

Pyramids and Obelisks Beyond Egypt¹

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Who, then, was Cestius,
And what is he to me? -
Amid thick thoughts and memories multitudinous
One thought alone brings he.

I can recall no word
Of anything he did;
For me he is a man who died and was interred
To leave a pyramid [...]

Rome at the Pyramid of Cestius Near the Graves of Shelley and Keats
by Thomas Hardy (1887)²

I was fortunate to work with Brian Curran in the Department of Ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern Art at the Museum of Fine Arts in the 1980s where among his many other contributions he helped organize much of the material in storage from the museum's excavations in Nubia, carefully arranging them by date and tomb group, making an invaluable resource for scholarly study. This note is in memory of some of his wide ranging interests.

One of the most remarkable monuments still standing in Rome and identified by a nearby subway stop, the Pyramid of Cestius was constructed between the years 20 and 12 BC (fig.1). It is located on the Via Ostiensis, the main route to the important ancient port of Ostia Antica.³

¹ The author is most grateful to Janice Yellin, John Taylor, Suzanne Davis, Bob Brier and Gwyn Ashworth-Pratt for their help and expertise in writing this article and to Rita E. Freed, John F. Cogan Jr. and Mary L. Cornille Chair, Department of the Ancient World and Lawrence W. Berman, Norma Jean Calderwood Senior Curator of Ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern Art of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for permission to publish the Senkamanisken obelisk.

² James Gibson, ed., *The Variorum Edition of the Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*. (London: Macmillan, 1979), 104-5.

³ Carla Alfano, "Pyramids in Rome", *Göttinger Miszellen* 121 (1991): 7-17.

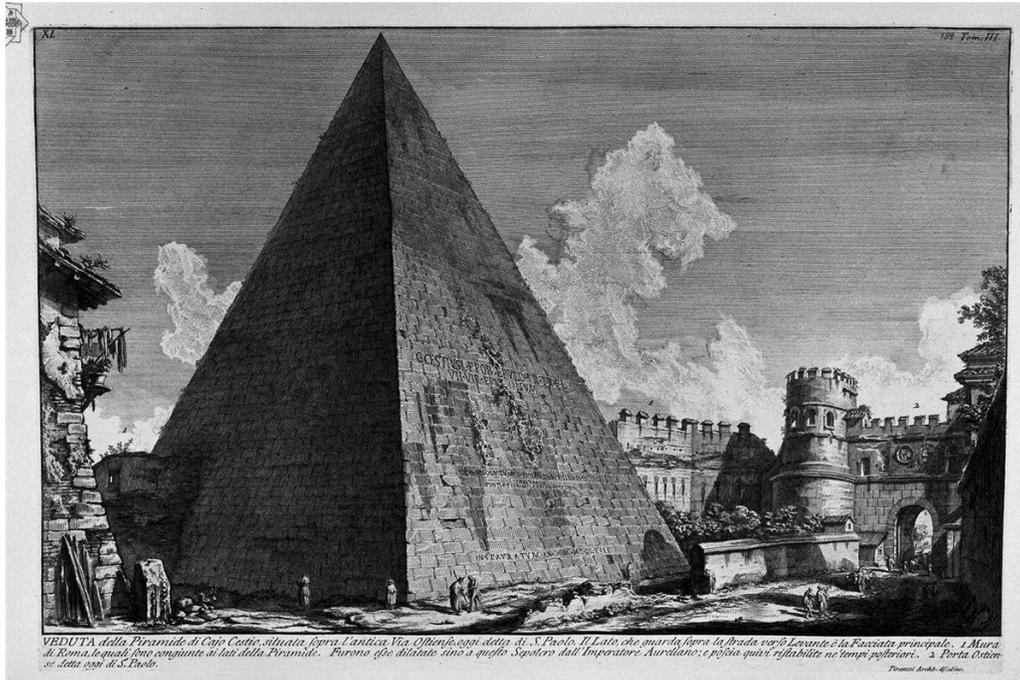


Figure 1: View of the Pyramid of Caius Cestius, from: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *The Roman Antiquities*, tome 3 (Rome: Angelo Rotili, 1757), Plate XL

The pyramid was built around a core of concrete with a skin of brick, and clad in white Luni marble.⁴ The base of the structure is a square measuring 29.6 meters (100 Roman feet) on each side and reaches a height of 37 meters (125 Roman feet), with a slope of 68°.⁵ Within it is a shallow vaulted, rectangular burial chamber measuring about 23 square meters accessed through the short end via a long, narrow corridor (fig. 2). The rather spare interior is not decorated in an Egyptianizing style but in a typical urn and panel motif.

