

THE ROLE OF THE EGYPTIAN OBELISK IN RENAISSANCE AND BAROQUE ROME

Dr. Abdel-Mohsen Mito¹

This paper is concerned with studying the role that the Egyptian obelisk had in architectural decoration and in urban organization in Rome during the sixteenth and the seventeenth century. This period represents an era of interest in Egyptian items that began with the Greeks and continues until the present times. However, this study does not inventory all the examples of obelisk. Instead, it deals with some examples to prove that the development occurred in the implementation of the obelisk motif, especially, in the seventeenth century Rome, where the obelisk became part of the symbolic array of the city of Rome, rather than just a decorative architectural motif.

Roman interest in Egyptian items dates back to the late first century B.C. after the battle of Actium in 31 B.C. when Egypt became a part of the Roman Empire. Items such as sphinxes, obelisks, and pyramids became the focus of immediate interest and admiration. Original sphinxes and obelisks were shipped to Rome as trophies of victory. Augustus brought back to Rome at least six obelisks as trophies of his victory. Eventually, Rome had more than forty two obelisks, twelve of which still survive. The last obelisk

¹ *Dr. Abdel Mohsen Mito, Assistant Professor of Art History, Faculty of Fine Arts, Alexandria University.*

was shipped by Emperor Constantius in 357, which can still be seen in the Piazza of St. Giovanni in Laterano.

When the first obelisk reached Rome, the cult of Isis and Serapis already had a long and firm establishment in Italy. As Rome fell into decay so did the obelisks, and most of the obelisks shared the fate of Rome, therefore, many obelisks were broken or toppled and buried in the ruins of the city. However, in the sixteenth century the interest in Egyptian obelisks was revived. At that time in Rome the Vatican obelisk was the only one which had escaped being toppled as a pagan symbol because of its Christian association. In fact, it was considered to be a witness of St. Peter's and other Christians martyrdom in the Vatican square. Originally, Augustus had placed this obelisk in the forum of Julia in Alexandria, but Caligula had the forum demolished, and ordered the Egyptian obelisk to be brought to Rome where it was reerected in 37 A.D. (Clayton, 1982, 11).

Obelisks in general attracted European artists for its striking vertical shape and enigmatic hieroglyphic symbols. An early examples of using obelisks in architecture appeared in the design of St. Maria di Loreto (1520-5) in Rome by Antonio da Sangallo (the elder). In its design Sangallo used the hybrid obelisk-pyramid as a decorative device which appears in the corner over the cornice (Fig. 1). Another example of Sangallo's use of the obelisk is in the church of the Madonna de Biago (1518-1545). The church has a central plan design, with the obelisk motif superimposed over the corners of the third tier of the tower. Most likely it was used to emphasize the

vertical line of the design since there is no crucial need for such a motif in the main design of the church (Fig. 2).

The Obelisk motif was moved from Rome to Venice by Jacopo Sansovino who was among the architects in the Bramantè circle. After the sack of Rome, in 1527 he left to Venice seeking work opportunity. In the 1530's he became the most famous architect of the city. In his design of St. Mark library (1536-66) Sansovino used obelisks in the corners of the upper storey of the library in order to emphasize the vertical line of the design and to strengthen the corners (Fig. 3).

Sebastian Serlio in his treatise *L'Architecture or the Five Books of Architecture*, found in book V, the design of a central plan church in which a large obelisk is set in each corner and takes the same height of the pediment (Fig. 4). In the text he referred to the obelisk as an excellent ornament (Wittkower, 1989, 65). Also in book III there is a drawing of four obelisks which could be identified as the obelisks which stand in the Piazzas; del Popolo, St. Peter, St. Maria Maggiore, and Navona (Fig. 5).

Late in of the sixteenth century the obelisk became a more important element in architectural design. In comparison with earlier examples of Sangallo and the later sixteenth century example of the church of St. Maria dell'Orto, Rome, (1566-7) by Giacomo de Vignola, the obelisk in St. Maria dell'Orto facade had become a very important feature and made a considerable impact on the character of the design. The use of the obelisk make the facade a unique example among the Roman churches (Fig 6).

The influence of Vignola is seen in the church of S. Maria degli Angeli in Milan by Antonio Barca ca. (1600), in which two obelisks are erected on each side of the upper storey of the facade (Fig. 7).

