

# A shared spatial symbolism: the Voortrekker Monument, the Völkerslächtdenkmal and Freemasonry

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This article responds to the current fascination around a possible connection between the Voortrekker Monument and Freemasonry. It aims to put forward a fact based argument and analysis to counter the subjective and sensationalized views dominating this debate. The article focuses on the relationship between the Völkerslächtdenkmal (1913) in Leipzig, Germany and the Voortrekker Monument (1949) in Pretoria, South Africa. The article establishes the origin of the influence of the Völkerslächtdenkmal on the design of the Voortrekker Monument and show that the designer of the Voortrekker Monument knew the Leipzig monument. It is then shown that the Völkerslächtdenkmal has strong associations with Freemasonry. A more rigorous analysis of the geometric and spatial correspondences between the two monuments then forms the basis on which an position is put forward that the Masonic spatial qualities in the Voortrekker Monument is probably due to the fact that it borrowed design ideas from the Leipzig monument and inadvertently imported the esoteric qualities.

**Keywords:** Voortrekker Monument, space, symbolism, Freemasonry

## 'n Gemeenskaplike ruimtelike simboliek: die Voortrekker Monument, die Volkelsagmonument en Vrymesselary

Hierdie artikel reageer op die huidige fasinasië rondom 'n moontlike verband tussen die Voortrekker Monument en Vrymesselary. Dit poog om 'n argument en analise voor te lê wat baseer is op feite om te staan teenoor die subjektiewe en sensasionele standpunte wat tans die debat domineer. Die artikel fokus op die verband tussen die Völkerslächtdenkmal (1913) in Leipzig, Duitsland en die Voortrekker Monument (1949) in Pretoria, Suid-Afrika. Die artikel ondersoek die oorsprong van die invloed van Völkerslächtdenkmal op die ontwerp van die Voortrekker Monument en bewys dat die Leipzigmonument bekend was aan die ontwerper van die Voortrekker Monument. Daar word dan gewys dat die Völkerslächtdenkmal sterk bande het met Vrymesselary. 'n Analise van die geometriese en ruimtelike ooreenkomste tussen die twee monumente vorm dan die basis waarop 'n posisie voorgelê word dat die Masoniese ruimtelike kwaliteite in die Voortrekkermonument waarskynlik te wyte is aan die feit dat dit mildelik geleen het by die ander monument.

**Steutelwoorde:** Voortrekkermonument, ruimte, simbolisme, Vrymesselary

Until I visited Europe in the late 80s, at the end of my second year of architectural studies, the Voortrekker Monument was the only truly monumental building I knew. As a child I was awestruck by its grandeur and atmosphere of dignity, majesty, and reverence. At that point in my life, the monument represented, for me, sacredness as an experience completely separate from its history and ideology. I thought it was a great building.

Even now I believe it is a magical building, laden with mysteries still to be revealed. A current 'mystery' occupying the popular imagination is the possibility of a connection between the Voortrekker Monument and Freemasonry.

A Google search under the combined keywords 'Voortrekker Monument' and 'Freemasonry' yields around 800 results<sup>1</sup>. These include the site of the Sons of Sion and a range of chatrooms in which numerous people speculate on the possible relationship between the monument and Freemasonry. This vague public interest and associated speculations, more often than not, originate from the book *South Africa – Reaping the Whirlwind of National Idolatry* by Denise Woods and published by Struik Christian Books in 2006.

In the opinion of Woods (2006), there is little doubt that the Voortrekker Monument is a Masonic Temple, supported by the fact that the architect, Gerhard Moerdyk, himself referred to the monument as a temple<sup>2</sup>. The Voortrekker Monument, she argues, is a product of nationalism and nationalism, in turn, is the product of satanic wisdom as the men who developed it had rejected the Word of God and embraced occult practices. Because of this the Afrikaner and their

descendants are bound into a strong covenant with the powers of darkness and it is now up to us, as future generations, to deal with this idolatrous and blasphemous legacy that we inherited from our fathers. (Woods, 2006: 126)

The festivities and rituals conducted during the Centenary celebrations of the Great Trek in 1938 and the inauguration of the monument in 1949 confirm, for her, the Masonic characteristics. This includes activities such as the vows made along the ox wagon routes, the torch marathon, the sacred flames lit from the sun and burning today still, and the laying of the foundation stone. In the design Masonic elements and symbols include the altar, the perpetual flame, the floor pattern which represents the blazing star, the obsession with the exhalation of womanhood, and on the bas relief panels, referred to by Woods as the ‘title deed’, the Governor’s hand symbol, the mother and child, the anchor, the building implements and act of building, the circle (mandala) of wagons and finally, obviously, Piet Retief’s water bottle clearly marked with Masonic symbols<sup>3</sup>.

