JANUARY 22, 1881. “Cleopatra’s Needle” is raised in Central Park before a crowd of 10,000 New Yorkers. When the obelisk was at 45 degrees, the man who brought the obelisk to America, Navy Commander Henry Gorringe, halted the turning so a photograph could be taken, preserving the moment. This artotype, from Gorringe's book, "Egyptian Obelisks", is based on that photograph. Courtesy the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
CLEOPATRA’S NEEDLES
The Lost Obelisks of Egypt
Part 2
THE OLDEST SKYSCRAPER IN NEW YORK

TO

WILLIAM H. VANDERBILT

IN RECOGNITION OF THE ENLIGHTENED MUNIFICENCE TO WHICH NEW YORK IS INDEBTED FOR THE POSSESSION OF ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING MONUMENTS OF THE OLD WORLD, AND OF THE MOST ANCIENT RECORD OF MAN NOW KNOWN TO EXIST ON THE AMERICAN CONTINENT.

The dedication page of “Egyptian Obelisks” by Henry H. Gorringe, published in 1882—just a year after he raised “Cleopatra’s Needle” in Central Park, New York. William Vanderbilt was an American railroad magnate who was asked to head a committee to raise the necessary funds to bring Cleopatra’s Needle to New York. Vanderbilt, caught up in obelisk mania, offered to pay the entire bill. New York had to have an obelisk. Image courtesy the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
Like other obelisks, “Cleopatra’s Needle” in New York was erected to perpetuate the glory of a pharaoh. To some extent, it has failed to do this.

The great 18th Dynasty warrior pharaoh, Thutmose III, treated himself to a pair of obelisks to mark his third jubilee (celebrated by the king after 30 years of rule and repeated every three years thereafter), around 1450 B.C. Obelisks were usually made in pairs, and these two were made to flank the entrance to the great sun temple in Heliopolis, now a suburb of Cairo. The king carved his titles boldly down the center of all four sides of each monolith. On the pyramids at the top, he recorded his adoration of Re-Horakhty and Atum, two manifestations of the sun god.

Two centuries later, Ramesses the Great elbowed his way in and proclaimed his glory by carving his names and titles in columns on either side of Thutmose’s inscriptions. Several centuries later, a minor pharaoh, Osorkon I (22nd Dynasty), wanted to be remembered with the great ones. However, by this

The journey to Alexandria

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This all became clear when Consul-General Farman received his instructions to secure the gift of the obelisk. The 46-year-old had only recently been appointed Consul-General, but he was in constant contact with the Khedive and had never heard mention of an obelisk. He knew something was wrong. Soon a letter arrived from Dixon explaining the confusion.

So there was no offer of an obelisk, and once the confusion was straightened out, Farman received no further communications about obelisks from anyone. If America was going to have an obelisk, the Consul-General would have to start from square one and do the work on his own.

The idea of an American obelisk was not new. Paris and London had theirs, so why not New York?

In 1869, when the world gathered in Egypt for the opening of the Suez Canal, the United States was offered an obelisk, not out of generosity and friendship, but out of desperation. Egypt was bankrupt, and despite the festivities, Egypt no longer owned the canal. It was in the hands of receivers, owned by the powers of Europe who had loaned the funds to build it.

It was under these difficult circumstances that William H. Hurlbert, editor of the New York World, was introduced to Egypt's ruler, Khedive Ismail, at the opening ceremonies. Khedive Ismail, eager for an ally to save him from his European creditors, suggested to Hurlbert that America might want an obelisk, but nothing was done and the offer was soon forgotten.

Eight years later, in 1877, when London erected its obelisk and New York was suffering from obelisk envy, Hurlbert would have gladly accepted the Khedive's offer. But did it still stand?

That same year, a friend of Hurlbert's chanced to meet in London John Dixon who was in the process of moving London's obelisk. Dixon revealed that Egypt was willing to offer America an obelisk and that, for 15,000 pounds sterling, he could bring the upright Alexandrian obelisk to the United States. Hurlbert was ecstatic; not only would New Yorkers soon have an obelisk, but he had a news scoop!

But there was one problem: the Khedive now had no intention of giving away another obelisk. It was all a mistake. Dixon hadn't said anything about Egypt's willingness to give away an obelisk. He merely suggested that if the United States could get one, he could bring it to America's shore.

