

ECDC NEWS

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IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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ECDC's Axumite Heritage Foundation Applauds Italy's Return of Plundered Obelisk of Axum

With the return by Italy of the last component of the ancient Obelisk of Axum to Ethiopia on May 2, a bitter seven-decade long conflict between the two countries ends in ways that should be instructive to all nations as they confront issues of accountability and reconciliation, according to the head of an Arlington, Virginia-based foundation engaged in preserving Ethiopia's archaeological, historical and cultural heritages.

Looted by forces commanded by dictator Benito Mussolini during Italy's brief occupation in 1937, the 1,700-year-old monolith monument had stood for 68 years in a Roman Piazza until agreement was reached for its return. Measuring 78 feet high and weighing 160 tons, the Obelisk was divided into three pieces for shipping back to its original site in Axum.

"Such symbols of an ancient civilization's architectural, cultural and artistic achievements should never again be considered spoils of war," said Tsehaye Teferra, President of the Axumite Heritage Foundation (AHF). "They offer insight and inspiration to all who view them and deserve respect—even a sense of ownership—by all of humanity."

Established in 1992 to help restore, preserve and promote the ancient and modern cultural achievements of Axum in northern Ethiopia, AHF has restored the 19th century Governor's Palace, the *'Inda Nebri'd*, which now serves as a public library, and played a leadership role in establishing the Axum Historic Development and Preservation Program. A fund-raising effort is underway to build a new library in Axum and convert the restored governor's Plance into an ethnographic museum and an Institute of Axumite Studies.

The Obelisk returned by Italy is one of three that long stood as symbols of Axum's engineering achievements. The tallest, originally 110 feet high, lies in massive pieces on the ground. The third, about 75 feet tall, is still in place.

The pre-Christian Axumite Kingdom was a political and religious center that emerged in the 4th century on the eastern coast of the Red Sea, soon exerting a powerful influence throughout northeast Africa and southern Arabia. It had its own written calligraphy and language, minted coinage and a thriving exporting industry, serving as the capital of the legendary Queen of Sheba and King Ezana, according to AHF reports. In addition to the legendary stone obelisks, the Kingdom was also the site of the Lost Ark of the Covenant and is today a designated United Nations *World Cultural Site*.