



HAL
open science

An atlas of the obelisks of Karnak

Luc Gabolde

► **To cite this version:**

| Luc Gabolde. An atlas of the obelisks of Karnak. Egyptian Archaeology, 2007. hal-01895067

HAL Id: hal-01895067

<https://hal.science/hal-01895067>

Submitted on 13 Oct 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

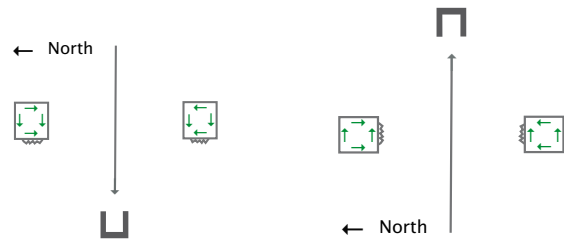


An atlas of the obelisks of Karnak

In collaboration with the Franco-Egyptian Center of Karnak, an Atlas of the obelisks of Karnak is being prepared under the direction of **Luc Gabolde** who reports on progress to date.

Of the 17 great obelisks which once adorned the gates or the axis of the great temple of Amun at Karnak (and the temple of Amun at North-Karnak), two are still standing in situ: one of Tuthmosis I in front of the Fourth Pylon and one of Hatshepsut in the *Wadjyt*-hall. Two other obelisks, which were removed from the site under the Emperor Constantin, have been re-erected in Rome (originally in the Circus Maximus, and then moved by Domenico Fontana to stand in front of St John-in-Lateran's Cathedral) and in Istanbul. The 13 remaining monuments, crashed down at various times, used as granite quarries in the late Roman Empire and in the Medieval Age, were sawn up, and commonly transformed into millstones or thresholds.

More than 1,200 fragments belonging to these fragmented monoliths, spread on the site of Karnak, or transported to Luxor, or even further afield to Akhmin or Abutig, have been documented by the writer and drawn by Chr Laval, J



Eastern obelisks of Hatshepsut.

Left: sculptures placed on the western sides of the obelisks if access is from the east to the west. Right: sculptures facing sides along the passage in between the monoliths, if access is from west to east

Florentie and C Courier de Méré in the course of the past nine years. In addition A Chéné assembled photographs of the standing obelisks providing high density images of these monuments. Provisional reconstructions have been assembled with the help of the drawings, providing new

information on the monuments.

The eastern obelisks of Hatshepsut, very damaged, were previously badly documented. They appear to have been decorated with a central line of inscription surrounded by 11 registers of scenes with, alternatively, ordinary and ithyphallic Amun worshipped by Hatshepsut (and rarely Tuthmosis III). They bore on one side of the lower part of each shaft a high relief representation of Amun (preserved) and of the queen (erased). These scenes were placed either on the western sides of the obelisks if access was from the



Numbered fragments of the eastern obelisks of Hatshepsut on the site. Photograph: Luc Gabolde

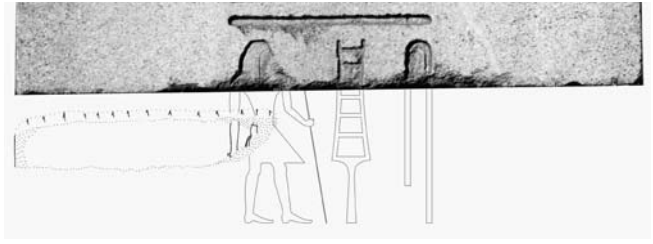


east to the west, or on the facing sides along the passage in between the monoliths if the access was from west to east. In the latter, more likely, case leading possibly to the Nerty-menu recently published by the writer (*MIFAO* 123, pp.25–26). However, these original figures were later blocked in, and hidden by the precinct wall of Tuthmosis III, or the side walls of the rear-temple of the same king.