Accordingly, she posits, the monument is infused with occult symbolism associated with ancient practices of Sun worship, and, says Woods (2006: 152): “... all evidence points to the fact that the monument is an altar endowed with spiritual authority to ‘govern’ the affairs of the nation and direct its destiny for a thousand years and more”. In conclusion, she states that the merits of dismantling not only the Voortrekker Monument but also the associated minor monuments erected during the 1938 Centenary Celebrations are open to debate as each offer an entry point for demonic activity. (Woods, 2006: 207) God, she says, leaves the choice up to us... but it is clear what would happen if left up to her.

In this article I would like to present another point of view, namely, that because of the strong association between Architecture and Freemasonry, some buildings and especially monuments, can often be ‘read’ by a Freemason in a Masonic way. I will illustrate how this statement applies to a monument that clearly influenced the design of the Voortrekker Monument – the Völkerslächtdenkmal<sup>4</sup> in Leipzig – and how, as a consequence of this influence, the Voortrekker Monument also embodies representations that could be regarded as esoteric. This does not make it a Masonic Temple. I will argue that the strongest correlation between the Voortrekker Monument and the Völkerslächtdenkmal is a shared spatial symbolism that derives from Freemasonry and that in the case of the Voortrekker Monument this association was unintended.

This is not the first work to draw attention to the similarities between the designs of these two monuments but it is the first to explore this connection more rigorously and specifically in relation to the geometric and spatial orders of the two monuments. In conclusion, I will put forward my speculation that the Masonic qualities of the Voortrekker Monument are due to the influence of the Völkerslächtdenkmal on its design and therefore, in essence, due to the unoriginality of its design.

The Völkerslächtdenkmal was inaugurated in 1913 on the centenary of the Battle of Leipzig – a battle fought by a range of nations against the forces of Napoleon. The battle is remembered as one of the largest in history with 100 000 lives lost over three days. It also signified the beginning of the end for Napoleon. This article is interested in three aspects: the origin of the influence of the Völkerslächtdenkmal on the Voortrekker Monument, the geometric and spatial similarities between the two monuments and, finally, the Masonic qualities that derive from this association.

### **The influence of the Völkerslächtdenkmal on the Voortrekker Monument**

In October 1935 the newspaper, *Die Volksblad*, published the first description of the Voortrekker Monument – a proposal of a large stone archway in the Egyptian style. It seems that the architect

of this proposal, Gerhard Moerdyk, might have had it published as a strategic move to become associated with the project. We know that he did not produce it on instructions of the Central Voortrekker Monument Committee, for at a meeting of the Form Sub Committee, a few months later, the issue of what the monument should look like, came up for the first time<sup>5</sup>. At this meeting, held on 26 January 1936, it was resolved that the Secretary of Foreign Affairs would be asked to direct a request to the Union Missions in Rome, Paris, Berlin, New York and London to send portraits or drawings of historical monuments from these respective countries.

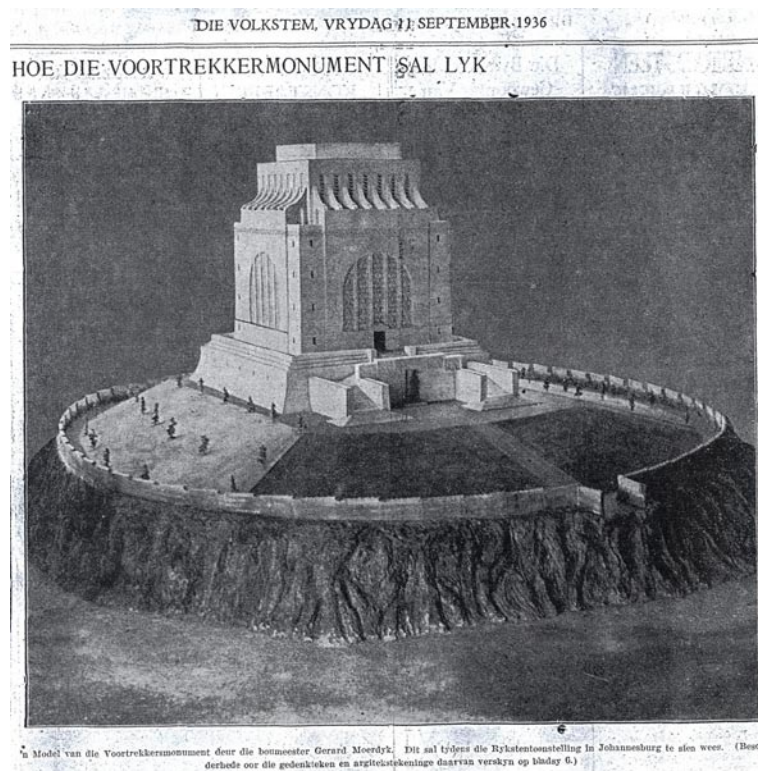
Within a month, the Form Committee started receiving material from the different overseas offices: photos and postcards of a wide range of monuments, a publication on the work of the German sculptor Hugo Lederer, a publication on the Bismarck National Denkmal and three folders on the work of the German architect Bruno Schwitz – the architect of the Völkerslachtetdenkmal (although it must be said that this monument was not one of the buildings represented in these folders).

