Dedication of the obelisk in the Circus Maximus (CIL VI, 701)

Obelisk of Augustus (Circus Maximus)

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Dedication.
Original Location/Place: Heliopolis, Egypt, then the eastern end of the spina of the Circus Maximus, Rome.
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Piazza del Popolo, Rome
Date: 1292 BCE to 1189 BCE
Physical Characteristics:
Red granite monolith from Egypt dated to the XIXth dynasty (Sethos I and Ramesses II), inscribed with hieroglyphs.
Erected on top of a doubly-inscribed marble base and placed on the central barrier (spina) of the Circus Maximus.

Material: Red Granite.
Measurements:
Height: 25.53m (plus base: 3.34m)

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications: CIL VI, 701 (=702)

Commentary: This inscription is repeated on both the north and south faces of the pedestal of the obelisk that currently stands in the centre of Piazza del Popolo in Rome. The pedestal and obelisk originally stood on the spina of the Circus Maximus, where it was placed by the emperor Augustus in 10 BCE, twenty years after the successful annexation of Egypt as a Roman province (Rushforth, Latin Historical Inscriptions, p. 3. For the exact placement of the obelisk in relation to the other monuments of the spina, see Humphreys, Roman Circuses, p. 175-292). This obelisk, along with several others, was brought to Rome between 13-10 BCE by Augustus precisely to commemorate this conquest (Pliny the Elder, Natural History XXXVI.14). It, and the obelisk placed on the Campus Martius close to the Altar of Augustan Peace (now reconstructed from fragments and situated on the Montecitorio, Rome) – whose pedestal recorded almost exactly the same inscription (CIL VI, 702) – came to play a significant role in Augustus’s message of political supremacy.

The inscription makes two important points. Firstly, the obelisk was acquired after Augustus had brought Egypt “back into the power of the Roman people” (Aegypto in potestatem / populi romani redacta). Even 20 years after the fact, Augustus’s success in Egypt was a major military and political victory; not only had Antony and Cleopatra been defeated, but their defeat had brought to an end decades of civil war in Rome. Egypt was now a province of Rome, and one that benefitted her citizens directly through the rich resources that they were now able to exploit; indeed, just a few years after Cleopatra’s death, Egypt was able to send five billion bushels of grain to Rome, almost one third of the capital’s total consumption (Sorek, The Emperor’s Needles, p. 36). However, although presenting the annexation of Egypt as something achieved on behalf of the Roman people – a statement also repeated in very similar language in chapter 27 of the Res gestae Divi Augusti (“I added Egypt to the empire of the Roman people” (Aegyptum imperio populi [Ro]mani adieci)) – the reality was quite different. Egypt was not a senatorial province, but an imperial one. Rather than being administered by a proconsul, appointed by the Senate, it remained the personal estate of Augustus, who retained the right to appoint its governor (legatus Augusti) independently from the Senate. The senators themselves could only enter the province with the express permission of the emperor; as Susan Sorek has noted, Augustus essentially managed to establish there a form of monarchy,
with the Egyptians easily assimilating him as next in line to the throne of pharaohs and Ptolemies (The Emperor's Needle, p. 36). Augustus was, however, careful not to exploit this acceptance of him as a monarchical figure in the city of Rome; the inscriptions at the base of the obelisk were deliberately placed to face the northern and southern sides of the Circus Maximus, facing the largest groups of spectators on either side. Whatever the reality of his conquest of Egypt, twenty years after it had occurred Augustus still ensured that it was presented in a way that propagated the message that underscored his position; he had not ‘taken’ Rome under his own dominion, but rather returned her to the control of the people and their constitutional rights.

The final line of the inscription illustrates another key facet of Augustus’s persona: his pietas. He states that he “gave [the obelisk] to Sol as a gift” (Soli donum dedit). Not only was the votive nature of the dedication an indicator of piety to the gods, but his choice of location for the dedication of this particular monument was especially apt. The Circus Maximus had been associated with the sun-god, Sol, since its earliest years. John H. Humphreys has suggested that a shrine to Sol may have been set up with an altar in the regal period of Rome’s history, which was maintained through to the imperial period (Humphreys, Roman Circuses, p. 62). Tacitus certainly refers to there being an ‘ancient shrine to Sol near the circus’ (Soli, cui est vetus aedes apud circum, Annals XV.74.1), and a temple-like building decorated with ornamentation suggesting the Sun and its rays has been identified on the Aventine side of the circus’s seating (see Humphreys, Roman Circuses, p. 92-3). It is clear from the frequency with which it is mentioned in the sources that the cult of the Sun was closely tied to the activity of the circus, wherever its shrine or temple were located. The movement of the chariots around the spina was compared with the movement of heavenly bodies around the sun (Tertullian, On Spectacles VII) and the name ‘circus’ was said to come from Circe, the daughter of the Sun with whom Odysseus fathered a child, Latinus, the ancestor of the Latins (Hesiod, Theogony 1011-16. For ancient sources which discuss the association of Sol with chariot racing here, see also Pliny the Elder, Natural History XXXVI, 72-3; Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XVII.4 (17-23)). The obelisk, as a monument, was also understood by the Romans to be the particular symbol of Egyptian sun-worship (or Heliopolitan theology), which made it ideally suited as a votive dedication in the circus (Humphreys, Roman Circuses, p. 94). Indeed, there is even a parallel to be drawn between the chariot of the Sun, which pulled it across the sky, and the pose of the victorious charioteer, creating a connection between the cult and victory. This was not the only instance of Augustus engaging with the solar connections of the Egyptian obelisk and his own political ideology; the monument erected on the Campus Martius was also dedicated to Sol, and acted as a sundial, connecting the Ara Pacis with that other Augustan dynastic construction, the Mausoleum, all of which worked together to convey a powerful message of the power and longevity of the ruling family (for the placement of the ‘sundial,’ see Sorek, The Emperor’s Needle, 45-50; Coarelli, Rome and her environs, p. 298-9; Claridge, Rome, p. 190-2).

The erection of this, the first obelisk brought from Egypt to Rome, was therefore a statement of both religious and political ideology (Roulet, Egyptian and Egyptianizing Monuments, p. 43). It connected the religious institution of the sun cult with a monument whose size and nature denoted prestige in both its country of origin and the capital of the Roman Empire. Not only had the obelisk stood as a symbol of divine, dynastic power in the Egypt of the Pharaohs, but its seizure and erection in the Circus Maximus was emblematic of the superior power of Rome and her people. This particular obelisk had a precise resonance for Augustus too, bound up as it was in his own relationship with Egypt and the success that his conquest of Antony and Cleopatra had brought (Humphreys, Roman Circuses, p. 270). Its location in the Circus Maximus afforded him the opportunity, however, to present that victory and success as one won by, and for, all Romans, and which was integrated into the microcosm of Roman society that the spectacle of the circus permitted.

Keywords in the original language:

- Augustus [2]
- Aegyptus [3]
- potestas [4]
- populus romanus [5]
- redigo [6]
- Sol [7]
- donum [8]

Thematic keywords:
Roman conquests [9]
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obelisk [17]
sun god [18]

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