THE MATERIALITIES OF BE-LONGING:
Objects in/of Exile across the Mediterranean

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The transfer of architectural heritage as a transcultural tool:

the case of the obelisk of Axum

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Abstract   The story of King Ezana's Obelisk of Axum and its Italian exile represents the epitomic example of the cultural and political implications of relocating architecture. The 4th-century CE stele in basaltic stone, which stood broken in Axum, modern Ethiopia, was taken as war booty by the Italian troops after the military occupation of 1935. In 1937, the obelisk was transferred to Rome and re-erected in front of the Ministry of Italian Africa, overlooking the Circus Maximus: a graft resulting in cultural contaminations. Ethiopia had been asking for its restitution since 1947, but the stele was returned only in 2005. It was disassembled and reduced again into pieces, then transferred to Ethiopia by three cargo flight. The restitution required the export of Italian technologies and professionals to carry out the re-composition, providing the African country with the necessary knowledge to re-erect the other obelisks lying broken in Axum. From this point of view, the return of the obelisk prompted a process of knowledge transfer, opening new opportunities of cultural cooperation.

Monuments on the move[1]

Artworks and even architecture move and travel like all other goods. In 70 A.D, Cicero, referring to the tour guides and to the artworks Verres took away from the people of the province of Sicily, wrote "*[they] now have their description of things reversed; for as they formerly used to show what there was in every place, so now they show what has been taken from every place*" (*In Verrem*, II, 4, 132). Cicero's text proves how the physical transfer of artworks is a practice that dates back millennia, although its cultural and philological implications have only recently been investigated, particularly in the field of relocated monuments.

Artworks and monuments move, or better 'are moved', for several reasons and with many different consequences. The relocation of works of art is always the result of asymmetrical power relations in times of peace and war – be they economic, political, martial, etc. – and as such unjust but not always illegal. The range of situations is wide, and the ethical margins are blurred. The phenomenon unfolds through art theft, war spoils in the context of *ius praedae*, the appropriation of cultural assets during colonialism, the export of artefacts from excavations, including clandestine ones, confiscations justified by ideology, and the material diaspora of
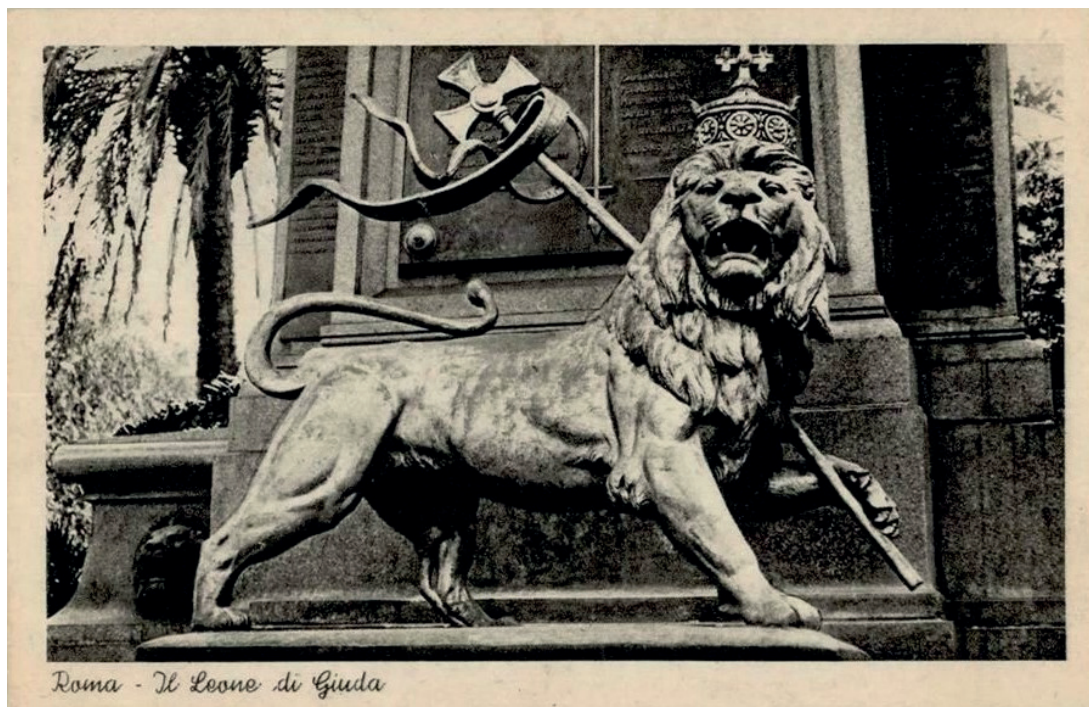
Figure 1. The Lion of Judah, brought to Rome in 1937, beneath the monument to the fallen soldiers of Dogali. Courtesy of Il Corno d'Africa.

