seti I passed, leaving Ramesses to finish the inscriptions and properly install the obelisk at the temple complex in Heliopolis. When Ramesses completed the inscriptions, he did so with his own name. Part of the inscription reads:

> Re shines forth, rejoicing over them in his House of millions of years. It is His Majesty who has completed ["beautified"] this monument for his father, so that his name might be granted to aid in the House of Re; Made for him [by] the Son of Re, Ramesses II, the beloved of Atum, Lord of Heliopolis, and given forever.[84]

Despite the inscriptions, history attributed the obelisk to Seti I and it stood for a thousand years before it was transported to Rome where it eventually became known as the Lateran Obelisk.[85] Nonetheless, Ramesses had set a precedent for himself and succeeding kings that one could appropriate the obelisk of a past ruler. These acts were of course justified by the fact that, according to tradition, the Egyptian king was meant to be all the same divine person. In effect, the names of the kings, like their physical bodies, were interchangeable. Another such example was Ramesses II's appropriation of Tutmose III's obelisk erected in Heliopolis two hundred years earlier. Like with his father's obelisk, though these inscriptions were completed, Ramesses II changed the name

[84] Ibid, 13.

[85] Ibid, 24.

of Tutmose III to his own.[86] This obelisk in particular, along with its nearly identical twin, had a rather eventful life. They were moved during the Augustan period to Alexandria to stand outside the entrance of a mausoleum constructed by Cleopatra, hence they were each dubbed 'Cleopatra's Needles.' Later, they were rediscovered and eventually gifted to New York and London respectively by the by the Khedive of Egypt in the nineteenth century.[87] Through each of these transitions in history, the obelisks were often attributed to Ramesses II, not to the king who actually built them. Ramesses II ended his sixty-six-year reign with at least twenty-five obelisks to his name, some of which were from scratch, while others via appropriation. Meanwhile, his father Seti I, who was a great pharaoh in his own right, had dedicated to him only one obelisk in his fifteen years of rule.[88]

All the while, despite the glorification and further deification of kingship, the gods remained supreme as seen through the repeated motifs of the obelisk inscriptions. The shafts of the obelisks were used purely for the glorification of the king in an earthly sense, with many inscribing royal victories and other achievements, usually architectural.[89] Meanwhile, the pyramidion, being the most sacred aspect of the monument, was reserved for imagery that paid respect to the sun god.[90] Early on, the pyramidion would often depict an image of the king praying, crawling, or kneeling before the much larger visage of the god. This was to show the dependency the king had to the god, because it was to him that the king owed his life, health, strength, and most importantly, his

[86] Ibid.

[87] Sorek, 131.

[88] Curran, 24.

[89] Sorek, 14.

[90] Ibid.

divinity.[91] However, despite their more religious context, the pyramidion inscriptions still managed to act as a glorification of the king. Over time, this use of the pyramidion became more blatant. A later period obelisk in Heliopolis from 26th Dynasty king, Psamtik II (595–589 BCE), which would later serve as the gnomon for the Hologorium of Augustus, had the following inscribed on one side of its pyramidion (fig. 6): "I give you life, all serenity, all health and all joy of heart forever," These inscribed words are understood as those of Ra, who is displayed prominently, beside a sphinx which was symbolic of kingship. The other side reads: "King of the South and the North, Nefer-ab-Rā son of Rā, Psemmthek living like Rā forever and ever."[92] These inscriptions appear to be the full title of Psamtik II who is displayed in much the same way the god is, positioned as his reflection and sitting upon the very same throne. The king here is seen as an equal, rather than a subordinate. Or perhaps it was meant to symbolize that, while the king may be called the 'Son of Ra,' in reality, he and the god were now one and the same, even in life. Either way, the pharaoh's use of obelisks from the New Kingdom onward served to not only cement Amun-Ra/Atum-Ra as the chief deity of the land, but also to further deify the king himself.

Obelisks did not reach quite the same cultural and institutional height after the New Kingdom period. This was largely due to the fact that kingship and its authority over the land had begun to weaken. Firstly, a weakening that was seen most notably by the Persian invasion of King Cambyses in 525 BCE, who broke the dynastic tradition for a time.[93] Despite this, Egyptian kingship would eventually continue, but under a new foreign guise. In 332-331 BCE, Egypt was conquered by Alexander the Great, but this time, unlike under the Persians, Egyptian kingship was

[91] Ibid.

[92] James Stuart's engraving of the pyramidion of the Montecitorio Obelisk; Bandini 1750: plate III.

[93] Curran, 32.

firmly reestablished. Familiar as it was, the new Ptolemaic Dynasty was not purely Egyptian, but was Macedonian. And while the Ptolemies tried their best to emulate what came before by building temples and monuments in accordance with Egyptian tradition, even erecting a few minor obelisks of their own, they nonetheless marked the decline and eventual definitive end of dynastical Egypt.[94] Obelisks themselves had not only fallen out of use but forgotten as well. Many, such as the obelisk of Psamtik II, had toppled and laid buried in the ruins of the temple complexes that were once the epicenter of royal worship. As the obelisks slept, however, the world changed, and Egypt was conquered yet again. In 10 BCE, hundreds of years after its initial creation, the obelisk of Psamtik II was excavated and Ra's light shined upon it once more. Although, after its treacherous odyssey down the Nile and across the Mediterranean, perhaps it was more apt to say that it now bathed in the divine light of Sol-Apollo. For the king who was now associated with this monolith was no longer Psamtik II, nor was he Egyptian, nor was he even considered a 'king' at all. Instead, the mighty obelisk became synonymous with *Caesar*, specifically, the first in a long line of a new *imperial* dynasty. It was now the obelisk of Augustus Caesar, the first emperor of Rome.

[94] Ibid, 33.

CHAPTER II

Emperors & Obelisks: The Deification of the Roman Emperor

In July of 30 BCE, Octavian, now called Augustus, entered Egypt as its conqueror. A year prior, the newly self-appointed emperor had defeated and embarrassed his rival Mark Antony at the naval battle of Actium. Antony, along with Cleopatra, fled back to their powerbase in Alexandria. For Augustus, the conflict between himself and Antony for the right to be Caesar's heir was essentially over. Antony's defeat at Actium was one of Augustus' first steps in his long-term goal of securing his new position. And so, Augustus and his forces followed them to Egypt and promptly laid siege to Alexandria. The city fell to him rather quickly and, with his city taken, according to Roman historian Suetonius, Mark Antony surrendered to Augustus in the hopes to negotiate peaceful terms. Augustus, however, refused and forced his rival to take his own life.[95] His Egyptian wife, Cleopatra, on the other hand, Augustus wanted alive so that he might use her as the crowning trophy in his triumphal march through the streets of Rome. Unfortunately, she too committed suicide, allegedly via asp venom, depriving Augustus of the satisfaction.[96] Lastly, Caesarion, son of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra and the last Pharaonic king of Egypt in the line of Ptolemy, was put to death on Augustus' orders.[97] With the boy-king gone, Augustus was seen indisputably as Caesar's legitimate heir.

While eliminating his adversaries may have been Augustus' primary goal during his brief stay in Egypt, with the death of Cleopatra and Caesarion and the definitive ending of the pharaonic dynasties, he'd also had inadvertently placed himself, like dozens of conquerors had done before,

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[95] Suet. *Aug*. 17.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid.

as next in line to the Egyptian throne. Despite this seemingly advantageous circumstance, Augustus declined to be crowned pharaoh. He most likely declined the great honor for two reasons. Firstly, back in Italy, hearing tell of Augustus being officially established as a 'king', of a foreign land no less, would have frightened the Roman people who had been strictly anti-monarchy since the founding of their republic. Additionally, the minds of the Roman people were still soured by the thought of Egyptian royalty as it conjured up images of the drunken and frivolous Mark Antony and his bewitching queen, Cleopatra.[98] This, of course, was a product of Augustus' own very effective anti-Egyptian propaganda machine that ran during the civil war. Secondly, Augustus' ambitions were beyond that of Egypt, and he did not wish to tie himself down to the position of pharaoh.[99] At the same time, he did not want to claim to be a Hellenistic king either. The alleged Hellenization of Mark Antony was yet another effective product of Augustus' propaganda and it painted not only Cleopatra, but Egypt itself as a dangerous temptress that could turn model Roman men soft and *Greek*. Roman historian, Cassius Dio (155-235 BCE), a scholarly product of such propaganda, harshly details the widely held sentiment in his histories:

> When he sees that this man [Antony] has now abandoned all his ancestors' habits of life, has emulated all alien and barbaric customs, that he pays no honor to us or to the laws or to his fathers' gods, but pays homage to that wench [Cleopatra] as if she were some Isis or Selene... but being a slave to that woman, he undertakes the war and its self-chosen dangers on her behalf against us and against his country... Therefore let no one count him a Roman, but rather an Egyptian.[100]

A similar anti-Egyptian/Hellenistic sentiment, though less explicit, extended to the actions of Julius Caesar, the entire Ptolemaic dynasty and, in Augustus' mind, perhaps even to Alexander himself. Augustus, while avoiding officially adopting a title akin to pharaoh or Hellenistic king,

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[98] Dundas, Gregory S. *Augustus and the Kingship of Egypt*. *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 443.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Cass, Dio, 50.25-26.

still sought to use the symbolism found in both positions to legitimize his brand-new seat of power, that of emperor, through royal and divine sanction. Nowhere on earth was there a place richer with divine monarchical symbolism than in Egypt. Here, Augustus would find, along with various other methods, the ultimate tool to achieve his efforts in this arena: the obelisk.

After the defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, Augustus appeared to be uninterested in Egypt for the time being. His stay in the newly established province was relatively brief, likely only a few months at most.[101] This was noticeably unique compared to his predecessors, Caesar and Antony, both of whom stayed for large extended periods of time. Augustus did, however, make time for a form of sightseeing. His interests did not lay in marvels of the ancient kingdoms of Egypt; rather he sought to pay a visit to the tomb of a non-Egyptian man he admired greatly. According to dozens of Roman writers, Suetonius being one of the earliest (second century CE), Augustus visited the tomb of Alexander the Great. There he ordered that the sarcophagus containing the body of Alexander be brought to him so that he may gaze upon it. After this, he supposedly placed a golden laurel upon Alexander's head as a sign of his respect. Then, once his respects were paid, the priests asked if he also wished to see the tomb of the Ptolemaic kings, those who succeeded Alexander in Egypt. According to Suetonius, to this question Augustus replied, "My wish was to see a king, not corpses," effectively dismissing the whole of the Ptolemaic dynasty who ruled over Egypt for nearly three centuries, the longest of any Pharaonic dynasty.[102]

While Augustus' denial to see the Ptolemaic kings may have seemed like a dismissal of Egyptian kingship as a whole, it was far from it. He was simply dismissing the Ptolemies as the legitimate successors of Alexander, and by extension, calling into question their legitimacy as a

[101] Ibid, 438.

[102] Suet. *Aug*. 18.

Pharaonic dynasty. By skipping over the Ptolemies, Augustus was, in effect, positioning himself as the true successor of Alexander, not just as pharaoh, but as world-conqueror.[103] Still, Augustus sought to do more than simply succeed Alexander, he wanted to emulate his success as well. He did so primarily by emulating Alexander's use of Egyptian mythology, symbolism, and kingship for the purposes of personal deification. All of which, most likely done unconsciously by Alexander, Augustus wanted to recreate deliberately.

The true history of Alexander the Great's life and later ascension to godhood, is greatly colored by the motivations and circumstances of the various ancient writers through which it was preserved. Augustus was not so much concerned with the true story of Alexander, but rather the sensational understanding of his life and character that was popular among the Roman people and the broader Greco-Roman world. According to popular tradition, Alexander had always been told by his mother, Olympias, that his true father was not Philip II of Macedon but Zeus himself, making him divine. Alexander likely believed in his mother and proclaimed to indeed be a son of Zeus during his campaigns. He would even go so far as to depict himself in art or on coinage as Dionysus or Heracles, both sons of Zeus.[104] However, it wasn't until his journey across the desert to the oracle of Siwa in Egypt that he allegedly found confirmation his mother's claims to.[105] After seizing Egypt from the Persian Empire in 332 BCE, Alexander was more or less welcomed by the Egyptian people, who had been adversarial towards their Persian rulers for the better part of the last hundred years.[106] So when Alexander arrived as a conqueror, he was seen more as a liberator and was afforded all the respects and luxuries Egypt had to offer. He enjoyed it so much that he

[103] Dundas, 441.

[104] Wheatly, Pat, & Charlotte Dunn. "Coinage as Propaganda." *Alexander the Great and Propaganda*, 175.

[105] Arr. *Anab*. 3.3.2.

[106] Ibid, 3.1.1.

decided to found a city on the western coast of the delta, Alexandria, one of the many cities named after himself. While his workmen began the construction of the city, Alexander used the time to make an excursion to the famed Oracle of Ammon.[107] The god Ammon, who himself was a later version of Amun-Ra, was seen by the Greeks as another guise of Zeus. It is then no wonder why Alexander sought to visit such a place if it meant he could have a chance at communion with his alleged divine father. There at Siwa, from the Egyptian oracle, Alexander received the information he wanted to hear and confirmed his suspicions and his mother's claims that he might have been indeed the son of Zeus and not Philip. Although, many writers, as Plutarch states, believed that Alexander misheard the oracle when the Egyptian tried to speak to him in Greek. His foreign pronunciation of the phrase *O paidion*, meaning 'O my son,' was heard as ending with an 's' instead of an 'n.' Therefore, Alexander instead may have heard the phrase *O pai Dios*, meaning 'O son of Zeus.'[108] From then on, Alexander proudly depicted himself on coinage with the horns of the syncretized Egyptian god Zeus-Ammon.[109] This is again another instance of Alexander not necessarily seeking to artificially craft this divine lineage for himself, rather, it was something he truly wanted to believe. This was unlike Augustus who was seeking divinity purely for political gain.

Nevertheless, just as Alexander himself was convinced without a doubt that he was divine, so too were the Egyptian people. Not long after his visit to the oracle of Siwa, or perhaps sometime before, Alexander was crowned pharaoh in the city of Memphis. For the Egyptians, Alexander was not only their new king, but explicitly a son of Amun-Ra, making him a definitive Horus-king.[110]

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[107] Plut. *Vit. Alex*. 26.6-7.

[108] Ibid, 27.3-5.

[109] Wheatly, 174.

Finally, after decades of Persian rule, despite the fact that Alexander was a foreigner, traditional Egyptian kingship was restored with all its divine implications firmly intact. Ptolemy I Soter, Alexander's general who gained control of Egypt after his death, understood the divine preconditions of the Egyptian political landscape, likely far better than Alexander himself did. He understood the importance of maintaining the Egyptian kingship and positioned his new dynasty to follow suit not just with Alexander, but with the pharaohs who came long before him as well. Ptolemy, however, did not have the explicit and powerful association to Zeus-Ammon that Alexander did, so instead chose the syncretic deity Sarapis to act as the patron deity of his new dynasty.[111] While weaker than an association with Ammon, Sarapis was likely chosen due to his connection to the god's Hellenized place of origin, the Black Sea city of Sinope.[112] Another connection could have been from the root *-apis* which was the same as the ancient Greek king Apis who was said to have died in Egypt.[113] Splicing divine genealogies like this was common practice among the Greeks, and while it may seem flimsy, it allowed for Ptolemy to comfortably claim divinity and the right of succession in accordance with the old pharaonic system. Augustus, however, was not interested in a loose connection to a Greco-Egyptian god in order to set up a pharaonic dynasty, nor was he particularly interested in the gods of Egypt at all. Instead, he sought to introduce the concept of a divine king abroad in Rome using methods originating in Egyptian kingship.