⁴ Richard Stillwell, MacDonal, William L. McAlister, Marian Holland, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites* (Princeton University Press, 1976), 84-6.

⁵ Christian Tietze, ed., *Die Pyramide: Geschichte, Entdeckung, Faszination* (Potsdam et al.: Arcus Verlag, 2005), 92.

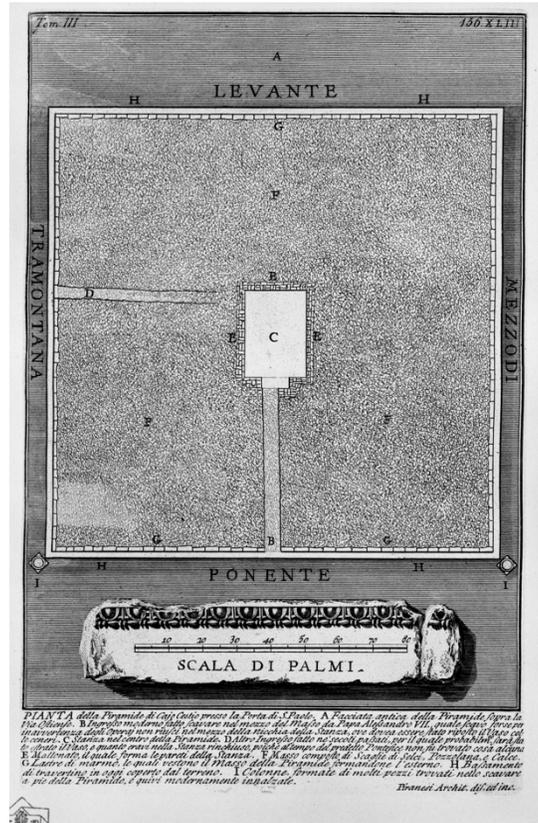


Figure 2: Section through the pyramid of Caius Cestius, from: Piranesi, *The Roman Antiquities*, Plate XLIII



Figure 3: Inscription from the pyramid of Gaius Cestius, from: Piranesi, *The Roman Antiquities*, Plate XLI

An inscription carved on the eastern and northwestern sides of the pyramid (fig. 3) reads:

C. Cestius L.F. Pob. Epulo pr. tr. pl.
VII vir epulonum
Opus apsolutum ex testamento diebus CCCXXX arbitratu
L. Ponti P.F Cla. Melae heredis et Pothi L.

Gaius Cestius Epulo, son of Lucius, of the Poblilian district, praetor, tribune of the people, official of the public banquets. According to his will, this work was completed in three hundred and thirty days; it was executed by his heirs L. Pontus Mela, son of Publius, of the Claudian district, and his freedman Pothus.⁶

The tomb was constructed for Gaius Cestius Epulo, the son of Lucius, of the tribe of Pabilia. The inscription also mentions that Cestius was a “praetor”, a tribune of the plebs, and a “septemvir” of the Epulones, a college of priests responsible for preparing the feasts in honor of the gods. A second inscription announces that the building of this monument was completed in 330 days.⁷

The Pyramid of Cestius was not the only pyramid in Rome; there was another known as the “Pyramid of Romulus”. Incidentally, during the Middle Ages, the Pyramid of Cestius was known as the “Pyramid of Remus”, and it was believed that these two pyramids were the tombs of the legendary founders of Rome.⁸ The larger “Pyramid of Romulus”, located between the Vatican and Hadrian’s Mausoleum, later, the Castel Sant’Angelo, was dismantled during the 16th century for its marble that was used in the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica.⁹

The inspiration for these pyramids has been debated and while pyramids are popularly associated with Egypt, they most closely resemble the pyramids of the Kingdom of

⁶ Amanda Claridge, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 59; 364–6.

⁷ Molly Swetnam-Burland, *Egypt in Italy, Visions of Egypt in Roman Imperial Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Anne Rouillet, *The Egyptian and Egyptianizing Monuments of Imperial Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 42-3, 84-5.

⁸ Nicholas Temple, *Renovatio Urbis: Architecture, Urbanism and Ceremony in the Rome of Julius II.* (Firenze: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 14.

⁹ Eugenio Lo Sardo, ed., *La Lupa e la Sfinge: Roma e l’Egitto dall storia al mito* (Milano: Electa 2008), 59-163; Brian Curran, *The Egyptian Renaissance: The Afterlife of Ancient Egypt in Early Modern Italy.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 29-30.

