

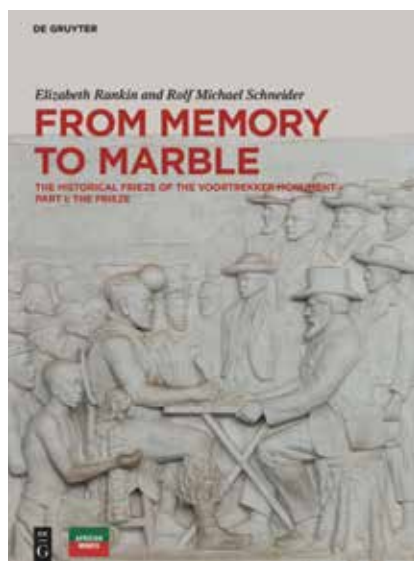
FROM MEMORY TO MARBLE: THE HISTORICAL FRIEZE OF THE VOORTREKKER MONUMENT, PART I, THE FRIEZE

by ELIZABETH RANKIN and ROLF MICHAEL SCHNEIDER

Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019.

EARLIER this year, spurred on by the international momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement, the Black People's National Crisis Committee demanded that all colonial statues, memorials and iconography in South Africa be removed. This stipulation intersects chillingly with the sumptuously produced and lavishly illustrated first volume of *From Memory to Marble*. In it, the art historian Elizabeth Rankin and the classical archaeologist Rolf Schneider closely interrogate the 92 metres of marble frieze that surrounds the Hall of Heroes in the Voortrekker Monument outside Pretoria inaugurated in 1949. The floor of the hall has a central opening that reveals the cenotaph commemorating the Voortrekkers who died in violently opening up the South African hinterland to white domination; while the 27 panels that constitute the frieze illustrate scenes from the Great Trek and give unambiguous visual form to the founding myth of the Afrikaner nation and its ultimate ideology of apartheid.

It is one of the very many strengths of this interdisciplinary and multi-faceted work of profound scholarship that the place in post-apartheid South Africa of this unabashed monument to racial supremacy is so sensitively considered. The authors explain why the Voortrekker Monument has thus far survived, and how, in the initial spirit of post-apartheid national reconciliation, it has been successfully depoliticised and rebranded as a heritage, educational and tourist site. Naturally, the status of the Voortrekker Monument could change



again as the promise of the rainbow nation fades into monochrome under the ideological pressures gathering pace since this volume was first published in 2019.

That said, it is not the ultimate fate of the Voortrekker Monument itself that is the main burden of this work. The frieze is the focus of the book, a work of art that provides what the authors term 'an engrossing case study of the interaction of history, ideology and iconography'. The second volume, which is not reviewed here, offers a detailed analysis conducted in these terms of each of the 27 panels. What Part I provides us with is the context of the conceptualisation of the Voortrekker Monument and its place in the evolving ideology of Afrikaner nationhood and white supremacy.

The authors painstakingly track down how the project was driven forward and

how it was funded, how it interconnected politically with the centenary of the Great Trek, and why the monument's selected site was controversial. The shaping of the final design of the monument (one that had various sources of inspiration and went through various forms) is deftly laid out. The authors make very clear that the frieze, which triumphantly embodies Afrikaner ideology at the time, was from the very outset integral to the design of the monument, and that the Hall of Heroes was designed specifically to accommodate it.

A large part of this volume is taken up with the complicated process through which the themes of the panels were finally decided upon. The authors carefully consider the work of the four sculptors who executed the project, the roots of their stylistic inspiration, and their concern with historical accuracy regarding dress, artefacts and the verisimilitude of the portraits of individuals. All the technical aspects of the creation of the frieze are carefully handled, from drawings through maquettes and plaster casts to the final form in Querceta marble created by sculptors in Italy.

Statues and monuments to subsequently vilified individuals and now discredited causes have been overthrown ever since people first began erecting them, from images of Pharaoh Akhenaten through Lenin and Stalin to Christopher Columbus and Cecil Rhodes. If the Voortrekker Monument is one day gutted or demolished, it has its own monument in this book. Not that the authors are in any way apologists for what the Voortrekker Monument and its frieze represent. Indeed, they are extremely sensitive to the conscious intent of their creators whose ideologically driven objectives were controversial and divisive from the outset. Yet, thanks to this magisterial book, we are able to appreciate fully that – tainted as it is – what they created still remains the remarkable product of architectural and artistic vision and skill.

Note: This is an open access monograph and the digital version is available in full and free of charge.

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