[110] Gregory, Steven. "The Obelisks of Augustus: The Significance of a Symbolic Element of the Architectural Landscape in the Transmission of Ideology from Egypt to Rome.", 17.

[111] Takács, Sarolta A. "Alexandria in Rome." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, vol. 97, 265.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid.

Before coming to Egypt, Augustus had already begun to lay the groundwork of his apotheosis, through the swift deification of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar. This was no easy feat, for, unlike the Egyptians, the honoring of a mortal as a god, even after their passing, did not come easy to the Roman mind. Luckily for Augustus, however, there had been a precedent set for such an occurrence. Romulus, the founder of Rome, while understood as the son of a god, was still mortal up until his death. As generations passed however, he was honored as a divinity, alongside other notable Roman founding heroes such as Aeneas and Latinus.[114] Later traditions, likely marred by Augustan influence, would further flesh out this transition by cementing the notion that directly upon his death, Romulus ascended to become the god Quirinus.[115] So, Augustus sought out to do the same and deify unarguably the most popular Roman since Romulus. Understanding the popularity of Caesar in Rome, Augustus not only vowed to avenge his death, but also honor him with several days of festivals and games. During the first round of games put on by Augustus, a comet was said to have appeared in the sky above them and remained there for seven days. A claim spread that the comet was in fact the soul of Caesar being received into the heavens as a god.[116] Augustus was quick to validate this rumor and had Caesar officially made a god by formal decree who was now allowed to be worshiped as the Divine Julius.[117] Augustus would later go on to facilitate the worship of this new god by constructing the temple of Mars Ultor, celebrating the avenging of Caesar and the divine lineage of the Julian clan (of which Augustus was sure to place depictions of himself as the product), and the temple of Divine Julius for the formal worship of

[114] Burton, Henry Fairfield. "The Worship of the Roman Emperors." *The Biblical World*, vol. 40, no. 2, 80.

[115] Plut. *Vit. Rom*. 28.

[116] Suet. *Iul*. 88.

[117] Ibid.

Caesar as a god.[118] Augustus would also strengthen his connection to his newly deified father by taking his now divine name, *Caesar*, as his new title.[119]

In terms of his propaganda, Augustus was now the son of a god in the eyes of the Roman people. Still, he was far from becoming one in his own right, especially abroad. Outside of Rome he was simply the son of an assassinated Roman dictator; the Hellenistic and Egyptian world did not have the same reverence for Caesar as the Roman people did. Like Ptolemy, Augustus needed to construct a divine lineage for himself. There had been a story Augustus was toying with, one that told that he was the son of the Olympian god, Apollo. Again, according to Suetonius, Augustus' conception began with a god taking an animal disguise, mirroring the birth of many Greek heroes. It was said that Augustus' mother Atia, while sleeping in the temple of Apollo was impregnated by the god in the guise of a snake. This story was made to explain why Atia never went to the public baths due to the strange snake-like mark she'd received on her body from the supposed divine encounter. Augustus was born nine months later and because of the strange story was proclaimed the son of Apollo. Gaius Octavius, Augustus' father, was also said to have dreamed of the sun arising out of his wife's womb, adding confirmation to his son's true lineage.[120] It is impossible to know whether this story arose during the period of Augustus' actual conception, however, it is more likely that Augustus had this rumor propagated after the fact, once he'd risen to power, or even, sometime after his death. Nevertheless, Apollo was a god that much of the Greek-speaking world could accept as their ruler's parentage, a precedent having been set by Alexander. Rome itself was shakier about this concept, which is why the son of a mortal-turned-

[118] Aug. *RG*, 19.

[119] Gregory, 20.

[120] Suet. *Aug*. 94

god served to somewhat mask the outright claim of divine parentage. In Egypt laid an entirely different issue.

The Egyptians did not have the concept of a mortal being the son of a god. Instead, powerful mortals, often always kings, were seen as the incarnations or aspects of a given god. Therefore, the understanding of Augustus' conception story was tweaked in Egypt. Luckily, the story fit rather nicely into Egyptian canon with little to no changes needed.[121] Either way, as explained by American anthropologist, Steven Gregory, "in Roman artistic convention, a serpent was representative of the *genius*…part of the self, an inner double or an aspect of the self which might be equated to the *daimon* of Greek conception…which, in ancient Egyptian thought, may have been recognized as the *ka*."[122] Through this understanding, the implications of the story, especially in Egypt, becomes such that the sun god, having impregnated a mortal woman in the guise of a snake (symbolic of his *genius* or *ka*), created a living aspect of himself on earth.[123] Augustus became, therefore, not only the son of Apollo, but the incarnation of Apollo and his Egyptian equivalents, namely Horus and Amen-Ra. While ruling Egypt, Cleopatra and Mark Antony also made themselves into incarnations of Egyptian and Greek gods. Cleopatra ruled as the embodiment of Isis and Selene, Antony as the embodiment of Osiris and Dionysus.[124] Augustus as Apollo, however, was a much stronger connection to have, as it gave Augustus those solar implications that had at that point become synonymous with kingship in Egypt. It was therefore easy for the Egyptian priests to slip him into the role of a proper Horus-king, son of Amun-Ra.

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[121] This may make one question whether Augustus crafted this story specifically for legitimization in Egypt in the first place.

[122] Gregory, 19.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid, 18.

Augustus, despite refusing to be crowned pharaoh, had advertently created the mechanisms by which to be proclaimed as one in Egypt. Even without the official crowning, as historian Gregory Dundas states, "it was natural for Augustus automatically to assume, in the minds of all Egyptians, the role of Pharaoh, and he was immediately portrayed thus not only on the temple walls but in free-standing statuary."[125] Augustus laid his portrayal in these dynastic continuity projects entirely in the hands of the Egyptians priests. Based on the history of Alexander and the Ptolemies, Augustus must have known that the Egyptians would not only portray him favorably, but as royal and divine as well.[126] To facilitate such portrayals, Augustus had to undertake a primary pharaonic duty, the commissioning of large-scale building projects.

Shortly after establishing Egypt as a province, Augustus commissioned several ambitious Egyptian-style temples to be constructed. Today, known temples of Roman construction that are attributed to Augustus include the temples of Kom Ombo, Kalabsha, and Denderah. Meanwhile Ptolemaic temples, such as Edfu, received extensive Roman additions during this period.[127] Even far from the Delta at a temple dedicated to Isis of Philae, located 50 miles south of Aswan in Lower Nubia, there were inscriptions denoting Augustus as king in the traditional Egyptian manner. A stela from the site at Philae reads: "Regal year, 1, 4th month of winter, day 20 under the majesty of Horus, the perfect youth, mighty of arm, ruler of rulers… chosen of Ptah, Caesar living forever."[128] Through both its invocation of Egyptian gods coupled with its overall verbiage, one could easily associate this inscription with the numerous traditional dedications to the pharaohs of old. Augustus temples, the likes of which had not been seen since the New Kingdom, eclipsed most of

[125] Dundas, 439.

[126] Ibid.

[127] Ibid, 447.

[128] Gregory, 10.

the Ptolemies' work. In fact, Augustus made a concerted effort to emulate ancient Egyptian styles rather than the more recent Ptolemaic models. [129] Again, this was to further delegitimize the Ptolemies as the true successors of Alexander, and by extension, the past kings of Egypt. It could have also been done to combat the fact that, within these temples, Augustus was forced to depict himself as the successor to Cleopatra and Caesarion as not to upset *ma'at*, the cosmic order.[130] Nevertheless, to the average Egyptian, Augustus' building program along the Nile, which saw him putting up temples reminiscent of old pharaohs, would have firmly inserted Augustus into the millennia-old tradition and legitimized him as the king of Egypt, and thus, a god.[131]

Back in Rome, Augustus continued to downplay his growing royal and divine Egyptian status while among a Roman audience.[132] He sought to maintain a humble image and denied being a god, despite "subtly setting up all the facilities by which the people could lead themselves to worship him as such."[133] Augustus, however, did not overlook the golden opportunity that Egypt had made known to him. He witnessed the power of Egyptian pharaonic imagery through his temple-building projects and wondered if he could replicate a similar effect back in Rome. This would all be in the hopes to expand his image as a god-king outside of Egypt, to Rome itself, and beyond. Egypt, and its sophisticated system of symbolic representation, was the missing piece Augustus had been looking for, a piece that would enable him to push the minds of the Roman people over the edge and make them fully submit to a divinely ordained seat of monarchical power. However, Augustus

[129] Loar, Matthew P. MacDonald, Carolyn. Peralta, Dan-el Padilla. Rome, *Empire of Plunder: The Dynamics of Cultural Appropriation*, 116.

[130] Gregory, 17.

[131] Loar, 116.

[132] Gregory, 11.

[133] Ibid, 20.

could not simply commission an Egyptian-style temple to be built in the middle of Rome, nor could he logistically transport one under the guise of plunder. Instead, he found an effective and reasonably efficient tool to achieve his goal: the obelisk.

After the Roman conquest of Egypt, it was annexed by the empire and became not merely a Roman province but an imperial property. Augustus did this to avoid making Egypt another Roman powerbase, as Antony had done for himself. Therefore, Augustus did not allow senators or persons of the equestrian rank to enter Egypt without his permission. This made him the de facto ruler of Egypt and paved the way for future emperors to use it as their own glorified extensions of their estates.[134] The annexation had a curious effect on the Romans themselves. Despite having just come out of a propaganda-heavy war against the former rulers of Egypt, fascination with the country and its culture spread rapidly. The Greeks and Romans had always held a curiosity for the land of the Nile due to its perceived exotism and 'backwards' way of life.[135] However, following Rome's conquest, a sort of 'Egyptomania,' not unlike what Europe and America experienced in the early 1900s with the discovery of King Tut's tomb, emerged in Rome, which had a profound effect on emperors and civilians alike.[136] The effects of this Roman Egyptomania were found even in the private palaces of the imperial family. Augustus and Livia's villa on the Palatine—the *aula Isiaca* and the Villa della Farnesina, probably the home of Agrippa and Julia—were both lavishly decorated in Egyptian imagery. The wall decorations found in the upper *cubiculum* of Augustus' villa contained Egyptian scenes fit with obelisks, lotus flowers, asps, and distinctive Egyptian pottery. Similar motifs were depicted across the villas, most of which contained an explicit

[134] Ibid, 10.

[135] See Hdt. 2.35.

[136] Sorek, Susan. *The Emperors' Needles: Egyptian Obelisks and Rome*, 37.

Egyptian solar theme.[137] While the decorations of these imperial villas were seemingly a mere product of Rome's Egyptian fascination, it was part of a larger process of appropriation that Augustus intended to use to his advantage.

The dynamics of Roman cultural appropriation are complex. Often the Romans do not plunder a foreign land of goods, resources, or cultural imports merely for the sake of plunder. Yes, conquest was what drove their imperial machine, but when it came to deliberate cultural appropriation of recently conquered lands, there was always more behind their reasonings. As historian Matthew Loar puts, "[the Romans] master their empire by taking things over, appropriately."[138] Meaning that, the Romans rarely introduced a cultural import into their society without at least a base understanding of that cultural import within its original context. This was done so that the Romans could then use the cultural import effectively to their own advantage. Romans were doing this since the inception of their state. For example, the early Romans adopted the armor and tactics of their recently annexed Italian neighbors, the Samnites. They then turned around and put their new gear and strategies to great effect against the Greeks who were expecting the Etruscan-style tactics that the Romans used to employ.[139] This efficiency-based appropriation extended beyond military applications to cultural and political uses. Likely the most famous form Roman cultural appropriation was their adoption of nearly the entirety of Greek culture, including their modes of art, architecture, literature, philosophy, and religion. The Hellenization of Rome happened very early on and is apparent in one of the oldest preserved pieces of Roman literature, Plautus' *Menaechmi*.[140] In the comedy, the characters are from Greek Syracuse, written shortly after the

[137] Takács, 269-270

[138] Loar, 2.

[139] Ibid.

[140] Ibid, 15.

establishment of Sicily as the first Roman Province, and they discuss all matters of Greek dress, mythology, and art.[141] While the characters are shown to be frivolous and effeminate, staples of Roman caricatures of Greeks, Plautus nonetheless displays a great deal of knowledge and reverence for their culture. The later appropriation of Egyptian culture, while not as strong as earlier Hellenization, had the backing of the fully established imperial machine by the time of Augustus. Whereas Hellenization began and was especially built upon following the Roman conquest of Greece, Egyptian culture was being actively used by the imperial powers, most notably the emperor, for political gain. Augustus' introduction of the Egyptian obelisk in Rome was perhaps the best example of this combination of both culturally and politically effective appropriation.

While not being a traditional province with a senate-appointed governor, Egypt still needed someone to act as its head. Again, to avoid Egypt becoming another Roman powerbase, Augustus appointed the loyal and relatively minor politician and poet, Cornelius Gallus, to act as prefect of the region. In his new position, Gallus immediately developed, what was seen by the Augustan Rome, as an unhealthy fascination with Egypt, much like Caesar and Antony had before, perhaps even more so. According to Cassius Dio, Gallus began setting up Egyptian-style images of himself everywhere, usually standing alongside the deified and pharaonic Augustus Caesar. He also inscribed lists of his achievements upon pyramids and other ancient facades. The senate, and likely Augustus himself, found his actions as prefect to be unseemly and voted that he should be convicted, exiled, and deprived of his estate. Gallus, unable to bear such a punishment, committed suicide before the decrees took effect.[142] While seemingly just a blip on the imperial radar, Gallus

[141] Ibid, 16.

[142] Cass. Dio, 53.23.5-7

may have made one of the most important contributions to Roman monumental architecture during his brief stint in Egypt. Cornelius Gallus was the first Roman ever to be credited with the re-erection of an Egyptian obelisk.

The practice of erecting obelisks had somewhat fallen out of favor during the Ptolemaic period, but they were by no means a forgotten art when the Romans arrived. There had been at least one obelisk that stood in Alexandria proper. This obelisk of Ptolemy II Philadephos was raised at the temple of Arsionoe II, a short distance from the Caesareum.[143] It would have been hard to miss by any Roman visitors, even if they were only staying in Alexandria for a short while. Two more Ptolemaic obelisks were erected much further south at the site of Philae in Lower Nubia. Those were a pair of obelisks dedicated to Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II that acted as pylons of the Temple of Isis located there.[144] Nevertheless, the vast majority of obelisks standing at the time could still be traced back to the 18th and 19th Dynasties, despite the majority of New Kingdom obelisks having fallen into disrepair or lost. Gallus in keeping with the Augustan tradition of skipping over the Ptolemies, managed to find an unfinished obelisk likely dating to the 18th or 19th Dynasties or later. It's impossible to know which Egyptian king this obelisk originally belonged to because its faces are completely smooth and devoid of inscription. Pliny guessed that it may have been the king he called 'Nencoreus,' perhaps referring to Amenemhet II of the 12th Dynasty, which was an unsubstantiated claim.[145] Nevertheless, the obelisk, which was situated—standing or not—in Heliopolis was shipped up the Nile to Alexandria and erected in the Forum Julium by the order of Gallus.[146] Along with being the first one re-erected by a Roman, this obelisk in particular would

[143] Gregory, 18.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Curran, 36.