Meroe, the southern neighbor of the land of the pharaohs.¹⁰ Norman Neuerburg noted that the steep sides of the pyramid of Cestius are closer to the royal tombs of Kush, but rejects the idea that Cestius would have been inspired by the Nubian monuments and sees his tomb as an imitation of private pyramids in Thebes instead.¹¹ However, the private pyramids at Thebes, and elsewhere in Egypt, dating to the New Kingdom and later are much smaller, made of mud brick and faced with elaborate exterior doorways opening directly into an interior chapel. Such pyramids often have statue niches set in the exterior of the superstructure and are capped with decorated and inscribed stone pyramidia.¹² Their burial chambers are reached with a vertical shaft cutting down into the ground below or in front of the pyramid and usually have a high barrel-vaulted or flat ceiling entered from the middle of the long end of the burial chamber, entered through a short stair or directly from the vertical shaft (fig. 4).

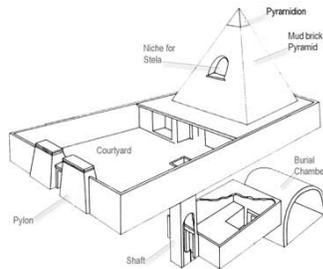


Figure 4: Diagram of an Egyptian New Kingdom Pyramid, drawing by Andrew Boyce

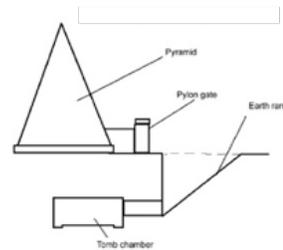


Figure 5: Diagram of a Nubian Meroitic Pyramid, drawing by Andrew Boyce

On the other hand, the Meroitic pyramids are larger, made of stone and have a low vaulted burial chamber reached by a long, narrow entrance stairway¹³ opening into the short end of the burial chamber, which more closely resembles the internal plan of Caius Cestius' monument (fig. 5). Although Neuerburg discounted the possibility of

¹⁰ James Stevens Curl, *The Egyptian Revival: Ancient Egypt as the Inspiration for Design Motifs in the West* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 25-8.

¹¹ Norman Neuerburg, "Greek and Roman Pyramids", *Archaeology*, 22, 2 (April 1969): 106-15.

¹² Alexander Badawy, *A History of Egyptian Architecture. The Empire (the New Kingdom) From the Eighteenth Dynasty to the End of the Twentieth Dynasty 1580-1085 B.C.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 375-83.

¹³ Friedrich W. Hinkle, "Die meroitischen Pyramiden: Formen, Kriterien und Bauweisen", *Meroitica* 7-8 (1980): 310-31.

Romans seeing the Nubian pyramids at the time of the construction of the Cestius monument, there had already been the campaign of Publius Petronius, the Roman governor of Egypt into Nubia in 23 BC and a treaty establishing a free border zone in Lower Nubia in the area known as the “Dodekaschenos”, “the land of twelve schoinos” (about 120 miles of land). As part of the “commilitum” of 21 BC.¹⁴ While Petronius did not succeed in penetrating all the way to Meroe, he did reach Gebel Barkal where there were a number of Meroitic pyramids.¹⁵ In addition, the large number of imported goods from the Mediterranean world found at Meroe¹⁶ suggests there had already been significant contact between the cultures by the time Caius Cestius was inspired to create his monument.

Ironically, before the Napoleonic campaign and the publication of the careful renderings of the *Description d’le Egypte* it was the pyramid of Caius Cestitus that informed most of the European images of what were believed to be ancient Egyptian pyramids (fig 6).¹⁷

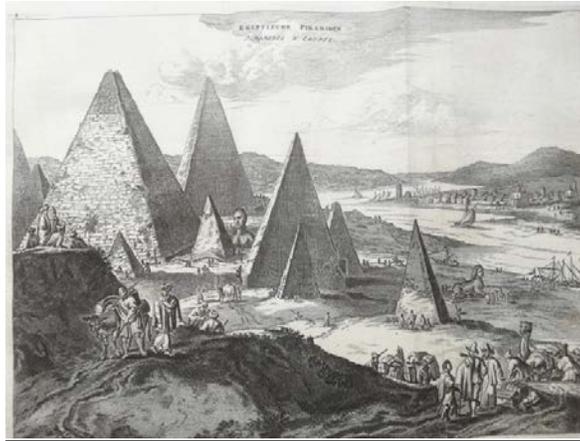


Figure 6: An imaginative depiction of the Giza Pyramids, from: D. O. Dapper, *Description de l’Afrique*, (Amsterdam: Wolfgang, Waesberge, Boome & van Someren, 1686)

¹⁴ László Török, *Between Two Worlds: The Frontier Region Between Ancient Nubia and Egypt, 3700 BC-AD 500* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 427-46

¹⁵ Dows Dunham, *Royal Cemeteries of Kush Vol IV: Royal Tombs at Meroe and Barkal* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1957).

