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EGYPTIANIZING GRAVE MONUMENTS IN
LONDON'S BROMPTON CEMETERY

In memoriam Morton Smith
(May 28, 1915 – July 11, 1991)

Grave shrines, monuments, and epitaphs are at once an enduring element of the culture of a given society, and a reflection of the tendencies that prevail at various times in its artistic predilections.¹ It is a normal and comprehensible human reaction to hark back to the devices typical of earlier epochs. A particular place in this respect has always been occupied by motifs derived from the world of Egyptian art, which in the nineteenth century was becoming increasingly better known, while its symbolism and basic forms were closely bound up with the strong impressions made by the endurance and uncommon significance of its ancient sepulchral structures.²

In London's Brompton Cemetery, one may find a rather numerous group of grave monuments that appeal to motifs from Egyptian art. The most numerous graves, to be sure, are those marked with ordinary crosses, or – also in large numbers – Irish (Celtic) crosses. In addition to the very numerous ordinary graves marked only with the symbol of the cross, more imposing grave structures occur here also, and indeed one sometimes

¹ The observations contained in this article were made in early 1994, as an additional and entirely unexpected result of a stay in London, which I owe to the generosity of the Lanckoroński de Brzezic Foundation.

² On the subject of the broader effects of Egyptian civilization, see S. Morenz, *Die Begegnung Europas mit Ägypten*, Berlin 1968, *Europa und der Orient 800-1900*, Berlin 1989 and recently J. -M. Humbert, *L'Égyptomanie dans l'art occidental*, Paris 1989 and *Ägyptomanie. Ägypten in der europäischen Kunst 1730-1930*, Wien 1994.

encounters monumental shrines erected in imitation of classical Greek or Roman temples, as well as Gothic structures.

Brompton Cemetery is located in London's West End (in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea), and is one of the city's oldest necropolises.³ Construction of the cemetery was undertaken in 1837; it was consecrated on June 15, 1840, by C. J. Bloomfield, the Anglican bishop of London.⁴ Its name at that time was "The West of London and Westminster Cemetery." It is situated on an extended rectangular plot with a surface area of 15 hectares, between Old Brompton Road (the main entrance from the north) and Fulham Road (the south entrance); the two gates are connected by a central avenue 617 meters long. The architectonic form of the cemetery is the work of Benjamin Baud, who modeled the chapel on St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. A major contribution was also made by J. C. Loudon, responsible for the greenery and the landscaping effects. North of the chapel is the so-called "Great Circle," with a diameter of 92 meters, surrounded by arcades, which at certain points also run parallel to the central avenue.⁵ The cemetery was originally intended to hold only ca. 60,000 burials, but by 1889 there were already more than 150,000 people buried here, and by 1951, almost 200,000. It became necessary, then, to close the cemetery.⁶ In 1969, the cemetery chapel, the colonnades, the north entrance, and four of the graves were listed Grade II. In 1985, the cemetery as a whole became an historic site, and since 1993 it has been under the control of the Royal Parks Agency. To quote the author of the guidebook, the Friends describe the cemetery as a "biography in stone of West London in the heyday of the Empire"⁷.

Brompton Cemetery holds the graves of many meritorious and outstanding personalities, politicians, artists, creators, and scholars. Some of these graves are unique works of art, intended to testify to the extraordinary talents and merits of the deceased. One cannot avoid noticing the Gothic sarcophagus of Valentine Cameron Prinsep (1838-1904), supported on eight columns, and carved of pink Sienna marble,⁸ or the grave of Frederick Leyland (1831-1892),⁹ designed by Edward Burne-Jones in the form of a copper box-shrine, the walls of which are covered with ornamentation composed of exquisite vegetative plaits. Here, too, is the final resting place of the

³ See P. Pierce, *Brompton Cemetery* (London 1993), an illustrated guide brochure published by the Royal Parks.

