African Minds
Proposal

African Minds, an open access publisher of scholarly monographs, has committed to publishing From Memory to Marble by Elizabeth Rankin and Rolf Schneider. For the authors it is important that the book be published by a South African publisher. At the same time, both the authors and the publisher acknowledge the challenge of attracting attention and interest in a world saturated with content.

The networked nature of contemporary society in the information age presents opportunities for collaboration within and between networks to increase the visibility of new knowledge. It is for this reason that the authors and African Minds are seeking forward-looking and open-minded scholarly publishers to collaborate in the co-publication of From Memory to Marble, possibly in a first of its kind open-access co-publication of a significant scholarly work in both print and digital formats. In practice, this could mean a collaborative publishing arrangement in which the costs of production are shared, territories for print sales are defined, and marketing efforts to distinct networks are undertaken to promote all formats of the publication to a niche but global readership.

A modest subvention is available to support the cost of open access publication, and the authors are actively seeking additional support.

Our specific interest in co-publishing a South African book with a US university press is driven by the similarity of the two countries’ histories of internal conflict and appropriation of native land, and of the emigration of the Voortrekkers to the northern regions of southern Africa to the emigration to the American West. Both movements led to the foundations of new republics and/or states; both violated the human rights of native peoples.

For more information about African Minds, see www.africanminds.org.za.
Key points

- *From Memory to Marble* offers a rare case study through which to gain new insight into the dynamics, processes and shifts around the creation of complex monuments and should find its place amongst studies of the world’s major monuments.

- No in-depth art-historical study exists of this frieze, chiselled from Carraran marble in the Italian city of Florence and one of the largest of its kind worldwide.

- This approach is needed to understand a frieze that was made to ‘petrify’ the sole authoritative version of the Afrikaner myth of the ‘Great Trek’.

- The visual evidence opens up unexpected perspectives, not only for the reading of the narrative of the frieze, but also the understanding of Southern African history.

- Our analyses contributes to the current debate about the relationship of text and image from an unconventional viewpoint, and to the differences of narratives in diverse art media.

- As we tackle one of the most prominent and debated monuments of (South) Africa, there is little doubt that the book will attract public attention and provoke lively discussion.
Background

*From Memory to Marble* is a study of the frieze of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria (1938–49).

Commissioned by Afrikaners, this Art Deco structure measuring 40 x 40 x 64 metres is the largest monument building in South Africa and has provoked the most varied responses from the country’s different peoples – from unconditional adulation to calls for its demolition.

Designed to house, at eye-level, a colossal frieze with a historical narrative, the Monument enshrines the ultimate version of the Afrikaner myth of the ‘Great Trek’ of 1835–52, including the journeys, conquests and rites of the Boer pioneers who became known as the Voortrekkers.

The interest in this book project emerged when the two authors – one an art historian in Johannesburg then Auckland, the other a classical archaeologist in Cambridge then Munich – wrote an article “Copy nothing”: Classical ideals and Afrikaner ideologies at the Voortrekker Monument’ for the book *South Africa, Greece, Rome: Classical Confrontations*, edited by Grant Parker and published by Cambridge University Press in 2017.
Our research on that occasion revealed much untapped primary material, mainly in Afrikaans, and that no in-depth and question-driven art-historical study of this exceptional frieze exists, one of the largest of its kind worldwide.

The key question of our book then is: How, a century later, were seventeen years of Voortrekker memory and history transformed into a frieze, 92 metres long and 2.3 metres high, chiselled from Carraran marble in the Italian city of Florence?
A brief purpose-driven study of Southern Africa history from the time of the Voortrekkers, provides in our first chapter the historical context – with a specific focus on the rise of Afrikaner nationalism/racism, the establishment of Afrikaner institutions (political, social, religious, economic, academic), and the introduction of apartheid, set against the diversity of South African cultures and ideologies. We argue that, in the development of Afrikaner ideology, the Monument and its frieze played a key role.

Invaluable for our work on the frieze was the evidence of unpublished material in South African archives we examined, private collections of photographs, and our interviews with people who were eye-witnesses to the making of the frieze (our digital database contains some 3 000 documents, photographs, architectural drawings, artwork, etc.). Another significant research reference is our critical exploration of the Official Guide, the authoritative blueprint of the monument’s intended Afrikaner reading, published in eight editions in Afrikaans and English between 1955 and 1976. This 87-page mouthpiece of apartheid with extensive coverage of the frieze constitutes a rare patron document in the history of memorials.

In contrast to predominantly linear ‘progress’ models of large monument commissions, especially in cultures and periods without available archival records, the evidence we analysed enabled us to reconstruct, step-by-step, the meandering and often conflicting dynamics in the conception and making of the frieze, dealt with in our chapters on Concept and Process. This approach is badly needed to understand the colossal Voortrekker frieze that was made to ‘petrify’ the sole authoritative version of the Afrikaner myth of the ‘Great Trek’ forever.
We present the first art historical analysis of the frieze, a close reading of the changing compositions, forms, styles and interpretations over a time span of twelve years and in such diverse materials as paper, clay, plaster and marble (1937–1949). The chosen topics were given a visual form that betrays its prejudices in its unification of white people by impeccable dress and controlled habitus, black people by semi-nakedness and motifs of extreme behaviour, all presented in measured planar compositions to ennable the historical events.