In April 1936 another Afrikaans newspaper, *Die Volkstem* published a description of yet another design by Moerdyk, in this instance based on the Mausoleum of Hallicarnassus. But in less than a week the Central Voortrekker Monument Committee put out an official statement that the design had not been finalised but that the idea was of a massive building in white granite bearing influences from the Zimbabwe style, with the figure of a Voortrekker woman in front, arranged within a wall representing a laager. The monument, the Committee emphasised, would be truly South African and, it cautioned, to say that it would be Greek or any other monument was wholly wrong.

A month later Moerdyk was invited to address the Form Sub Committee on the advantages and disadvantages of a design competition. He started off stating that it might appear the best option to launch a competition in order to find the best possible architect but then raised a range of issues as to why this would not be a good idea: an architect, he explained, might make a nice drawing but this would not guarantee his competence to execute the project. The competition, he went on, would only be open to architects who submitted to the regulations of the Council of South African Architects and dormant design geniuses would be excluded. The Committee, he cautioned, would have to be very careful in their choice of assessor and they might not agree with the assessor's first choice. Whichever way you look at it, Moerdyk advised, a competition would be a mistake.

He suggested that the Central Committee should rather nominate a *boumeester* – a master builder – with good past experience. Such a person, he explained, would more likely have had good training and a broad knowledge of building. He would more likely have knowledge of finances. Moerdyk also advised that this person should ideally be known to the Central Committee as sentiment played an important role in the construction of a monument. The person appointed should be familiar with the *volksiel* – the spirit of the nation – and he must be able to bring out the *volksverlede* – the past of the nation – in his built work. And, finally, Moerdyk concluded, such a person would be able to work with a range of artists. It would not be unfair to say that Moerdyk was describing himself.

Not long after this meeting, Moerdyk was appointed as *boumeester* for the project and soon he had produced a design in line with the Committee's description presented earlier. This design of the Voortrekker Monument was revealed to the public for the first time in September 1936 in the form of a model that was exhibited at the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg (figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
**Model of the Voortrekker Monument (*Die Volkstem*, 11 September 1936).**

From this point onwards Moerdyk, became the prime spokesperson on what the monument symbolised and represented and in this capacity he was often called on to defend the design. I will focus here on one such defense published in the newspaper *Die Vaderland* on 10 December 1936. I use this as an example because it captures a range of ideas repeatedly put forward by Moerdyk and the Central Voortrekker Monument Committee and it also contains the first direct reference to the Völkerslachtdenkmal.

The issue of what the monument should look like, Moerdyk explained, was a difficult one as there was no architectural heritage to associate with the Voortrekkers. Rather, he proposed, one should find one's reference from the Bible, as the Voortrekkers would have done. Like Abraham had led his people to a promised land, the Voortrekkers had conquered savages and an equally savage nature to bring white civilisation to the dark interior of southern Africa and, like Abraham did, an altar should be built to honour the sacrifices made by the Voortrekkers. Moerdyk went on to explain that there were obviously many examples of such sanctuaries around the world: he mentioned the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, the Altar of Zeus, the Taj Mahal, the Dome de Invalides in Paris, the Völkerslachtdenkmal in Leipzig and the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne. But, he went on; none of these said anything about the Voortrekkers or the country. Civilisation in building, he stated, meant order and geometry. Was it then inappropriate, he asked, that civilisation brought order to chaos? Therefore, he said, the design was guided by its geometry; it copied nothing, and contained not a single European style motif. Said Moerdyk:

The design is one of squares, cubes, circles and planes – all in harmony with out tabular landscape.  
(*Die Vaderland*, “Monument moet verlede sowel as volkskarakter weerspieel: mnr. Moerdyk verduidelik idée van sy ontwerp”, 10 Desember 1936. Own translation)

It must be said that the range of monuments referred to by Moerdyk expanded over time and that the Völkerslachtdenkmal was not among the first group for comparison put forward. But this illustrate clearly that Moerdyk at some point was made aware of the Völkerslachtdenkmal or, if he had known it, elected to acknowledge, albeit in a indirect way, its influence on the design of the Voortrekker Monument.

The chronology that has been presented here also raises questions about Moerdyk's authorship of the design for the Voortrekker Monument. How could the Central Voortrekker Monument Committee have provided an accurate description of the design while Moerdyk was still describing a design derived from the Mausoleum of Halicarnasus? Why was Moerdyk appointed as *boumeester* rather than architect? Might it have been because the Committee already had a good idea of what the monument should look like? And might Masonic qualities inadvertently have been imported into the design of the Voortrekker Monument because it borrowed so liberally from another monument? These questions will be further explored by firstly exploring the Masonic characteristics of the Völkerslächtdenkmal and then to show how these characteristics might have made their way into the design of the Voortrekker Monument.