The Egyptian obelisk acquired a new symbolic meaning in a proposed plan of Pope Sixtus V (1585 – 1590) to replan Rome. The Pope decided to connect the holy shrines by means of wide straight roads and the re-erection of four obelisks in front of the major shrines to terminate long urban vistas so as to give visual prominence to sacred places, and to elaborate the triumph of the Roman church. The plan also included, new fountains to supply the new areas with water. However, the idea of re-erecting the Egyptian obelisks in Roman piazzas was not the original idea of Sixtus V. The issue was first addressed by Pope Nicholas V (1447-55) who asked Alberti the Vatican obelisk. Alberti suggested the obelisk be moved from the side of the old basilica of St Peter to the front of the new one. But the operation faced a complexity of problems: first, finding the technology which would have to be used to move the obelisk, and second, determining the precise axis of the unfinished new church of St. Peter. Therefore, the project was never executed. But with the tremendous technical skill of Domenico Fontana, Pope Sixtus V managed to re-erect the Vatican obelisk, in its present location in St. Peter's square.

After Fontana succeeded in re-erecting the obelisk of St. Peter, Sixtus V obsessed with the re-erection of the Esquiline obelisk, one of a pair of obelisks standing before the mausoleum of Augustus, which Fontana managed to raise in 1587. Sixtus V next turned to the obelisk which used to be in Circus Maximus. This obelisk had been brought from the temple of

Amun in the Karnak to Alexandria by Constantine the Great. After his death, it was transported to Rome by his son Constintus in 357. Fontana was called upon again and it was successfully erected before S. Giovanni in Laterano in 1588. The obelisk in Piazza del Popolo was the last one Fontana re-erected in 1589. It was the first obelisk brought from Egypt to Rome, and its fragments were found in Circus Maximus (Clayton, 1986,11).

In general, the new plan gave a coherence to the city and a different conception of space which rather fitted the Baroque conception of the city which was based on expansion of space beyond the traditional borders of the city. It differed from the Renaissance city with its static nature and its enclosed space. The plan of Sixtus V (Fig. 8) was a plan of spaces rather than a distribution of buildings, configured on horizontal expansion marked with a vertical axis. Schulz explained this conception by saying:

The ... plan organizes extensions in relation to foci, among which one is usually dominant. All these foci represent a termination to the horizontal movement, they should be defined by means of a vertical axis. Sixtus V and Domenico Fontana were conscious of this basic spatial problem, and used Egyptian obelisks found among the Roman ruins to mark the nodes of their system (Schulz, 1986, 12).

There is an ecclesiastical impulse for Sixtus's V plan. The connection of roads with the shrines of the city, reflect the implementation of counter Reformation ideas and the newly awakened vitality of the church. Fontana expressed the real intention of the plan he carried out by saying:

Our lord, now wishing to ease the way for those who, prompted by devotion or by vows, are accustomed to visit frequently the most holy places of the city of Rome, and in particular the seven churches so celebrated for their great indulgences and relics: opened many most commodious and

straight streets in many places. Thus one can by foot, by horse, or in a carriage, starting from whatever place in Rome one may wish, and continue virtually in a straight line the most famous devotions.... Now at a truly incredible cost, and in conformity with the spirit of so great a prince (Sixtus), has extended these streets from one end of the city to the other, without concern for either the hills or the valleys which they crossed: but, causing the former to be leveled and the latter filled, has reduced them to most gentle plains, and charming sites, revealing in several places which they pass, the lowest portions of the city with various and diverse perspectives; so that, aside from the devotions, they also nourish with their charm the senses of the body (Giedion, 1982, 93)

Fontana shows that the plan served as means of persuasion, to manifest the religious experience as much as possible, by making a systematic visit to the holy places by the faithful easy and possible. The whole city was imbued with religious values which made it a real "Citta Santa" or a "single holy shrine" (Schulz, 1986, 11).

Two visual documents represent Sixtus's V plan of Rome. The first is a schematic map by Gian Francesco Bordini, published in a short encomiastic book in 1588 (Fig. 9). The second is a frescoed panorama of the city, elaborating the wall of the new Vatican library (Fig. 10). While Bordini's is conceptual, the Vatican panorama is an aerial perspective of the city. However, both indicate the coherence and the scale of the new plan and both "are, indeed, icons of reformed totality" (Burroughs, 1994, 190).

Bordini's map has a special emblematic significance. The major shrines have been indicated by symbols, while secular monuments are represented iconographically in a star-like shape centered by Sta. Maria Maggiore Church. Sta. Maria Maggiore was an early object of the

veneration of Sixtus V. Before his pontification in 1585, he built his residence "Villa Montalto" in a thinly populated area adjacent to the Church of Sta. Maria Maggiore. The choice of the location of the Villa Montalto in relation to Sta. Maria Maggiore is related to the veneration of sacred mountains in the Franciscan order to which Sixtus V belonged. Villa Montalto, therefore, also became included in the heraldic motif of Sixtus V in which a group of three stylized hills *Monticuli* are surmounted by a star. The *Monticuli* device is surmounted by the four obelisk Sixtus V erected in Rome (Fig. 11).