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entire civilisations favoured by the art trade. These practices have recently prompted ethical and legal issues on the illicit transfer of cultural property. They resulted in motions for repatriations which have been legitimised by several international agreements and directives, from the 1970 UNESCO Convention to the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention, and recently the Sarr-Savoy Report (2018), which has a special focus on decolonising policies.

However, the directives rarely mention the fertilising processes triggered by the transfer of cultural assets. Imported objects are capable of influencing tastes and fashions: consider, for instance, the overseas shipment of entire monasteries dismantled in France and the Iberian Peninsula (e.g. the Met Cloister and the Cistercian Monastery in Miami) or of parts of buildings sold by antique dealers through an international sales network (Brugeat 2018; Colonnese, D'Amelio, Grieco 2021).[2] John Henry Merryman, in his pioneering writings on restitutions (2006, 2009), tried to move the discussion to a different level. Besides recognising the validity of the reasons in favour of repatriation, which are largely taken for granted (Thompson 2003), Merryman sustained that often objects 'in captivity' can improve the notion of diversity and connect distant cultures.

These operations are the basis of recent analyses on the status of migrant objects, characterised by a process of displacement and exile; in particular, the debate on the fate of archaeological, artistic or ethnographic collections raises ethical, political and cultural questions, only partially silenced by reasons of legitimacy, as the controversies on the Elgin Marbles and more generally the theme of the decolonisation of museums demonstrate (UNESCO Recommendation 19.COM 8; Procter 2020; Grechi 2021). The judgement on the asymmetry of power that has engendered the diasporas of artefacts, imbued with allogeneic cultures, is now taken for

Figure 2. The stele in Axum, visited in 1935 by the Italian marble carver Rocco Altieri (Castelluccio Valmaggiore, FG, 21 October 1911 - Castelbolognese, RA, 18 January 2006). Courtesy of Leonardo Altieri.

2   See also the Decolonize Our Museum project at https://decolonizeourmuseums.tumblr.com (accessed December 2021).

granted. However, it cannot be ignored that 'migrant' works, besides dealing with the identity of peoples and territories, are the foundation of powerful and subtle cultural contaminations that branch out into multiple spheres. In this sense, the concept of the material or immaterial 'contact zone' (Pratt 1992) may be useful. This is defined as the 'spatial and temporal coexistence of subjects previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures' (Pratt 1992: 7), capable of implementing phenomena of osmosis and, in any case, prompting powerful cultural mechanisms.

The 'prodigious flight' from Nazareth to Loreto, which transported the Holy House (9.50 x 4 m) in its entirety in 1294, has become a myth. It gave rise not only to one of the most important places of pilgrimage for the Catholic Church, but also to a flourishing of fanciful legends, an endless iconographic repertoire, and even musical compositions. All these narrative and artistic expressions have flowed into the so-called 'Loreto tradition', which has also blossomed in places far away from the small town in the Marche region, eventually promoting the construction of copies of the small building/custody (Giffin 2021).

As Alina Payne wrote, the circulation of art and architecture, including smaller items like fabrics, printings, medals and artefacts, was of crucial importance in shaping a global history of art. She subtly distinguished mobility from portability; the former does not imply the physical movement of a work of art or the product of a culture, be it material or immaterial. In particular, the scholar highlighted how, in the modern period, traded objects influenced artistic experimentations and developments in the Mediterranean area. In such a scenario, portable images can help to unlock the host culture. An effective example of this is the facade of Palazzo Spinelli in Florence, which features a *sgraffito* with the decorative motifs of textiles that this family of merchants traded, especially with Asterabad, Iran. Through this exotic intermediary, the Florentine formal repertoire absorbed innovative patterns that had formerly originated in Asia – arabesques, some asymmetrical arrangements, dragons, and other such animals – which then spread through the Mediterranean region.

