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FINDING A NEEDLE IN A VERY LARGE PARK: RECONSIDERING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEW YORK OBELISK

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Abstract

Cleopatra’s Needle is a monolithic piece of syene granite that stands 21.21 meters tall and has a mass exceeding 224 tons. But it is more than a large stone in New York’s Central Park. It is a monumental obelisk, heir to more than three millennia of cultural memory. As the form has been passed down from ancient Egypt to Rome, resurrected during the Renaissance, and embraced in nineteenth century Europe and America, monumental obelisks have always been urban nodes, arranging space and conveying their significance through prominent axial connections to surrounding architecture. Hence, and obelisk is both a needle and a thread.

When Cleopatra’s Needle was first erected in the Park in 1881, it was connected to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and 5th Avenue by a prominent visual axis. As the Museum expanded and the micro-landscape of this part of the Park changed, the tangible link between the obelisk and its surroundings has disappeared entirely. The Needle has been subsumed by Central Park, and its “spirit of place” has been compromised. Since axial connection is a fundamental part of an obelisk’s tangible significance, this thesis outlines why future conservation efforts related to the Needle must be as mindful of the site surrounding the monument as they are of the stone itself.