[146] Plin. *HN*. 36.15.

gain further fame nearly a century later after it was relocated to Rome by the emperor Caligula. In Rome it stood as part of the *spina* or median strip of what came to be called the Circus of Nero upon completion.[147] It was one of the only obelisks in Rome that didn't eventually topple, though it was moved by Pope Sixtus V in 1586 to St. Peter's Square (fig. 7). Its relocation was part of the reconstruction efforts of the basilica, and Rome as a whole, started by his predecessor Pope Nicolas V.[148] Theories for why the obelisk never toppled gave credence to its new prominent position, as many believed it bore witness to the martyrdom of St. Peter himself. During Roman rule, St. Peter was said to have been crucified upside down at the foot of the obelisk in the Circus of Nero.[149] So not only was Gallus' obelisk the first of Roman interest, it also eventually became arguably the world's most famous.

After Gallus, Augustus resumed more direct control over the Egyptian province, still through a prefect, though a less divisive one, named Rubrius Barbarus. Here Augustus may have been inspired by Gallus' actions, because shortly after the late prefect, he too made his first foray into the re-erection of obelisks. He, like Gallus, would start such a project in the near-forgotten city of Heliopolis. Heliopolis, while still containing the vast majority of obelisks to choose from, had fallen into disarray. It had long been absent in the minds of the Ptolemies as a location of religious and political importance like it once was under the pharaohs of old. Gallus, and now Augustus, however, were inexplicably drawn to this older Egyptian tradition. Which was seen first with Augustus' temple building using pre-Ptolemaic techniques and styles, and now here with Augustus deliberately choosing to co-opt one of the most important pharaonic symbols of the New Kingdom:

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[147] Ibid.

[148] Zeitsman, J.C. "Crossing the Roman Frontier: Egypt in Rome (And Beyond), 4.

[149] Ibid, 5.

the obelisk. As such, Heliopolis was revitalized, not as a religious and political location, but as a primary source of this new cultural import.

By the arrival of the Romans, the city of Heliopolis, as both described by Pliny and Strabo, was still in ruins from the Persian invasion of Cambyses nearly 500 years prior. Strabo details Cambyses 'sacrilegious' destruction of the temples at Heliopolis via 'fire and iron.' He states that the Persians did the same to the temples as they did to the obelisks. Some of which were still standing, though the majority, standing or not, had been "thoroughly eaten by the fire."[150] One the other hand, Pliny, writing sixty years after Strabo, claims that Cambyses, while storming the city and desecrating the temples, stopped to admire the obelisks. He then ordered the fires to be put out, "thus showing his respect for the mighty block when he had felt none for the city itself."[151] Whether or not the obelisks of Heliopolis required restoration or even excavation of some kind, is up for debate, but the facts stand that in 13 BCE Augustus looked to the ruins of a forgotten ancient city of old Egypt and selected two obelisks to be brought up the Nile to Alexandria, just as Gallus had done before him. However, these first two Augustan obelisks, unlike Gallus', were decorated with hieroglyphic inscriptions. According to the inscriptions, both were erected originally by Tutmose III (1479-1425 BCE, later appropriated by Ramesses II, 1279-1213 BCE) and were likely the pair that acted as the pylons to his temple at Heliopolis.[152] The obelisks would fulfill a similar role as they once did for Tutmose after they were transported to Alexandria by Augustus and placed before the entrance way of the Caesarium at the edge of the sea. The Caesarium itself had originally

[150] Strab. 17.1.27.

[151] Plin. *HN*. 36.14.

[152] Curran, 36.

been a structure begun by Cleopatra to serve as Mark Antony's mausoleum. However, after the conquest, Augustus dedicated it to Julius Caesar and his descendants, i.e., himself.[153]

This was not only the first instance of a Roman ruler utilizing obelisks, but also the first time Augustus was explicitly using Egyptian symbolism to express his power in a largely Roman setting. Before, his depiction as a proper pharaonic king was relegated to Egyptian-style temples and statuary under the direct care of the Egyptian priests, all of which could be chalked up to simple cultural formalities. Here, however, in the heart of Roman Alexandria, Augustus was showing that he, as Gregory states, "felt secure in his association with symbolism expressing the ideology of the Egyptian Horus-king."[154] Ironically, due to the Caesarium's close association with Cleopatra, these two Augustan obelisks came to be known as 'Cleopatra's Needles,' which both eventually made their way over to New York and London, respectively, in the nineteenth century (fig. 8).[155] The obelisks sported a curious Roman addition, replicas of which can still be seen adorning the one in New York as they once were. Bronze crab statues, weighing 922 pounds each, were placed as supports beneath the damaged bottom four corners of the monuments. One claw of each crab contained a Latin inscription on the inside and a Greek inscription on the outside, stating that the obelisk was 're-erected by prefect Barbarus and architect Pointus in the eighteenth year of emperor Augustus' reign (fig. 9).[156] The crustacean was chosen likely due to their association with Apollo in the Roman religion. The crab or "cancer", being the zodiac in which the summer solstice occurs, was occasionally figured in representations of Apollo.[157] This might have been done to

[153] Ibid.

[154] Gregory, 18.

[155] Curran, 36.

[156] *Crab from 'Cleopatra's Needle'*. Gift of Henry H. Gorringe, 1881, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

further familiarize Romans with the symbolism of this foreign monument. Apollo, being the god of the sun, helped to retain the solar implications of obelisks, while Augustus' established connection to the god further strengthened his own personal dominion over the monument. Augustus' re-erection of these two obelisks in Alexandria was more than a simple show of conquest. It is what Loar calls "double appropriation," meaning that it was both an "impressive physical object brought from far away," same as any other imperial plunder, while at the same time being "valued for its [original] sacral and monarchic connotations."[158] Of course, all of this "sophisticated layering and cultural layering that combined Egyptian, Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman [stood] in the service of Rome and its ruler."[159] Cleopatra's Needles in Alexandria, however, stood partly as a 'test run' of what Augustus was planning to replicate within Rome itself.

Three years later, in 10 BCE, the first Egyptian obelisks were brought to Rome. Just as Cleopatra's Needles were taken from the obelisk-rich city of Heliopolis, so too were the first pair to arrive in the heart of the empire. The obelisks in question, the Obelisk of Ramesses II and Psamtik II, both had their original Egyptian contexts discussed in chapter one. The larger and older of the two monoliths was the Obelisk of Ramesses II (1279–1213 BCE), which was originally quarried and transported to Heliopolis by his father, Seti I, before Ramesses completed the inscriptions and erected it in his own honor.[160] Following in the popular pharaonic tradition, just as Ramesses had appropriated the obelisk from his father, Augustus would now appropriate it for

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[157] Warren, Mary Houston. "'Cleopatra's Needle': The Bronze Supports." *Art and Progress*, vol. 2, no. 10, 289.

[158] Loar, 119.

[159] Ibid.

[160] Zietsman, 6.

himself. Today, this obelisk, now known as the Flaminio Obelisk, stands in Rome's Piazza del Popolo (fig. 10).[161] The second, the Obelisk of Psamtik II (595–589 BCE), was much younger, though, it still contained many of the same motifs as the Obelisk of Ramesses II, thanks to the constancy of Egyptian art and architecture. Therefore, aside from size, to the Roman eye these two monoliths would appear largely identical despite being nearly 600 years apart from each other in construction. After being repaired with parts of the fallen Column of Antonius Pius (138-61 CE) in 1748, the Obelisk of Psamtik II is now known as the Obelisk of Montecitorio and stands in the Piazza de Montecitorio, directly in front of the Italian Houses of Parliament (fig. 11).[162] Both of these monuments, while deriving their current names from the place they now stand, were not originally re-erected in these locations. For most of their Roman tenure they stood as the centerpieces of the Circus Maximus and the Horologium of Augustus respectively.

For both the Egyptian pharaohs and the Roman emperors, the act of transporting and re-erecting an obelisk was a triumph alone. The latter even more so, for emperors would not only have to ferry these massive monoliths up the Nile to Alexandria, but have them then make the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean and into the heart of Rome as well. In 10 BCE, the Roman citizens were made well aware of Augustus' feat in this regard. According to Pliny, the ship that carried the first two obelisks into Rome attracted much attention from sightseers.[163] One could only imagine the excitement and wonder amongst the crowd upon seeing such an impressive and unwieldy foreign artifact being shipped into their city. It would been akin to the public's perception of Roman triumphal marches, which often paraded foreign enemy leaders and exotic

[161] Sorek, 56.

[162] Zietsman, 50.

[163] Plin. *HN*. 36.14.

animals through the streets of Rome. Augustus was aware of the spectacle he'd created and knew that a primary element of obelisks' power came from the king's ability to move and erect them. Therefore, he commemorated the very ship that carried the two obelisks at a permanent dock in the port of Pozzuoli where it first arrived, thus celebrating the remarkable achievement in and of itself.[164]

After successfully completing the treacherous journey to Rome, the first obelisk, that of Ramesses II, was re-erected in the *spina* of the Circus Maximus. Here was one of the many instances where Augustus made an active effort to try and 'effectively appropriate' the monuments as his own. The obelisk's placement in the *spina* was not arbitrary, for the circus, particularly the *spina* itself, already held cosmological and solar implications in the Roman mind. The Circus Maximus' connection to the sun-cult derived from the popular Greco-Roman metaphor that likened chariots racing around a *spina* to the movement of heavenly bodies around the sun.[165] The sun-cult's patron, Apollo (or the syncretized Sol-Apollo) had also long been tied to the circus, for the god himself was a charioteer and the very sky was his circus. Each day Apollo was thought to have driven the sun across the sky, much the like how Ra was thought to have sailed across the sky as the sun itself. Apollo was not originally one of the most revered gods among the Romans—such honors would likely go to the likes of Jupiter, Mars, and Venus—but the sun-god's influence was growing with the continued introduction of eastern ideas in Rome.[166] Augustus used the placement of the obelisk in the Circus Maximus not only to strengthen the prestige of the increasingly popular god to whom he'd bound himself to, but also to use as shorthand in the

[164] Ibid.

[165] Zietsman, 7.

[166] Curran, 40.

education of the Roman people, so that they might come to easily understand the solar and divine symbolism of the obelisk. However, given the lack of hieroglyphic translations (broadly, not just on obelisks) it's likely that no Roman, nor many of the scholars of the time, knew the authentic Egyptian symbolism of the obelisk apart from Augustus' propagandic framing.

Augustus' obelisk at the Circus Maximus was one of the only obelisks that Roman scholars knew, or at least thought they knew, what the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the monument actually said. Although, their understanding came only from a single source. When discussing the obelisk, many Roman writers, such as the fourth century historian Ammianus Marcellinus, cited the Alexandrian scholar Apion who was long credited with translating the hieroglyphic inscriptions into Greek. In fact, up until the sixteenth century CE, Apion's translation of the Flaminio Obelisk, despite its inaccuracies, remained the only example of a sustained Greek translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone.[167] Despite this, Apion remains a rather elusive figure in Roman history; the precise dates of when he lived or when he resided in Rome are unknown. That Ammianus was able to identify Apion's translation as belonging to that of the Circus Maximus obelisk means that his translation must postdate the obelisk's arrival in Rome. Coupled with that fact, Pliny the Elder's awareness of Apion's most famous work, the *Aegyptiaca*, likely places him as living in Rome for an extended period during the reigns of Tiberius and Claudius.[168] So, any notion of Apion working explicitly with Augustus is unlikely to be correct, though he was writing relatively close to the first emperor's reign and the recent importation of the monument.[169] Thus, his influential translation was still colored by Augustan propaganda.

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[167] Benaissa, *Amin. Ammianus Marcellinus "Res Gestae" 17.4.17 and the Translator of the Obelisk in Rome's "Circus Maximus" Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 114.

[168] Ibid, 115.

[169] Ibid, 116.

Below is an example of a modern translation of the Flaminio obelisk base inscriptions alongside the same section translated by Apion, preserved through Ammianus:

Modern Translation:	Apion Translation:
Amen-Ra, Hor; Lord of heaven Ra-user-ma, Approved of the sun, Rameses (II.) beloved of Amen, giver of life like the sun Amen-Ra, Lord of the seats of the upper and lower countries, Har-em-akhu, great god. Lord of the heavens.[170]	Apollo, mighty son of Heron, Ramestes, king of the world, who hath preserved Egypt by conquering other nations; whom the Sun loveth; to whom the gods have granted length of life; Lord of the world, Ramestes ever-living.[171]

The starkest difference between the two translations, is the substitution of Amen-Ra for Apollo in Apion, showing that the two sun gods were fully syncretized at this point, or at least so when framed by Augustus. Secondly, the line "who hath preserved Egypt by conquering other nations," in Apion, is likely a slanted translation of the common pharaonic epithet, "Lord of the seats of the upper and lower countries." The latter is a declaration of the ruler's sovereignty over Egypt, while the former's framing is clearly more imperialist in nature. Apion's translation was emblematic of the narrative Augustus was trying to push, particularly with his insertion of Apollo, and by proxy himself, into traditional pharaonic narrative, with an added imperialist bent for good measure.

The prominence of Apollo to the obelisk at the Circus Maximus was intentional on the part of Augustus. Alongside the prominent introduction of the obelisk, he continued to align himself with the sun-god elsewhere in Rome. Firstly, Augustus credited his important victory against Mark Antony at Actium to Apollo of Leucas, a nearby Greek island. Now, just as Apion's translation implies, the Battle of Actium could be understood by the Roman people as Apollo, in the mortal form of Augustus, triumphing over Egypt and becoming the rightful heir to its throne, and soon,

[170] Parker, John Henry. "The Twelve Egyptian Obelisks in Rome" *The Archaeology of Rome*. J. 14.

[171] Amm. Marc. 17.20.

the world.[172] Back in Rome, Augustus built a temple to Apollo on the very grounds of his public estate. The temple became the first in Rome to be constructed entirely of white Carrara marble, making it immediately impressive to any onlooker. To add further importance to the spot, Augustus ordered the sacred Sibylline oracles to be stored beneath the temple's cult statue of Apollo.[173] Augustus was, without a doubt, trying to syncretize himself with the sun, just as the pharaohs had before him. Along with various other methods, the obelisk proved to be one of his most effective tools in doing so.

The second Augustan obelisk, the Obelisk of Psamtik II, was re-erected in a much more intimate place as opposed to standing amidst the spectacle of the Circus Maximus. It was instead brought to the Campus Martius, where the symbolism Augustus was trying to propagate between himself and the monument was undeniable. Simply by virtue of residing in the Campus Martius, placed the obelisk in an explicitly Augustan context. As archaeologist Paul Rehak states, "the complex in the northern Campus Martius… represents something fundamentally different from the Augustan projects in all other parts of the city and conveys a set of messages that focuses on the person of Augustus himself."[174] Whereas past architectural 'zones' in Rome were occasionally devoted to prominent families, Augustus used the—at the time—blank canvas of the northern Campus Martius to create a more egocentric project, that reflected his absolute power and new seat of emperor. Most importantly, he wanted his divine image to last, and the Campus Martius would be the primary altar upon which he would immortalize himself.