I will show that the Völkerslächtdenkmal in Leipzig has a strong connection to Freemasonry and that this fact is expressed in the symbolism associated with its spatial order. I will illustrate how the geometric and spatial orders of these two monuments correspond and will then put forward an argument that the spaces of the Voortrekker Monument can be argued to represent Masonic ideas because of this influence.

### **A Masonic monument – the Völkerslächtdenkmal**

On a visit to the Völkerslächtdenkmal (figure 2) in January 2006, I bought a book at the monument's bookshop titled: *Testament of the Freemasons – The Monument of the Battle of Leipzig*.

This monument, explain the authors Rolf Affeldt and Frank Heinrich, has two faces, one that serves to commemorate the battle of liberation and another as a testament to future generations of Freemasons. Therefore the profane world is presented with the largest memorial in Europe and the initiated brothers with a shrine to their craft, an “almighty graildom of resurrection” (Affeldt and Heinrich, 2001: 11). The project was conceived of by Clemens Thieme, a qualified architect, and described as the ‘spiritual creator of the monument’. The ‘real’ architect, Bruno Schmitz, worked alongside Thieme and there is apparently no evidence that Schmitz was a Freemason. Thieme was a well-known Freemason and he regulated the design. The monument, they say, constantly makes itself visible to those who have the knowledge to recognise it. Its connection to Freemasonry is not disputed, there is even a Masonic Temple located deep in the recesses of its vast basement.



**Figure 2**  
**Völkerslächtdenkmal, Leipzig, 1913.**

Worshipful Master  
Candidate  
(Spoken during the Ceremony of Passing the Second Degree)

What is Freemasonry?  
A peculiar system of Morality, veiled in Allegory, and illustrated by Symbols.

Freemasonry is a very old, secular, fraternal society which requires the belief in a Supreme Being as its principle qualification for membership and which is dedicated to the practice of tolerance, respect and understanding of others; the encouragement of high standards of morality among its members; and the performance of charitable works. Freemasonry might be all these things, says Kirk MacNulty (1991: 6), the author of this definition, but he goes on to ask, how has it survived so long and often attracted the brightest minds of diverse societies and cultures? He explains that Freemasonry should be understood as a form of psychology that states its principles by employing a range of rich symbolic images that derive from the mystical philosophy of the ancient world – the ‘mysteries’. This Masonic Psychology, he says, is very different from the materialism that characterises industrial society, which is focused on the physical world with little belief in the existence of the other worlds. Freemasonry holds forth the promise for an individual (male only) to reconnect with those levels of existence outside of the material world. This is done through an exploration of a metaphysical system of the four-level world and is based on the premise that the individual who explores his psyche can, and should, be committed to and guided by his God to reconnect to those levels outside of the material world, namely the soul, the spirit and the Divine.

Architecture, MacNulty explains, plays a fundamental part in Masonic instruction of understanding one’s own psyche. This stems directly from the fact that once, for example in the time of Vitruvius, architecture as an element of the physical world, served also to translate the essence of the pantheon and its underlying psychology.

Steven Curl (2002: 44), the eminent Architectural Historian of Freemasonry, emphasises the role of memory as central to any basic understanding of Freemasonry. The Lodge itself is mnemonic of the Temple, which represents an ideal that has been lost and of the metaphysical system. Architecture, he explains, became a way of capturing the esoteric knowledge in material form that would be recognisable to initiates but obscure to the ignorant. This was considered safer than committing secrets to a page. Clearly, he states, such a mnemonic technique could encourage associations, abstractions and identification by symbol and attribute in a built environment lavishly decorated and embellished with architectural ornament and statuary that themselves were derived from a sophisticated *vocabulary* and fully developed *language* of *literate* design. However, he continues:

The point is that the technique would work with Classical Architecture, or perhaps with Gothic, but it would stand little chance of success with some of the more feeble products of the last sixty years or so, most of which hardly rate as Architecture at all (Curl, 2002: 45).

Freemasonry, like architecture, is fundamentally spatial. From the temple’s point of view ‘outside’ relates to ‘below’, to material things, to the physical world tied to mortal passion and fate, to that which is ‘below’ the spiritual belt, that part of existence governed by the inevitability of death, the dark side of spiritual emptiness – all things human. ‘Inside’ and ‘above’ relates to the search for the ideals of God, dominated by light and the liberation of the spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Freemasons regard themselves as the corner stones and building blocks of the spiritual temple of brotherhood. Each individual also builds his very own temple and in this process his spiritual journey is equated with a rough stone (ashlars) that is worked on until perfectly shaped. This process symbolises the journey from darkness to light, imperfection to perfection and ignorance to knowledge both in relation to self and to self in relation to society.

All the Freemason's metaphysical journeys are of a moral, ethical or ideal nature, from the world of profanity to the spiritual world, from the limit to the centre, periphery to navel, outside to inside, down below to the holy light above. This is fundamentally a spatial analogy and architecture has the unique ability to represent it in material form.

