**1) Central Park’s Secret**

Only about a year ago, after 22 years of living in New York Metropolitan area, I learned that an ancient Egyptian obelisk stands in Central Park—a monolithic, 220 ton piece of rock split from its quarry 3500 years ago. An article about the engineering difficulties with the transport of the obelisk from Egypt in the 1880-ies caught my attention and prompted me to pay a visit. &#x2666; 3500 years? Just look at the tower being built in the background; how long it has still to go to match that milestone! Do you honestly think that the skyscraper will stand that long? &#x2666; The first sign was not too encouraging. A month after my visit, hurricane Sandy broke the operating arm of a tall crane behind the building (not seen; above the frame of the picture). Fortunately, the arm did not fall to the ground; it hung for a few weeks like a lifeless limb.

**2) Hidden from View**

The obelisk is located a quarter of a mile from the eastern edge of the Park (a bit south of the Metropolitan Museum of Art) – far enough to be overlooked. In contrast to the Place de la Concorde in Paris, where a similar obelisk is a focal point of the surrounding area, the New York monument stands completely unadvertised, waiting to be discovered, pre-school children playing around it on a picnic, not noticing the obelisk’s significance. &#x2666; There are perhaps a dozen of ancient Egyptian obelisks on the West: Rome has 8—including the largest one—all brought there in antiquity; Paris, London and New York have one each. The last three, known as <em>*Cleopatra’s Needles</em>*, were offered by the Egyptian government to the respective countries as gifts in the 1800s. Cleopatra’s Needles were transported with great effort from two separate places in Egypt: from Luxor in 1830s (the Paris obelisk), and Alexandria in 1877-1880 (the London and New York obelisks). &#x2666;

The London obelisk’s journey was the most dramatic. The monolith was laid horizontally and encased in a boat which was built around it at the original site in Alexandria. The boat did not fare well on the seas; it was believed to have sunk in the storm in the Bay of Biscay until it was found four days later, and taken to Ferrol in Spain for repairs. Fortunately, the engineers did not botch the second chance; the monument stands today on the Victoria Embankment in the City of Westminster.

**3) Cry From the Past**

This powerful monolith comes from so different a reality that I regret not checking whether it wasn’t wrapped in a delicate bluish halo explaining its power to last. Would that halo be easier to see at night?

Think about it—when the monolith stood originally in Heliopolis 3,500 years ago (today a far suburb of Cairo), it proclaimed the godly power of Tuthmosis III of the 18th (18th!) Dynasty of Pharaohs. What if those claims were true? Could the column serve as some kind of a warning sent over the millennia to our times from a civilization that lasted as long as ours, but ultimately collapsed? Hardly anyone who saw the monument in ancient Heliopolis doubted the divinity of those who erected it. 200 years after Tuthmose III, the greatest of the Egyptian Pharaohs, Ramesses II, added an inscription whose fragment is shown below.<br><center><em>

... the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, ...<br>

 mighty in years and great of victories, <br>

the son of Ra, Ramesses, beloved of Amun, <br>

 who came forth from the womb in order to receive crowns of Ra, <br>

 who created him to be the sole lord, <br>

the Lord of the Two Lands ... </em></center>

**4) The Godly Light**

The Paris obelisk’s pyramidal tip is covered with a veneer of gold put on in 1998 by the government of France. The original cap is believed to have been stolen in the 6 century BC when the monument stood in front of the magnificent Luxor temple in Egypt. Gold had a religious meaning to ancient Egyptians; it was believed to be the flesh of the sun god Ra – a believable claim given the Sun’s reflections form the column’s tip. &#x2666; The fashioning of obelisks – inhumanly heavy, single blocks of granite -- was an endeavor extremely expensive in labor. The Egypian Pharaoh, Ramesses IV, for example, sent and expedition of 9,262 people to bring monumental stone from the quarries in Wadi Hammamat. 5,000 of the expeditioners were soldiers, 2000 were slaves; those 7,000 people performed, most likely, unskilled work of pounding and chiseling the stone under the direction of the remaining officers, skilled quarrymen and artists. 900 people perished during the expedition, which, judging from the records of Karnak monuments, must have spent at least 7 months in the quarries. &#x2666; There must have been at least 50 large monoliths (30 ft or taller) put up by the ancient rulers. Today, only 5 remain in Egypt. The Paris monument was erected on the orders Ramesses II who clearly loved the prestige they conveyed; he had 14 of them in Tanis, and usurped the monument of Tuthmosis III, now standing in New York.

**4) Accelerated Erosion?**

It appears that the obelisks in New York ( left) and Paris (right) do not say the same things. Indeed, the left one gives an elaborate titulary of Thutmosis III (Egypt’s ruler around 1450 BC), while the right one of Ramesses II (1250 BC). Wikipedia, generously gives the exact <a href=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/f/f3/Cleopatra\_needle\_glyhic\_translation.jpg>reproduction and translation</a> of the text on the Central Park obelisk. As one tries to reconcile the monument’s face shown above with the one reproduced in Wikipedia, one quickly notices that the hieroglyphs on the picture lack some details. For example, each of the hieroglyphs in the second row should contain a contour of a bull in their upper half—they do not. Light’s play, or the acid rains of the past 130 years have eroded the obelisk’s surface?