[172] Sorek, 55.

[173] Ibid, 56.

[174] Rehak, Paul. *Imperium and Cosmos: Augustus and the Northern Campus Martius*, 90-91.

The senate commissioned—under auspices of Augustus—three major personal monuments in the Campus Martius, each conveying a specific achievement or essence of Augustus' person, and all proclaimed his divine glory in one way or another. The first was the Mausoleum of Augustus (28 BCE), would hold the ashes of Augustus himself along with subsequent members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. The second was the *Horologium(/Solarium) Augusti* (10 BCE), or monumental sundial of Augustus, where the Obelisk of Psamtik II was the centerpiece. The third was the *Ara Pacis* (9 BCE) or Alter of Peace, which was a small but symbolically rich monument that celebrated the peace Augustus had brought to Rome. Romans had seen each of these types of monuments before—mausoleums, altars, and sundials—but never had they seen them presented so impressively and so close together in the dedication of one man (fig. 12).[175] While the *Ara Pacis* tends to get the most attention in academic circles due to its near-pristine preservation, the Horologium remains just as important to Augustus' monumental propaganda campaign.

At the Horologium, the solar and cosmological symbolism of the obelisk was not only retained but built upon in its new Roman context. The most detailed description of the monument comes to us from Pliny. According to him, the structure itself consisted of the Obelisk of Psamtik II acting as the sundial's *gnomon* or needle with a vast swath of stone laid out atop the land in front of it. The furthest reaches of this stone-paving allegedly corresponded exactly with the length of the obelisk's shadow during noontime on the day of the winter solstice (roughly 100 ft), meaning that its entirety was always on the dial no matter the time or season. Inserted into the stone were lines of arching brass arranged into a grid. The shadow's location along the arch corresponded with the time of day, while each section of the grid (indicated by the length of the shadow) represented the current month (fig. 13).[176] This meant that, unlike standard sundials, the Horologium was able to

[175] Rehak, 62.

keep track of not only the time of day, but the time of year as well. Due to the colossal scale of the obelisk, making the monument into a functional astronomical device was no easy task. It would have required not only a mastery of ancient astrology, which had been popular for over a millennium, but also a mastery over the relatively young field of applied mathematics.[177] So, according to Pliny, Augustus enlisted the help of Roman mathematician Novius Facundus, who was credited with the design of the monumental sundial. Facundus made the important addition of a gilded ball to the pinnacle of the obelisk so that the shadow cast by the point would be more precise. He was said to have modeled the principle off his observations of shadows when cast by the human head.[178] The enlistment of a well-informed mathematician—as opposed to the myriad of astrologically inclined priests Augustus would have had readily at his disposal—meant that he knew that for the monument to convey the message he was trying to send, it needed to be devoid of old Republican systems. This was a significant function of the endeavor due to the fact that proper calendar-keeping had always been seen by the Romans as a highly distinguished and near-divine institution.

The Roman institution of calendar-keeping was said to have begun when the legendary kings Romulus and Numa Pompilius founded the ten-month year, which started in March on the vernal equinox.[179] Despite lasting for centuries, the Roman ten-month year was overly complex and unwieldy, constantly needing extra days added in order to maintain seasonal consistency. Calendar upkeep was relegated to the priests due to the strong connection cylindrical time had with broader

[176] Plin. *HN*. 36.15.

[177] Rehak, 80.

[178] Plin. *HN*. 36.15.

[179] Rehak, 79.

ancient cosmology and divinity.[180] Julius Caesar, however, breached the priestly exclusivity of the calendar when he established his revised twelve-month year, negating the need for their constant monitoring and changes. Augustus later firmly cemented his adoptive father's calendar and officially changed the months of Quintilis and Sextilis to July and August respectively.[181] Caesar and Augustus' interest in the calendar was not merely to correct a failing societal system, but to further cement their divinity. Not only did calendar-keeping have a rich cosmological significance, but by inserting himself into the very calendar, Augustus was quite literally placing himself among the gods. Through the creation of July and August, he and his father now stood in eternity alongside the likes of Mars (March), Aphrodite (April), and Juno (June).

The Horologium was a physical manifestation of Augustus' dominion over the calendar, and thus the cosmos itself. All of this was playing on and serving to inform the symbolic significance of the obelisk that acted as the monument's centerpiece. Curiously, despite its meticulous design, by the time Pliny was writing the dial had not been functional for nearly thirty years.[182] Pliny has a variety of theories of why this might have been the case, ranging from the heavens shifting the position of the sun, earthquakes, and land displacement from the Tiber causing the monument to sink.[183] While it's possible that the foundations could have shifted, some historians have posited that the dial never worked properly in the first place.[184] What is attested, however, it that the *gnomon* allegedly never failed to cast a shadow onto the nearby *Ara Pacis* on Augustus' birthday (September 23rd). Perhaps then, Augustus was much less concerned with the cosmological feat of

[180] Ibid.

[181] Ibid.

[182] Sorek, 48.

[183] Plin. *HN*. 36.15

[184] Sorek, 48.

the Horologium and more so with the ways in which it could further his propaganda campaign. As historian Werner Eck states, in the Campus Marius on September 23rd, "Augustus' birth, destiny and achievements could thus be rendered visible in a single moment; even the gods of Egypt, so it appeared, sanctioned his divine right to rule."[185]

At both the Circus Maximus and the Horologium, the native symbolism of the obelisk appeared to be working in tandem with Augustan propaganda, while being modified for its new Roman context. They line up so well, in fact, that even if Augustus did not have a proper translation of the obelisk inscriptions at his disposal, he certainly must have been made aware of their history and symbolic meaning. Nowhere is this better showcased than within the Latin pedestal inscriptions that were added to the base of each of the monuments when they were re-erected in Rome. The Latin inscriptions on both pedestals of the Obelisk of Ramesses II and Psamtik II were the same. Each read:

> When Imperator for the twelfth, Consul for the eleventh, and Tribune for the fourteenth time, Imperator Augustus, son of divine Caesar, High Priest, dedicated this to the Sun after Egypt had been brought under the dominion of the Roman people.

This bears a striking resemblance to the hieroglyphic inscriptions of obelisks broadly. For example this inscription, briefly discussed earlier in relation to Apion, from the west pyramidion and base of the Obelisk of Ramesses II at the Circus Maximus reads:

> He has made good this edifice of his father [Seti I], whom he loved, giving stability to his name in the abode of the sun. He who has done this is the son of the sun, Amen-Mai Ramesses, the beloved of Tum, Lord of Heliopolis, giving life forever…
>
> Amun-Ra, Hor ; Lord of heaven Ra-user-ma, approved of the Sun, Ramesses beloved of Amen, giver of life like the sun Amun-Ra, Lord of the seats of the upper and lower countries, har-em-akhu, great god. Lord of the heaven. The king of upper and lower Egypt, lord of the two countries, Ra-user-ma, approved of the sun Ramesses, beloved of Amun.[186]

[185] Ibid, 49.

Though over a thousand years apart from each other, in both the Roman and Egyptian inscriptions, the kingly figure (Augustus and Ramesses respectively) is being deified in a similar rhetorical framing. Augustus, gives credit to his father's divinity, 'the divine Caesar,' while Ramesses too credits his divine father Seti, who has since become a full-fledged god alongside every pharaoh's shared father, Ra. Ramesses makes it clear that he is inheriting his father's previous position as king and god. It's safe to say that Augustus was trying to convey the same thing regarding his own assumption of Caesars role, though with less explicit language. Augustus also highlights his current position of *Pontifex Maximus*, the high priest of Rome. So, much like the pharaoh, he was both head of the state and its religious cult. Both inscriptions, invoke the divine sun as the ultimate source of the kingly figure's power. Obelisks, due to their solar implications, were always dedicated first and foremost to Ra. Multiple lines in this inscription, as well as most other obelisks, inscriptions, are filled with devotion to Ra or Amun-Ra. Augustus too made sure to rededicate these monuments to the sun, though now, in a Roman context, the sun no longer meant Amun-Ra, but Sol-Apollo. With the leg work Augustus had already put into associating himself with Apollo, a Roman could have easily interpreted this inscription as a dedication to Augustus' patron deity (or even his divine father) much like an Egyptian would have understood the relationship between the king and Ra. Lastly, both inscriptions proclaim the kingly figure's dominion over their land, specifically Egypt itself. The Egyptian title 'king of upper and lower countries' was almost always applied to a pharaoh's long list of titles wherever they be inscribed. While seemingly just a simple statement of fact, this epithet served to remind the Egyptian people of the founding of the pharaonic dynasties at the legendary joining of Upper and Lower Egypt. Meanwhile, Augustus' "after Egypt had been brought under the dominion of the Roman people,"

[186] Parker, 14.

is quite similar, though with a more imperialist bent. Here Augustus is memorializing the historic 'joining' of Rome and Egypt, just as Upper and Lower Egypt had joined thousands of years before. And while he states that Egypt now belongs to 'the Roman people,' as Steven Gregory points out, "the obelisk is used to symbolize the power of one man, the king, never has it referred to a people, therefore, even by saying this, in using the obelisk Augustus is actually saying that he, not the people have control of Egypt."[187] Therefore, the Obelisk of Ramesses II and Psamtik II retained much, if not all, of their kingly, solar, and divine implications. However, now they were no longer in service of an Egyptian pharaoh, but a Roman emperor.

During the later years of his reign, besides the obelisks of Ramesses II and Psamtik II, Augustus himself likely ordered the transport and re-erection of two additional, uninscribed obelisks later in his career. Due to being uninscribed, like the Vatican Obelisk, these obelisks' original Egyptian origins cannot be discerned. In Rome, however, they were made to stand before the entrance of Augustus' mausoleum.[188] This was Augustus' most blatant use of obelisks as reflections of their original context. Twin obelisks flanking the entrance of his mausoleum was no doubt meant to allude to the imagery of an Egyptian tomb where twin obelisks often acted as dueling pylons, symbolizing the gateway into the afterlife.[189] Flanking a tomb in either Heliopolis or Karnak was how these obelisks were likely found by Augustus' retinue in Egypt and they may have been recreating their positions exactly in Rome. Regardless, by this time in Augustus' reign it's clear that he was entirely comfortable with presenting himself so closely in image to that of an Egyptian king. A powerful divine and monarchical image that was facilitated by said kings' monuments that

[187] Gregory, 21.

[188] Takács, 270.

[189] Curran, 15.

he'd successfully been able to integrate into the Roman architectural landscape. Later rediscovered and re-erected by sixteenth century Popes, these twin obelisks now stand at the Piazza del Quirnale and Piazza dell' Esquilino respectively.[190]

Augustus' many efforts to deify himself and establish the position of the Roman emperor, which came to be called the Principate, had all but come to fruition upon his death. Joining his adoptive father, Augustus was officially declared a god, having been seen as one by the Roman people in the years leading up to his death, at least according to Suetonius, who seems to foreshadow his defecation heavily in this period of his histories.[191] Most importantly, he established the seat of emperor itself as not only an absolute power in the state, but intrinsically divine as well. Subsequent emperors would have a much easier time depicting themselves as gods, even in once foreign, non-Roman ways, now that Augustus had set the precedent. And the obelisk continued to be a physical representation of this precedent. Obelisks were utilized by emperors to both follow Augustus' example and further solidify the divine and imperial symbols that he had successfully embedded into the monuments. Some went as far as to further embrace the original Egyptian symbolism as opposed to just alluding to them in a Roman context like Augustus did.

The emperor Domitian (81-96 CE), for example, a patron of the cult of Isis, transported and re-erected a pair of obelisks in front of the relatively new temple of the Egyptian goddess in Rome.[192] There, upon the obelisks' Latin pedestal inscriptions, he blatantly presented himself as an authentic Egyptian king and proclaimed to be the son of Re-Horakhty (syncretized Ra and Horus). One of Domitian's obelisks was later recovered, having been unearthed by Dominican

[190] Takács, 270

[191] Suet. *Aug*. 95

[192] Sorek, 57.

friars in 1665. Then, under the supervision of Pope Alexander VII, in association with the artist Bernini and mathematician Athanasius Kircher, the obelisk was re-erected in the Piazza della Minerva, sporting unique elephant pedestal statuary. Later emperors, such as Hadrian (117 -138 CE), created and erected obelisks themselves, avoiding the trouble of finding, excavating, and shipping an authentic obelisk from Egypt. Many, including Hadrian's even, contained Roman inscriptions that served to imitate authentic Egyptian hieroglyphics. Hadrian's came to be called the Obelisk of Antinous, in dedication to his lover with whom he spent much of his time in Egypt. The Roman hieroglyphs, while not entirely accurate, proclaim Hadrian an Egyptian king, his wife Sabine a queen, and Antinous as the god Osiris.[193] The obelisk's divine symbolism had become so ingrained into the Roman understanding that they could be used in attempts to deify individuals who weren't even emperor. The Obelisk of Antonius now stands on Pincian Hill in the Vatican, moved there by Pope Pius VII in 1822 years after its initial rediscovery in the sixteenth century.

Roman obelisks began being put up outside of Rome as well, usually in the *spinae* of major cities' circuses, mirroring Augustus' actions at the Circus Maximus.[194] In fact, the last of the authentic Egyptian obelisks to be brought to Rome was originally planned to be transported to a new city. Emperor Constantine (324-337 CE), seeking to legitimize his new powerbase in Constantinople, planned to transport another obelisk of Ramesses II (appropriated from Tutmose III) at Karnak to his burgeoning capital, likely within its very own circus.[195] Ammianus, who lived during the reign of the emperor, criticized his plan to transport so great an obelisk to anywhere but Rome, seeing it as a slight against the late great Augustus. Unfortunately for Constantine and

[193] Ibid, 89.

[194] Takács, 217.

[195] Zeitsman, 8.

luckily for Ammianus, the emperor's initial plan never came to pass. [196] Constantine passed before the project began and the task was taken up by his son and heir Constantius II. Constantius, likely in a bid to preserve the honor of Augustus, transported the obelisk instead to Rome, where it joined the first emperor's obelisk in the *spina* of the Circus Maximus.[197] In order to oversee the task, Constantius II visited Rome for the first and only time in his life.[198] While Constantine's plan to utilize the monument never came to pass, it was clear that he understood the obelisk's symbolic significance in the Roman world at this point, especially when it came to legitimizing otherwise dubious claims to power. However, over three hundred years since their introduction in Rome, it's likely that Constantius' understanding extended only to the new Roman conception of obelisks, created by Augustus, opposed to their original Egyptian significance. The same could be said for the obelisk of each subsequent emperor who succeeded Augustus. Constantine/Constantius' obelisk, now known as the Lateran Obelisk, was rediscovered in the fifteenth century and a century later was re-erected by Pope Sixtus V in the Piazza San Giovanni. The Lateran Obelisk currently stands at 150 feet, the largest standing authentic Egyptian obelisk today.

Up until the fall of Rome, not only did the emperors continue use obelisks to revere Augustus and amplify themselves through association, but, as evidenced by the eventual fate of these monuments, sixteenth century popes began to do the very same. During the Renaissance era, popes often, being the most powerful single figures in the Mediterranean world, began taking on characteristics akin to those of a Roman emperor. These included the use of obelisks in order to harken back to and revive the glory that Augustus had once brought to Rome. This was made

[196] Amm. Marc. 17.13.

