

Experience a book that documents the greatest engineering achievement of Renaissance Italy

Domenico Fontana, *Della Trasportatione dell'Obelisco Vaticano*. Rome: D. Basa, 1590. 17 1/8 inches x 11 3/8 inches (435 x 289 mm), 216 pages, including 38 engraved plates.

One of the first stops for any visitor to Rome is the oval piazza known as St. Peter's Square. At the very center, against the imposing backdrop of St. Peter's Basilica, with its huge façade and its famous dome, an obelisk of pink granite from Egypt perches with surprising lightness on the backs of four miniature bronze lions. It is virtually impossible for us now to imagine the Vatican any other way. In 1585, however, not one piece of this spectacular view had yet been set in place.

Carved of Aswan granite in the reign of Nebkaure Amenemhet II (1992–1985 BC), the obelisk originally stood before the monumental gateway to the Temple of the Sun at Heliopolis. It was brought to Rome in 37 AD by the emperor Caligula as one of many tokens of the Roman conquest of Egypt, and was erected in the Circus of Caligula (later the Circus of Nero).

In 1585, Pope Sixtus V announced that he would move the obelisk as part of his master plan for the renovation of the city of Rome. Five hundred contenders thronged to the city to present their plans for the feat, but that of Domenico Fontana seemed to promise the most successful results: Fontana's huge wooden scaffolding, each leg made of four tree trunks bound together, took the full measure of the granite hulk it was designed to move with gentle precision. The actual procedure of transporting the obelisk would test wood and iron to their limits and demonstrate the superior resilience of rope. Moving the 92-foot, 340-ton obelisk a mere 260 yards took nearly a year, from 21 September 1585 to 10 September 1586. The process captivated the entire Roman population, who were restrained from the site by barriers and ordered not to speak so Fontana's orders could be heard by his hundreds of workers.

Fontana's successful effort is memorialized in this intricately detailed

volume, which describes the moving of the obelisk as well as many of Sixtus' other building projects. Fontana lent his text an immediacy and an authenticity that recaptures the calculated daring that went into moving the Vatican obelisk and evokes the full force of its drama; the beautiful and technically accurate engravings were adapted from the architect's own drawings.

This copy from the Rare Book and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress is bound in contemporary limp vellum with manuscript spine title "Obelis | co | Vaticano | Di | Fontana." Later freehand decorations were added in sepia ink; page edges are sprinkled in red.

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