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Hewitson, Maddie

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Hewitson, M 2024, 'Visualizing North Africa in Barkentin & Krall's monument to James Augustus Grant', *Sculpture Journal*.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

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Visualising North Africa in Barkentin and Krall's c.1892 Monument to James Augustus Grant

One of the 37 plates published in James Augustus Grant's *The Botany of the Speke and Grant Expedition* (1873-75) is a numerically ordered dissection of *Polygala acicularis* (Fig. 1: James Augustus Grant, 'Polygala acicularis', 1872, in 'The Botany of the Speke and Grant Expedition, an Enumeration of the Plants Collected During the Journey of the Late Captain J. H. SPEKE and Captain (now Lieut.-Col.) J. A. GRANT from Zanzibar to Egypt. The Determinations and Descriptions by Professor OLIVER and Others Connected with the Herbarium, Royal Gardens, Kew; with an Introductory Preface, Alphabetical List of Native Names, and Notes by Colonel GRANT.' *Transactions of the Linnean Society of London* 29, 1872, TAB 9.). Although the plant is described by Kew Gardens, where Grant deposited the specimen on which he based the illustration in 1868, as a 'low glabrous shrubby herb with stout rigid branches' the plant is shown flowering. If the flowers were coloured, they would be white, blue or purple.¹

Grant encountered this plant during a 200-mile stretch between Karuma Falls in Uganda and Gondokoro in southern Sudan. There, he found 'the richest flora of our whole route'ⁱⁱ where the Nile had 'its grandest courses'.ⁱⁱⁱ During the 1860-63 expedition led by John Hanning Speke to discover the source of the Nile, Grant collected and drew hundreds of plants, making several discoveries in the process and publishing *The Botany of the Speke and Grant Expedition* for the Linnean Society in 1872.

On Barkentin and Krall's c.1892 memorial brass panel to Grant in the Crypt of St Paul's Cathedral, on the south aisle of the Chapel of St Faith, his contribution to botany is commemorated and even outshines his military campaigns and medals (Fig. 2: Barkentin and Krall, *James Augustus Grant*, 1894, bronze and brass, 76 x 61 cm. St. Paul's Cathedral). The

Commented [A1]: A very low resolution image, presumably it's a placeholder pending one at a higher resolution?

Commented [A2]: Rephrase to clarify Grant's role on this expedition

roundel portrait of Grant in left profile is [inset in the brass panel and](#) surrounded by pines with woody branches, spiky needles and ovoid cones. In addition, along the borders of the panel are laurel leaves that acknowledge Grant's extensive military service which started in the Indian Army in 1846, later taking an active role in suppressing the Indian Uprising of 1857 and, finally, retiring as an [intelligence officer](#) under General Robert Napier following the [Abyssinian Expedition of 1868](#).^{iv} The densest scene of plant life is found in the riverscape across the bottom of the panel. The river's banks are covered in rushes and dotted in palm trees which extend over a distant, mountainous horizon.

Commented [A3]: Senior intelligence officer

Commented [A4]: Add a little more detail to clarify that this punitive expedition ran from 1867-8 with the aim of destroying the emperor Tewodros II's power

[Grant's interest in plants was life long](#). As a young man in Aberdeen, he took classes in natural philosophy, natural history, botany, and drawing. His style is firmly naturalist, but the stylised flowers [engraved between his birth and death dates on the memorial](#) gesture to the aesthetic developments inspired by such botanical studies, the most notable of which was [Professor of Botany](#) Christopher Dresser's *Studies in Design* (1874) published almost concurrently with Grant's Linnean Society volume (Fig. 3: Barkentin and Krall, detail of *James Augustus Grant*, 1894, bronze and brass, 76 x 61 cm. St. Paul's Cathedral). This emphasis on plant life in the panel shifts Grant's established legacy as the [doting, loyal](#) companion of Speke, [in contrast to the adversarial Richard Burton who had accompanied him on an earlier expedition, and onto one that foregrounds the importance of his scientific work and art, sublimating his military achievements in the process.](#)

Commented [A5]: Or 'Grant had a lifelong interest in plants'

Commented [A6]: Add for clarity

Commented [A7]: Is this a reference to Dresser receiving a doctorate from the University of Jena in 1860? If he was also made a professor, state where this post was held. Might be simpler to omit and add a footnote giving references to Dresser's texts on botany.