The relocation of large-scale artefacts or life-size pieces of architecture provides an even more powerful unlocking mechanism, as in the case of the Altar of Zeus, which was moved from Pergamon to Berlin (Payne 2008, 2013, 2014). In this case, the premise for the architecture's portability must be particularly strong, as it also requires a complex and expensive operation. The entire process must be worth the effort needed both in dismantling the building (studying how to divide it into smaller, transportable parts; numbering the elements; lifting and packing; moving; etc.) and in reassembling it. This generally requires a different approach and techniques from the primitive ones, since the passing of time may have obliterated the original construction techniques and the dimensions and materials of the reconstructed building rarely coincide with the original ones (Bilsel 2012). These processes demand significant expertise and complex operations, since the transported objects are rarely monolithic elements (obelisks or statues); instead, they are often poly-material constructions in which at least some parts of the original material are conserved in the final product.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the musealisation drive triggered a sort of diaspora of temples, urban walls, tombs and other constructions, testified by the temples of Debod, Tafa and Dendur re-erected in Madrid, Leida and New York respectively, the chapel of el-Lessiya, which was moved to Turin, and the gate of Ishtar and the market of Miletus, which were

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transported to Berlin (Troilo 2021). One of the effects of this global agency was to promote a new awareness of place and the inextricable relationship architecture has with it. The deep meaning of architecture itself started to be questioned from the perspective that a building is valuable only when it weaves an organic relationship with the site and embodies the genius loci. Even ephemeral architecture, from Bedouin tents or nomadic medieval huts to classicist revolutionary architecture for feasts, revised the traditional bond of a structure to a place through its temporary character.

The practice of moving architecture pieces away from their original place, often exerted over the Global South through military and economic power, neglects the premise that objects, but even more monuments, only make sense when they maintain an organic relationship with the place (Hopkirk 1980). Due to their rooted nature in the space, architecture pieces are always transported with material and symbolical alterations (Annoni 1941). Further considerations arise from the idea of architecture as a language, whose meaning, citing thinkers like Walter Benjamin (2002) or Jacques Derrida (1979; 2001), cannot be translated (physically and figuratively) without losing the non-grammatical factors that influenced its original state. Can Bilsel (2002), referring to the Staatliche Museen in Berlin, puts forward the hypothesis that artefacts recomposed elsewhere are nothing but reveries of the originals. They can be seen as enactments, which are perceived – because of the cultural strategy that produced them – as authentic monuments.

In this historical and theoretical context, the story of the Ethiopian Obelisk of Axum (Aksum), its Italian exile in the twentieth century and its restitution to the country of origin in the twentyfirst century epitomise the cultural and political implications of relocating architecture. In Ethiopia, the obelisk was charged with a sacred and symbolic value; Axum was considered to be one of the holiest cities in the country. The two relocations it was subjected to, first from Axum to Rome in 1937 and then from Rome back to Axum in 2005, produced not only a deep transformation of its meanings, perception and reception, but also a two-fold cultural cross-fertilisation that we will describe and discuss below.
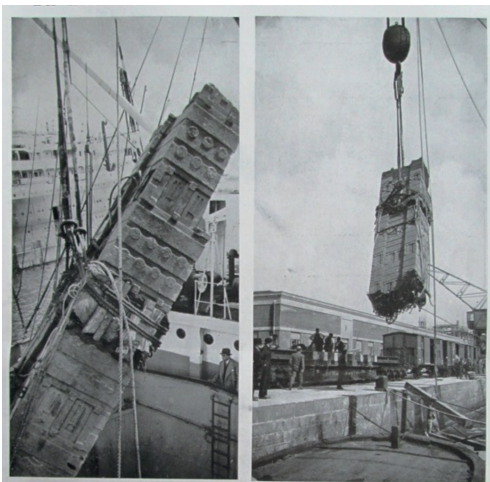

Figure 4. The fragments of the stele arriving in Naples, 27 March 1937. From L'Illustrazione Italiana 4 April 1937.