[197] Loar, 139.

[198] Amm. Marc. 17.13.

manifest through Rome's restoration efforts started by Pope Nicolas V, which included the rediscoveries and subsequent re-erections of Roman and Egyptian obelisks. By this time, while their Egyptian origins were not wholly forgotten, there was much more of an emphasis placed on the obelisks' Roman role. During the Renaissance and onward, the monuments had become far more synonymous with Augustus' constructed version of them, while their connection with Egypt became more of an alluring aesthetic by which Augustan ideas of power and empire were conveyed. Even their defining solar implications had largely begun to wither away by the late Roman Empire. This remained the case for hundreds of years as, across Europe and the world, obelisks were being built to commemorate powerful figures. Unlike the sphinx or the pyramid, the obelisk was able to transcend the cultural barrier of Egypt and become a fixture of the Western architectural and monumental landscape. However, I argue that a major shift in the perception of obelisks began in the 1800s when perhaps the most impressive obelisk known to man was constructed. This one monument is why obelisks, which for two millennia were synonymous with Augustus and Rome, are possibly now today more closely associated with Washington and America.

CHAPTER III

American Obelisks: Democratization or Deification?

Before the turn of the nineteenth century, there was only one monumental obelisk in the United States, and it very much followed in the long-held European tradition that had been utilized on and off since the popes' restoration of Rome in the mid-1400s. In commemoration of the tricentennial anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery, a 44-foot tall obelisk was erected by a French consul on his private estate in Baltimore, which was later donated to the city itself to be displayed publicly (fig. 14).[199] In proper Egyptian and Roman fashion, the obelisk was dedicated to one man, and while the notions of kingship and deification had since faded to the background, the obelisk's power was still owed to these foundational ideas. Constructed on the eve of a Classical and Egyptian style resurgence, the Columbus Obelisk did not make an impact on the American architectural landscape as much as a later wave of obelisks would. This was likely due to the lingering monarchical implications of the traditional monument that would have to be modified—or at least masked—in order to gain popularity and wide-spread acceptance in democratic America. However, whatever form later obelisks would take, Americans would nonetheless have to grapple with the monuments' ancient implications that seemed so antithetical to their young republic.

Obelisks saw a reemergence as well as a form of democratization in the early 1800s in the wake of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign (1798-1799). The campaign famously resulted in the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, which spawned a surge of early-modern archaeological interest in Egypt. The campaign also led to the subsequent publication of French diplomat Vivant Denon's *Voyage dans la basse et la haut Egypte* (1802) and the *Description de l'Egypte* (1809- 28), both

[199] McDowell, Peggy, and Richard E Meyer. *The Revival Styles in American Memorial Art*, 135.

serving as equal parts natural history catalog and travel guide. The books disseminated the new discoveries and many wonders of Egypt to the broader public.[200] The combination of increased scholarly and public interest in the land of the Nile produced one of Europe and America's first bouts of Egyptomania, with obelisks being a major part of this sudden popularity. At this point, obelisks took on a slightly altered role compared to their ancient and renaissance counterparts. It was the beginning of what could be dubbed their 'democratization,' as the usage of the monument was no longer restricted only to kings, emperors, and popes. Instead, due to the martial origins of their reemergence, obelisks in this period often found themselves dedicated to military leaders or simply to major battles, with no prominent figures attached.[201]

America, having never had a chance to fully integrate obelisks into its architectural landscape, jumped on this new 'democratized' form of the monument, namely through obelisks' heavy usage within American funerary and commemorative art.[202] Obelisks had been part of a resurgence of classical styles in American cemeteries, and quickly became the most pervasive of all of these 'revival forms.'[203] In this new funerary context, the obelisk's signature size had to be scaled back, going from towering granite spires meant to pierce the sky, to relatively modest gravestones measuring at most around ten to twenty feet tall (fig. 15).[204] Still, obelisk gravestones were immediately more impressive than the standard stone markers of the time, which were of simple shape—often rectangular slabs—and usually only two or three inches thick and eight to ten inches

[200] Zukowsky, John. "Monumental American Obelisks: Centennial Vistas." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 58, no. 4, 574.

[201] Ibid.

[202] McDowell, 133.

[203] Ibid.

[204] Hijiya, James A. "American Gravestones and Attitudes toward Death: A Brief History." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 127, 355.

tall.[205] The obelisk had even begun to outshine its revival form counterparts such as the column. Columns had ties to Roman history and symbolism—having been once used by emperors—but they lacked the intriguing Egyptian origin that made obelisks so appealing during this period of wide-spread Egyptomania.[206] Obelisks also offered a sought-after simplicity which the overtly-classical column couldn't achieve.[207] As a result, it wasn't long before "sections of some cemeteries became forests of obelisks," as historian James A. Hijiya aptly puts.[208]

There were criticisms of the popular funerary trend. One critic in particular, T.H. Bartlett, wrote rather bluntly in *The American Architect and Building News* that obelisks were "the form that could be used to built to the greatest height for the smallest sum of money."[209] He was right, of course. Aside from the Egyptomania which brought about their surge in popularity, obelisk gravestones became a fixture of funerary art because they were cheap to make and took up less ground space, all while remaining visually and symbolically remarkable.[210] The rich symbolic nature of the obelisk was not outshined by its ease of creation in a funerary context. Even notable figures, who could have chosen any number of ornate burial styles, instead opted for the simplicity of the obelisk gravestone. One such figure was none other than Thomas Jefferson, who requested that his own gravestone be that of an obelisk. In regards to his burial, an older Jefferson was quoted as stating: "Could the dead feel any interest in monuments or other remembrance of them… the following would be to my manes the most gratifying: on the grave a plain die or cube three feet

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[205] Ibid.

[206] McDowell, 133.

[207] Ibid, 137.

[208] Hijiya, 355.

[209] *The American Architect and Building News (Dec. 4, 1886), 56.*

[210] McDowell, 133.

square, without any mouldings, surmounted by an obelisk six feet in height, each of simple stone."[211] In 1833, six years after his death, his request was fulfilled when a modest obelisk to his specifications was erected at his plantation in Monticello, Virginia (fig. 16).[212] Ironically, the obelisk's sudden popularity and subsequent retooling resulted in the loss of one of the it's most prominent feature: its difficulty. The impressive technological feats that were required to quarry, transport, and erect a monumental obelisk, once boasted about by pharaohs and emperors alike, had been lost. This, however, would be amended with the arrival of yet another form of obelisk, a distinguishably American version of the monument.

Funerary obelisks in America were often used to commemorate soldiers for two main reasons. The first was their initial marital resurgence, coming out of the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt. And the second was due to their ease of creation, yet highly honorable presentation. All this came to the mind of twenty-two-year-old Horatio Greenough in 1823 when he submitted his monumental obelisk design to the competition that would decide the form of the new Bunker Hill memorial in Boston.

In the early 1820s, nearing the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill, there was fear among locals that the peak of the hill would be bought and divided up for house plots. As a response, a group of concerned citizens formed the Bunker Hill Monument Association and bought the land themselves.[213] With it, they proposed to build a new monument that would replace the middling one already there, which was nothing more than an 18-foot wooden column built shortly after the battle. They sought to dedicate a monumental new memorial to honor not only the battle

[211] *The American Architect and Building News* (April 28, 1888), 200.

[212] McDowell, 137.

[213] Curran, 268.

itself, but also "the spirit of representative government" as a whole.[214] Following the precedent of the original memorial, the Association at first envisioned a massive classical column to be its replacement. However, after holding a design competition, they found that some participants, such as Greenough, had submitted obelisks instead.[215] This sparked a debate amongst the associates, with one camp favoring the traditional column and the other favoring the more daring obelisk design. Solomon Willard, the chosen architect of the project, had tremendous sway in the matter and ended up favoring the obelisk over the column. Willard praised the obelisk "for its severe cast and its nearer approach to the simplicity of nature than the others," whereas "the column might be more splendid. The character of the obelisk…seems to me strictly appropriate for the occasion and I think would rank first as a specimen of art and be highly creditable to the taste of the age."[216]

Both Willard and Greenough—whose streamlined obelisk design was eventually chosen due to its utter lack of any European-style flourishes—saw the obelisk as being able to transcend its original monarchical implications and act as a new symbol of republican values instead. Willard's memoir acknowledges the inherent despotism associated with both columns and obelisks, stating that neither monument style has ever paid tribute "to the rights and feelings of man. Majestic and graceful though they are, they have no record but that of sovereignty sometimes cruel and tyrannical, and sometimes mild; but never that of a great enlightened and generous people."[217] It's never made clear within his memoir or his own writings why Willard believed that obelisks in particular could make the jump from despotism to republicanism. However, his justification likely

[214] Ibid.

[215] Ibid.

[216] Zukowsky, 579.

[217] Wheildon, *Memoir of Solomon Willard*: *Architect and Superintendent of the Bunker Hill monument*, 1865, 66-67.

lied within two factors. The first being the obelisk's recent popular retooling in the early nineteenth century: its 'democratization.' And the second, as the following section discusses, being the wholly new style of monument born out of the sheer size of the Bunker Hill project, placing it in a new category entirely, away from both traditional and revival form obelisks alike.

The Bunker Hill Monument had to be a military memorial first and foremost. The revival form obelisk's martial origins combined with its popularity in American funerary art, likely played a major role in the association's decision.[218] The monument would serve to combine the obelisk's European tradition and American popularity, by creating one that would be dedicated to a battle, but also as a memorial for all those who died there, not just the leaders or major heroes. The use of so great an obelisk would then immediately suggest, to any nineteenth century onlooker, an honorable dedication as well as funerary memorial for a multitude of soldiers. Before the monument was even built, one writer from the *Columbian Centinel* stated that if it were to be an obelisk then it would surely "excite emotion of love of country, or of sorrow, or of gratitude, over the relics of fallen heroes."[219] This would stand in heavy contrast to columns which were far more symbolically cemented into despotic ideas. Columns did not become democratized or receive any form of cultural retooling when making their way to the US, as evidenced by individualistic dedications such as the 1829 Washington Monument in Baltimore. This column to Washington took heavy cues from its Roman predecessors, going so far as to plant a colossal statue of Washington in Roman senatorial dress at the very top (fig. 17). Horatio Greenough himself cautioned the Association that "the American people will not be altogether pleased with their

[218] Zukowsky, 574.

[219] Purcell, Sarah J. "Commemoration, Public Art, and the Changing Meaning of the Bunker Hill Monument.", 63.

adopting a Monumental column, the memorial of the tyrannical age of the Roman Emperors."[220] Suffice to say, it became evidently clear to the Bunker Hill Monument Association that an obelisk, rather than a column, was the suitable direction for the project. All that remained was to brand the monument as distinctly American, which would come, quite simply, from its sheer size.

Upon its completion in 1843, the Bunker Hill Monument was an obelisk-shaped tower made of colossal granite bricks that stood 221-feet tall (fig. 18). Due to its immense size, the interior of the obelisk was a hollow shaft home to a spiral staircase numbering 294 steps. Never in the form's long history had visitors been able to ascend an obelisk from the interior. Greenough cites his influences for this unique aspect of the monument not as stemming from any particular obelisk or column, but rather from the famed Pharos of Alexandria, the massive lighthouse which stood watch over the harbor of Egypt's Greco-Roman capital.[221] Thus, the monument was closer to a full-fledged building rather than a single memorial object. This aspect of the Bunker Hill Monument alone was enough to place it into a new category, distinctively characteristic of the American architectural landscape.[222]

Despite Bunker Hill's status as a wholly new form of monument, there was no escaping the firmly ingrained ancient symbolism of the obelisk. When criticisms began to be levied against the choice, before the monument was even finished, Willard wrote his book, *Plans and Sections of the Obelisk*, justifying the effort. However, in it he did not address a single aesthetic or symbolic argument against the obelisk.[223] Rather, he lauded the technological feat of the project. Such boastings included his mention of the Granite Railway, which was one of the first railroads laid in

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[220] Ibid.

[221] Zukowsky, 579.

[222] Ibid, 574.

[223] Solomon Willard, *Plans and Sections of the Obelisk* (Boston, 1843) as quoted in Curran, 269.

the United States, built to carry quarried stone from Quincy to Bunker Hill for the project.[224] In this, Willard frames the endeavor as a triumph of technology and American ingenuity, playing off of the practical marvel of the obelisk, like the pharaohs and emperors had as well, but without all the monarchical and imperial symbolism. It's possible, however, that at least some imperialist elements were intentional. As historian John Zukowsky argues, "Monumental obelisks are tangible expressions of that sense of Manifest Destiny…An ascending observer would experience seemingly endless views; he would participate imaginatively in expansionism without facing the expense and dangers of pioneering west."[225] While Zukowsky's framing of the monumental American obelisk as an explicit element of Manifest Destiny may be somewhat of a stretch, its undeniable that some Americans at the time were picking up on the monument's Roman imperial influence. However, classically educated Americans who understood the implications often sought to criticize rather than praise said influence. Despite all efforts to make the monument distinctly American, there were those that thought classical monumental styles had no place in the American architectural landscape. One such critic in an 1855 *New York Times* piece titled, "Anti-Monumental" argued thusly:

> What need can there be for a monument to commemorate an event that has been already commemorated by millions of printed books and newspapers? The Egyptian obelisk served the purpose of a historical record, as did the Roman columns and triumphal arches, and Assyrian tablets; but we who are a reading people, and have plenty of newspapers, need nothing of the sort, and the people revolt at them as affectations… If strangers ask for our monuments we can show them the Croton Aqueduct and reservoirs, our magnificent institutions of charity, our Churches, Schoolhouses, Asylums and public Libraries.[226]

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[224] Ibid.

[225] Zukowsky, 579.

[226] Anti-Monumental," *New York Times* (June 22, 1855) 4.

Here the columnist makes the assertion that, to be a proper republic of the modern age, America must leave behind all the symbols of the tyrannical old world and instead embrace their societal institutions which provide a tangible and intellectual good to the nation. This sentiment would be debated further, and on a much grander scale, with the later creation of the Washington Monument in the nation's capital.

The Founding Fathers and their successors faced a difficult challenge when it came to the commemoration of those whom many believed was the greatest American to ever live, George Washington. Although the American people had overcome the tyranny of the British Crown during the revolution, many were still trapped within a monarchal mindset. The desire for an absolute ruler was prevalent and nearly every monarchist's eye was on General Washington to fulfill that role. This was evidenced most infamously by the Newburgh letter written by Colonel Lewis Nicola to Washington with the support of various army officers. The letter proposed that their great General should become the first king of an American constitutional monarchy.[227] Luckily, Washington abhorrently shot down the idea and, after some debate, the concept was dropped by Congress entirely.[228] However, this did not stop the 'King Washington' sentiment among the public and even within Congress itself. If monarchy, and arguably deification, couldn't be expressed concretely within the laws, it would reveal itself elsewhere, namely through Washington's various forms of memorial commemoration and the ancient ideas latent within them.

Despite the modest citizen Washington tried to portray himself as, monarchists were determined to elevate his character. In fact, it was his very distain for rule and power that made

[227] "To George Washington from Lewis Nicola, 22 May 1782" *Founders Online*. U.S. National Archives.