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The oldest skyscraper in New York

There were only five large obelisks left standing in Egypt, and Farman knew two of them well. One was in the Heliopolis section of Cairo, but this one had its own special problem. It was the oldest obelisk in Egypt, erected by the Middle Kingdom pharaoh, Senusret I (ca. 1950 B.C.), and centuries older than the other four erect ones. Egypt was clearly not going to give away its senior obelisk.

He was also quite familiar with the single standing obelisk at Alexandria—the mate to the one the British had recently taken. It was right on the coast and stood alone, perfectly situated for removal, but Farman knew there was a political problem with this obelisk.

When the British took their obelisk there was an outcry about Egypt's ancient treasures being stolen by foreigners. Now, taking the second one might be difficult. That left the three southern obelisks to assess which one might be best for America.

At that time Farman welcomed an esteemed visitor: General Ulysses S. Grant. The great Civil War hero had just completed his second term as President and had declined to run for a third. After three decades of public service, General Grant was ready for some relaxation, and began a grand tour around the world. By the time he arrived in Alexandria in February 1878, he had already seen much of Europe and was eager to encounter Egypt's antiquities.

The Khedive offered the group a palace in Cairo to lodge his group and also a steamboat for their trip up the Nile—just the kind of generous hospitality that was bankrupting Egypt.

When General Grant's party started up the Nile, Consul-General Farman was with him. He also had an ulterior motive for joining the group.
Grant’s group was happy to leave Cairo. The city was too French for their taste, not Middle Eastern enough. The walls of the palace the Khedive had provided were covered in French wallpaper, there was French dinnerware, French food. The Service des Antiquités was run by the French; even official government correspondence was in French. Now on the Khedive’s steamer they could have a proper adventure.

As they steamed south and visited the temples and tombs along the way, anticipation was growing. They were nearing Luxor, the holy grail of all Victorian travellers to Egypt.

Two obelisks were still standing at Karnak Temple, one erected by Hatshepsut, the female pharaoh, and the second raised by her father, Thutmose I. Farman knew the Egyptians would never let Hatshepsut’s only standing obelisk, and the tallest obelisk in all of Egypt, leave the country. Besides, both Hatshespsut’s obelisk

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**WHEN DID THE NEEDLE BECOME CLEOPATRA’S?**

No one really knows, although it was certainly well before Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt. Ten years earlier, American explorer, John Ledyard, sent a letter to an acquaintance, Thomas Jefferson (of American Founding Father fame). Ledyard had participated in Captain Cook’s third voyage and was now looking for a new adventure. He set his sights on Africa.

Starting in Alexandria, Ledyard encountered the few remaining ruins, and in his letter wrote, “A pillar called the pillar of Pompey, and an Obelisk called Cleopatra’s are now almost the only remains of great Antiquity—they are both & particularly the former noble subjects to see and contemplate…”

This image of the future New York obelisk standing in its 19th-century environment—a neglected area of the Alexandria harbour—has been attributed to British photographer Francis Frith (1822–98), taken not long after Ledyard’s visit.
and that of her father just a few yards away were smack dab in the middle of the temple, hemmed in by other buildings, and it would be very difficult to lower them from their pedestals. No, the Karnak obelisks were out. That left the one at Luxor Temple.

Accompanying the group was Emile Brugsch, a high-ranking official in the Antiquities Service who served as the group’s guide. He had constantly expressed his view that the French and English were vandals and only regarded the monuments “as reservoirs from which they can supply their own museums.” One can only wonder what he would have thought if he had read Farman’s mind as he stood in front of the obelisk.

As Farman stared up at the pristine shaft of granite raised by Ramesses II, he had visions of this gem coming to the United States. It was in beautiful condition, and the French had removed its mate in 1833, so clearly it was possible for American engineers to lower and remove this one.

Undoubtedly New Yorkers would still like one, and Vanderbilt was almost certainly still willing to pay for its transportation. As the group sailed south to Philae Temple and then back to Cairo, Farman worked out his strategy. He would approach the Khedive with his request and present the case why it would be good for Egypt to give an obelisk to America.

