



Obelisk of Constantius II, Circus Maximus (CIL VI, 1163)

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[1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Dedication.

Original Location/Place: Temple of Amun, Karnak; moved to the Circus Maximus, Rome.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Now lost; fragments survive in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples; piazza S. Giovanni in Laterano, Rome (re-used to restore the body of the obelisk).

Date: 357 CE

Physical Characteristics: Granite base for an obelisk, inscribed on four sides with a dedicatory inscription; now lost.

Material: Red granite.

Measurements: Height: 34 cm

Width: 134 cm

Depth: 7.5 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications: *CIL* VI, 1163

[EDR122871](#) [2]

Commentary: In 357 CE the emperor Constantius II visited the city of Rome; in order to commemorate his visit he ordered that an Egyptian obelisk, dating to the reign of pharaoh Tuthmosis III (1504-1450 BCE) and completed by his grandson Tuthmosis IV, should be brought to Rome and set up in the Circus Maximus. A red granite base was also set up and inscribed with the above text, which was comprised of 24 hexameters, and recorded the monumental feat that moving the obelisk represented. That base is now lost, with the exception of a few small fragments, but the inscription has survived due to its inclusion in a number of Renaissance manuscripts, from which the entirety of the text can be reconstructed (for the manuscript tradition of this inscription, see Marchionni, "La Tradizione non solo Manoscritta," p. 455-471). The inscription celebrated not only the extraordinary achievement of Constantius II in succeeding in managing to move the obelisk, but it presented it as a reflection of or metaphor for Constantius's superior power as emperor; this was all the more relevant as Constantius had, only four years earlier, conquered the Roman emperor in the West, Gallus, leaving him as sole ruler of the empire.

The obelisk had originally stood as part of the complex of the temple of Amun in Karnak, Thebes. Having been set up in the 15th century BCE, it remained standing there until the reign of Constantine, who determined, in emulation of the emperor Augustus, that it should be moved to adorn his own city of Constantinople. He was successful in moving the obelisk as far as Alexandria, but it did not cross the Mediterranean until the reign of his son Constantius II, some forty years later (for the history of the obelisk in Egypt, see Iversen, *Obelisks in Exile*, I, p. 55-64; Liverani, "Costanzo II e l'obelisco del Circo Massimo a Roma," p. 471-487). Constantius II, the second son of the emperor Constantine and his wife Fausta, had ascended to the imperial throne with his brothers Constantine II and Constans following the death of Constantine in 337 CE. In 340 CE, unrest broke out between the brothers over the governing of the western provinces, resulting in the death of Constantine II and Constans as emperor in the



west, with Constantius left to control the east. In 350 CE, the usurper Magnentius had overthrown and killed Constans, which led to Constantius II travelling west in order to restore order and control (see Dedication to the usurper Magnentius). At the battles of Mursa and Mons Seleucus Constantius defeated Magnentius, who later committed suicide, leaving the last surviving son of Constantine the sole ruler of the empire (for a detailed synthesis of these events, with full references to primary sources, see Harries, *Imperial Rome*, p. 185-208). Further military campaigns were to follow, with successful defeats of the Germanic tribes, including the Alamanni, in 354 CE, and the Quadi and Sarmatians in 357 CE. However, warring barbarian tribes were not the only source of his troubles; Constantius Gallus, the emperor's cousin, had been raised to the position of Caesar in the east in 351 CE, but his repeated acts of violence and corruption had led to his execution in 354 CE (Harries, *Imperial Rome*, p. 196-199).

It was against this political backdrop that Constantius II visited the city of Rome in 357 CE. It was a memorable event that “publicly and successfully celebrated the relationship of city and emperor” (Harries, *Imperial Rome*, p. 274). Not only did Constantius II fulfil the ceremonial expectations of an imperial visitor to the city, arriving in a glorious military procession, but he also fulfilled his civic responsibilities, answering the queries of senators and petitioners and, crucially, setting up a monument – in the form of the obelisk – that permanently communicated his respect for the ancient capital. The obelisk was shipped from Alexandria, where it had lain for some forty years, and set up on the *spina* (central barrier) of the Circus Maximus, on a red granite base. The inscription that decorated each of the four sides was composed from twenty-four hexameters that related the obelisk's journey to Rome, and its status there as a gift to the city from a victorious emperor. From the first lines of the epigram, Constantius II emphasised the link with his divine father, stating that the obelisk represented “the work of his father” (*Patris opus*) and “his own gift to you, Rome” (*munusque suum tibi, Roma*). The extraordinary nature of this gift is stressed, emphasising its marvellous quality, which “no land produced nor age had seen” (*quod nulla tulit tellus nec uiderat aetas*), which is also linked personally to Constantius's own achievements as emperor: “he has set up in order to make his gifts equal to his brilliant triumphs” (*condidit ut claris exaequet dona triumphis*). It is clear that the obelisk is a dynastic celebration that connects father and son; Constantine had invested in improvements to the Circus Maximus itself, and the form of the obelisk made subtle reference to his devotion to the cult of the sun god Sol (see e.g. [Nummus depicting the head of Constantine](#) [3] and [The Column of Constantine](#) [4]), whilst the actual dedication of it in the Circus fell to his son, whose success in bringing it to Rome was given as a metaphor for his own strength and power (Trout, “Poetry on Stone,” p. 86). The epigram tells us that the obelisk was not originally intended for Rome, however, but that Constantine wished “this ornament to be an adornment for the city of his name” (*hoc decus ornatum genitor cognominis urbis / esse uolens*), or Constantinople. The plan was delayed by fear that “by no skill and exertion and labor could the Caucasus-like mass be moved” (*nullo ingenio nisque manuque moueri / Caucaseam molem discurrens fama monebat*), in further emphasis of the extraordinary nature of Constantius's own achievement to do so. Constantius is described in the next line as “master of the world” (*dominus mundi*), a significant descriptor of Roman emperors also found on coinage, whose abilities went above and beyond those of his father. Grant Parker has noted that this movement of the obelisk resulted in social meaning too; not only was the physical act of moving impressive, but it was a “metaphor for their changes in audience too,” which might be understood as an “index of monarchic power and particularly riverine despotism” (Parker, “Obelisks still in exile,” p. 211). The appropriation of the obelisk and the addition of the Latin inscription to its base represented a performance of power that recontextualised the meaning of the obelisk in a multitude of senses.