[228] "To Lewis Nicola from George Washington, 22 May 1782" *Founders Online*. U.S. National Archives.

him the perfect "patriot-king" in the eyes of the public.[229] This was a product of Washington's classical education and active emulation of his historical hero, the Roman Cincinnatus.[230] Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus was a Roman statesman of the early Republic who was appointed dictator to defend against the invading Italic tribe of the Aequi. Despite his absolute power over the Roman state as dictator, Cincinnatus abdicated the position once the invaders had been dealt with, successfully completing his job for which he was appointed. He then supposedly returned to the life of a humble farmer.[231] Regardless of the actual truth behind the story, Cincinnatus nonetheless became a legendary figure of Roman virtue, standing for the rights of the Republic and against monarchy. Washington tried his best to follow suit, portraying himself not as a republican leader, but a publican citizen—'the model American.'[232] In this way, as historian Kirk Savage argues, Washington could "remain a national icon in a republic, a form of government incompatible with the whole idea of icons."[233] Ironically, despite framing himself as a Roman hero of the republic, Washington had inadvertently laid the groundwork that would later destine his image to align closer to that of Roman emperor. His ideal image as the model American quickly backfired as it reminded the American people—whether consciously or not—less of Cincinnatus' republican hero and more of Emperor Augustus' *princeps* or "first citizen." In this way, Washington had given the people and the republic itself the symbolic grounding to present him in a wide range of classical

[229] Savage, Kirk. "The Self-Made Monument: George Washington and the Fight to Erect a National Memorial." 227.

[230] Ibid.

[231] Liv. 3.26-29.

[232] Savage, 227.

[233] Ibid.

frameworks. His depictions varied from his preferred Cincinnatus analog to, in some cases, full-on deified Roman emperor.

The first instance of a desire to overtly present Washington as a classical monarch came at the close of the Revolutionary War. In 1783, the Continental Congress voted the erection of equestrian statue of Washington, a depiction favored by the likes of Louis XV and finding its origin in the imperial example of the bronze equestrian statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, circa 181 CE.[234] In the statue, the general was meant to be in full Roman dress, making the symbolic intentions unmistakable. The proposed statue, however, never passed in Congress, likely because Washington was still alive and would stand promptly against any such depictions of himself until his dying breath.[235] However, when he did eventually pass, the demands for commemoration and questions of what form that commemoration should take, sparked heated debate.

Mere days after his death, on December 24, 1799, there was a unanimous resolution by the Federalist-controlled Congress that called for the construction of a monumental public tomb in the Capitol. This proposal stood against Washington's expressed instructions for burial at his home in Mount Vernon.[236] As the Federalists remained relatively unchallenged in Congress, their aspirations for the project grew. Shortly after the resolution, they brought on neoclassical architect and designer Benjamin Latrobe who had been heavily inspired by the work of French funerary architect Etienne-Louis Boullee. Boullee was best known for his monumental pyramids in dedication to national heroes across Europe—most of which remained only in his designs, too fantastic in scale to be buildable.[237] Boullee held that the Egyptian style monuments were, as

[234] Ibid.

[235] Ibid.

[236] Ibid, 228.

[237] Ibid, 229

Savage describes, "meant to astonish and beholder, who must imagine himself shrunk to nothingness below the immensity of the structure."[238] Latrobe sought to bring Boullee's vision to life in America, with his designs for the proposed tomb of Washington quickly turning into that of a monumental Egypto-Roman mausoleum. Latrobe envisioned a heavily colonnaded tomb akin to the Pantheon, rising from the ground with a 100-foot-tall step pyramid as its roof (fig. 19). Inside would have no doubt been home to not only the decorated sarcophagus of Washington, but dozens more Greco-Roman statues likening him to not just an ancient statesman or emperor, but a god.[239] The closest comparison would be to the very mausoleums of the emperors Augustus and Hadrian, and their predecessor, the legendary tomb of Alexander the Great.

Latrobe's goal was to utilize ancient awe-inspiring geometry of the emperors and pharaohs to elevate Washington alongside them in immortalized fame. For the Federalists who proposed the idea, Latrobe was providing precisely what they were looking for. One Federalist on the House floor had this to say about Latrobe's Mausoleum of Washington designs: "It is indeed of infinite importance to civil society, that the memory of that great man should be perpetuated by every means in our power."[240] This was a far cry from the warnings in 1785 of John Adams, once-leader of the party, that "instead of adoring a Washington, mankind should applaud the nation which educated him… I glory in the character of a Washington, because I know him as the exemplification of the American character."[241] At this point, the Federalist Party, who had once praised Washington as the ideal American, were betraying their own rhetoric by setting Washington up as an example to stride towards while at the same time placing him upon an

[238] Ibid.

[239] Ibid, 228.

[240] Ibid, 229.

[241] Adams to John Lebb, September 10, 1785, as quoted in, *Washington in Literature*, 30.

unreachable pedestal. Fortunately, Washington's final wishes were adhered to when Thomas Jefferson was elected president and his Republican party took over Congress. Any and all ideas for a tomb for Washington in the Capitol were scrapped.[242] In fact, the Republicans' staunch anti-monumental stance, put all Washington commemoration efforts in the Capitol to bed for nearly fifty years.

While Washington's monumental commemoration remained stymied in the Capitol, dedications began cropping up elsewhere. Once such dedication was the aforementioned Washington Monument in Baltimore, which was a monumental column that explicitly portrayed him explicitly as a Roman emperor (fig. 17). The column, completed in 1829, was based on a design by the Latrobe-trained architect, Robert Mills who carried on many of the same ideals as his teacher and Boullee before him.[243] The project clearly came out of the failed Federalist movement for commemoration years earlier. The Baltimore monument even came to sport the once-abandoned equestrian statue of Washington at its base.[244] Widespread praise for the monument in Baltimore made some question why there wasn't any such commemoration for Washington in the Capitol. By the mid-1800s, public outcry and the shifting ideals of the country's ruling body eventually spurred Congress into reconsidering the commemoration of Washington within D.C. The only debate that remained was what form of classical monument would be utilized for such a project.

In 1833, much like at Bunker Hill, a private organization titled the Washington National Monument Society was formed, with the backing of Congress, to oversee the construction of the

[242] Savage, 231.

[243] Ibid, 232.

[244] Ibid.

new monument. From the outset, there was no debate amongst the society that the monument would be classical in form. Classical imagery had been used in describing the Capitol since its inception; all public buildings had exclusively used the style up until the construction of Renwick's Smithsonian building in 1847.[245] The style was meant to showcase America as a combination of both the virtues of Greek democracy and the power and grandeur of imperial Rome.[246] This, in addition to the "classicized" character of Washington in the public imagination, made it so there was no doubt that the Washington Monument would follow suit in the city's uniform architectural language. This was not unlike what the abandoned Mausoleum of Washington designs sought to do, though at this point, the monument would not be a tomb as it wouldn't contain the body, which had already been buried at Mount Vernon for several years. As such, the Society employed Robert Mills, of Baltimore monument fame, to continue his neoclassical work and create the new Washington Monument within the Capitol.

Following in the grandeur of his predecessor's designs, Mills initially envisioned his Washington Monument to be a great Greco-Roman pantheon, based on Emperor Hadrian's reconstruction of the Pantheon of Agrippa in Rome (fig. 20).[247] Mills' Pantheon would consist of a 100-foot-tall circular Doric colonnade enclosed by a flat rotunda. The interior would host a "pantheon" of revolutionary heroes represented in murals and sculpture.[248] The Doric rotunda, however, would only serve as the base for the real centerpiece of the monument: a massive obelisk that would give the building another couple hundred feet in height. At this point, Americans would

[245] Freeman, Robert Belmont. "Design Proposals for the Washington National Monument." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.*, vol. 49, 165.

[246] Ibid.

[247] Savage, 233.

[248] Ibid.

be highly familiar with obelisks used as grave markers and the monumental version of the form utilized in the recently completed Bunker Hill Monument.[249] Additionally, standing at the base of the obelisk, but atop the portico of the rotunda, would be not just an equestrian statue of Washington, but an extravagant depiction of him on a chariot at the helm of six charging horses.[250] This was the depiction once favored by Roman emperors as well, having been made popular by the charioteer statue of Augustus that once stood as the centerpiece of the Forum of Augustus, dedicated to him by the senate. This was a far cry from the comparatively humble Roman statesman Mills had utilized on his column in Baltimore. The Society and most of Congress agreed that Mills' design was in good taste, despite it undermining the virtues of their republic in much the same way the plans for the Mausoleum of Washington did.[251] Mill's proposal for the D.C. monument, furthermore, seemed like they could be well realized, since by 1836 the Republican issues regarding Washington's commemoration had all but disappeared. The Society held firmly to the old Federalist stance; one Society member went so far as to directly compare the monument to the tomb of Cyrus, hoping that in the same way Alexander was moved to awe and respect of said tomb during his conquest of Persia, so too would any future invaders of America when they came upon this testament to Washington's greatness.[252] Additionally, they wanted to elevate not only Washington the man, but D.C. itself. They hoped that such a grandiose monument could help D.C. finally become seen as a fully realized capital city and not a swampy backwater. This was evidenced especially by Society member, J. Goldsborough, who reworked Mills' obelisk design,

[249] Ibid, 234.

[250] Ibid.

[251] Ibid, 233.

[252] Washington National Monument Society, *The Washington National Monument*, (Washington, 1871) as cited in Freeman, 165-167.

fixing it at 501 feet. This would make it one foot taller than the then tallest building in the world, the cathedral at Cologne, Germany which also under construction at the time.[253]

Construction of the monument began reasonably smoothly, with the shaft of the obelisk started first and the colonnade and rotunda to be added later around it. However, on March 9, 1855, with tensions rising in the country, the monument grounds were stormed and seized by members of the radical Know Nothing party. The party believed they were doing their part to stop the "Romanization" of America, a plot they thought was being hatched by Catholics to subdue Protestant religious and political freedoms.[254] By the time the Society had delt with the Know Nothings' occupation of the grounds, the country had arrived on the eve of the Civil War. All construction efforts were thus halted because of the war and wouldn't be resumed for another twenty years (fig. 21). However, upon returning to the project, Congress would find that the Civil War had radically changed Americans' perception of their country and its most important founder.

Ten years after the war, on July 5, 1876, the two houses of Congress both unanimously resolved "in the name of the people of the United States, at the beginning of the second century of the national existence, [to] assume and direct the completion of the Washington Monument."[255] Coming out of the Civil War and on the hundredth anniversary of American independence, Congress sought to 'make sense of the past,' but also to launch the nation into the future. They saw the unfinished Washington Monument project as the perfect symbol to reunify the country, but some changes to the original design had to be made. Congress appointed Lt. Col. Thomas Casey of the Army Corps of Engineers to oversee the revitalized construction efforts, with many

[253] Freeman, 179.

[254] Ibid, 235.

[255] *Congressional Record*, vol. 4 (July 5, 1876), 4376. as quoted in Savage, 236.

of the old Federalist-aligned Washington National Monument Society members having been phased out as the government proper took on a more active role. Casey stripped the various Greco-Roman ornaments attached to the Mills' design and he scrapped the Pantheon-style base entirely. He decided that no ornamentation of any kind would disturb the bare surface of the obelisk and that its symbolic meaning would instead come from the mere feat of its creation.[256] In this way, Casey sought to bring the Washington Monument more in-line with its predecessor at Bunker Hill, embodying the American version of the obelisk which owed little to the despotic stylistic flourishes of the old world and instead promoted American liberty and ingenuity. In fact, Casey wished to outdo the Bunker Hill monument with its hollow interior and spiral staircase, by instead making the Washington Monument "a technological marvel equipped with a passenger elevator and electric lights yet disguised as the most ancient of forms, ruthlessly simple and hermetically sealed."[257] In making the monument into a technological feat on multiple levels, Casey echoed precisely what Congress was looking for at the time: a symbol of the past that, at the same time, could propel America into the future.

Upon its completion in 1884, the Washington Monument, at 555-feet, was the tallest structure in the world for about five years until being overtaken by the Eiffel Tower (fig. 22). Despite its short reign, a law was passed within D.C. that forbade future structures from exceeding the height of the monument, making it by far and away the most stand-out feature of the capital city.[258] And just as Casey intended, its power comes from its simplicity as much as from its size. Additionally, despite the name, Washington is not the focus of the monument, allowing for its symbolism to

[256] Savage, 239

[257] Ibid, 238.

[258] Gordon, John Steele. *Washington's Monument: And the Fascinating History of the Obelisk*., 3.

stretch beyond the man himself. Unlike its memorial counterparts such as that of Lincoln and Jefferson, the centerpiece is the obelisk itself and not a statue. A statue of Washington did not exist on the site until one was placed there on the ground floor in 1994. Almost hidden, the statue receives little attention from the populace.[259] This leaves the plain, austere monumental obelisk to speak for itself to over 600,000 visitors per year.[260]

Shortly after its completion, Speaker of the House, Robert C. Winthrop had this to say in his dedication of the monument, addressing Congress:

> It is not indeed, as were those ancient obelisks, a monolith, a single stone cut whole from the quarry; that would have been obviously impossible for anything so colossal. Nor could we have been expected to attempt the impossible in deference to Egyptian methods of construction… America is certainly at liberty to present new models of art as well as government, or to improve upon old ones; and, as I ventured to suggest some years ago, our monument to Washington will be all the more significant and symbolic in embodying, as it does, the idea of our cherished national motto, E PLURBIS UNUM. That compact, consolidated structure, with its countless blocks, inside and outside, held firmly in position by their own weight and pressure, will be ever an instructive type of the National strength and grandeur which can only be secured by the union of "many in one."[261]

Of course, as Winthrop states, it would have been impossible to recreate the ancient form of the obelisk at so great a scale, but he argues that it doesn't need to, nor would they want it to be. For those obelisks of old would forever be marred by despotism, imperialism, and divine monarchy, aspects so antithetical to the ideal of the American republic and its beloved democracy. Instead, through their efforts at Bunker Hill and now Washington, Americans had sought to reforge this ancient symbol of the obelisk in the service of human progress.[262] Whether or not they succeeded in the endeavor depends on how closely one associates the monument to the man it was built for.

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[259] Ibid, 6.

[260] Ibid, 3.

[261] *The Dedication to the Washington National Monument, with the Orations by Hon. Robert C. Winthrop and Hon. John W. Daniel. February 21, 1885. Published by Order of Congress* (Washington, 1885) 52-53.