In Bordini's map the *Monticuli* motif marks the element *monti* (mountain) in the names of the churches of St. Trinita dei Monti, and the Madona dei Monti. Thus, the *Monticuli* device affirms the association of Sixtus with the district containing both the Villa Montalto plus the Magnificent funerary chapel with the prominent dome that he constructed adjacent to the church of St. Maria Maggiore (Burroughs, 1994, 193).

Therefore, the *monticuli* in Bordini's map is considered to be the core of the reformed symbolic topography of the entire city. Moreover, the star in Bordini's map is not a real representation of the straight roads of the city, but is a symbolic representation of Sta. Maria:

The star in Bordini's is a symbolic figuration saturating the lofty terrain of Monti with the presence of the Virgin in her familiar manifestation as Stella Maris and Stella Mututina (Burroughs, 1994, 193).

As in ancient Rome, expansion of the imperial boundaries was celebrated by an expansion of the city, so Sixtus's V conception of a new, greater Rome was implemented by vastly expanding the realm of church

activities. The two columns of Trajan and Marcus Arilius in Bordini's map were rededicated by Sixtus V. to St. Peter and St. Paul. These two columns had been long associated, especially, in Hapsburg emblems, with the pillars of Hercules that marked the opening of the Atlantic world. In the new lands, Europeans devised various ways to inscribe and legitimize their presence along the African coast. For instance, the Portuguese erected four-sided stone pillars *Padroes* marked with heraldic crests and religious symbols and carrying the symbol of the cross. The *Padroes* have navigational and symbolic significance reinforced with symbols abstracted from indigenous cultural landscape in the colonies associated with the saintly cults and providential ideology of Christianity.

Thus if Rome functioned as a microcosmic model for the wider world of Christianity, Sixtus's V obelisks perhaps echo the *Padroes* and with other markers erected by European voyagers and conquistadors on distant seas. In the same context, symbolically Madonna travelled with the voyagers, for instance, the first ship that reached America was Columbus's Sta. Maria and the first gold brought from the new world was put in the ceiling of Sta. Maria Maggiore. Furthermore, the Merian cult soon established overseas as part of world wide network of observances centered at the Madonna's great shrine in Rome. The obelisk in the rear of Sta. Maria Maggiore in Piazza Esquilina has a particular importance concerning the city-wide array of emblems. The obelisk closed the vista down the Strada Felice, the major street in Sixtus's V plan, and was aligned with other streets, notably via Panisperna, approaching from the heart of the city, and with the portal of the villa Montalto on Piazza Esquilina. The ancient inscriptions on its base referred to the Emperor Augustus, who had originally brought the obelisk to

Rome and set it up as a trophy of his victory over Cleopatra. Inscriptions added by Sixtus to proclaim that the triumph of Augustus and the pagan Empire had been surpassed and superseded by that of Christ, whose birth in the time of Augustus was commemorated by the great relic of Sta. Maria Maggiore

The very manger in which the Christ child had supposedly been laid, now centerpiece of Sixtus grand chapel. The iconography of the chapel's rich marble encrusted decoration is an elaborated agglomeration of narrative and emblematic elements. Its message is inscribed in a more condensed and emphatic version on the nearby obelisk or rather is imagined as proclaimed by the obelisk, speaking in the first person to the piazza, the radiating streets, and the city (Burroughs, 1994, 197).

Obelisks induced the development of the Roman squares. For instance, Piazza del Popolo, the main entry to the city, until the time of Sixtus V was simply a starting point of triple-streets but with the obelisk re-erected in 1589 it became a true urban center, and about the middle of the seventeenth century it was transformed into a Baroque Piazza (Fig. 12). In St. Peter's square, Fontana erected the Egyptian obelisk in 1586. The obelisk functioned as a node or a center in which all directions are unified by a longitudinal axis which leads to the church (Fig. 13). In 1667 Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) managed to find a genuine solution to solve architecturally the relationship between the square and the cathedral by the colonnade. The colonnade, like the obelisk, had a symbolic basis as Bernini said in his own terms:

For since the church of St. Peter's is the mother of nearly all the others, it had to have colonnades which would show it as if stretching out its arm maternally to receive

Catholics, so as to confirm them in their faith, heretics, to reunite them to the Church and infidels, to enlighten them in the true faith (Schulz, 1986, 27-30).