On March 4, 1878, Farman had an audience with the Khedive. When he asked His Highness about the possibility of Egypt giving America an obelisk the Khedive was surprised. Farman explained that Paris and London had obelisks, but New York, a far bigger city, had more people who would see an obelisk there, and Egypt’s tourist business would increase. The Khedive replied that he was favourably inclined to offer America an obelisk, and would consider the request. With that the audience was concluded.

The Khedive was indeed inclined to give an obelisk to the United States because his country needed all the friends it could muster. He had just been forced to sell the Gizira Palace to a hotel chain to pay some of his European creditors, and there was a movement on the part of France to depose him. It would not hurt to have the United States on his side.

Serious negotiations

A few days later, Farman was attending a ball at the Abdin Palace and was approached by Emile Brugsch’s older brother, Heinrich Brugsch, who was director of the newly created Egyptian Museum in Boulaq, a district of Cairo. He was not impressed with Farman’s plan to obtain an obelisk: “The Khedive has asked me to give a description of the obelisks remaining in Egypt, and to state which one can best be spared; I shall not designate any to be taken away, for I am totally opposed to the removal of any of them.”

Farman wasn’t discouraged by Brugsch’s staunch opposition, but he had yet another unpleasant surprise ahead of him. The Khedive had told Farman that the Alexandria obelisk was out of the question, so it seemed that the Luxor obelisk was the only real possibility left. Word had gotten around Cairo that Farman wanted an obelisk, and now the British Consul-General informed him that the Luxor obelisk had been given to the British many years ago. Indeed, it was true. When the Khedive’s grandfather, Mohamed Ali, gave the French their obelisk, he gave the British the second obelisk at Luxor. Now they had approached the Khedive and reasserted their claim to it. To Farman, it seemed as if all of Europe was conspiring to ensure that he didn’t get an obelisk.

Brugsch had already said that he would not select an obelisk to be taken out of the country. Now he was joined by Auguste Mariette, the Director of the Service des Antiquités.

It is ironic that Mariette was now the defender of Egypt’s treasures. As a young man in the 1850s, he was first sent to Egypt by France to purchase ancient manuscripts. While he was waiting for the deal to be struck he explored the sites of Egypt. At Saqqara he discovered the ancient burial site of the sacred Apis bulls. Mariette took his manuscript money and used it to excavate the tombs. He packed up everything that wasn’t nailed down and shipped it back to the Louvre. Soon after, he was asked to leave the country for pillaging.

For Farman, just as things seemed utterly hopeless, sunlight entered through an unexpected crack.

The political scene in Egypt had been in turmoil. Egypt was bankrupt, and an Anglo-French ministry was installed to run the country. The Khedive was still the nominal head of Egypt, but foreign powers now controlled the purse. Anti-European sentiment was strong, however, and the Khedive pounced on the
opportunity to disband the commission that had been created to oversee the country’s finances, and appoint a new, entirely Egyptian commission. For its head, he appointed Cherif Pasha, a man educated in Europe, and now Egypt’s most powerful government official during the country’s most difficult time.

The good news for Farman was that he and Cherif knew and respected each other. After a few weeks of political calm Farman screwed up his courage to ask about the obelisk. Cherif Pasha asked, “It is the obelisk in Alexandria that you prefer, is it not?” The Consul-General explained that it would be the easiest to removed. “Well,” said the Pasha, “we have concluded to give it to you.” New Yorkers would have their obelisk; all they had to do now was find someone to pick up the gift.

The right man at the right time

When decorated naval commander Henry Honeychurch Gorringe read the announcement in The World asking for someone to move New York’s obelisk, he couldn’t believe it. After the Civil War, he had visited the Alexandrian obelisks while mapping coastlines for the United States Navy, and had even thought about moving one to America. The obelisks were unappreciated amid the garbage of a squalid neighbourhood. Some of the locals made money by taking a sledgehammer to the standing obelisk to chip off souvenirs for tourists. Now the 38-year-old could rescue the standing obelisk and bring it to New York.

Gorringe began planning how he was going to move the obelisk. He had to sail America’s obelisk across the Atlantic, so he needed a ship that could navigate heavy seas with a 250-ton obelisk in its hold. Up to this time, the largest object ever put in the hold of a ship was a 100-ton cannon manufactured in England and shipped to Italy. Instead of trying to lift the obelisk onto the ship, Gorringe planned to open the ship’s hull, slide the obelisk into the hold, and then replace the planks.