The lower part of the obelisk in Istanbul had been looked for on the banks of the Bosphorus for many years. It has been possible to identify at Karnak several remains of the lower part of the monolith which obviously broke during the attempt to pull it down. A fragment (block Karnak 707 LG), joining directly the lower part of the Istanbul shaft and recut on its upper edge, even shows that the irregularly broken underface of the upper part of the obelisk was recut on the spot at Karnak before its transportation.

The obelisks erected in year 25 by Tuthmosis III in front of the Fourth Pylon had been inscribed with extra decoration, strangely enough left incomplete: scenes of Ramesses II at the base of both shafts and extra columns of texts on the south and east faces of the northern one, in the name of Merenptah, with additions of Amenmose reinscribed in the name of Seti II. On the southern monolith the extra columns of Merenptah were added to the northern and eastern sides. Unfinished, it appears, interestingly enough, that

High density image of the east face of the southern obelisks of Tuthmosis I. Photographs and assemblage: A Chéné, © CFEETK



Assemblage of the lower part of the shaft of the obelisk in Istanbul and of the block Karnak 707 LG showing traces of recutting on its upper edge. Photograph and drawing: Luc Gabolde

their carving had been undertaken at various levels of the shaft before being stopped, showing now discontinuous portions of texts.

To these monumental obelisks, a series of at least 14 smaller stone needles has to be added. Among others, it is worth mentioning the two oldest (and among the smallest, as they did not exceed 23cm) obelisks of Karnak, made by king Sekhemre-Wadjkhau-Sobekemsaf of the Seventeenth Dynasty, (CGC 17011) and a pair of greywacke monoliths of Horemheb, of which fragments are spread through two magazines of Karnak and two different storerooms in the Cairo Museum. Reassembled through the help of photos, they show texts intimately connected with the solar aspect of Amun. One of them (CGC 17018 + JE 64932 + JE 88805 A et B + Karnak Cheikh Labib, ANX 473) describes the king as ‘Image of Re, born of Re-Horakhty’, and as ‘Son of Atum, born of Weret-heqau’. The obelisk is broken where the monument to which it belonged to was named, but similar small obelisks of Amenhotep II and Tuthmosis IV found at Aswan have been directly connected with an ‘altar of Re’, like the obelisks of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel, so that there are good reasons to think that the obelisks of Horemheb at Karnak had played the same role in connection with a solar altar, the latter being attested on the site by several textual sources.



High-relief representation at the basis of the shaft of one of the eastern obelisks of Hatshepsut. Photograph: Luc Gabolde



Assemblage of the fragments of one of the obelisks of Horemheb.
Photographs Luc Gabolde and assemblage A Chéné, © CFEETK

Small obelisk of Sekhenre-Wadjkhau-Sobekemsaf (CGC 17011). Photograph: Luc Gabolde



The amazing number of obelisks erected at Karnak, the ‘southern Heliopolis’, is only paralleled by the temple of Amun at Tanis, the ‘Northern Thebes’ and by the temple of Re-Atum at Heliopolis. The meaning of these unquestionable solar symbols, ‘skyscrapers of the past’ as Labib Habachi so pertinently described them, was apparently to establish a direct link between the earth and the heaven—they were said to ‘pierce the heaven’. Clearly the more obelisks you had, the better the contact would be !

□ Luc Gabolde is a researcher at the French Research Center (CNRS, laboratory of Montpellier-Lattes, UMR 5140). He would like to thank the Franco Egyptian Center and the SCA representatives at Karnak as well as staff in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photographs as credited in captions.



The unfinished extra columns of texts of Merenptah on the east side of the southern obelisk of Tuthmosis III in front of the Fourth Pylon. Photograph © archives CFEETK n° 65473 (face now hidden)

CYBELE
BOOKSHOP

EGYPTOLOGY

New and out-of-print books
CATALOGUE ON REQUEST

LIBRAIRIE CYBELE
65BIS RUE GALANDE, 75005 PARIS
TEL: 01 43 54 16 26 - FAX : 01 46 33 96 84
e-mail : cybele5@wanadoo.fr

VISIT OUR WEBSITE
www.librairie-cybele.com