The representation of this spatial order, characterised by spaces that lie below as having some association with death, and spaces that extend upwards being associated with a connection to a higher being, is commonplace in the history of societies and their architectures. These spaces, imbued with deeper symbolic meanings, can often be related to the essence of Freemasonry. Conversely, one could argue that Freemasonry has appropriated such buildings as representative of its ideals. Gothic Architecture would be a case in point but this would apply to many monuments of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### How is Freemasonry represented in the Völkerslächtdenkmal?

The public part of the monument follows, spatially, the four-level metaphysical system referred to earlier (figure 3) wherein level 1, the horizontal datum containing the water represent the physical world, the material level of the world; level 2, where the stairs part and one meets the Archangel Michael represents the symbolic level of the soul; level 3, the inside of the monument and up the spiral staircase to the half-cube at its top, represent the symbolic level of the spirit; and level 4, the immaterial world, lies beyond the light, on the other side – where the Freemason will see for himself what he had experienced symbolically up to that point. Therefore the spaces of the monument become a physical representation of the metaphysical system of the human psyche.

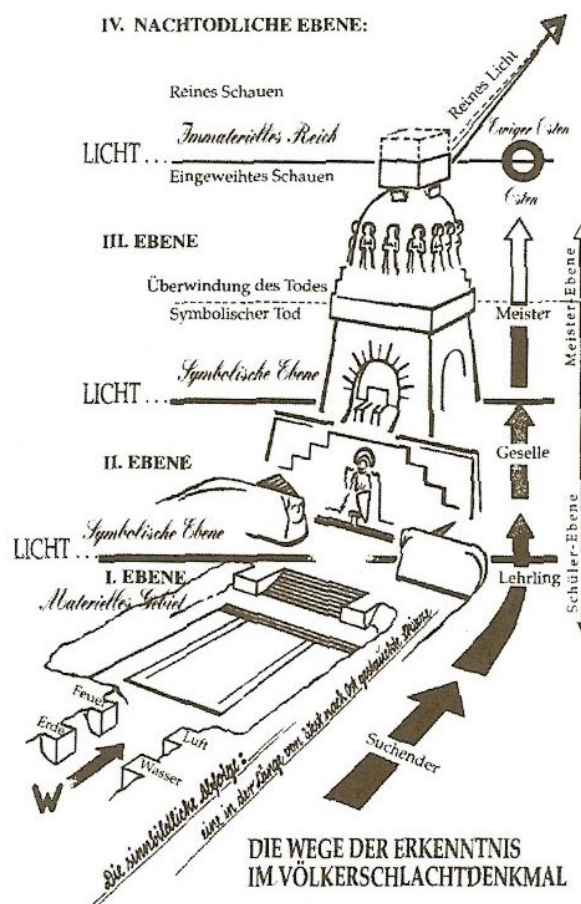


Figure 3  
Path of Realization in the Völkerslächtdenkmal (Affeldt & Heinrich, 2001: 90).

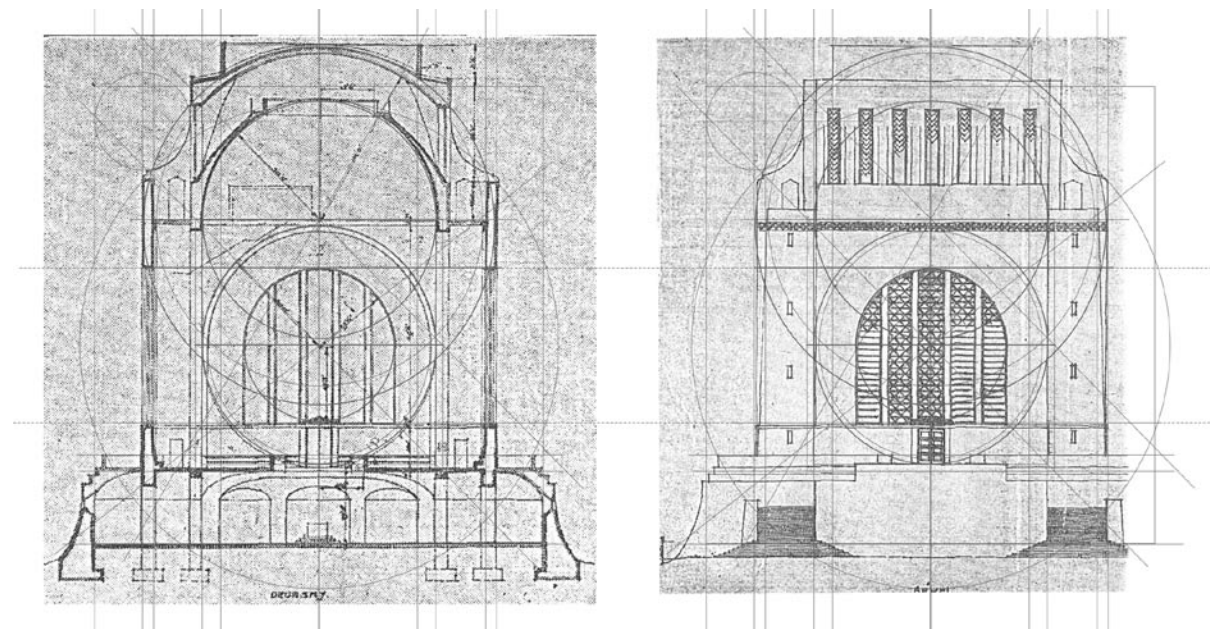
The monument was the result of patriotic and contemporary spirit as well as a Freemasonry vision in a field of tension between the national altar of faith and the humanistic temple of mankind. In order to portray their own identity at this time, it became a Testament for posterity, as well as a temple of grail for the fraternity. (Affeldt and Heinrich, 2001: 121)