Piazza Navona dates back to 86 A.D. It was a place that followed the outline of Emperor Demitian Stadium. In the Middle Ages, houses were built on Roman ruins but the shape of the square was kept, and used for popular games. Sixtus IV (1471-84) made the square a market place. Pope Innocent X decided to glorify his family, the Panphili, by reconstructing a new residential palace on the western side of the square, rebuilding the adjacent Church of St. Agnese as a family chapel, and enhancing the water supply. The space in Piazza Navona is narrow and long. Buildings around the square shared a general scale and colors and classical elements which created a sense of continuity. St. Agnese church has more complicated classical elements which created a hierarchical structure which dominated the others. Its facade is concave which creates a Baroque sense of space in the piazza, rather than having abstract geometrical quality as in Renaissance space (Fig. 14). The square was planned to have three fountains, one at each side and the fountain of the Four Rivers in the centre. The three fountains divided the space into four varied zones with human dimensions.

When Pope Innocent X decided to have a fountain in Piazza Navona, Alessandro Algardi submitted a design of the fountain with an allegorical figure of the River Tiber. However, when Innocent decided to incorporate the Egyptian obelisk brought to Rome by the Emperor Antonius Caracalla and had been long buried in Capo di Bove, Francesco Borromini submitted a design of the fountain including the obelisk with four river-gods. At that time Gian Lorenzo Bernini was disfavored by Pope X Innocent because of

his connection with previous Pope Urban XIII. However, Prince Nicolo Ludovici convinced the Pope to see Bernini's model of the fountain. When the Pope saw it, he immediately liked the work and ordered Bernini responsible for the fountain. Baldinucci in his *Vita del cavalier Lorenzo Bernino* described this event by saying:

Upon seeing such a noble creation and a design for such a vast monument he was nearly ecstatic. Since he was a prince of the clearest intelligence and the loftiest thoughts, after spending half an hour or more around the model, continuously admiring and praising it, he burst out with the presence of the whole secret council with the following words: It will be necessary to make use of Bernini despite those who do not want his works, must not look at them (Enggass, 1970, 112).

Bernini in his model represented the four principal rivers of the world: The Nile for Africa, the Danube for Europe, the Ganges for Asia, and the Rio de la Plata for America. He arranged the four rivers in the accordance with the four sides of the fountain. Then he placed the obelisk over a grotto made of travertine from which water gush to give the illusion that the granite obelisk rested on air (Fig. 15 & 16).

Baldinucci described the fountain in his biography, but most importantly, he grasped Bernini's intention to dramatise the impact of the obelisk by creating an illusion that made it look as if it was resting on air while including the gushing of the water as part of the design.

But I do not want to pass too rapidly to other matters without first saying something about the fountain, which is counted among Bernini's most marvelous creations and which proved to be one of the most beautiful ornaments of the city of

Rome. In the very center, then, of the length and breadth of the great Piazza Navona is situated at ground level a step or bank, so to speak, which forms a great circle about 106 Roman palmi in diameter. About 10 palmi from the two extremities lies a great basin symbolizing, I believe, the sea, in the midst of which there rises up to a height of about 30 palmi a mass or, let us say, a grotto made of travertine. This mass is tunneled through so that from all four sides one can see through the other side of the piazza. By means of these openings the rock is divided into four parts, which are joined and united at the top. These four parts represent the four continents of the world. The sections, by broadening and jutting out in various craggy masses, provide places for four very imposing giant figures of white marble representing the four rivers. The Nile symbolizing Africa is the figure covering the upper part of his head with a cloth as an indication of the obscurity that long prevailed regarding the exact point from which it springs from the earth. Beside it is a very beautiful palm tree. The Danube, which represents Europe, is admiring the marvelous obelisk and has a lion nearby. The Ganges, which stands for Asia, holds a large oar indicating the great extent of its waters. A little below it is a horse. Finally, comes the Rio de la Plata for America. It is represented by a Moor, and next to it are some coins to show the wealth of minerals abounding in that country. Beneath the figure is a terrible monster commonly known as the Tatu of the Indies. Around all these river allegories water brought there from the Trevi Fountain gushes in great quantities. In the basin at the water line appear some large fish in the act of darting into the sea, all of them most beautiful. One fish on the side toward Piazza Orsini is seen swallowing the water that sustains its life, and having taken in too great a quantity, it blows out the excess—a truly brilliant concept.... The pedestal stands splendidly at the exact center of the rock's summit, about twenty-three palmi high. Upon it rests the great obelisk

about eighty palmi in height. It is crowned with a beautiful metal finial about ten palmi high upon which a gilded cross shines. Above rests a dove with an olive branch in its beak, the emblem of the Pamphili family. One marvels not a little to see the immense mass of the obelisk erected on a rock so hollowed out and divided and observe how-speaking in artistic terms-it seems to stand upon a void. The water falls in abundance; the sweet murmuring sounds and plenitude make it a thing of utility and delight to the commune (Enggass, 1970, 113-4).