Commented [A8]: Yes, loyal but was he also doting? E.g. Roy Bridges (author of Grant's ODNB entry) says there's some evidence that he resented Speke's decision to go alone to 'Ripon falls'.

Commented [A9]: Suggest either breaking this into two sentences or, better still, cutting the reference to Burton as it doesn't add to your main point which is a pivotal argument in the text.

As a result, in this essay, I further address the riverscape scene that occupies the bottom third of the panel. This evocation of the fertile banks of the Nile pulls together Grant's study of plants and links it to mid-nineteenth century explorations of Africa.

The Nile was a central geography in the earlier St Paul's pantheon as well as Grant's life, and British imperial interests at this moment. On Grant's panel, the words 'THE NILE'

are centred in the panel text with the lettering the same size as Grant's name, larger than the words which list his campaigns, honours and relationship to Speke.

In the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century monuments concerned with figures connected to the river and its bordering lands, many are naval figures who died in Egypt during the Napoleonic Wars which culminated at the Battle of the Nile in 1798 and marked the beginning of British involvement in North and Central Africa. Amongst these monuments, the imagery of ancient Egypt is dominant. For example, on either side of Richard Westmacott's c.1802-08 monument for Sir Ralph Abercromby's reimagined death scene, two serene Sphinx flank the falling lieutenant-general. Similarly, in a low relief panel underneath the figurative pair on Thomas Bank's c.1802-04 memorial to Captain George Blagdon Westcott, a Sphinx supports the weight of a river god who sits besides a pyramid. These symbols rely on an understanding of Egypt filtered through Classical education, rather than experience of Egypt.

Grant's panel is representative of the second generation of Nile-themed imagery. These monuments are inevitably influenced by the ~~the~~ post-Napoleonic relationship between Britain and North Africa which was marked by interlinked military incursions and scientific explorations such as the Speke expedition. As a piece of sculpture, it is unusual to see a landscape depicted although there are several exceptions in the St Paul's Pantheon including ~~the slightly earlier Johnson and Gawthorp's~~ Memorial to War Correspondents Killed in the Sudan (1887) ~~by Johnson and Gawthorp~~ (Fig. 4: Gawthorp and Johnson, *War Correspondents Killed in the Sudan*, 1887, bronze and brass, 207 x 130 cm, St. Paul's Cathedral) and ~~the later William Goseombe John's~~ Memorial to Journalists Killed in South Africa (1904) ~~by Sir William Goscombe John~~ (Fig. 5: William Goscombe John, *Journalists of South African War*, 1903-04, bronze and marble, 73 x 150 cm, St Paul's Cathedral).

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Commented [A10]: Helpful to give the chronology

Commented [A11]: Add the full names of the artists and a note that Fig 4 is a detail. Cross reference to an image of the complete memorial if it is referenced in another essay.

Typically, anthropocentric sculpture studies have tended to emphasise human figuration and to consider sculpture's placement within and relationship to physical landscape rather than its depiction within sculptural form or on its surface.^v Additionally, Barkentin and Krall's Nile riverscape depicts one of the most culturally potent bodies of water in the Victorian imagination. This gives the panel an interesting textural quality by traversing material boundaries between hardness and softness. A solid brass panel is used to depict flowing water, faint lines are engraved to show disturbances on the water's surface, but the nature of the material also recalls bronze and brass in their liquid states during the process of creation.^{vi}

