

Kircher's book commemorating the successful relocation by Pope Innocent X of an obelisk at the Piazza Navona, in front of the Palazzo Pamfili.

Kircher, Athanasius. *Obeliscvs pamphilivs*. Romae, typis L. Grignani, 1650. 13 inches (330 mm), 34 pp. 1., 560, [28] pp., 1 l. front., illus., fold. pl.

The learned Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602–80) spent most of his career in Rome, a well-connected scholarly spider in the center of a web of international connections. He never achieved his ambition to be sent to China as a missionary, but all the world came to him in the form of artifacts and manuscripts brought back by his co-religionists for whom the Age of Exploration had given an entirely new dimension to the notion of Catholicity. Egyptology was one of Kircher's most enduring enthusiasms, and for this pursuit much of the essential material was already at hand, inherited by the Papacy from the Rome of the Caesars in the form of the obelisk.

The religious and regal associations of the obelisk made it an irresistible element in the symbolic *translatio imperii*, the transfer of power when the ancient Romans conquered Egypt in 30 B.C. For some four centuries, obelisks continued to migrate eastward until some 48 specimens stood erect in Rome. By the Middle Ages only one, the Vatican Obelisk, survived upright. It was eventually to be moved from a cramped and uncongenial site to the vast square before St. Peter's by command of Pope Sixtus V in 1586: this extraordinary engineering feat was commemorated in Domenico Fontana's illustrated account of the *Trasportazione dell'Obelisco Vaticano* (1590) (on rarebookroom.org as "ftaobc").

Engineering in the service of Christianity was soon pursued in Rome as zealously as road-building in the service of the commuter was practiced in the Los Angeles of the 1950s. The remaining obelisks in Rome had been toppled or broken, eliminating at least the perils of dismantling, and several old obelisks were excavated, rehabilitated or pieced together in the 17th century. There are now eleven ancient obelisks standing in Rome—one has recently been returned to Ethiopia, having had the good fortune to have been the war-booty of Mussolini rather than a series of Caesars who lie far beyond the statute of limitations.

In *Obeliscus Pamphilius*, Kircher provides at **Spreads 23–28** a convenient chronology of the history of obelisk-erection, from the pharaohs to the popes. Like Fontana’s book, Kircher’s treatise was produced to commemorate a successful relocation: Pope Innocent X’s (portrait at **Spread 4**) erection of an obelisk at the Piazza Navona, where Bernini had provided a “Fountain of the Four Rivers” to accommodate it. The fountain, in which Bernini was inspired (or instructed) by Kircher’s geological theories about the origins of the world’s rivers from reservoirs hidden beneath hollow mountains, stood in front of the Palazzo Pamfili, hence the title *Obeliscus Pamphilus*. The four sides of the obelisk are illustrated in a folding plate at **Spread 38**. After an illustrated inventory of the essential elements of the hieroglyph (**Spreads 166–231**), Kircher proceeds to translate the texts incised on the obelisk (**Spreads 231–316**).

The book contains the usual Kirchnerian digressions—on Egyptian history, religion and hieroglyphs, much of it bogus. The first volume of Erik Iverson’s authoritative *Obelisks in Exile* (Copenhagen, 1968) is devoted to Rome. In it he cites an inscription in *Obeliscus Pamphilius* (**Spread 285, bottom right**) as typical of the work. The currently accepted, post-Champollion, translation of the text is simple: “the everlasting Caesar Domitianus.” Kircher applies his “hieroglyphic method, identif[y]ing each sign with a metaphysical idea ... reading the signs in the inspirational light of what he calls *lectio idealis*” to come up instead with: “The beneficent generative force commanding through supernal and infernal dominion, augments the flow of sacred humours emanating from above. Saturn, the disposer of fleeting time, promotes the fecundity of the soil, commanding humid nature. For by his influence all things have life and force” (p. 92). Kircher’s one correct interpretation, the letter M from the wavy hieroglyph for water, appears on **Spread 105**.