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The stele that came from Axum to Rome

The Obelisk of Axum is actually a carved stele in phonolite (a basaltic stone), which dates from between the first and fourth century BCE (Ricci 1996). It is part of an ancient funerary site in Axum, Ethiopia, where it was found along with another 176 funerary stelae, probably marking the location of underground burials. Over the ages, most of the stelae fell. In the nineteenth century, of the three major stelae, only King Ezana of Axum's Stele (21 metres) stood upright; the Great Stele (33 metres long) and the so-called Obelisk of Axum (24 metres) lay broken on the ground.

In short, in 1935, during the wretched colonial occupation of Ethiopia, the Italian troops found the archaeological site and, in 1936, it was decided to bring one of the major stelae to Rome. This operation was part of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime's aim to remove the monuments celebrating Ethiopia's independence, including those celebrating the Battle of Adowa (1896), in which Menelik II had defeated the Italian troops. The Duce originally planned to remove the statue with the Lion of Judah and that of Menelik and to convert the Ethiopian king's mausoleum into a different use (Pankhurst 1969; Antonsich 2000).

Due to technical difficulties in moving the Lion of Judah, Mussolini demanded that the biggest of the fallen obelisks in Axum be taken instead of the animal statue, and sent to Rome to be re-erected. Eventually, both the Lion and the obelisk were sent to Rome in 1937. This choice was possibly a consequence of Mussolini's specific interest in the figure of the lion and its relationships with the Roman obelisks and Hercules, symbols of ancient power.[3] In any case, the Lion of Judah was transferred by the Fratelli Gondrand company. It was remounted at the bottom of an Egyptian obelisk, which was brought to Rome by Emperor Domitianus (I century CE) and re-erected in 1887 by the Termini Station within a monument commemorating the Italian soldiers who died in the battle of Dogali against the Ethiopians.

The obelisk was also transferred by Fratelli Gondrand. It arrived in fragments at the port of Massaua, Ethiopia, before being shipped to Naples and then moved to Rome, where, two and a half months later, it was re-erected under the direction of archaeologist Ugo Monneret de Villard.

The relocation and reassembly of the stele achieved the dual purpose of exhibiting political muscle befitting a colonial power and technical prowess. This technological supremacy was not only displayed in the context of the construction site: it was also amplified through several means of communication, including newspapers, magazines, comics, photographs and newsreels. In this way, the fascist state aimed not only to deprive the Ethiopian people of one of their

3   Mussolini is only one episode in the centuries-long bond between Rome and the Lion. The Lion, with its mantle, recalled the mythical Hercules, who defeated Caco and was celebrated as a protector by the early Romans. In the Middle Ages, the Lion became a symbol of civic power, witnessed by the medieval map of Rome in the shape of a lion and a statue of a lion grabbing a horse at the Piazza del Campidoglio. This statue was close to an Egyptian obelisk resting on 4 lions, eventually moved to Villa Matte in 1535 and indirectly linked to the Vatican Obelisk, whose copper globe was reputed to hold Julius Caesar's ashes. Mussolini's war trophies – a lion and an obelisk – seem to be part of this iconographic chain. Born under the zodiac sign of Leo, the lion, the Duce was rhetorically associated with figures such as Julius Caesar and Hercules, for example in the proposal to build the Colossus on Monte Mario. In this light, both his love for lions (he had a lioness called Italy and a lion called Libai, captured in Ethiopia) and the lions depicted by artists in Fascist buildings – from the Casa delle Armi to the Palestra del Duce and GIL in Trastevere – and squares – the mosaics of Piazzale dell'Impero – can be seen to stem from an ambition to compare himself with the greatest Roman ancestries and myths. See Cacace 2007. The authors would like to thank Marco Giunta for his information on the subject.

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Figure 5. A fragment of the stele arriving in Rome by Train, 1937. Private Collection

identifying monuments, but also to demonstrate the results of the African campaign, embodied in the stele displayed in Rome, to Italy's citizens.

From this point of view, the stele was just one of the many symbolic and narrative elements distilled by the regime (Sbacchi 1985; Fuller 2010). Another example was the 'human zoos', the African villages reconstructed for pseudo-ethnographic purposes at national and international fairs, beginning with the Turin 1884 expo. These 'zoos' hosted indigenous Africans, who were indirectly called upon to display their technological backwardness and, by contrast, to recall the supremacy of the white and Italian man. They were intended as pseudo-anthropological tools to legitimise any colonial operation (Abbattista 2013). In this case too, displacement and recontextualisation were meant to provide new anthropological meanings and to educate the eye to the colonial gaze. By the end of the 1920s, propaganda preferred the architectural body to the physical body of the wild, exotic, diverse native. Thus, in spite of *Povero Selassiè* (Poor Selassiè), the terrible ditty in which the Negus Neghesti is described being brought in a cage to Rome, Mussolini preferred the architectural remains of the subjugated enemy.