For the Victorians, the Nile represented an imaginative geography as much as it was a vital resource for transport, resource extraction, and military domination.^{vii} By 1860, it was the destination for the first mass British tourism movement and Nile cruises became the fashionable choice for middle-class tourists as well as artists and writers who crafted visions of an Orient filled with ancient monuments and exotic native peoples, an iconography closer to the palm trees and pyramids that dominated the earlier iconography of the Battle of the Nile at the Cathedral.^{viii}

In Victorian Protestant visual culture, meanwhile, it was the river where, in the Book of Exodus, Moses was rescued from the bullrushes, similar to those depicted on the panel (Fig. 6: Elizabeth Gardner Bouguereau, *Moses in the Bulrushes*, 1878, oil on canvas, 125 x 88.2 cm, private collection, Image: Alamy). By 1911, the entire primary course of the Nile ran through British controlled territories. Therefore, the Victorians' relationship to the Nile was as strong as the cultural connection to the Tyne or the Thames.

While most art historical accounts of the Nile deal with the six cataracts from Cairo to Khartoum, there was also, especially for the mid-Victorians, a fervent quest for the source of

Commented [A12]: Isn't it sculptural practice that has been anthropocentric and sculpture studies that has followed suit?

Commented [A13]: How about adding here (or when you first describe the memorial) a bit more about the fact that it is technically, and culturally, in the tradition of monumental brasses? I think one of the interesting things about this type of work is that it's as much pictorial as sculptural, and that the engraving by Barkentin and Krall (both goldsmiths by training) taps into the technique, as well as the iconography, of 19th century illustration.

Commented [A14]: You make a good point about the Nile's place in the British public's imagination, but surely the 'cultural connection' to the Tyne and Thames was very different because both rivers were identified with heavy industry and densely populated cities.

the river during the 1850s. If the first six cataracts were for tourists and cultural elites, then the journey down the white Nile into southern Sudan and Buganda (present day Uganda) was for explorers, a nineteenth-century identity that combined the roles of geographer, naturalist, anthropologist, soldier, spy, and diplomat – roles which Grant inhabited simultaneously or moved between seamlessly.

In his travel account, *A Walk Across Africa: or, Domestic Scenes from my Nile Journal* (1864), Grant described the 220 miles between Karuma Falls and Gondokoro in more detail. His expedition largely travelled by foot, although famously Grant suffered from an ulcerated wound on his leg and had to be carried by Sudanese porters (Fig. 7: Anon, ‘Captain Speke’s Mode of Travelling in Eastern Africa’, 1867, wood engraving, image: Bridgeman). This injury, in addition to the loss of his right thumb and forefinger during the Indian Uprising, perhaps explains the choice to show only his intact head on the panel.

While they travelled on land, Grant’s party continually tracked the course of the Nile and he took several opportunities to describe the landscape in ekphrastic detail. At 3.5 degrees northern latitude, he noted that the Nile’s banks were ‘tame and flat, with but few trees. The opposite, or left bank, rose into three blocks of lofty bare hills, almost mountains, called “Jubl Kookoo”. Round their north-east bluff end the majestic Nile made a sweeping turn from the west to the north; and looking down the stream from this point, the scene appeared wild and romantic like the Highland Pass of Glencoe.’^{ix}

When the panel was unveiled at the Cathedral in mid-December 1894, the *Illustrated London News* described the scene as a ‘perspective view of the Victoria Nyanza’.^x This assertion was likely based on an earlier medal that had been issued by the Royal Geographical Society to commemorate the expedition which shares the same compositional elements and which identifies the scene as Victoria Nyanza across the top (Fig. 8: Royal

Commented [A15]: Was this required of him given that his travels, writings and sketches served a military, economic and political purpose?

Geographical Society medal to commemorate the exploration of the Source of the Nile, by Speke and Grant, c. 1867, bronze. Royal Geographical Society, Image: Bridgeman).