He would also have to move the obelisk over land, first from where it stood in Alexandria, to the transport ship, and then from the ship when it docked in New York to its final site in Central Park. He decided that he would move the obelisk on cannonballs along specially-built iron channels.

The last part of his plan was how to lower the obelisk from its pedestal in Alexandria. For this, he designed a structure that looked like two mini-Eiffel Towers standing right next to the obelisk on opposite sides. An iron belt fitted around the obelisk was bolted to clamps (trunnions) projecting from the miniature towers. The obelisk would then be pivoted around its centre of gravity until it was parallel to the ground. Once in this position it would be lowered to the ground by hydraulic jacks at both of its ends.

When Vanderbilt was told of the plan and the man who would carry it out, he offered Gorringe the job—but only if Gorringe footed the $75,000 bill. Vanderbilt would cover the cost only when the obelisk was in place in Central Park. Thankfully, a (very) wealthy friend came to Gorringe’s rescue and put up the money.

The original Roman crabs that propped up the corners of the obelisk were gifted by Gorringe to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and replaced with new substitutes, cast in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, when the obelisk was moved to New York. This crab, inscribed in Latin and Greek, tells us that not only was the obelisk moved to Alexandria in the eighth year of an emperor’s reign (probably Augustus), but also that Barbarus was Prefect and Pontius was the architect.
With his plan accepted and money in hand to execute it, Gorringe went full steam ahead. He returned to Alexandria and began prowling the port, looking for a suitable ship to purchase to transport the obelisk across the Atlantic. He arrived at the perfect time. Because the Egyptian government was bankrupt, it could not afford to maintain a fully active postal service and had decommissioned several of its postal steamers. Gorringe spotted one, the Dessoug, at dock. Although the engines and boilers needed a lot of work, the hull was in perfect condition and was just large enough to admit the obelisk.

After some protracted negotiations, the Assistant Postmaster-General offered Gorringe the ship for £5,100. It was a done deal and, soon after, he boarded the ship and raised the American flag, making it clear to all who owned the ship. As the ship began being refitted, Gorringe turned his attention to lowering the obelisk.

DECEMBER 6, 1879.

Before being lowered, the obelisk was clad in wood to protect its surface. The large American flag was flown from the top to emphasize who now owned the obelisk. Even at this late stage there was local opposition to the transfer of Alexandria’s last obelisk to America—not least from the builders of the apartment-house being built on the adjacent ground who wished to have the obelisk adorn their new courtyard.

Rather than stealing the obelisk, Gorringe earnestly felt that he was rescuing it. In his account of the project, published a year after the obelisk was erected in New York, Gorringe wrote that in Alexandria “the constant washings of the surf had begun to affect the foundation, and for the last fifteen years the obelisk had been gradually inclining more and more toward the sea. In a few years it must have fallen, and almost certainly have been broken by the fall.”

One hundred local workers were hired to clear rubble and prepare the site. Two masonry piers were constructed, and when the prefabricated turning mechanism arrived from New Jersey, it was quickly assembled without the slightest difficulty.

Now the bronze crabs on which the obelisk rested could be cut free. By means of turnbuckles and screws (much like the mechanism in an automobile jack) the obelisk was raised straight up a few inches so it would clear the crabs that were still attached to the pedestal.

The crabs are an important source for figuring out the obelisk’s history. When the obelisk was re-erected in Alexandria by Augustus, four bronze crabs were placed at the bottom corners for stability. One of the crabs was inscribed with the details of the move. In Gorringe’s time, only two crabs remained, and they can be seen today in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Unfortunately, almost all the visitors walk right by this wonderful bit of history without noticing it.
The obelisk turns

Steel cables were run from both ends of the obelisk over the top of the scaffolding and into the masonry piers to take some weight off as it turned. Gorringe was afraid that when the obelisk went horizontal it might break under its own weight!

