

SECRETS OF ROME

egyptian rome the obelisks

One of Rome's nicknames is "the city of obelisks". If we talk about ancient obelisks in general, in Rome there are 13, but only 8 of them are originally Egyptian, while 5 are ancient Roman copies. According to some, others lie here and there, buried underneath the modern city. For example, there is a huge one underneath Palazzo Giustiniani, in Piazza San Luigi dei Francesi. This used to stand in Piazza Navona and people refer to it as the "ghost obelisk". Obelisks were associated with the cult to the Egyptian Sun god Amon-Ra. The original Egyptian term to indicate this particular monument was "TeKHeN". The word "obelisk" comes originally from ancient Greek: "ὀβελίσκος", "small spit", because of its shape. Obelisks are quadrangular columns carved from a single block of stone (a monolith), which end with a pointed top called "pyramidion" or, in Ancient Egyptian, "BeNBeNeT". The "pyramidion" was generally covered with electrum, an alloy of gold and silver with traces of copper. Obelisks were placed in front of the temples dedicated to the Sun God Atum-Ra, because they symbolized the god himself. Its shape was a petrified rendering of a ray of the sun. Pyramids too had the same symbolic significance, and like the obelisks, had a "pyramidion" on top. The "pyramidion", or "BeNBeNeT", in particular symbolized the "BeNBeN", the primeval mound which emerged from the waters of chaos, the first firm object on which the rays of the sun fell. Or, according to another version of the same myth of creation, it represented the petrified semen of the god Atum, when he self-copulated and brought things into being. Therefore, obelisks embodied the stability and the creative force of Atum, and were used to protect temples and tombs. In the world there is a total of 26 ancient Egyptian obelisks, and 8 of them are in Rome.

These are the obelisks created in antiquity by the Ancient Egyptians, taken from Egypt after the Roman conquest, and brought to Rome:

- **Campense, or Solare:** erected by Psammetichus II (595-589 BC) in Heliopolis. It was brought to Rome in 10 BC, by the first Roman Emperor, Augustus, and was used as the gnomon of the "Solarium Augusti" (giant sundial). In 1792, it was placed in the Piazza Montecitorio by Pope Pius VI;
- **Dogali:** erected by Ramses II (XIII century BC), in Heliopolis. Moved to the Temple of Isis in Rome, it was discovered in 1719. In 1883, it was re-discovered and in 1887, was moved in front of Termini Station and was incorporated in the monument built to commemorate the Battle of Dogali. In 1924, it was placed in the present location, in Via delle Terme di Diocleziano.
- **Flaminio:** erected by Sethis I and Ramses II (XIII century BC) in Heliopolis, this was the first obelisk brought to Rome by Augustus, in 10 BC. It was placed on the eastern side of the spina (i.e. the wall around which the chariots raced) of the Circus Maximus, during the celebrations for the twentieth anniversary of the conquest of Egypt. In 547, the Goths of Tothila pulled it down, and it was re-discovered in 1857. Pope Sixtus V, in 1589, had Domenico Fontana place it at the centre of Piazza del Popolo.
- **Lateranense:** it is the tallest obelisk in Rome. It was erected by Tuthmosis III (XV century BC) in the temple of Amun in Karnak. Originally it was moved to Alexandria by Constantine, who intended to have it brought to Constantinople. Constantius II, several years later, in 357 AD, brought it to Rome as a gift. It was placed at the centre of the Circus Maximus' spina. In 547, the Goths of Tothila pulled it down, and it was re-discovered in 1857. Pope Sixtus V, in 1589, had Domenico Fontana place it in Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano, on the left side of the Basilica of St. John Lateran.
- **Macuteo:** erected by Ramses II (XIII century BC) in Heliopolis, Domitian (I century AD) had it placed in the Temple of Isis, which used to be where now stands the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. Found in 1373, it was erected in piazza di San Macuto in 1404. and In 1711, it was moved to the front of the Pantheon by Pope Clement XI, over a fountain designed by Giacomo Della Porta.
- **Matteiano or Capitolino:** erected by Ramses II (XIII century BC), in Heliopolis. Originally it was placed in the Temple of Isis, which used to be where now stands the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. In the Middle-Ages, at the beginning of the XIVth century, it was moved on the Capitoline hill. In 1582, it was moved to Villa Celimontana.
- **Minerveo:** erected by Apries (VI century BC) in Sais, it was brought to Rome by Diocletian for the Temple of Isis which used to be where now stands the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. Found in 1655, a few years later, in 1667, Pope Alexander VII had it erected on an Elephant base by Bernini, in Piazza della Minerva.
- **Vaticano:** Carved of Aswan granite in the reign of Nebkaura Amenemhet II (XX century BC), the obelisk originally stood before the pylon to the Temple of the Sun at Heliopolis. It is the only obelisk with no inscription. Augustus had it placed in the Forum Iulium, in Alexandria. In 37 AD, it was brought to Rome by Caligula, for the *spina* of the Circus he was starting to build by the Vatican hill. In 1586, Pope Sixtus V had it relocated at the centre of St. Peter's Square. Domenico Fontana was the architect in charge of this delicate task. On top of the obelisk, there used to be a bronze globe which was believed to contain the ashes of Julius Caesar. Fontana later removed the ancient metal ball, which now is visible in the Museo dei Conservatori, on the Capitoline hill.

These, on the other hand, are the obelisks made by Roman emperors:

- **Agonale:** it was commissioned by Domitian to celebrate his family, the Flavians. Scholars differ on its original location, but probably it used to be in the Temple of the Flavian family, on the Quirinale hill. Maxentius moved it on the spina at the center of the Circus he built on the Appian way (IV century AD). In 1651, Bernini erected it on top of the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi.
- **Quirinale:** Originally erected on the eastern flank of the Mausoleum of Augustus, it paired with the Esquilino obelisk. It does not have a pyramidion on the top. It was found in 1781, and a few years later, in 1786, Pope Pius VI had it moved on the Quirinale hill, in front of the Quirinale Palace.
- **Esquilino:** It paired with the Quirinale obelisk. Found in 1519, in 1587, Pope Sixtus V had it placed in front of the entrance of his villa, behind the Basilica of Saint Mary Major.
- **Sallustiano:** Aurelian (III century AD) had it made and placed in the Horti Sallustiani (Gardens of Sallust). The text is a copy of that which is carved on the Flaminio obelisk. In 1735, Pope Clemens XII had it moved in the Lateran Palace. In 1789, Pope Pius VI, had it placed in front of the Church of Santissima Trinità dei Monti, above the Spanish Steps.
- **Pinciano:** Emperor Hadrian (II century AD) had it made for the funerary monument of Antinoos (his boy lover), which was on the Palatine hill. Elagabal (III century AD) moved the obelisk inside the Circus Varianus (on the northern part of Rome), on the *spina*. In 1632, it was placed inside the Barberini Palace, then, in 1769, it was brought in the Vatican. In 1822, Pope Pius VII had it moved on the Pincio.