However, in the context of memorialising Grant, identifying this scene as Victoria Nyanza perhaps strategically ignores the fact that he was forced to turn back and, in fact, never made it to the actual source of the river. It's unknown if the panel's makers, Barkentin and Krall, consulted passages that describe the Nile in his travel account, but the text makes a scene of the river, rather than a lake, a far more likely choice for his memorial.

On the horizon, the sun either rises or sets. Its rays emanate outwards over a clear sky. In nineteenth-century literary accounts, Africa was often described as the 'dark continent' but in this relief the landscape is bathed in light and the bright, shiny brass illuminates the scene.^{xi} Grant's evocation of the 'wild and romantic' Nile banks, matched in the panel's vegetative spread and sun rise/set, is reminiscent of Orientalist landscape painting, although this genre was typically staged further down the Nile in Egypt. Victorian artists took to the water to depict the interaction between water, light and colour, which they perceived as altogether different from Western landscape.^{xii} However, Grant's description ties it directly to the coast of Glencoe; creating strong nationalistic links between Egyptian and British imperial (in this case, Scottish) waters.

As Grant made the return journey from Khartoum to Cairo, the nonsense poet and painter Edward Lear finished work on his oil painting *Philae, Egypt* (1863) (Fig. 9: Edward Lear, *Philae, Egypt*, 1863, oil on canvas, 27.5 x 53.3 cm, Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection). This exemplifies the tradition of land and riverscape painting in Egypt. Lear's painting, which glows through his use of rich ochre, cool lilac, and variegated green pigments, was based on a number of sketches and watercolours which he made on the spot during his visit to Egypt in 1853.

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Commented [A17]: How about reversing these epithets? Introducing Lear as a landscape painter living in Europe and travelling widely in the Mediterranean and India will add weight to your point.

These on-the-spot sketches are akin to the mode Grant was working in during the expedition, across which he made nearly 375 watercolours and pencil sketches.^{xiii} Several of these are landscape views including one of the junction between the Blue and White Nile which creates an alternative visual account to the written record in *A Walk Across Africa* (Fig. 10: James Augustus Grant, 'Junction of the Blue and White Niles, AM' (1863) in R.C Bridges, *A Portfolio of Facsimiles Drawn from Grant's 'Nile Sketches'*, Edinburgh, publisher?, 1982, plate 63).

Commented [A18]: Incomplete reference

In this watercolour, Grant draws on several motifs from the landscape genre such as a repoussoir view that draws attention to a moored dahabia, the most common sailing vessel on the Nile, and two Black men sitting in an open tent, Egyptian figures conspicuously absent from the Barkentin and Krall landscape as if to suggest the region as a familiar imperial terra nullis.

In the bronze roundel portrait at the top of the panel, meanwhile, Grant has a straightforward, steady gaze looking out to the left. In the Cathedral, he looks eastwards and within the Crypt, towards the Monument to War Correspondents Killed in the Sudan. However, his gaze could also be engaged with elements within the iconography of the panel. He could be looking out towards the horizon, observing a plant to sketch or monitoring threats to his safety from outside the camp, a trope frequently highlighted in accounts of travelling through the African interior.^{xiv} As such, the panel neatly captures Grant's various, simultaneous imperial occupations.

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Unlike Speke, who died during the expedition, Grant recovered from his leg injury and went on to continue his military service, using the knowledge he gained in North Africa to help Napier destabilise Abyssinia, before Grant eventually married and retired, dying at the age of 65. His birth and death dates are noted underneath his name, postnominals and rank.

Commented [A20]: Understated?

Similarly, the dates of the expedition (1860-63) are noted on either side of 'THE NILE' suggesting the same birth and death format.

In the same year Grant died, Uganda became a British protectorate. This followed on from Egypt which came under British control in 1882 and which later, in 1899, became the Anglo-Egyptian Protectorate which also included Sudan. This imperial chronology can be seen in the formation of the Crypt where Grant's memorial is directly next to the Monument to War Correspondents Killed in the Sudan which he looks towards, as we have seen.