This imperial glorification was solemnly renewed on 9 May 1937 with a military parade along Via dell'Impero, featuring the marches of indigenous colonial troops from Libya and Italian East Africa. A few months later, on 17 July 1937, Mussolini re-opened the Museo delle Colonie, renamed Museo dell'Impero Italiano. In line with these events, on 28 October 1937, the stele was erected in Piazza di Porta Capena.

To re-erect the body of the stele as an emblem of the new empire, Ugo Monneret de Villard resorted to the technique for assembling broken obelisks invented by Domenico Fontana (Fontana 1590), which enabled, for example, Gian Lorenzo Bernini and his collaborators to recompose the pieces of the Roman obelisk in Piazza Navona in 1650. Fontana's description of his advanced technological solution had also played a major role in the recomposition of the Egyptian obelisks in San Giovanni in Laterano, Santa Maria Maggiore and Piazza del Popolo between 1587 and 1589 (D'Amelio 2006; Long 2018). And in 1932, this same technique had been used to raise Mussolini's obelisk designed by Costantino Costantini onto the base made of large prismatic marble blocks (D'Amelio 2009).

The four main fragments of the Obelisk of Axum were reassembled with mortar cement, while the missing parts were filled with some stones taken from the original base. The recomposed stele had a rectangular section, with a total height of 23.50 metres (of which 21.10 meters were above ground) and weighed 152 tonnes.

The Ethiopian stele was regarded as symbolising historical continuity in the ancient imperial tradition of looting obelisks from North Africa to be erected again in Rome. The stele, not by chance named 'obelisk' in the press (Romanelli 1938), served to establish a line of continuity with the colonial traditions of the Roman Empire. Of course, like the many obelisks taken by ancient Romans from Africa, the Obelisk of Axum was not a voluntary gift of friendship from the Ethiopian people; it was war booty, and the Ethiopian people soon missed an important symbol of their national identity.

The re-erection place was chosen in order to express the obelisk's full political and cultural potential. As a war trophy, it was re-erected along the road connecting Via dell'Impero and Via Cristoforo Colombo and EUR (known as the 'Third Rome') and the sea. Specifically, it was placed along the main axis of the Circus Maximus, where a proper headquarters for the Ministry of Italian Africa was planned and built one year later. Despite its significant location, no further apparatus was added to the obelisk. Unlike the many Egyptian obelisks, which had bases, inscriptions, animals, bronze spheres, crosses and other elements added to them to celebrate their patron and emphasise their new role in the urban space, only a simple white marble block was used as a base for the Ethiopian monument. Compared to this 'silent' monument, the Egyptian obelisk in Piazza dei Cinquecento, which had had the Lion of Judah added to it, looked like an explicit celebration of the fascist victories in Africa (Acquarelli 2010a).

While the transfer of ancient monuments certainly embodied a colonialist approach to cultural heritage, the practice of moving ancient architectural pieces for symbolic aims was not unusual in that period. For instance, a few years before the transfer of the Obelisk of Axum, in 1934 the Italian government donated an ancient Roman column from the archaeological area of Ostia to the city of Chicago, to be used in a monument celebrating the transatlantic flight (1933) performed by the Italian aviator and politician Italo Balbo.[4] Similarly, in 1928, the Fascist government had donated a Pompeian red granite Roman pillar for a cenotaph to the Byakkotai samurai to be built at Iimori Mountain, Japan. The transfer of architectural artefacts, and especially those of historical relevance, was therefore seen not only as a demonstrative exercising of political dominance, but also as a symbol of cultural assimilation.

