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Italy Returns Ethiopia's Plundered Obelisk

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Italy has returned the first of three sections of Ethiopia's famous Axum obelisk, nearly 70 years after it was looted by Italian troops under dictator Benito Mussolini.

Ethiopia's long wait for the return of a 1700-year-old Axum obelisk has ended. The first section of the 80-foot granite column arrived in Axum on a massive Russian-made cargo plane. The final two sections are scheduled to arrive next week.

To Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, the obelisk was a trophy, marking Italy's brief occupation of Ethiopia during World War II. The intricately carved, 180-ton obelisk stood in a square in central Rome before it was dismantled at the end of 2003, in preparation for its eventual return to Ethiopia.

To Ethiopians, the obelisk is a source of national pride. Historians say it is one of seven massive funerary monuments erected by an Axumite king. Ethiopia's Axumite Empire once stretched into the Arabian Peninsula and the historical birthplace of Christianity in Ethiopia.

Richard Pankhurst is a widely respected Ethiopian historian and founder of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital. Speaking by telephone from Addis, he says the return of the obelisk could embolden other African nations to demand the return of artifacts and national treasures looted during European colonization.

"The loss of the obelisk would be almost like losing the pyramids for Egypt," he explained. "But looking at it more widely, I think one could say that the return of such a major and historical object as the obelisk of Axum has implications, and

[it] will cause people all over the third world, particularly in Africa, to demand things that were taken from them unjustly during the colonial period."

It is not the first time the ancient obelisk has come under attack. The Italian soldiers who removed the obelisk found it in pieces, having been toppled by Muslim rebels during an uprising 500-years ago.

The return of the obelisk ends a bitter feud between Ethiopia and Italy, which promised in 1947 to give it back, but logistical problems hindered its return.

Ethiopian officials are planning a national holiday to celebrate the obelisk's return.