In our chapter on Image, we link the approach to the idea of ‘pure art’, as defined by the German sculptor and art theorist, Adolf Hildebrand, in his pioneering book *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture* published in 1893 and translated into English in 1907. This model provided the ideal breeding ground for grand historical narratives and was susceptible to political misuse, especially by nationalist regimes such as Stalin’s Marxism–Leninism, Mussolini’s fascism and Hitler’s perverse Master race ideology of the pure Aryan, all in power when the Voortrekker frieze was conceived. A concept akin to Hildebrand’s pure form helped the Afrikaner patrons and the four sculptors to develop the nationalist and racist narrative of the frieze, and to achieve the formal unity they sought to mark the frieze as a collective ‘volkswerk’.

A reading of the frieze raised so many issues that we decided that it was imperative to give individual attention to each scene in the second volume of our book. The visual evidence of the 27 scenes, rigorously analysed and read against the relevant published and unpublished historical sources, opens up unexpected perspectives, not only for the reading of the narrative of the frieze, but also the understanding of Southern African history in the nineteenth century and its interpretation in the twentieth.

Major inventions and misinterpretations of historical fact by the commissioners and sculptors...
are, for example, the signing of the all-important land treaty by the Zulu king Dingane, which according to our evidence was never signed; the inclusion yet visual manipulation of Retief’s Masonic flask in the scene of his murder (which led to new historical discoveries reaching as far as the United States in the early nineteenth century); the mistaken architectural form of the Church of the Vow, the religious icon of Afrikanerdom, which in our view had never existed.

Our analyses of the scenes contributes to the current debate about the relationship of text and image from an unconventional viewpoint, and to the differences of narratives in diverse art media, depending not only on such agents as material and genre, but also on patron, workshop, technique, style, context, culture and interpreter.

As a final angle for analysis in our chapter on heritage, we consider the Voortrekker Monument in the context of the removal of dishonoured monuments in post–apartheid South Africa, and how it has been redeveloped to counter such political threats, through rebranding and the fostering of new audiences (particularly black school children), and achieving status as a national monument in 2012.

The Monument, the ceremonies it has hosted, and related keepsakes – souvenirs, medals, stamps – all played an important part in forming concepts of Afrikaner heritage historically, and for many continues to do so. But, as a charged symbolic form, it has also had an extended afterlife, both positive and negative, in art, photography and film, demonstrating its continued role in South African culture.

Our enquiry regarding this mega-monument with its mega-frieze is timely in the context of the pressing debates about commemoration worldwide. The toppling of statues of discredited dictators in the Near East, heated interchange about the fate of United States monuments of the secession and Jim Crow periods, and the
‘Rhodes Must Fall’ protests in South Africa itself (spreading even to Oxford), to name only a few, demonstrate the ongoing and contentious impact of historical works. All this makes the Voortrekker Monument – to the present day an outsider – a very new and productive point of reference in the challenge of what to do with difficult or disliked monuments of the past.

Because it is written in English, the book will reach a far wider audience than earlier discussion of the Monument, chiefly in Afrikaans, which gives little critical attention to the frieze. It will place in the international spotlight a visual narrative of South Africa, so far widely ignored but of prime (art)historical importance, providing a new way of understanding the background to South Africa’s pernicious apartheid policies – and tracing the Monument’s relationship to the country’s remarkable turnaround to an inclusive democracy in 1994.

In interpreting the frieze and its narratives, we have drawn constantly on primary sources, and the book makes available in English unpublished archival documents, with original excerpted texts predominantly in Afrikaans quoted in full. The analysis of these documents and the preparatory studies leading up to the Voortrekker Monument’s final frieze is not only of major interest politically and culturally; the book also has a much broader role to play in art historical terms. It offers a rare seminal case study through which to gain new insight into the dynamics, processes and shifts around the creation of such complex monuments, of which we generally still know very little; thus it should find its place amongst studies of the world’s great monuments from antiquity to the present.

As it tackles one of the most prominent and debated monuments of (South) Africa, there is little doubt that the book will attract public attention and provoke lively discussion.
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Rolf Michael Schneider is Professor Emeritus of Classical Archaeology at the Ludwig–Maximilians–Universität, Munich, Guitty Azarpay Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and, until 2019, Honorary Professor for Classical Studies at the University of Cape Town. He is a specialist of Greek and Roman art with a focus on sculpture with further interests encompassing the classical tradition in post-antique art history and cross-cultural exchange. He has held senior positions in Heidelberg, Cambridge, and Munich. In 2008 he founded with François Lissarrague and R.R.R. Smith the series ICON, spotlighting the interaction of image and context. ICON has published 18 edited volumes. In 2009 he began to work in and about South Africa. Recent relevant publications include ‘Image and Empire: the shaping of Augustan Rome’ in *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared* (2008) and ‘Context matters: Pliny’s Phryges and the Basilica Paulli in Rome’ in *The Archaeology of Greece and Rome. Image, Text and Context* (2016). His first collaboration with Elizabeth Rankin was ‘“Copy Nothing”: Classical ideals and Afrikaner ideologies at the Voortrekker Monument,’ in *South Africa, Greece, Rome: Classical Confrontations* edited by Grant Parker and published by Cambridge University Press in 2017.