During the twenty years of the Fascist regime, the relationship between the dominant and the indigenous culture was not entirely one-directional. Indeed, the cultural history of Fascism reveals some hints of cross-fertilisation, especially in terms of arts and architecture. While architects like Marcello Piacentini and his young assistant Luigi Piccinato were planning the expansion of Libyan towns and designing specific typologies to export Italian rationalism to the African colonies, other architects and artists were fascinated by the objects coming from these exotic places. Exchanges, travel, merchandise and art objects provided the images of otherness and elsewhere (real or imaginary) required by the colonial policy. Some exhibitions,

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4   The inscription on the monument says: "This column twenty centuries old erected on the shores of Ostia port of imperial Rome to safeguard the fortunes and victories of the Roman triremes Fascist Italy by command of Benito Mussolini presents to Chicago Exaltation symbol memorial of the Atlantic squadron led by Balbo that with Roman daring flew across the ocean in the eleventh year of the Fascist era". Balbo Monument, Chicago, USA.

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such as the First International Exhibition of Colonial Art in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome (1931)[5], the Second International Exhibition of Colonial Art in the Maschio Angioino in Naples (1934-5)[6] and the Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare (1940), also held in Naples, played a central role. These events housed pavilions inspired by the souks with shops selling and processing carpets, mats, cushions, trinkets, weapons, utensils and exotic jewellery, along- side rooms displaying paintings of typical costumes and scenes of life (Tomasella 2017). They conveyed an image of Italian Africa that influenced artists (Manfren 2019). One such artist was Enrico Prampolini, the creator of the ceramic wall decorations for the buildings of the Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare, whose iconography stems from a common colonial repertoire. Prampolini also referenced African art in his paintings.[7]

While the political consequences of the cultural contamination fostered by these exhibi- tions is currently being analysed by scholars (Abbattista 2013; Falcucci 2020; Falcucci 2021), the political potential of Italian artistic heritage was already clear to the regime. Mussolini's

Figure 6. The stele in piazza di Porta Capena, Rome, before its final relocation, 15 November 2003. Courtesy of Lattanzi Srl www.lattanzi.it

5   See Giornale Luce A0887.
6   See Giornale Luce B055201.
7   For instance, see Visione magica from 1931 and La disputa dei feticci from 1931.

instrumental and nonchalant use of Italy's cultural heritage prompted the lending of hundreds of masterpieces from the most important Italian museums to be showed at the 1930 London exhibition entitled 'Italian Art 1200-1900'. These pieces were intended to exalt the 'Italian magnificence' and to open a preferential channel with Great Britain in foreign policy. The cargo, which reached Britain by sea, was one of the most precious artistic treasures ever to reach the British coasts. It included Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Piero della Francesca's *Duke and Duchess of Urbino*, Donatello's bronze *David*, Giorgione's *Tempest*, Pollaiolo's *Portrait of a Lady* and Masaccio's *Crucifixion*. In addition, there were works by Titian, Tiepolo, Carpaccio and Caravaggio, to name only the most famous of the 600 names selected for the legendary exhibition, whose cultural and political repercussions are well known (Borghi 2011).

The return of monuments as knowledge transfer

Despite the Fascist policies, the relocation of the Obelisk of Axum sent a shockwave through the national spirit of the Ethiopian people. This is proven by the fact that the stele transferred to Italy was intentionally re-evoked in the shape of the Arat Kilo Monument in Meyazia 27 square, Addis Abeba, erected in 1941 to celebrate the end of the Italian occupation, while images of the stele were reproduced on official items such as stamps. After the peace conference of 1946, some of the artworks taken by the Italian occupants were returned. In 1947, the Ethiopian government started to officially ask the Italian State for the restitution of the Axum Obelisk. In 1951, the former Ministry of Italian Africa built by the obelisk was converted into the headquarters of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), and the proximity of the obelisk started to appear inappropriate, to say the least.

In the postwar years, Italian society struggled to deal with the colonial question and the implicit recognition of the 'other' (Meskell 2005). Newspapers and Rai, the national broadcaster, had built the reassuring 'myth of the good Italian'. Compared to the daily violence recorded in the French and British colonies, Italian 'colonisation was likened to a form of migration, through which the poor had found a job and brought value to African territories' (Deplano 2017: 83).