Affeldt and Heinrich (2001: 122) show how this spatial structure can be variously read as an analogy for the Egyptian inauguration of the neophyte or the passage of a Knight in his search for the Grail. Their point is that the monument easily accommodates both interpretations because the four-level metaphysical system facilitates and represents both interpretations. The monument, they say, turns into a book which can be read because the text turn into paths which have to be followed, with the pages being turned by climbing the steps and the stairs from one level to the next. Thus, its architecture becomes a rich text that reveals itself to someone equipped with the necessary vocabulary and knowledge that enable this interpretation.

These then are important characteristics to take into account when the influence of the Völkerslächtdenkmal on the Voortrekker Monument is explored. In the final part of this article the geometric and spatial correspondences between the two monuments will be presented. I will put forward that the Voortrekker Monument is a monument with a language that speaks to the essence of Freemasonry and will show that the origin thereof derives from the Völkerslächtdenkmal.

### **The spatial relationship between the Völkerslächtdenkmal and the Voortrekker Monument**

The process of the investigation of the spatial relationship between the Völkerslächtdenkmal and the Voortrekker Monument focused on two comparisons: firstly, a comparison of their spatial orders in relations to their geometric orders, and secondly, a comparison in which the four-level metaphysical system of the Völkerslächtdenkmal is related to the spatial order of the Voortrekker Monument.



**Figure 4**

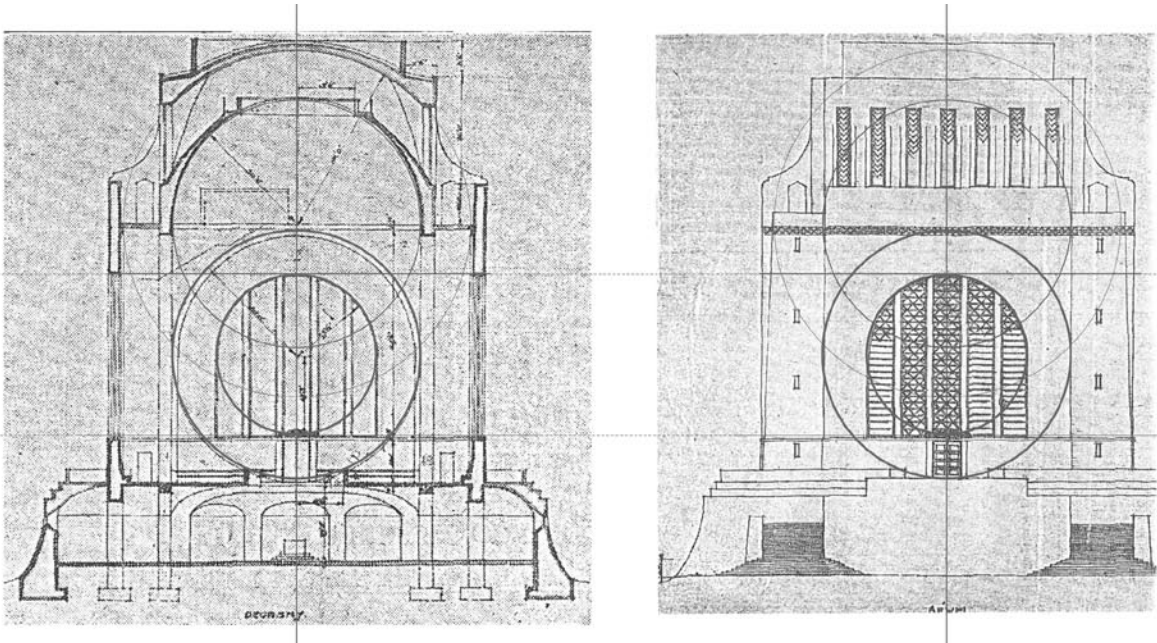
**Geometric order of the Voortrekker Monument (drawings of the Voortrekker Monument from *Die Volkstem*, 11 September 1936 with a line diagramme by the author superimposed on it).**

True to Moedryk's words, the design of the Voortrekker Monument is guided by a strict geometric order as illustrated in figure 4. This analysis uses the earliest drawings of the monument known



to me – a section and elevation that was published in *Die Volkstem* on 11 September 1936, the same time as the model was exhibited. The different lines and forms that informed the geometric order of the design was drawn onto the section drawing and then copied onto the elevation drawing. It shows clearly that the same geometric diagramme guided both drawings.