The design of the fountain of the Four Rivers went through several stages. The first designs, as have been mentioned, was submitted by Algardi who represented the fountain with an allegorical figure of the River Tiber (Fig. 17). Boromini submitted his design which included the obelisk with the four rivers of the world (Fig. 18). Probably, Bernini got the idea of the four rivers from Boromini's design. However, other sources could be considered as well. For instance, the fountain of the Rock at the Villa de'Este in Tivoli (Fig. 19), where two artificial hillocks rest on four rocky piers and water oozes into a cavern cruciform in shape. The gush of water creates a vertical ascent equivalent to the shape of an obelisk. A second influence was the Villa Iante, Bagnaia where its fountain has four rivers-gods each with one hand raised to hold the Chigi coat of arms. The recumbent allegorical figures of river-gods could possibly be derived from the recumbent figures in the fountain of the Belvedere of the Vatican.

Bernini's design itself went through several stages as shown in different drawings. The earliest drawing show a half-length river-god emerging from a grotto in a rocky mound, with both arms raised to support the curling cartouches of coat of arms. The obelisk rests diagonally, it faces

parallel with four coats of arms facing outwards above the rocky corners of the mound (Fig. 20). The diagonal alignment of the obelisk was a bold Baroque solution, however, it was abandoned in favor of a more classical solution. The second design of Bernini shows the river-gods emerging from their grottoes in full length. They are set on top of the rocky mound, looking inward and upward, holding the papal coat of arms. Below water gushes into curving shells from which dolphins emerge. Most daring is the large opening below the obelisk (Fig. 21), and most likely the same design to be repeated on the other side as well (Avery, 1997, 194-7).

In rapid sketches Bernini shows the development of the central opening in the composition. At first it looks like a diagram in which the blocks of travertine marble would be laid horizontally in two piles, with one bridging the gap between them. A variety of sitting or reclining poses for the river-gods is also included (Fig. 22). In other sketches, the marble has diagonal slants which give it a more natural appearance and better sense of unity than the previous design and differentiates it from the rocky base of the obelisk above. Moreover, the arrangement and the gestures of river-gods created a complex of spatial relationship which is a typical of Bernini's sculpture. He tended to avoid the static conception of sculpture that was dictated by the block of form. He used Mannerism tradition of using several blocks of stone in the same work to avoid the limitation imposed by a block of stone. Such manner allowed Bernini to wed his work with the surrounding space, to express energy and sense of ecstasy which distinguish Baroque sculpture from earlier periods.

In conclusion, Obelisks became objects of interest and were used in architects' compositions, as early as the sixteenth century. Architects like Sangallo and Vignola used obelisks for their formal and decorative elements.

Sixtus's V plan of the reorganization of Rome based on a network of long avenues, used strategically placed obelisks to connect the main shrines of the city. The plan was a manifestation of the accomplished restoration of the Catholic Church, and to express the role of Rome as the dominant focus of the Catholic World. Obelisks in Sixtus's V plan used as nodes or vertical axis to terminate the horizontal extensions of the city. However, the Roman Church gave particular importance to the visual images as means of persuasion, and to make the glory of the Church visible, obelisks used as symbols to proclaim the victory of Christianity over Paganism. For instance, the four obelisks Sixtus re-erected were crowned with the heraldic motif of monticuli over which the symbol of the cross is superimposed.

In the fountain of the Four Rivers, Bernini placed the obelisk over a grotto. The dominance of the obelisk, the design of the grotto and the arrangement of the figures enhanced the plastic quality as well as the emotional impact of the composition, which departed it from traditional, static composition of fountains. In this fountain the obelisk has become a Baroque element and like other Baroque works it "concentrates on vivid images of situation, real and surreal, rather than on 'history' and 'absolute form' or as Decartes says 'The charm of fables awakens the mind' (Schulz, 1986, 10)". The obelisk, at this time has become a Christian symbol, having transformed from its original Egyptian roots. It is no longer just a decorative

or architectural element . The obelisk, embedded with the triumphal spirit of the Catholic Church, is erected for all to see .