The debate heated up in the early 1960s, as the launch of Rai 2 and illustrated weeklies such as *Epoca* created a media platform for a more complex and contradictory cultural perspective. By acknowledging the emergence of specific African identities – from Abebe Bikila's victory in the Rome 1960 Olympic Games marathon, to the speeches of the leaders of African nations at the United Nations – the media started a laborious process of conscious decolonisation. At the same time, Aldo Moro's tenure at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, starting in 1969, was characterised by an attempt to tackle the ghosts of Italy's colonial past from an institutional perspective (Dau Novelli 2017: 254). His visit to Ethiopia in the summer of 1970 and the restitution of the Lion of Judah statue encouraged Haile Selassie to visit, after years of attempts. On his return to Italy in November, Selassie was finally received with the honours of a legitimate president. Part of the press was committed to promoting a new vision of the relationship with the former colonies, which included the need to return the Obelisk of Axum as well. Several intellectuals, including historian Angelo Montanelli and journalist Indro Montanelli, a veteran of the Abyssinian war, were well known for their support for the return: 'Let's give it back! Let's listen to our conscience: after all, we're getting off really cheap!' (Montanelli 1970; Frau 1993).

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Figure 7. The stele during the disassembly process, Rome, 23 November 2003. Courtesy of Lattanzi Srl www.lattanzi.it

Meanwhile, the obelisk was a fundamentally foreign object to the affairs of the Romans and Italians. The surrounding space was used infrequently as a car park and, on some Saturday nights, as the starting point for the religious procession to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Divine Love (Acquarello 2010a). Its profile, encircled by traffic, was also recorded in various scenes in the movie *Torture Me But Kill Me with Kisses* (1968), directed by Dino Risi. Somehow, the obelisk's lack of semantic contextualisation, which could be considered a consequence of the philological or 'soft' approach adopted by Monneret de Villard and his team, had fostered a sort of oblivion or incapacity to give sense to that dark *menhir*, which even managed to appear small in the vast esplanade of Rome's Piazza di Porta Capena, constantly crowded by noisy cars and buses.

The Ethiopian government's request for the return of the stele received a positive response from Oscar Luigi Scalfaro in April 1997. After a political debate, the stele was finally returned to the Ethiopian people on April 2005, almost 60 years after its theft (Pankhurst 1999; Ravaglioli 2005; Petraglia 2010; Santi 2014).[8] The operation was accompanied by further controversy, this time regarding the restitution.[9] Curiously, discussing the complex and expansive operation of repatriation triggered a novel interest in the monument, and after decades of indifference, the simple act of planning the return suddenly gave the object back its original value and meanings (Calchi Novati 1991; Ficquet 2004; Marcello, Carter 2020). The disassembly operation was arranged by the engineer Giorgio Croci of Croci & Associati and carried out by the construction company Lattanzi srl, led by the engineer Simone Pietro Lattanzi. To be shipped, it was disassembled and once again broken into pieces, along the ancient fractures (for a complete description, see D'Amelio 2006). The shaft was therefore divided into three pieces of about the same size and weight. In addition,

8   Interestingly, the operations were not carried out in application of specific international treaties, but in the context of war reparations to the Ethiopian state (Scovazzi 2009a; Scovazzi 2009b).

9   See the 2002 Italian Parliament's interpellation on the obelisk, retrieved from legxiv.camera.it/_dati/leg14/lavori/stenografici/Sed201/aint03.htm (accessed September 2021)

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Figure 8. One of the fragments while being loaded onto the Antonov An-124 aeroplane, 23 April 2005. Courtesy of Lattanzi Srl www.lattanzi.it

a specific cut was made to separate the stone block from the concrete foundation into which about two metres of the stele was immersed. The process required the use of special technologies, such as a layer of fibre-reinforced mortar and aramid and carbon fibre links, to protect the surface from stresses. Moreover, the forces for the breaking were applied to a mediating metal structure that surrounded the structure at the fracture points. A complex metal construction provided a pre-stressing force to compensate for any dangerous stresses during the dismantling process. The forces were applied by means of oil jacks, and sensors were used to monitor the integrity of the stone during the operation.