The final key aspect of the dedicatory inscription is given in line 15, in which it is stated “meanwhile, a foul tyrant was laying waste to Rome” (*interea Romam taetro uastante tyranno*). This was a clear reference to the usurpation of Magnentius, which Constantius II had suppressed almost a decade earlier; Dennis Trout has suggested that the inclusion of the word “tyrant” (*tyrannus*) twice in the inscription (lines 15 and 21) was a deliberate repetition of the same word from the [Arch of Constantine](#) [5] close to the Colosseum in Rome, and which had also been used as a “rhetorical twist central to Constantine's representation of Maxentius”. *Tyrannus* connected Constantius's victory against Magnentius with his father's against Maxentius, and suggested that the two be considered comparable achievements (Trout, “Poetry on Stone,” p. 87). The dedication of the obelisk in the Circus Maximus was, then, an exercise in a number of different expressions of imperial power: the physical transportation of the vast monument from Egypt to Rome emphasised the strength, wealth and infrastructure of the empire, whilst also acting as a metaphor for the emperor's own powers; the appropriation of the obelisk and its redeployment in a Roman, civic sense, complete with Latin dedicatory inscription, demonstrated Rome's superiority in a public context, and the references to tyranny overthrown highlighted the martial prowess that underpinned all imperial power. The obelisk provided an ideal and tangible dynastic link between Constantine and his son Constantius II, with both commemorated by monuments that linked them to public spectacle. The form of the inscription, in metrical verse, was also a conscious act that permitted imperial patrons to announce “their cultural as well as civic and religious



commitments in a city that had not yet forfeited all its importance as a stage for the performance of emperorship” (Trout, “Poetry on Stone,” p. 88).

Keywords in the original language:

- [pater](#) [6]
- [opus](#) [7]
- [munus](#) [8]
- [Constantius](#) [9]
- [orbis](#) [10]
- [tellus](#) [11]
- [donum](#) [12]
- [triumphus](#) [13]
- [ornatus](#) [14]
- [genitor](#) [15]
- [urbs](#) [16]
- [Thebae](#) [17]
- [Roma](#) [18]
- [dominus mundi](#) [19]
- [mons](#) [20]
- [pontus](#) [21]
- [tumens](#) [22]
- [placidus](#) [23]
- [maris](#) [24]
- [Hesperia](#) [25]
- [tyrannus](#) [26]
- [virtus](#) [27]
- [victor](#) [28]
- [tropaeum](#) [29]

Thematic keywords:

- [Roman power](#) [30]
- [Constantius II](#) [31]
- [Magnentius](#) [32]
- [obelisk](#) [33]
- [Rome \(city\)](#) [34]
- [monument](#) [35]
- [tyrant](#) [36]
- [Roman victory](#) [37]
- [Roman triumph](#) [38]
- [Circus Maximus](#) [39]
- [trophy](#) [40]

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[the_column.jpg \[48\]](#)



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Architecture

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[South Attic with inscription](#) [51]



[South side, from the Via Triumphalis](#) [52]



[North side, from the Colosseum](#) [53]



[Relief panels, round reliefs and frieze over left \(west\) arch, from south](#) [54]



[Round reliefs and frieze over right \(east\) arch, from south](#) [55]



[Detail of relief panel, south side, right panel of left arch](#) [56]



[Detail of north plinth on second column from east, viewed from east, with Victoria \(left\) and prisoners \(right\)](#) [57]



[Round relief, south side, far left, showing the departure for the hunt](#) [58]



[West: Profectio \(departure for the battle from Milan\)](#) [59]



[South West, Obsidio \(the Siege of Verona\)](#) [60]



[South east: Proelium \(Constantine's troops defeating Maxentius's army in battle\)](#) [61]



[East: Ingressus \(Constantine and his troops march into Rome\) \[62\]](#)



[North East: Oratio \(Constantine's speech to the citizens of Rome\) \[63\]](#)



[North West: Liberalitas \(Constantine distributes money to the Roman people\) \[64\]](#)



[Detail of the Liberalitas \[65\]](#)



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Numismatic item

[Nummus depicting the head of Constantine and Sol Invictus \(310-313 CE\) \[66\]](#)

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Inscription

[Dedication to the usurper Magnentius \(CIL XI, 6640\) \[67\]](#)

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