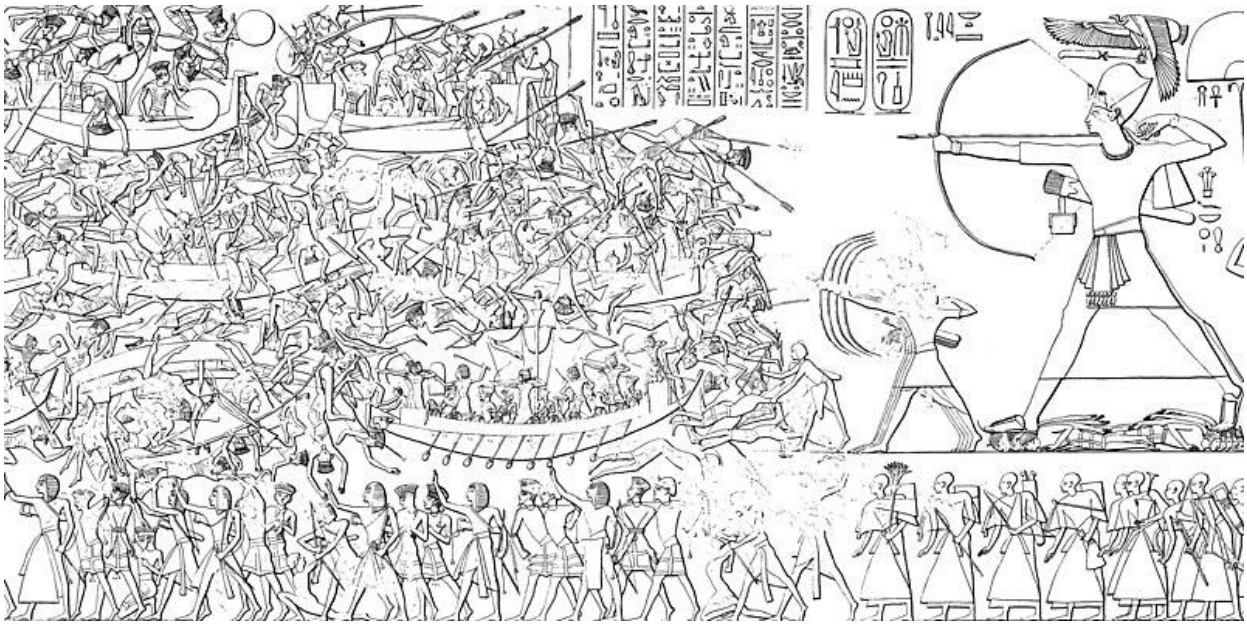
Its undeniable that the figure of George Washington has been glorified and even deified by the popular American conception and the selective history that informs said conception. Washington became an instant icon from the beginning, fostering an image that was quickly morphed into something out of his control even as he still lived. As Savage states, "It is useful to think of Washington as a historical invention; history made him perhaps more than he made history."[263] The question then remains whether Casey's retooling of the monument removed all its ancient despotic connotations as they related to Washington and successfully led it into becoming a wholly new American architectural form. I'd argue that the monument does embody a new era of the obelisk at the very least, one that does not implicitly echo the likes of Ramses or Augustus. Yet, at the same time, it stands to glorify Washington, not as a monarchical figure, but as the legendary founder of the country and a near-divine tribute to the first true American.

[262] Curran, 271.

[263] Savage, 225.

FIGURES

Figure 1

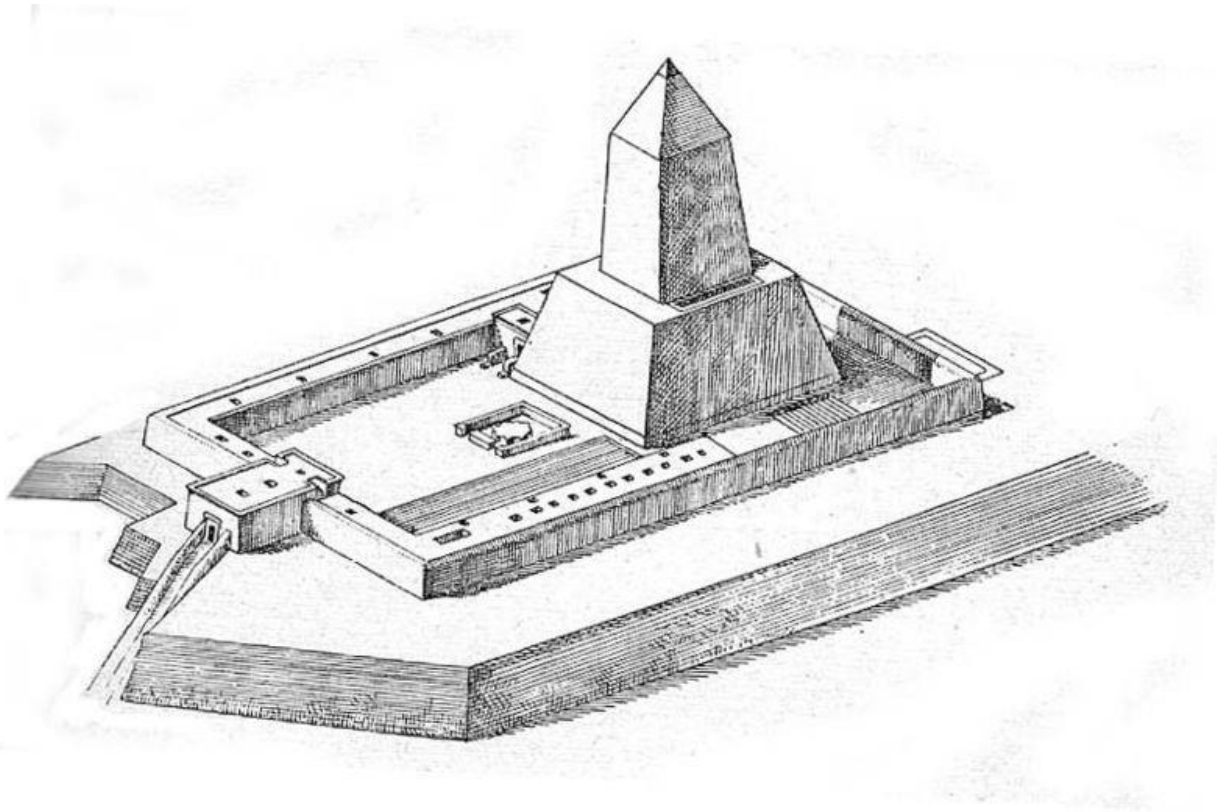


Gray, Dorothea. *Wall relief at Medinet Habu depicting Ramses III defeating the Sea Peoples in the Battle of the (Nile) Delta*. 1200-1150 BCE., *Seewesen, Archaeologia Homerica*, I, Göttingen, 1974.

Figure 2

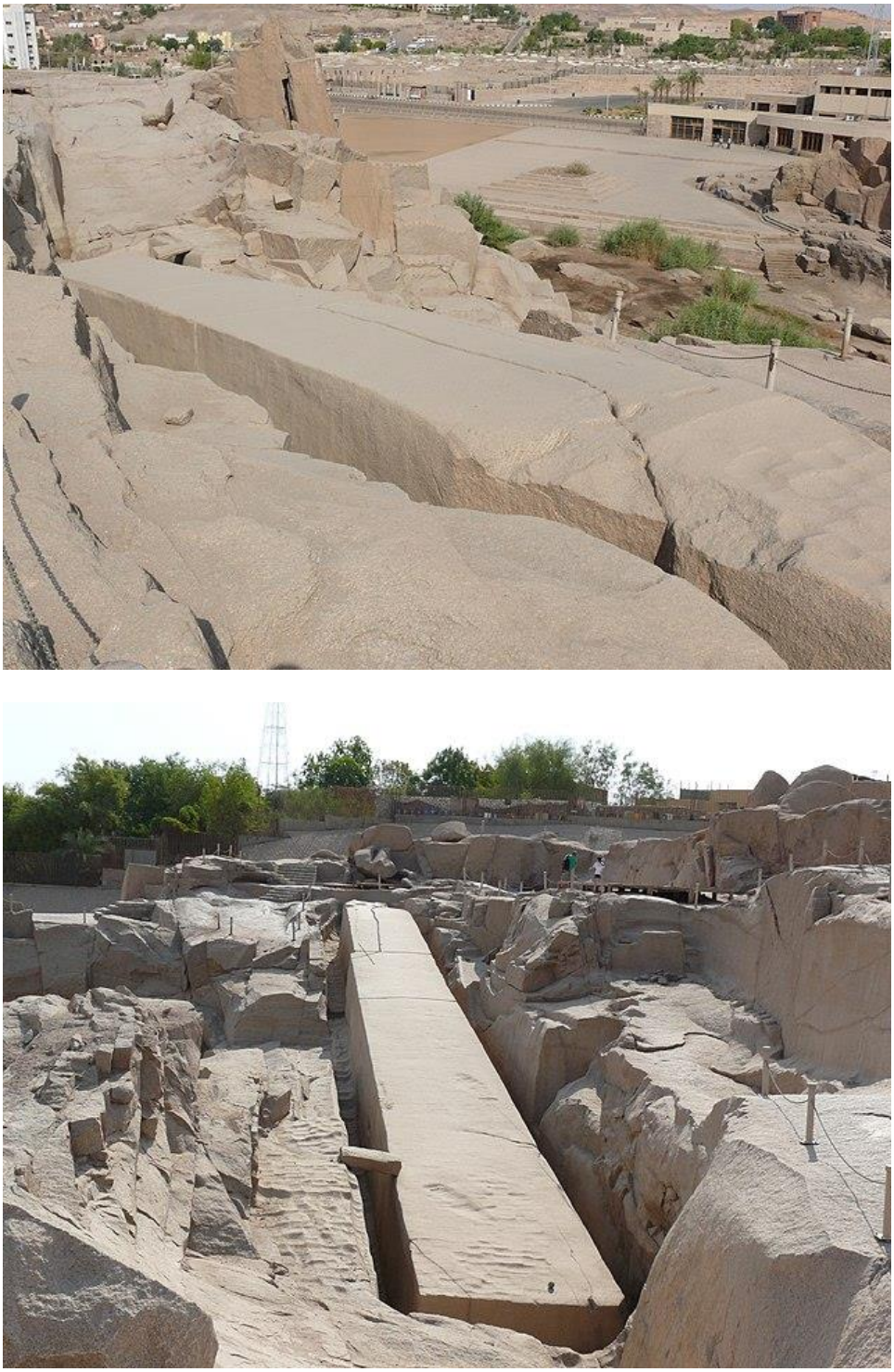
Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut. 1479–1458 BCE, MET, 29.3.1.

Figure 3



The model of the sun temple of Ni-Ausser-ra, according to "Maspero" 1907.

Figure 4

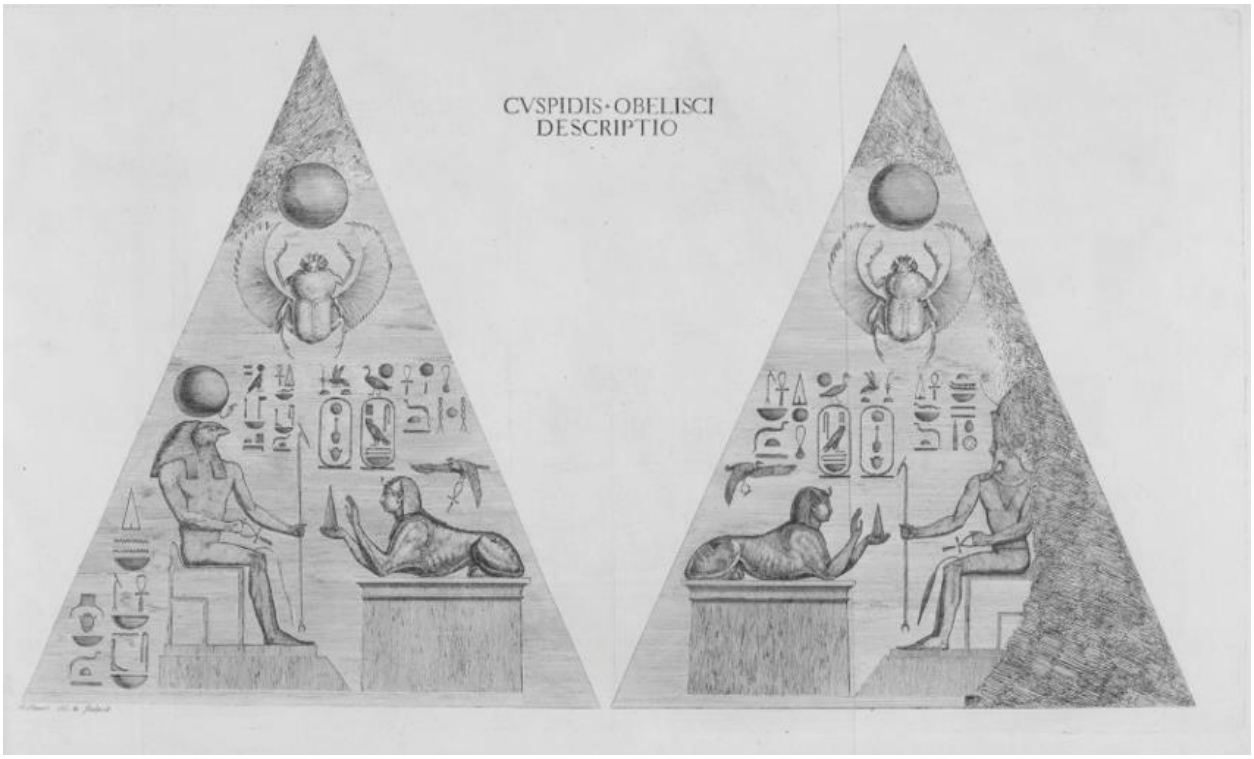


Meskens, Ad. *The unfinished obelisk, the largest known ancient obelisk, located in the northern region of the stone quarries of ancient Egypt in Aswan (Assuan), Egypt*, 2011.

Figure 5

Silar. *Obelisk of Hatshepsut in Karnak*. Luxor, Egypt, 2010.

Figure 6



James Stuart's engraving of the pyramidion of the Montecitorio Obelisk (Obelisk of Psamtik II). Bandini, 1750.

Figure 7

Brockelman, John C. *Vatican Obelisk*. St. Peter's Square, Vatican City, 2018.

Figure 8

Peel, Mike. *Cleopatra's Needle*. Central Park, New York, 2012.

Figure 9

Crab from 'Cleopatra's Needle'. 13 BCE, MET, 81.2.2.