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This moment, as well as being the advent of a new century, marked the end of Nile expeditions, given that the mystery of its source had been firmly established. In one sense, the placement of the dates on either side of 'THE NILE' marks the passing of this moment, a memorial to the age of adventurous exploration. The ambiguity of the sun's position means it can be read both ways; tying the glory days of expedition to the 'rising sun' of Speke and Grant and the 'setting sun' to a moment which marked a fundamental shift in Britain's relationship with northeast and central Africa.

Barkentin and Krall's panel offers an opportunity to consider depictions of the Nile through a non-Egyptological lens. The iconography brings to the fore Grant's interest in botany, relationship to the Speke expedition and, consequently, pushes his military career largely to the background. The panel commemorates Grant as a naturalist by making a sculpted land and riverscape central to his memorialisation. This landscape pushes beyond other sculptural references to the Nile in St Paul's, which rely on the iconography of ancient Egypt, and adapts nineteenth-century Orientalist modes of painting on the Nile and Grant's own descriptions and images on the river and amongst the vegetation. This reading offers a potential of posthuman interpretation of the monument which prioritise the liquid and vegetal. However, the context of British imperial interests in Africa and the strategic

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importance of controlling the territory along the Nile are still central to understanding this sculpture. The panel cements Grant's identity as an explorer, a distinct Victorian construct which encompassed the cross-pollination between scientific discovery, tropical botany, and imperial expansion which coalesce to reveal the complexities of visualising African exploration.

ⁱ The International Plant Names Index and World Checklist of Vascular Plants (2022), <https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:690973-1#other-data> Date of Access: 29 November 2022

ⁱⁱ J.A. Grant, 'The Botany of the Speke and Grant Expedition, an Enumeration of the Plants Collected During the Journey of the Late Captain J. H. SPEKE and Captain (now Lieut.-Col.) J. A. GRANT from Zanzibar to Egypt' *Transactions of the Linnean Society of London* 29, 1872, pp. 5-6.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

^{iv} Napier is commemorated elsewhere in the Crypt, in similar left profile roundel, in a c.1891 chapel by F.C. Penrose and F.W. Woodington.

^v For more see, P. Davies and T. Knipe, *A Sense of Place: Sculpture in Landscape*, Sunderland, Sunderland Arts Centre, 1984; B. Bloemink, *A Natural Order: The Experience of Landscape in Contemporary Sculpture*, New York, Hudson River Museum, 1990; and P. Curtis, *Sculpture 1900-1945: After Rodin*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

^{vi} M. Droth, *Bronze: The Power of Life and Death*, Leeds, Henry Moore Institute, 2005.

^{vii} E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London, Vintage, 1994, p. 93.

^{viii} For more, see A. Humphreys, *On the Nile: the Golden Age of Travel*, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2015.

^{ix} J.A. Grant, *A Walk Across Africa: or, Domestic Scenes from my Nile Journal*, Edinburgh, William Blackwood and Sons, 1864, p. 346.

^x Anon. 'Personal', *Illustrated London News*, 29 December 1894, p. 806.

^{xi} L. Koivunen, *Visualising Africa in Nineteenth-Century British Travel Accounts*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 2.

^{xii} See M. Hewitson, 'Journeys for Colour: British Orientalism and Artist-Travellers', in M. Hewitson, C. Ribeyrol and M. Winterbottom (eds.), *Colour Revolution: Victorian Art, Fashion and Design*, Oxford, Ashmolean, 2023.

^{xiii} These are now held at the National Library of Scotland, MSS.17919-17921. For more see, R.C. Bridges, 'Images of Exploration in Africa: The Art of James Augustus Grant on the Nile Expedition of 1860-1863', *Terrae incognitae*, 28.1, 2006, pp. 55-74.

^{xiv} One famous account is the Berber raid on Richard Burton's camp in 1855. He was stabbed through the cheek with a spear. See R. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa or, An Exploration of Harar*, London, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1856.