⁴ It should be noted that Brompton Cemetery is a necropolis of the sort where the deceased's religious affiliation (or lack thereof) was of no importance; the cemetery chapel has always been open for representatives of all religions.

⁵ There are underground catacombs under part of the colonnade, intended to expand the cemetery's capacity.

⁶ This means that at present burials are possible only in family graves (ca. 30 burials each year).

⁷ Pierce, p. 7.

⁸ Val Prinsep was a well-known painter in his day, a friend of the pre-Raphaelites. He won fame as the author, among other things, of numerous Indian scenes, as well as plays and novels, and a journal, which is also an interesting document of the era. On his grave, see Pierce, no. 56.

⁹ A wealthy shipowner, friend of the pre-Raphaelite Fraternity. Cf. Pierce, no. 57.



Fig. 1. Brompton Cemetery, London. A fragment of the main avenue, with the monumental colonnade in the southern portion of the cemetery. In the photo can be seen typical gravestones in the form of plain and Celtic crosses, and one of the many obelisks. Photo by the author

famous suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928),¹⁰ and of Margaret McCurrey (1795-1886), a well-known figure in the abstinence movement,¹¹ as well as the graves of such renowned dignitaries and scholars, the pride of the British Empire, as Sir George Everest (1790-1866),¹² Sir Andrew Waugh (1810-1878),¹³ or Sir John Fowler (1817-1898).¹⁴ We should also mention the modest grave of Sir Henry Cole (1808-1882), the creator and first director of the marvelous South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum).¹⁵

Brompton Cemetery also holds a significant number of Polish graves (more than 300), which constitute a very particular chronicle of the history of our compatriots in

¹⁰ Pierce, no. 5.

¹¹ Her epitaph reads, "A total abstainer from all intoxicating liquors"; Pierce, no. 45.

¹² A military engineer and cartographer, initially in the service of the East India Company; among his other achievements, he devised the triangulation grid for India; cf. Pierce, no. 21.

¹³ An astronomer and student of the Himalayas, to whose highest peak he gave the name of his colleague; Pierce, no. 22.

¹⁴ An outstanding engineer, one of the creators of the London subway; from 1871 to 1879, worked in Egypt. Pierce, no. 39.

¹⁵ Pierce, no. 12.

emigration, beginning with the national uprisings in the nineteenth century, and continuing to recent years.¹⁶

Of those monuments which draw their inspiration from Egyptian art, the most numerous group is comprised of obelisks.¹⁷ There are about 85 of these in the cemetery,



Fig. 2. Obelisk with “Gothic” elements, commemorating the final resting place of Frederick James Mellersh (1854-1907). Photo by the author

primarily along the main avenues (Fig. 1). They are typically made of granite, often red granite. In terms of their proportions and decorative details, they are very diverse. The obelisk form most frequently encountered is a slender shaft, mounted on a rather high pediment capped by a cornice, above which is located the monolith of the obelisk proper

¹⁶ Cf. the exhaustive work of Andrzej Suchcitz, *Non Omnis Moriar: Polacy na londyńskim cmentarzu Brompton* [*Non Omnis Moriar: Poles in London's Brompton Cemetery*] (Warsaw 1992); pp. 8-13 contain general information on the history of the cemetery.

¹⁷ On the meaning of obelisks in Egyptian civilization and basic information on the subject, along with the most significant secondary literature, see D. Arnold, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Baukunst* (Zürich 1994), pp. 179-180.

(cf. Fig. 1). The text of the commemorative inscription is also typically located on a rectangular surface below the cornice.¹⁸ There are also more thick-set variants encountered, such as the red granite obelisk of Thomas Hiram Fraser (1813-1865),¹⁹ or obelisks that display additional ornamental elements. Among the most curious of these is the obelisk with “Gothic” details (Fig. 2), erected in memory of Frederick James Mellersh (1854-1907).²⁰ An exotic note is added by a red granite obelisk with a Japanese text on the surface of the shaft and an English text on the postument of the



Fig. 3. Granite obelisk with Japanese and English text, erected on the grave of Yugoi Nagayori Asano (1865-1886). Photo by the author

cornice (Fig. 3), which attracts the attention of many visitors; it marks the final resting place of a young Japanese aristocrat, Yugoi Nagayori Asano (1865-1886).²¹ In addition

¹⁸ Only exceptionally is the commemorative text found on a surface of the obelisk itself (cf. Fig. 3).