At 11:00 a.m. on December 6 Gorringe gave the order to his men to pull on the cables. Surrounded by a teeming crowd, the obelisk slowly and silently moved. Then disaster struck; a creaking sound was followed by a loud snap. One of the cables had separated, and the obelisk’s motion began picking up speed. Spectators ran in all directions, but Gorringe had planned for such a situation. He had stacked timbers almost as high as the horizontal obelisk. As the obelisk went past the horizontal, it crashed into the timbers, bounced up a few feet and came safely to rest on the timbers. A great cheer rose from the crowd!

To lower the obelisk to the ground, Gorringe positioned a second stack of timber beneath its bottom end to match the one that had saved the obelisk. Using hydraulic jacks, the obelisk was raised a few inches to allow the top layer of timbers to be removed. The jacks were then lowered and the process repeated, four inches at a time, three feet a day.

Now Gorringe focused his attention on moving the 50-ton pedestal on which the obelisk had rested. An iron bar was inserted beneath the pedestal, and with the help of hydraulic jacks, it was raised off the three steps on which it rested. Iron channel rails with rows of cannonballs were positioned near the 50-ton pedestal and it was rolled onto the cannonballs. The balls slid on the rails with the greatest of ease, which must have been a great relief for Gorringe. This was precisely the same method he was going to use for transporting the obelisk, which was five times the weight of the pedestal.

A message from ancient Freemasons

With the pedestal out of the way, Gorringe began removing the three steps on which it had rested. These were formed of several dozen large stone blocks that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. When the last step was removed, Gorringe made a surprising discovery.

The foundation beneath the steps had been filled with several large stone blocks. Upon one rested a metal trowel and lead plummet bob. Gorringe, a Freemason, concluded he had found emblems of Freemasonry! A committee from the Grand Lodge of Egypt was called in to inspect the scene. Their report would eventually lead to one of the most incredible parades New York had ever seen. They agreed that the trowel and plummet were clearly Masonic, intentionally left behind, to be found by brother Masons in the future. Gorringe immediately decided he must bring it all back to New York for his brother Masons to wonder at. Neither the French nor the English had brought their pedestals home. Still, Gorringe felt New York should have the pedestal; it was the right thing to do.
Gorringe now faced the challenge of getting the obelisk over to the harbour, on the other side of the city, where the Dessoug was in dry dock.

Even though the overland route was less than a mile, the foreign merchants of Alexandria refused to give permission to use the paved streets through which the obelisk could have been easily moved using the iron channels and cannon balls. This gave Gorringe no other option but to bring the obelisk around by sea. It was to cost him an extra $21,000.

To access the sea a channel needed to be cleared through the great submerged blocks that were believed to be from Cleopatra’s lost palace. Gorringe hired professional divers to identify blocks that would be a problem, which were then lifted from the water by cranes. To use the cranes, piers first had to be built to support them. It took months.

Finally, on March 18, 1880, the obelisk was ready to be launched into the water down a well-lubricated gangway. It had been placed inside a caisson, a watertight 83-foot-long (25 metres) wood box resembling a giant coffin. It wouldn’t budge and had to be inchéd along by jacks. That took nearly two weeks. Finally, on March 31, the caisson was towed to Alexandria’s port.

On June 1, the Dessoug sailed. Gorringe felt a great sense of relief as he watched the coast of Alexandria recede: “The open sea, with the comparative rest and relief it brought, was acceptable and enjoyable beyond expression.” Gorringe was a navy man, and this was his element.
On July 19, 1880, they steamed triumphantly around the southern tip of Manhatten, up the Hudson River, and docked at 23rd Street. The Dessoug and its ancient, distinguished passenger were a sensation. New Yorkers had been following the progress of the Dessoug in their newspapers and, now that it was here, it was like a Broadway star.

The pedestal was first lifted out of the hold and swung onto shore, before being loaded onto a truck wagon specially rebuilt to bear the load. Sixteen pairs of horses would pull the 50-ton stone to its chosen location in Central Park.

There had been some debate about where to place the obelisk. Some favoured prominent sites in the middle of the city, like Columbus Circle. However, there were concerns that tall buildings would eventually obstruct the view of the obelisk, so a park site was agreed upon. Greywacke Knoll, the park’s highest point, near the city’s new Metropolitan Museum of Art, provided a solid foundation and was selected.