This geometric diagramme was then reduced to its essence: the centre line and circles that sit around two strategically located centre points as determined by Moerdyk and illustrated in figure 5. This essential geometric diagramme was then used as a starting point in the comparison of the Voortrekker Monument with the Völkerslächtdenkmal.



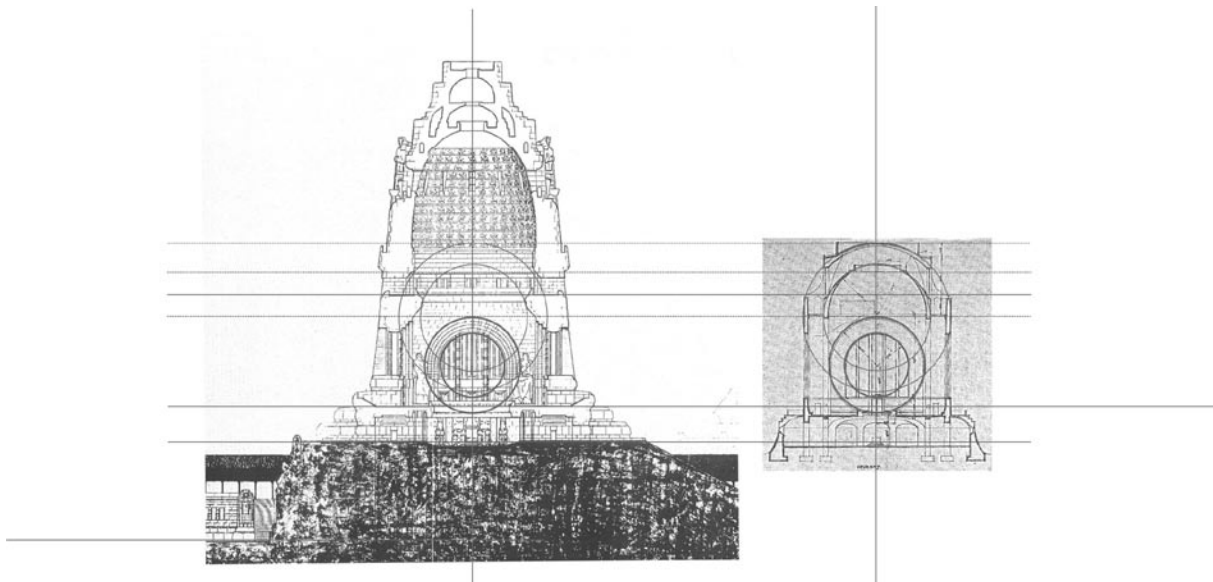
**Figure 5**

**Essential geometric diagramme of the Voortrekker Monument (drawings of the Voortrekker Monument from *Die Volkstem*, 11 September 1936 with a line diagramme by the author superimposed on it).**

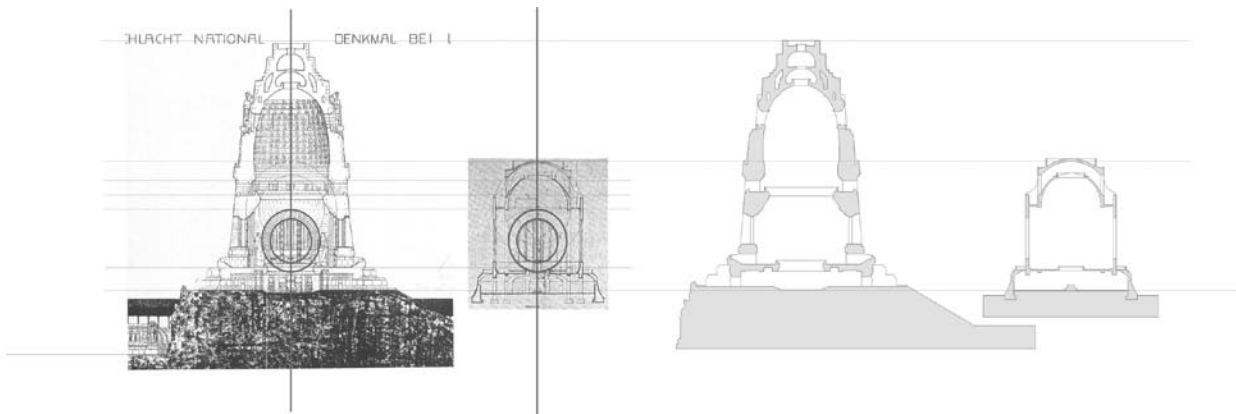
Without any consideration of actual scale, this essential geometric diagramme was transposed onto the section drawing of the Völkerslächtdenkmal as illustrated in figure 6. I did this, as the portal-like windows are the most distinct architectural feature common to both monuments. In this comparison the following spatial elements of the two monuments correspond: the levels of the crypt, the levels of the main hall, and the levels of the upper corridors. The analysis clearly illustrates a correspondence between the forms and orders of the two monuments.