¹⁹ Situated in the northeast section of the cemetery, in the vicinity of the grave of Henry Cole (cf. note 15). This obelisk also commemorates Fraser's previously deceased wife Emma (1823-1855) and their son, a naval cadet, who died in 1859 at the age of 15.

²⁰ Located in the western section of the Great Circle, in front of the chapel. It is carved of red granite.

²¹ This obelisk is located in the northwest section of the cemetery (cf. Pierce, no. 60).

to classic obelisks with a square shaft, one also encounters variants, such as “obelisks” with cylindrical²² or triangular²³ shafts.

Those Egyptianizing sepulchral structures that to the greatest and most conscious degree exhibit ties with ancient Egyptian architecture make up a separate category (Figs. 4-7). These are imposing mausoleum buildings, most often made of granite (one of sandstone), situated at the most conspicuous points in the cemetery.²⁴ They are characterized as a group by the simplicity and monumentality of their design, and the use of carefully chosen Egyptian stylistic elements. This type of structure is in fact a syncretic creation by nineteenth-century architects and construction engineers, who made skillful use here of such characteristic features of Egyptian buildings as mastabas, pylons, or the so-called “naos”. Such characteristic elements of Egyptian architecture as the typical concave *cavetto* cornice, or cylinder/toruses, often exactly executed, were put to good use in these structures.²⁵

The most outstanding example of such an “Egyptian” mausoleum is the granite sepulcher erected in 1853 for Lord Kilmorey (Fig. 4)²⁶ in the center of one of the smaller circles east of the cemetery’s central avenue.²⁷ The structure, erected on a square plan, stands on a two-step podium,²⁸ and exhibits the most essential characteristics of ancient Egyptian structures. The walls, in the typical Egyptian style, slant to the inside, and are surmounted with the *cavetto* cornice familiar to students of Egyptian architecture, set on a carefully modeled torus. Similar toruses run around the outside edge of the mausoleum, and also constitute the frame for the entrance opening and an additional ornamental element on the flat surface of the walls. The entrance to the mausoleum is on the south side (Fig. 4), but all the remaining wall surfaces have an identical shape. Instead of door openings, false doors have been outlined, a clear reference to the so-called “blind gates” of Egyptian mastabas. Obedient to the Egyptian paradigms, the characteristic ligatures have been carved on the surface of the toruses. A frieze is carved on the concave surface of the *cavetto* cornice, composed of triple

²² Red granite obelisk erected to the memory of John Thompson (1822-1877) and his wife Susan (1819-1877), situated in the northeast section of the cemetery, near the grave of Henry Cole (cf. note 15).

²³ Located south of the sepulchre of Lord Kilmorey (see below), erected to commemorate Charles Andrew Bredel (1792-1851) and his family.

²⁴ I noted the presence of three such buildings on the main avenue, while the mausoleum of Lord Kilmorey is situated near the main tract, in a special circle.

²⁵ Both these elements originate from the early development stages of Egyptian architecture: the *cavetto* cornice is a reminiscence of the palm branches planted to crown the walls, or in this case to cover the roof beams, whereas the toruses are bundles of straw, on which were indicated the bands binding them. (In Egyptian architecture these bands were marked in relief, or their course was painted on the surface of the toruses.) See Arnold, s.v. “Hohlkehle und Rundstab,” p. 108.

²⁶ Designed and built by Kendal & Pope while His Lordship was still alive; it was not accepted by him, and served as a place of repose only for members of his family.