¹⁶ Laurence P. Kirwan, “Rome beyond The Southern Egyptian Frontier”, *The Geographical Journal* 123 (1957): 13-9.

¹⁷ Curl, *Revival*, 108-112; Jean-Marcel Humbert and Clifford Price, *Imhotep Today: Egyptianizing Architecture* (London: UCL Press, 2003), 165-6.

The Obelisks of Nubia

While the obelisk, like the pyramid, is a quintessential feature of Egyptian architecture, it was readily copied throughout both the ancient and modern worlds, as documented by Brian Curran and many others.¹⁸ One of the early adopters of the form were the Nubian kings of the twenty-fifth Dynasty who sought to legitimize their rule over Egypt in their homeland, as well by constructing Egyptianizing monuments in the Middle Nile region.¹⁹ From the very outset of the Dynasty, King Piye (also known as Piankhy, reigned ca. 744–714 BC) departed from traditional burial custom and built the first royal pyramid in Nubia²⁰ and created at least one obelisk. The obelisk was found at the site of Kadakol and had been cut down to make it into a column, presumably for one of the early Christian churches in the area of Old Dongola.²¹ The obelisk, made of local black granite, is now in the National Museum in Khartoum (fig. 7).²²



Figure 7: Obelisk of Piye, National Museum in Khartoum, Photograph courtesy of Janice Yellin

¹⁸ Cf. Brian Curran, et. al., *Obelisk, A History* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Burndy Library/MIT Press, 2009); Bob Brier, *Cleopatra's Needles: The Lost Obelisks of Egypt* (London: Bloomsbury Egyptology, 2016), Labib Habashi, *The Obelisks of Egypt: Skyscrapers of the Past* (New York: Scribners, 1977); E. A. Wallis Budge, *Cleopatra's Needles and Other Egyptian Obelisks* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2003).

¹⁹ On the beginnings of the Dynasty see: Robert Morkot, *The Black Pharaohs* (London: Rubicon Press, 2000), 167-96.

²⁰ Peter Lacovara, "From Tumulus to Pyramid: The Development of the Royal Kushite Tomb", *The Journal of Ancient Egyptian Architecture*, forthcoming.

²¹ James Henry Breasted, "Second Preliminary Report of the Egyptian Expedition", *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 25, 1 (1908): 40; Bertha Porter and Rosalind Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings, VII (Nubia, Deserts and outside Egypt)* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1962): 192.

²² National Museum, Khartoum accession number 462.