The Freemasons have their day

The grand ceremony for laying the foundation was presided over by the Masons. On October 9, 1880, dressed in top hats, black coats and white gloves, more than 8,500 Masons from dozens of lodges marched down Fifth Avenue in military ranks. Bands preceded many of the lodges, so the 30,000 spectators that lined the route were treated to music as well as pageantry. It was the greatest congregation of Masons the world had ever seen.

The crowd gathered at Graywacke Knoll, along with some 20,000 visitors, before the large limestone blocks that formed the steps that would support the obelisk's pedestal. Months earlier, and 8,000 miles away, in Alexandria, Brother Gorringe and other Masons had concluded that 20 centuries earlier, brother Masons had prepared the obelisk base as a concealed message for the future. Later that day they would be told they were wrong.

At 5:00 p.m. Grand Master Anthony stepped forward to address the crowd. His speech was a bombshell. It began by praising the ancient Egyptian builders for their insight and skill. OK so far. Then he mentioned that many people believed there were Freemasons in ancient Egypt. Well, they were wrong. Freemasonry simply didn’t go back that far. Fellow Masons did not build the monument they were now inaugurating. There is no record of the reaction of Commander Gorringe or his fellow Masons. Were they disappointed? We just don’t know.

The following day, the 50-ton pedestal was lifted into place on top of the three steps, to await the obelisk's arrival. It would take another three months.
Only one dry dock in New York was suitable for the Dessoug, and once its owner heard about the obelisk, he asked an exorbitant rate. Gorringe tried to negotiate but he wouldn’t budge. However, there was an alternative: a marine railway that extended into the water at Staten Island. Here the Dessoug could be sailed into a cradle and held securely while the obelisk was loaded onto two pontoons. On September 6 the obelisk began moving slowly towards its new home. All along the way boats tooted their steam whistles, welcoming New York’s newest and most celebrated resident.

The obelisk came ashore at 96th Street, and before long the trusty metal channels Gorringe had been using finally split in two. For the two-mile journey to Central Park the obelisk would sit in a steel cradle with rollers attached underneath. A pile driver engine would winch the cradle containing the obelisk. It took over a month for the obelisk to travel its first steep quarter-mile to West Boulevard. To raise the obelisk to the height of the prefabricated turning mechanism that he had first used in Alexandria, a railroad trestle had to be built from Fifth Avenue to the final site of the obelisk. It was a massive undertaking.

In breathless silence, on January 22, 1881, before a crowd of 10,000 people, the obelisk was finally swung to a vertical position. While the crowd held its collective breath, Gorringe knew that the mechanism was going to work; he had held a secret test.

Two days earlier, near midnight, Gorringe and a few trusted workers had quietly entered Central Park. In the frigid cold, several workers pulled on the cables attached to the obelisk’s base. The obelisk began to pivot silently. Under the light of a quarter moon, the obelisk floated vertically, a few inches above the base. New York was ready for her obelisk.

Bob Brier

Dr. Bob Brier (‘Mr. Mummy’) is Senior Research Fellow at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University and one of the world’s foremost Egyptologists and mummy experts.
NEEDLE-MANIA
The 1880s in America were alive with Egyptomania, fueled by the arrival of New York’s spectacular “Needle”. Four years after the obelisk was raised, Tiffany & Co. released this marble and bronze, clock and obelisk mantel. Today it is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art—not far from the ancient obelisk that inspired it. The Met suggests that the set “represents a popular rather than an archaeological idea of Egyptian art: the hieroglyphs on the obelisks and on the sphinxes of the clock would not bear the scrutiny of an Egyptologist”.

On February 23, 1881, the New York Times covered the long-awaited raising of “Cleopatra’s Needle”:

“The Egyptian obelisk, of which so much has been said and written during these two or three years past, has been set up in the Central Park, and is now, to all intents and purposes, one of the possessions of the City of New York.”

Henry Gorringe’s recollection was a little more personal: “It was to me an inexpressible relief to feel that my work was complete, and that no accident or incident had happened that would make my countrymen regret that I had been intrusted [sic] with the work of removing and re-erecting… one of the most famous monuments of the Old World….”

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Congratulations to the winners of last issue’s competition: Katherine Pascal in Arizona, U.S., and Anne Godfrey in South Yorkshire, U.K. Both win a copy of “Cleopatra’s Needles”, signed by the author, Dr. Bob Brier.