²⁷ See Pierce, no. 19. The outer surfaces of the exterior walls are smooth and lack any inscriptions.

²⁸ Around it can be seen the traces of metal fencing, which has been removed.



Fig. 4. Egyptianizing mausoleum of Lord Kilmorey (Kendal & Pope, 1853).
Photo by the author

vertical elements serving as triglyphs to separate the metopic fields,²⁹ which in this case contain empty cartouches crowned with double feathers. The shaping of the structure's roof as a stair-stepped pyramid is also noteworthy.³⁰ The cast bronze doors leading to the sepulcher are also not devoid of Egyptian-inspired ornaments (despite the prominent initials MCHE in the center): the panel is surrounded by a band ornament with the repeated stylized hieroglyphic characters *Nebkheprure*, rendering the throne name of Tutankhamen, one of the last rulers of Dynasty 18.³¹

Mention should also be made of other mausoleums erected in a similar style (Figs. 5-7), though less monumental and now lacking some of the "Egyptian" details that

²⁹ Originating, however, from the palm leaf ornamentation or the sheaf of straw of the Egyptian frieze called *kheker*. See Arnold, pp. 49-50.

³⁰ In the case of Egyptian naos structures, such pyramidal capping was intended to symbolize the so-called "primeval hill," an important element in certain Egyptian cosmogonies.

³¹ Reigned 1319 – 1309 B.C.; obtained particular popularity after his grave was discovered by Howard Carter (1922). Cf. T. Schneider, *Lexikon der Pharaonen* (Zürich 1994), pp. 301-302 (including the basic secondary literature).

occur in Lord Kilmorey's structure. While preserving many of the fundamental characteristics, they are nevertheless more squat in profile: the *cavetto* cornice is entirely flat (while the torus beneath the cornice is significantly narrower), and there are

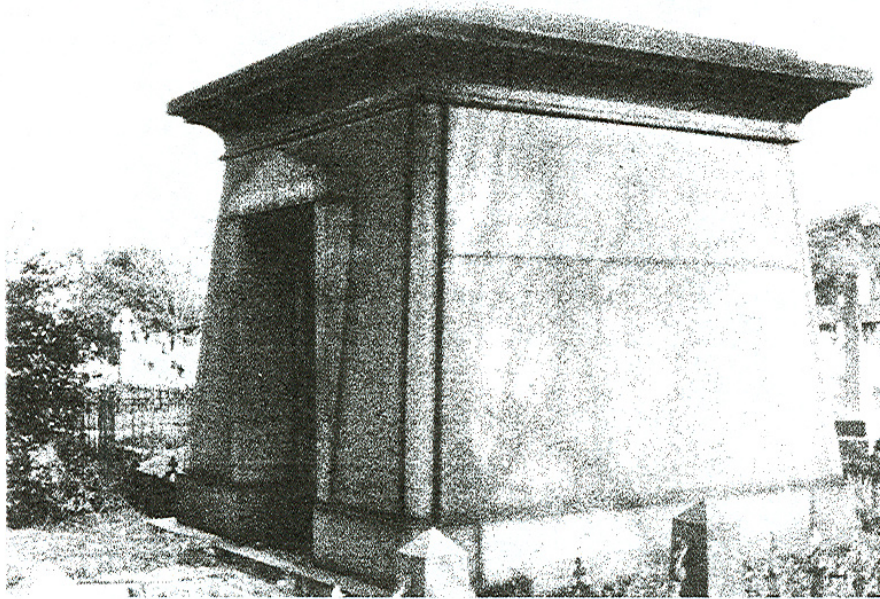


Fig. 5. Egyptian style mausoleum erected for Duncan Wilson (end of the nineteenth century). Photo by the author

