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Educational, Scientific and
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Item 62 of the agenda

THE REINSTALLATION OF THE AXUM OBELISK: A TESTIMONY OF SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND ITALY

SUMMARY

This item has been included in the agenda of the 180th session of the Executive Board at the request of Ethiopia and Italy. An explanatory note together with a proposed decision are attached.

Decision proposed: paragraph 12.

Explanatory Note

Joint communication by the Delegations of Ethiopia and Italy

The return and reinstallation of the Axum Obelisk: A round trip in history and a testimony to successful cooperation

1. As a result of the friendly and successful cooperation between Ethiopia and Italy and the significant facilitation work by UNESCO, the reinstallation of the Axum Obelisk, one of the country's most cherished cultural treasures, was celebrated in Ethiopia on 4 September 2008.
2. Axum, a World Heritage site in northern Ethiopia, has been a home of remarkable stelae. The second tallest stela (commonly known as Axum Obelisk) was taken to Rome in 1937. In 2002, the Italian Government agreed to return the Axum Obelisk to Ethiopia, thus taking a decision of historical relevance, respectful of the importance of cultural heritage worldwide. After a very complex technical operation financed by Italy and carried out by a highly qualified Italian team and two Ethiopian experts, the Obelisk was transported to Ethiopia. At the request of Ethiopia and Italy, UNESCO took responsibility for the reinstallation *in situ* of the Obelisk. The Italian team and two Ethiopian experts worked in close cooperation with the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities.
3. The reinstallation of the Axum Obelisk began in 2007 and the monument now stands in its original site after the inauguration ceremony held 4 September in the presence of Ethiopian and Italian authorities, who unanimously expressed their appreciation for the historical event. The event has been acclaimed as a tangible example of cooperation among UNESCO Member States, and of UNESCO's demonstrated role in advancing such relations.
4. The Axum Obelisk was taken from the ancient town of Axum in Northern Ethiopia, a site inscribed by UNESCO on the World Heritage List in 1980. The Obelisk is the second largest stela on the Axum World Heritage site, weighing 153 tons and standing 23.4 metres high. It was erected over 1,700 years ago at a site which was at that time among Africa's ancient and the world's oldest civilizations.
5. For most of the first seven centuries AD, Axum was the capital of what the archaeologist Neville Chittick has described as "the last of the great civilizations of Antiquity to be revealed to modern knowledge". At its height in the third and fourth centuries AD, Axum boasted great wealth, organizational power and technological sophistication. In the third century, Persian writer Mani classified Axum among the world's four greatest kingdoms, along with Rome, Persia and China.
6. In pre-Christian times many burial sites in Axum were marked by such stelae. Two tombs, clearly associated with the largest stela, were found in 1974. There is little doubt that these elaborate and magnificent tombs were reserved for the elite – probably royalty – of Axum. The standing monoliths of Axum – known as stelae and commonly referred to as obelisks – (or as "hawult" by the people of Ethiopia) are a living testament to the prosperity and sophistication of this ancient civilization. Intricately carved as visual representations of multi-storey Axumite buildings from the third and fourth centuries AD, they were an idealized representation of the dwellings of the rich and powerful.
7. The reinstallation of the Obelisk bears witness to the friendship between the two nations. Following the agreement between the two States Parties for the return of the Obelisk signed in 2004, Ethiopia established a national committee for the return of the Obelisk. This Committee worked with the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) that carried out research and technical analyses to prepare the segmentation and transportation of the Obelisk to Ethiopia together with the Italian engineering firm "Crocchi Associati" and the Italian construction company "Lattanzi S.r.l."

8. The Axum Stela was perfectly dismantled into three pieces by what was a very complex technical operation, and transported safely to Axum by two special Antonov flights in 2005. The dismantling and the transportation of the Obelisk to Ethiopia were accomplished thanks to the joint efforts of the same two Italian companies, and it was financed by Italy. After that, in line with the World Heritage Convention which commits States Parties to “give their help in the identification, protection, conservation and preservation of the cultural and natural heritage”, Ethiopia and Italy requested UNESCO’s cooperation in reinstalling the Obelisk in its original site. UNESCO took the responsibility for coordinating the experts who carried out the feasibility study for the reinstallation of the Obelisk in Axum. An Ethiopian archaeologist and an engineer participated in the work.

9. The reinstallation began in 2007, and the inauguration ceremony was held on 4 September 2008 in the presence of high-level representatives of the Ethiopian and Italian Governments, UNESCO authorities, as well as other distinguished guests, including African diplomats. The Italian Central Institute for Preservation and Restoration is currently carrying out a thorough restoration of the Obelisk. The entire operation has been implemented in close cooperation with the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities. The Italian Government covered all the costs out of a grant to UNESCO of more than US \$5 million.

10. The reinstallation of the Axum Obelisk is another testimony to a successful international cooperation in which UNESCO played an important part, and it goes to show how much such cooperation, if promoted more widely, can contribute to the promotion of culture, cultural identity and international understanding.

11. The Governments of Ethiopia and Italy convey their deep appreciation to UNESCO for the role it played for the reinstallation of the Axum Obelisk.

Proposed draft decision

12. After examining this document, the Executive Board may wish to adopt the following decision:

The Executive Board,

1. Recalling the inscription in 1980 of the ancient town of Axum in the World Heritage List and the great importance of the site from a historical and archaeological point of view for Ethiopia,
2. Recognizing the prolonged diplomatic efforts and the final agreement that have made possible the return and the reinstallation of the Obelisk in Ethiopia in accordance with the wishes expressed by the Ethiopian people for a long time,
3. Noting the significant technical and organizational contribution provided by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre for the implementation of this project, one of the most important achievements in the field of heritage conservation in the past decade,
4. Also taking note with satisfaction that the reinstallation of the Axum Obelisk is another testimony of a successful international cooperation in which UNESCO played a crucial role,
5. Expresses its deep appreciation for the successful completion of the project and congratulates Italy and Ethiopia for their exemplary cooperation.



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CORRIGENDUM

The proposed draft decision in paragraph 12 of document 180 EX/62 should read as follows:

Proposed draft decision

After examining this document, the Executive Board may wish to adopt the following decision:

The Executive Board,

1. Recalling the inscription in 1980 of the ancient town of Axum in the World Heritage List and the great importance of the site from a historical and archaeological point of view for Ethiopia,
2. Recognizing the protracted diplomatic efforts and the final agreement that have made possible the return and the reinstallation of the Obelisk in Ethiopia in accordance with the wishes expressed by the Ethiopian people for a long time,
3. Noting the significant technical and organizational contribution provided by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre for the implementation of this project, one of the most important achievements in the field of heritage conservation in the past decade,
4. Also taking note with satisfaction that the reinstallation of the Axum Obelisk is another testimony of a successful international cooperation in which UNESCO played an important role,
5. Expresses its deep appreciation for the successful completion of the project and congratulates Italy and Ethiopia for their exemplary cooperation.