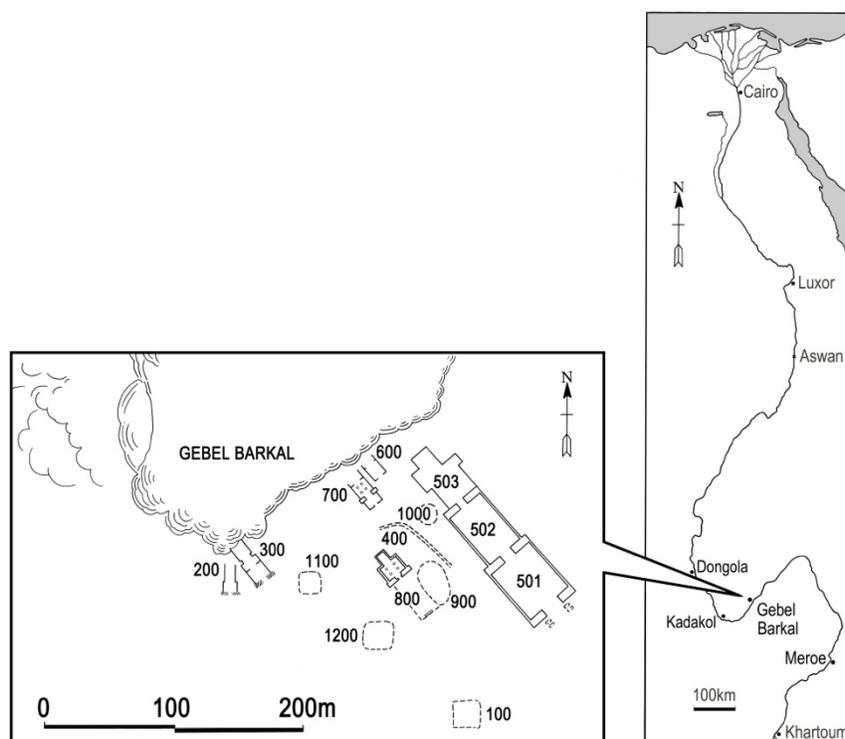


Figure 8: Map and plan showing the location of the Gebel Barkal temples. Drawing by Andrew Boyce.

It was inscribed with the titulary of Piye:

Strong-bull, Appearing-in-Dominion (Thebes), King-of-Upper-and-Lower-Egypt,
 Two-ladies, Ruler-of-Egypt,
 Son-of-Rê, Pi(ankh)y:
 what he made as his monument for his father Amen-Rê, lord of [...].²³

The dedication to Amun perhaps suggesting that it may have been taken from the site of Gebel Barkal to the south (fig. 8).²⁴ Similar in size and material is a fragment of the

²³ Tormod Eide et al., eds., *Fontes historiae Nubiorum: Textual Sources for the History of the Middle Nile Region between the Eighth Century BC and the Sixth Century AD*. Vol. I, 54 (Bergen: University of Bergen Press, 1994), 54.

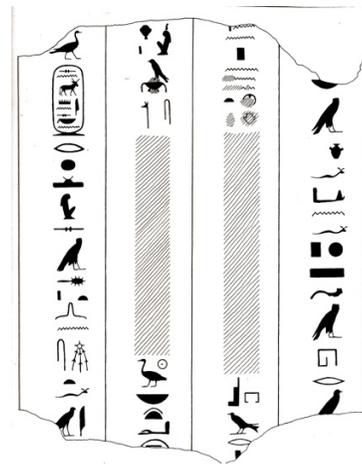
²⁴ Cf. Joyce Haynes, "Gebel Barkal" in Marjorie Fisher, Peter Lacovara, Sue D'Auria, and Salima Ikram eds., *Ancient Nubia: African Kingdoms on the Nile* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 285-93.

shaft of an obelisk of the Nubian King Senkamanisken (reign ca. 643–623 BC) from Gebel Barkal.²⁵ This dark gray granite obelisk fragment is inscribed on all four sides (figs. 9-10); one face has a cartouche of Senkamanisken.²⁶



Figure 9a: Four sides of the obelisk of Senkamanisken. Sudan, Napatan Period, reign of Senkamanisken, 643–623 BC, Black Granite, 94 x 18 x 18 cm (37 x 7 1/16 x 7 1/16 in.); Overall: Width at bottom of obelisk 19.5 cm (7 11/16 in.), from Gebel Barkal, B 702, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Harvard University - Expedition 20.5434, Photograph©. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 9b: Inscription on the four sides of the obelisk of Senkamanisken, after D. Dunham, *The Barkal Temples*, 35, fig. 29



²⁵ Dows Dunham, *The Barkal Temples* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1970), 33, 35.

²⁶ Karola Zibeli-Chen, “Zu Entstehung und Ende eines Großreiches: die 25. Dynastie in Ägypten”, in *Studien zum antiken Sudan: Akten der 7. internationalen Tagung für meroitische Forschungen vom 14. bis 19. September 1992 in Gosen/ bei Berlin*, ed. Steffen Wenig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 700.

The surviving inscription reads:

- (1) “[... Two Goddesses, Appearing]-on-account-of-Right; Horus of Gold, [Rich- in-valor; King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Sekheperenrec]; Son of Re, S[enkamanisken...]”
- (2) “[...] Amun of Napata [...] great seat [...]”
- (3) “[...] Son of Rec, Senkamanisken, I knew him in the womb, before he was born [...]”
- (4) “[...] all [...] in his heart [...] (I?) give to him the scimitar on [this]”²⁷

This obelisk was discovered by the Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts Expedition to the Sudan in 1916 and subsequently given to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.²⁸