no ligatures on the toruses. A strikingly dissonant note is sounded by the door openings, typically framed by plain slabs surmounted with a triangular tympanum, on which can be read the name of the deceased.³² It is typical for such mausoleums to be surrounded by a fence made of small, squat "obelisks" joined by chains. These structures are situated along the cemetery's main avenue. On the east side we find the sepulcher of Duncan Wilson, built of pink granite (Fig. 5), while on the west side of the avenue is the carefully crafted sepulcher of the George Morrison family, also built of this same stone (Fig. 6).³³ On the east side of the cemetery avenue, more or less at its mid-point, there is yet another "Egyptian" mausoleum, constituting the resting place of Charles Thompson (1824-1880) and his family (Fig. 7). This last differs somewhat from the two structures described above; it is built of sandstone, using toruses of uniform thickness; on the surface of each wall there are slight recessions surrounded by toruses, probably intended as a reference to the so-called "blind doors" of Egyptian mastabas.³⁴ Its state of preservation requires immediate intervention by the conservators.

³² The door panels themselves are richly decorated with "Gothic" elements.

³³ This sepulcher is signed by Barker & Son, a company once located at the cemetery's north entrance. The metal letters with which the company's name was rendered have been torn out; the text can only be made out by using the traces remaining of the pins that once mounted the letters. Upon comparison of the characteristics of the two mausoleums, it cannot be precluded that the above-mentioned sepulcher of Duncan Wilson is the work of the same firm.

³⁴ The signature of the builder has been preserved: "Banham & Co., Pimlico SW."



Fig. 6. Sepulchre of the George Morrison family (Barker & Son, end of the nineteenth century). Photo by the author



Fig. 7. Mausoleum of Charles Thompson (1824-1880) and his family (Banham & Co., Pimlico). Photo by the author

There remains to be discussed here a grave of particular importance, with unmistakable Egyptianizing characteristics, a monument closely associated with a person who devoted his entire creative career to Egypt. This is a sandstone slab with semicircular cap (resembling a typical Egyptian funerary stele),³⁵ commemorating first the sudden death of Joseph Bonomi's four children, followed by other members of his family (his mother-in-law and his wife), and Bonomi himself (Fig. 8).

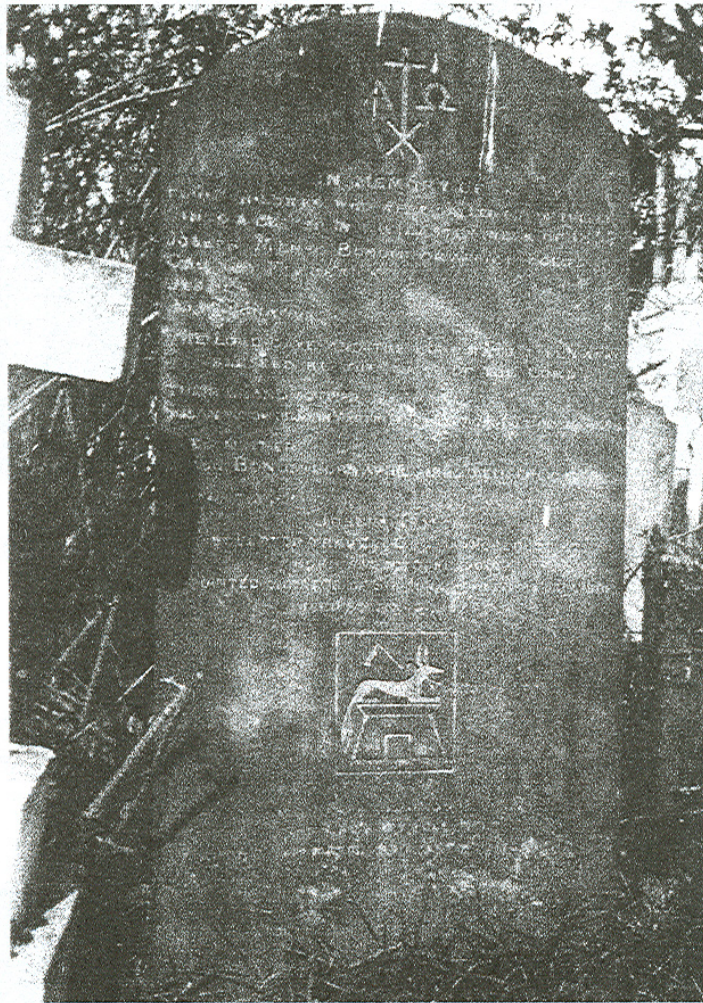


Fig. 8. Grave stele commemorating Joseph Bonomi (1796-1878) and his family.
Sandstone, 160 cm high. Photo by the author