Finally, this analysis was compared to a set of drawings that represented the true scale of the two monuments as illustrated in figure 7. The close resemblance of the set of drawings generated from a geometric comparison and the set of drawings to scale, came as a surprise.

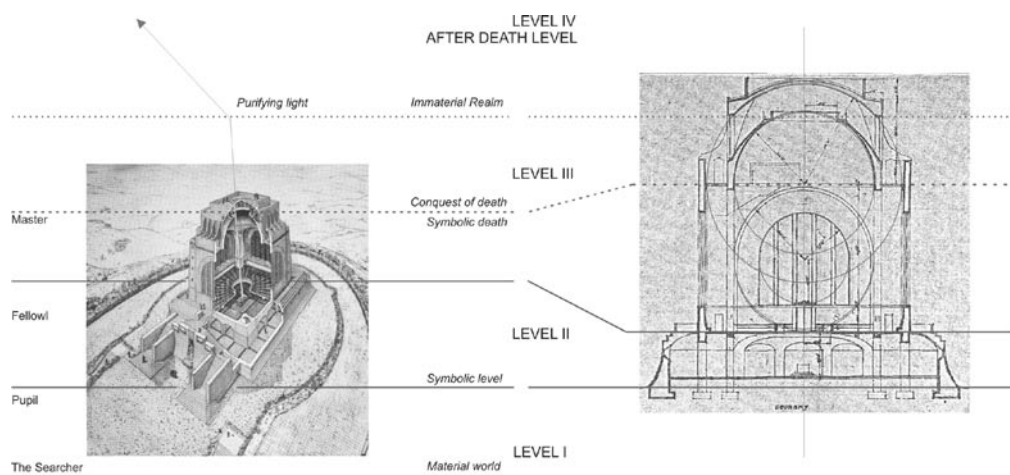
The second comparison derives from the representation of the four-level metaphysical system of the Völkerslächtdenkmal. It is based on the transposition of this system onto the Voortrekker Monument as illustrated in figure 8. This analysis makes it possible to imagine that the route followed into the monument, the descent into the crypt and ascend into the dome overhead can be read as a spiritual journey of self-discovery. It is acknowledged that this interpretation is forced and manipulated to adhere to a desired reading of the monument but this is exactly the point that needs to be made: with the necessary framework of reference a Freemason would make these connections without any difficulty. In such a reading one ascribes meanings to and make associations related to the spatial order of the monument.



**Figure 6**  
**Essential geometric order of the Voortrekker Monument compared with that of the Völkerslächtdenkmal (with line drawing by author superimposed).**



**Figure 7**  
**Essential geometric diagramme (left) compared to actual scale (right) (scale comparison from Steenkamp, 2008: 50).**



THE PATH OF REALISATION IN THE VOORTREKKER MONUMENT

**Figure 8**  
**The path of realisation transposed onto the Voortrekker Monument (analysis by author).**

## Conclusion

The strong geometric and spatial correspondence between the Völkerslachtetdenkmal and the Voortrekker Monument is extraordinary – both unexpected and astonishing. To say then that the Masonic qualities of the Voortrekker Monument are due to the unoriginality of its design is not to be derogatory towards it but rather as a contribution to an aspect of its history that has remained largely unexplored. The influence of Freemasonry on the design of the Völkerslachtetdenkmal is undisputed and these esoteric spatial qualities found their way, unintentionally, into the design of the Voortrekker Monument. It is not that the Voortrekker Monument is a Masonic Temple but simply that it borrowed so liberally from a monument with a sub text deliberately Masonic, that it becomes both the first face and the second – the face of the profane world and that of the initiated.

## Notes

1. This was end January 2009. The same search at the end of May, 2009, yielded 826 results.
2. This statement is not without truth. In Moerdyk's earliest notes on the Monument he often refers to the monument as a temple. In the press it was also referred to as 'Tempel van die Afrikanerdom' [Temple of the Afrikanerdom].
3. It is a well known fact, first put forward by Gustav Preller in his biography of Piet Retief, that he was a Freemason.
4. In this document I use the German name Völkerslachtetdenkmal instead of the lengthy English name Monument of the Battle of the Nations.
5. Archive of the Voortrekker Monument: Voortrekker Monument Papers, Minutes of Meeting of the Form Sub Committee held on 26 January 1936.
6. This reading derives from Affeldt and Heinrich.

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