Once disassembled, the three stumps of the obelisk were transferred to Ethiopia by three cargo flights, using the Antonov An-124 strategic airlift. Transporting them by air required a tailored approach, from adapting the aircraft and a precise calculation of its payload to accurately measuring the runway at Axum Airport and finding suitable machinery to move the fragments and transport them to the site. The complex orography of the archaeological site and the lack of mechanical machines and qualified workers in Axum meant Italian technologies and professionals had to be exported to carry out the recomposition work. The re-erection was planned by Croci and executed by the Lattanzi company, with the contribution of an Ethiopian technical committee, led by the engineer Tadele Bitul Kibrat. The reinstallation ceremony was accompanied by huge enthusiasm from the Ethiopian people, who came to celebrate the event, and the local engineering group, who soon started work on the re-erection process.[10] When asked about the reconstruction by a journalist, Tadele Bitul Kibrat expressed his pride in the project, underlining that 'the anchoring, the platform, the scaffolding, these were all made in advance by Ethiopian engineers', while the Italian Government had offered 'all the financial support from the time of dismantling to the re-erection.'[11] The circulation of expertise and machines also provided the African country with the necessary expertise to restore other stelae

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10 The parade and the ceremony on the occasion of the obelisk's return can be seen in several recordings, like the one retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zq9fD8IIl0 (accessed April 2022). See also the segment of the Tg2 Italian TV news report from 11 November 2012.

11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHauxo89Z8s

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in Axum. The knowledge derived from transporting the obelisk from Rome, for instance, was employed in the straightening of King Ezana's Stele, conducted from 2007 to 2008, with the project once again managed by Giorgio Croci and Lattanzi. Moreover, the restoration works carried out on the obelisk in Axum increased the numbers of tourists visiting the area, boosting the local economy, at least until war broke out once more. From this point of view, the repatriation of the obelisk prompted a process of technological transfer which opened new cultural and economic perspectives and resulted in hybrid knowledge.

Figure 9. The fragments of the stele after their arrival in Ethiopia, while being transferred to the re-erection site, 25 April 2005. Courtesy of Lattanzi Srl www.lattanzi.it

Of course, objects imported from colonies were used as a reference for cultural comparisons: their image served to compare the distant culture with the dominant countries. The comparison was often practiced by opposition, but the case of the Axum stele proves it was also exerted by means of affinity with the Egyptian-Roman tradition of obelisks. However, its difference from 'traditional' obelisks and the lack of a proper semantic apparatus made it an in-between object. Indeed, the transfer of architecture, which causes unavoidable estrangement, produced a third space: relocated architectures remain 'authentic' buildings, but their changed context highlights the loss of their *raison d'etre*, or the contingent relationship with the site (and often with the original function). At the same time, the physical return of the obelisk highlighted an unbalanced relationship between the Italian technological power and the Ethiopian knowledge. This inequality created a void which was filled by the development of a new hybrid expertise which, as stated above, was fundamental for the restoration of other obelisks at Axum. In this sense, a lot of artworks and architectural elements preserved in the museums and places of Western cities offer an extraordinary opportunity not only to return 'stolen' objects but also to balance this inequality and to foster the emergence and sharing of new hybrid knowledge.

Haile Mariam has underlined the cultural benefits of the operation. Even before the return, in 1994, Ethiopian and Italian archaeologists conducted a joint investigation at the stele site, excavating and preserving the ancient tombs. Moreover, during the return of the stele, 'the numerous technical challenges […] were adequately addressed through the cooperation of the two countries' (Haile 2009). For instance, Ethiopian restorers were trained on-the-job during

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the restoration of the stele, and they also had the opportunity to work with the Italian Central Institute of Restoration at the Tower of Pisa (UNESCO 2009). To strengthen the local skills and the sustainability in the preservation of the site, UNESCO also provided training events, including a workshop on the management of the site and a training session for tour guides (UNESCO 2009). The programme gave the Ethiopian state the opportunity to improve the management of the site and to restore the other steles, although to date few works have been completed and the results have been much debated (Hagos 2018).

In the meantime, the void the obelisk left in Piazza di Porta Capena, Rome, was simply erased. Today it is difficult to make out where the stele stood for almost 60 years. Every trace of its presence has been removed, despite a group of citizens' intention to replace it with an artistic substitute. The memory of the technologically advanced final relocation of the Obelisk of Axum, along with its function as a political model, has been totally neglected. Photographs, videos and press clippings, preserved in the archives of the companies engaged in the task, are the only traces left to reconstruct this story, which is worth narrating to prove how the movement of a physical object can prompt complex political, cultural, technological and economical phenomena. By analysing them and UNESCO reports, this paper proves that structural relocations and repatriations enhance complex processes. It aims to prompt major reflections on the colonial past in Italy, so the debate enters the consciousness of contemporary Italian society.

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