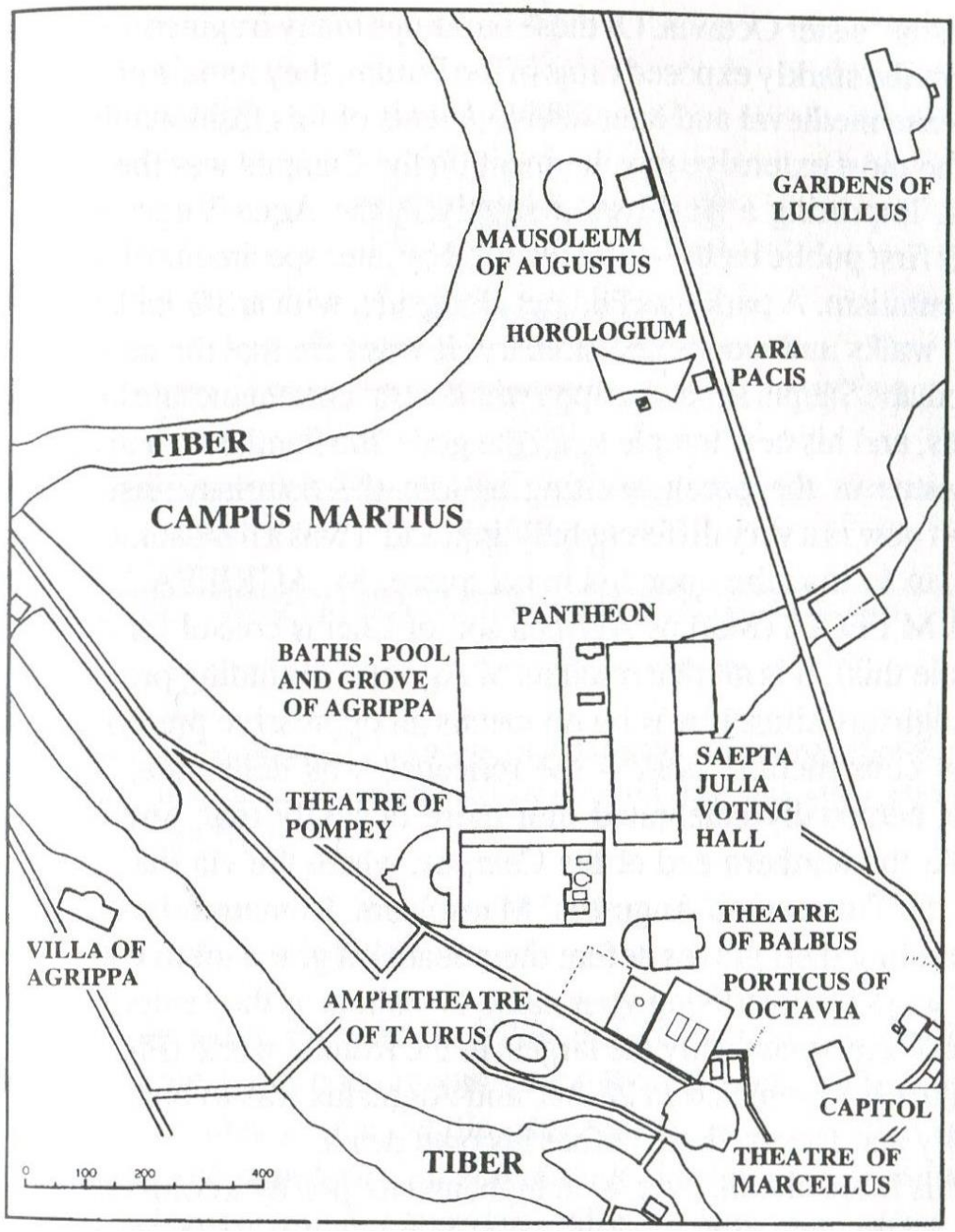
Figure 10

Haklai, Yair. *Flaminio Obelisk*. Piazza del Popolo, Rome, 2009.

Figure 11

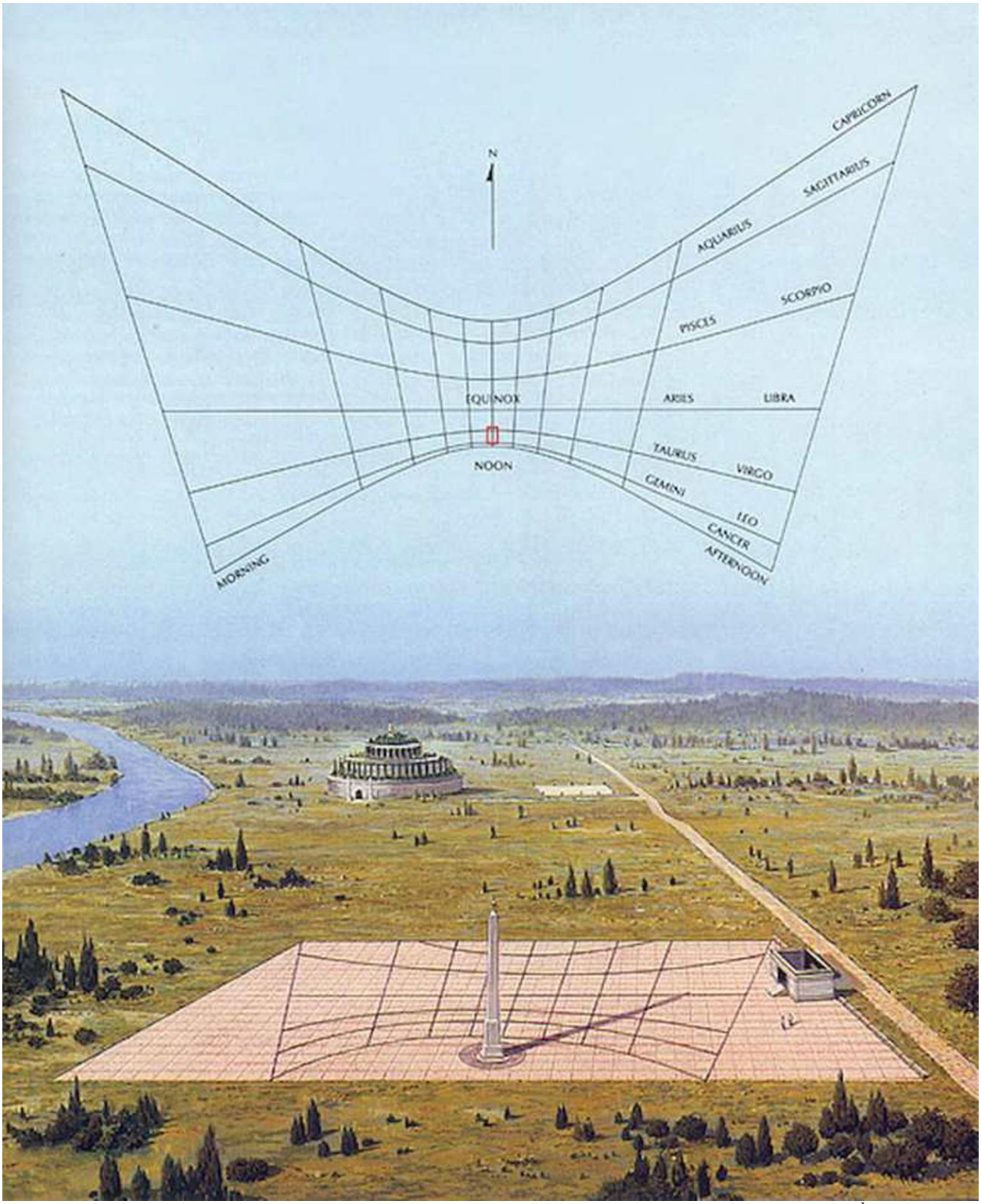
Brockelman, John C. *Obelisk of Montecitorio*. Piazza de Montecitorio, Rome, 2018.

Figure 12



Plan of the Campus Marius with New Augustan Buildings.

Figure 13



Grout, James. *Reconstruction of the situation of the Horologium Augusti*. ~Early 19th Century.

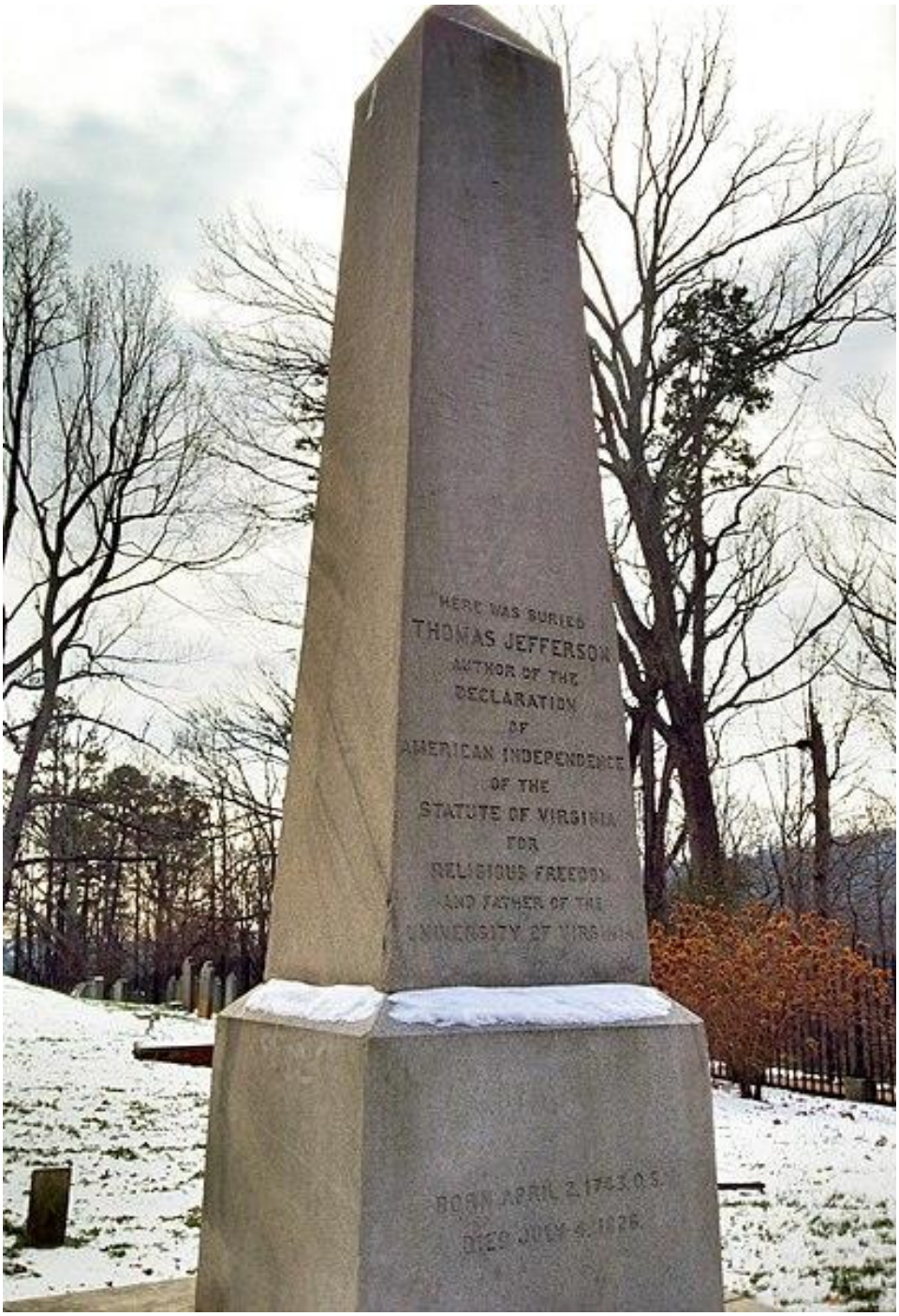
Figure 14

Pousson, Eli. *Columbus Obelisk*. Baltimore, Maryland, 2016.

Figure 15

Baile, C. *Dinsmore-Miller Obelisk*. Chartiers Cemetery, Pittsburgh, 2014.

Figure 16



Broad, David. *Monticello grave of Thomas Jefferson*. Charlottesville, Virginia, 2013.

Figure 17

Reading, Tom. *Washington Monument*. Baltimore. Maryland, 2006.

Figure 18

Siyuan, Chen. *Bunker Hill Monument*. Charlestown, Massachusetts, 2009.

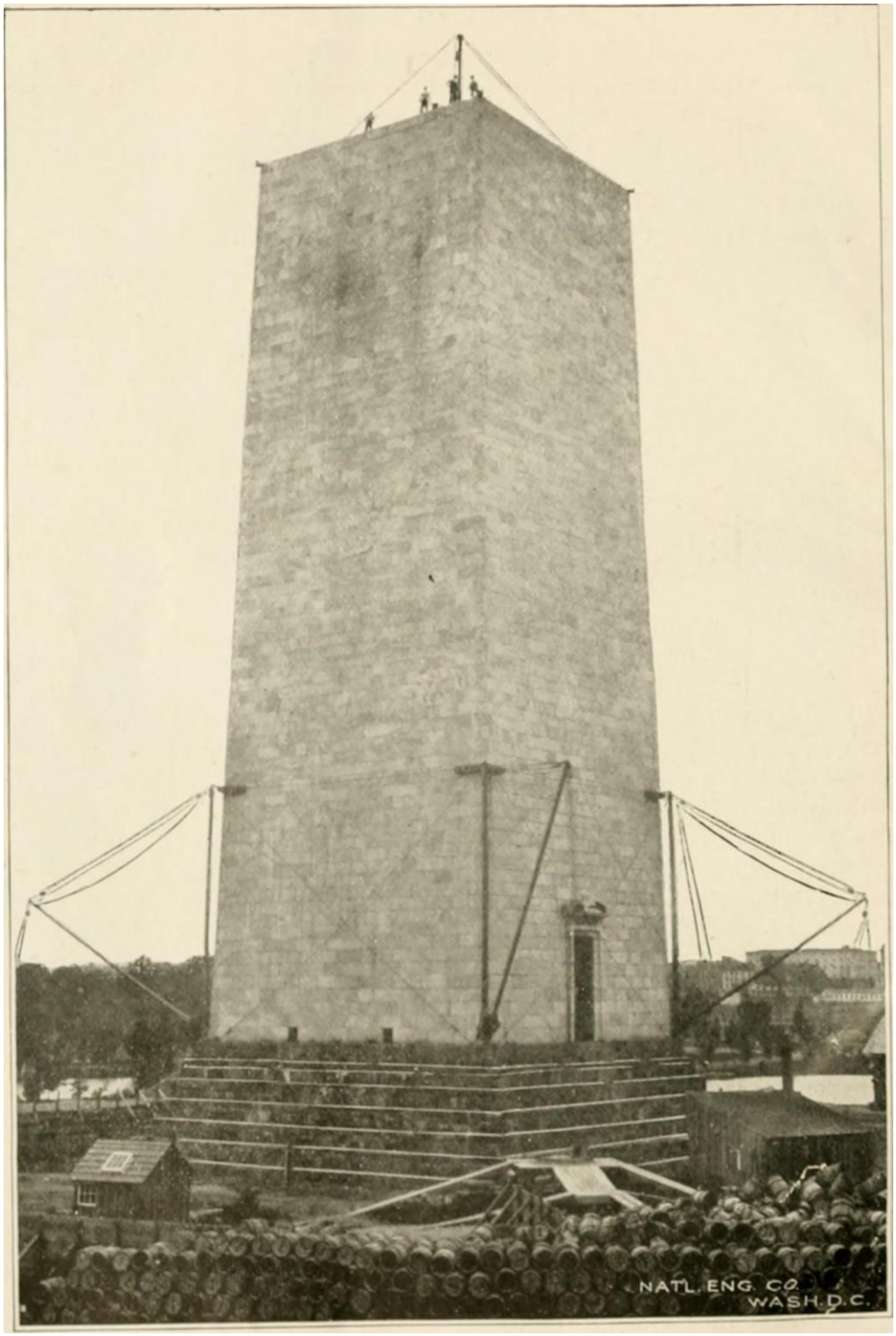
Figure 19

Latrobe, Benjamin H. *Watercolor, ink, and pencil of the proposed Washington mausoleum*, Library of Congress, c. 1800.

Figure 20

Mills, Robert. *Design of the National Washington Monument*. Library of Congress, c. 1846.

Figure 21



Lower portion of the monument, 1878. Ina Capitola Emery, ed. and pub., The Washington Monument, 1909.

Figure 22

Iswzo, *Washington Monument (NW Side)*. Washington, D.C., 2017.

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