De origine et usu obeliscorum: Some Notes on an Eighteenth-century Egyptological Study

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With the publication of De origine et usu obeliscorum in 1797, Georg Zoëga gave a new input to the approach of Western culture to the pharaonic civilization.\(^1\) The Egyptian antiquities, well-known in the Roman collections, had become the evidence of a civilization, already described by classical sources. Previous interpretations of the pharaonic culture represented the last step in the construction of an ideal Egypt, according to which these antiquities were part of an esoteric knowledge that went back directly to the last centuries of the ancient civilization. This approach is confirmed by some cultural phenomena, such as the alchemic sciences, or the neo-pagan doctrines.\(^2\) We can recognise in these evidences a concept of the past, still linked to the present through a long chain. This link expresses a fundamental theory: the esoteric wisdom of the past, specifically of pharaonic Egypt, was still a useful tool in the comprehension of the world.

When Zoëga started his study for the publication on the obelisks,\(^3\) many of these monuments were already erected in Rome: typical element of the urban model of the Pope’s city, they were also the expression of those hermetic doctrines, elaborated as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Thus, the traditional interpretation of the obelisks derives from a mixture of elements: proof of this can be seen in the so-called ‘Pulcino della Minerva’ by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, where the Egyptian monument is the sign of ancient

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1 G. Zoëga, De origine et usu obeliscorum ad Pium Sextum pontificem maximum, (Romae: typis Lazzarinii Typographi Cameralis, 1797).
3 For the preliminary work on the obelisks see the documents of the Danish scholars, published by Ø. Andreasen, K. Ascani (hrsgg.), Georg Zoëga. Briefe und Dokumente, 11–V, (Kopenhagen: Gesellschaft fur danische Sprache und Literatur, 2013); the study is already mentioned in a letter to his nephew, Wilhadus Christian Zoëga, dated to 21st January, 1786 (11, letter n. 277), but only in the winter of 1788–1789 Georg Zoëga started the work extensively, as confirmed by a letter to the prince Frederik VI of Denmark, dated 29th September, 1788 (11, letter n. 359).
knowledge, supported by physical matter. An esoteric interpretation of the pharaonic antiquity can also be found in some original architectural solutions that represent the ancient wisdom in a concrete form. For instance, we can mention here the Parco dei Mostri in Bomarzo, planned by Pirro Ligorio for Pier Francesco Orsini in 1547, where some Egyptian suggestions create an ideal world of knowledge, or the singular pastiche of ancient materials in the Porta Magica of Villa Palombara in Rome, whose core seems to be the alchemic sciences.

In the last two decades of the eighteenth century, when Zoëga addresses the Egyptian obelisks, his main interest is not the meaning of these monuments in his contemporary culture, but rather their nature in the frame of the pharaonic civilization and, more generally, in the ancient world. Thus, the study of the obelisks is the result of a complex approach, in which the presentation of the monuments in the contemporary and ancient context is mixed together with their history as reported by ancient sources.

It is striking to find no mention of any philosophical or hermetic theory concerning the nature of these monuments in the entire work of the Danish scholar. The new perspective is fundamental in the conception of Antiquity and its material evidence, and fits in with the antiquarian model described by Jan Assmann. According to the German scholar, this model is the last step in the cultural representation of ancient Egypt before the birth of Egyptology. Thus, the pharaonic civilization is now investigated as evidence of a past connected with the present time in a new framework: instead of a conception of ‘wisdom’ transmitted by the ancient culture, the new approach could be better understood as ‘knowledge’ of the culture’s traces. The core of this new approach is represented by the conception of memory: the importance of such

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4 The interpretation of the architectural elements in Bernini’s monument recalls the famous symbolic reading of the group in F. Colonna, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, (Venetiis: in aedibus Aldi Manutii, 1499), 38.
5 For these readings of the pharaonic patterns in the Renaissance see also E.M. Ciampini, Cercando un altro Egitto. Sopravvivenze di un’antica civiltà nella cultura europea, (Milano: Unicopli, 2013), 70.
6 The interest of the Danish scholars in the Egyptian antiquities in Italian collections is confirmed by the observations on the pharaonic materials in Italy: D. Picchi, Alle origini dell’Egittoologia: le antichità egiziane di Bologna e di Venezia da un inedito di Georg Zoëga, (Imola: La Mandragora, 2010).
7 The organisation of the work is clearly stated in the Praefatio of De usu et origine obeliscorum, vi–vii.