The obelisk was found in the remains of temple B 700 situated to the northeast of the main Amun temple (B 500) at Gebel Barkal.²⁹ Temple B 700 was begun in the reign of Atlanersa (reigned ca. 653 to 643 BC) and finished by his successor Senkamanisken. Interestingly, an inscription recorded on the now destroyed south pylon of the temple finished by Senkamanisken read in part, “[...] he set up for him an obelisk in the Great Place [...]”³⁰ The obelisk was uncovered lying by the inner doorway leading to the sanctuary of the temple and may have originally been part of a pair that decorated the temple. The obelisk’s dimensions as preserved are: 94 centimeters high by 19.5 centimeters square at the base and tapers upward to roughly 18 centimeters square at the preserved top of the shaft at an angle of about 83° which is roughly the standard slope for the shaft of an Egyptian obelisk. Based on other estimates the original height of the obelisk would probably have been around 2 to 2.5 meters high.³¹ A fragment of

²⁷ G. A. Reisner, “The Barkal Temples in 1916”, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 5 (1918): 99-112.

²⁸ Museum of Fine Arts Boston accession number 20.5434 (field number 16-4-330).

²⁹ László Török, *The Image of the Ordered World in Ancient Nubian Art: The Construction of the Kushite Mind, 800 BC-300 AD* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 158.

³⁰ László Török, *The Image of the Ordered World*, 161.

³¹ The black siltstone obelisk of Nectanebo II in the British Museum (EA 523) which is roughly double the size of the Senkamenisken obelisk is estimated to have been approximately 5.5 meters when complete: [reference](#) (accessed March 25, 2018); Sir Erasmus Wilson suggested that “The proper proportions of the shaft of obelisk, exclusive of its pyramidion, are said to be ten times the breadth of the base.” in *Cleopatra’s Needle: With Brief Notes on Egypt and Egyptian Obelisks* (London: Brain & Company, 1877), 21.

another obelisk from Gebel Barkal and now in the Museum there preserves the name of Atlanersa (fig. 10) and may have been a mate to Senkamanisken's.



Figure 10: Black granite obelisk of Atlanersa from the Gebel Barkal Museum, Photograph
Courtesy of Suzanne Davis



Figure 11: Obelisk of Aktisanes, Gebel Barkal Museum, Photograph courtesy of Janice Yellin

Also at Gebel Barkal are the remains of another small obelisk inscribed with the cartouche of King Aktisanes (late fourth century BC) housed in the site Museum at Gebel Barkal (fig. 11). Its exact find spot is not recorded but this king is also named on some blocks from the temple.³² Obelisks continued in importance in the later periods of Nubian history, and maintained their solar symbolism as they had in Egypt. The remains of one was noted in the Sun Temple at Meroe³³ and a scene on a coffin bench from a pyramid at Meroe shows the king worshipping an obelisk and the sun disc (fig. 12).³⁴

³² K.-H. Priese, “Eine verschollene Bauinschrift des frühmeroitischen Königs Aktisanes(?) von Gebel Barkal”, in *Ägypten und Kusch*, ed. Erika Endesfelder (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1977), 343-67.

³³ Karl Baedeker, *Egypt and the Sudan: Handbook for Travellers* (Leipzig: Baedeker, 1914), 422.

³⁴ BMFA (Boston Museum of Fine Arts) 23.868.



Figure 12, Block from a coffin bench showing a king praying before an obelisk, Sudan, Meroitic Period, early 2nd century B.C., Sandstone. 67.95 x 191.14 x 373.38 cm (26 3/4 x 75 1/4 x 147 in.), from Meroe: Pyr. Beg. N VIII, burial chamber, [excav. date] 1923, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Harvard University - Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition 23.868 Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

While it has been generally suggested that the great stelae of the Kingdom of Axum in Ethiopia were inspired by the Nubian obelisks,³⁵ perhaps a more probable antecedent is found in the so-called “Obelisk of Amanishaketo”. This monument was a fragmented square pillar that was originally about four or five meters in height and was discovered in the Amun Temple at Meroe.³⁶ Covered with inscriptions on all sides, it appears to have been dedicated by the famous queen, Amaniskaketo (reigned ca. 10 B.

³⁵ David W. Phillipson, *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 94-5.

³⁶ John Garstang, “Third Interim Report on the Excavations at Meroe”, *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 5 (1912): 47.

C. – 1 A.D.).³⁷ Both it and the later Axumite stelae it may have provided the impetus for, show that monumentality and inventiveness in ancient Africa extended far beyond the borders of Egypt.

³⁷ Claude Rilly, “L'Obélisque' de Méroé”, *Meroitic Newsletter* 29 (2002): 95-190.