Joseph Bonomi (1796-1878) was a sculptor and draftsman; though Italian by birth, he lived from childhood in England, and performed great services for the learning and culture of his adopted country.³⁶ He spent many years in Egypt as a draftsman,

³⁵ About 160 cm high, poorly preserved (primarily weathered in the lower portion of the slab). The stele is located in the eastern section of the cemetery, on the north side of the path that connects the cemetery's main avenue with the circle on which Lord Kilmorey's mausoleum is located (cf. above).

³⁶ See W. R. Dawson and E. P. Uphill, *Who Was Who in Egyptology*, 3rd ed. (London 1995), pp. 53-54.

cooperating with such scholars of antiquity as R. Hay, J. Burton, E. W. Lane, and J. G. Wilkinson, and took part in the research expeditions of L. M. Linant de Bellefonds, F. Arundale and F. Catherwood, and C. R. Lepsius. He was also responsible for the first hieroglyphic printer's font in England, used to print S. Birch's *Egyptian Dictionary* (1867), and produced numerous catalogues of Egyptian artworks, along with an enormous number of illustrations for many basic works from this period. It may be worthwhile here to quote the opinion expressed by Lepsius: "[Bonomi] is not only full of practical knowledge on the life there [i.e. on the Nile], but he is also a connoisseur in Egyptian art, and a master of Egyptian drawing."³⁷

A simple cross is engraved in the upper curve of this stele, supported on the chi-rho monogram, with the Greek letters alpha and omega on the left and right side of the cross (Fig. 8). Below is the commemorative text, underneath which is an image of Anubis as a jackal, engraved in a rectangular frame. We are thus dealing with a deliberate juxtaposition of Christian and ancient Egyptian symbolism on the surface of a slab that has the general outline of a typical Egyptian stele.

The story told by the text engraved on the surface of the plate is a tragic one: «In memory of four children who were called out of this life into a better in the Easter week of 1852. Joseph Menes Bonomi on April 11th aged 5y10m, Cautley Frederick on April 15th aged 4y5m, Jessie on April 17th aged 2y8m, John Ignatius on April 11th aged 8m. "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away"; "Blessed be the name of the Lord"»³⁸. Further on, information is given regarding the grandmother of the deceased children (Susan, widow of John Martin, 1780-1858), their mother (Jessie Bonomi, 1825-1859), and finally their father, Joseph Bonomi, "sculptor, traveller and archaeologist, born 9th October 1796, appointed curator of Sir John Soane's Museum 1861, died 3rd March 1878." The portion of the text devoted to Joseph Bonomi is located directly above the image of Anubis. Beneath, however, is a now faintly legible text: "Colonel J. I. Bonomi, C.B.E., the King's Own Regiment, died 27th March 1930 aged 72 years"³⁹.

³⁷ See G. Ebers, *Richard Lepsius: A Biography* (New York 1887), p. 142.

³⁸ Bonomi's four children died as the result of a raging epidemic of diphtheria.

³⁹ It could thus be inferred that it was he (probably the youngest son of Joseph and Jessie Bonomi, born in 1858) who erected this stele in the place of his family burials, and the date of his death was added on later, after his remains were also laid to rest here. It is more likely, however, that this stele was made after Joseph Bonomi's death according to his own design (shortly after 1878), while the fragment dealing with Col. Bonomi, as a sort of "P.S." in the lower portion of the place, located below the image of Anubis, is much later.