In common with many others who have studied the Anglo-Zulu War, this writer has found the battle at Isandlwana a fascinating complexity of riddles. There are a substantial number of first-hand accounts by eyewitnesses, but often these accounts present further problems whilst shedding only a little light on those issues to be resolved. Among the enigmas of that day, the identification of the location of the Zulu bivouac during the night before the battle might seem a trivial matter but its resolution will shed important light on the points of attack subsequently developed by the Zulu army.

We should perhaps begin by comparing the secondary narratives. These have identified the location of the bivouac as almost anywhere along the Ngwebeni stream. This rivulet rises some four kilometres north of Isandlwana Hill and trickles for about six kilometres east across the Nqutu plateau, which itself falls gradually to the north-east. (Thus far, it has run roughly parallel to the escarpment of the plateau to the south.) At this point, its flow is interrupted by a gentle horseshoe curve round the north side of Mabaso Hill, then turns south-east, squeezing though a narrow defile between Mabaso and another hill to the north, after which it resumes its north-east flow. There is thus a distance of more than eight, even ten, kilometres along the Ngwebeni where the impi might have rested.

The first narrative to be considered is as follows:
Before sunset they had reached their objective, a rocky, bushy valley close under the north-east slope of the Nqutu about five miles from Isandhlwana and, of course, completely hidden from it. (1)

Not very specific, but certainly sufficient to identify the Mabaso ravine. Next:
It is true that there was no Zulu army in the vicinity [of Isandlwana] on the 15th, but on the 20th, as the British force began to set up their tents in a neat line 150 yards from the base of the mountain, the Zulu army was moving into the deep horseshoe-shaped valley of the Ngwebeni River four to five miles north-east of the camp. (2)

John Laband expressed the location in more specific terms:
During the evening of 21 January the army moved in small detached bodies to the steep and rocky Ngwebeni valley, which abruptly opens up under the Mabaso heights. (3)

A less orthodox opinion was put forward by David Jackson:
On the 21st … the ‘impi’ moved westwards across the Nondweni valley and took up a position for the night along a glen running east and west in the Nqutu hills, the head lying three miles north of the camp but hidden from it by the escarpment and the plateau already mentioned. (4)

The final example is diametrically opposed to that given by Laband and, by implication, Coupland and Drooglever, and is more unorthodox even than Jackson. The author suggested that new evidence (5) demonstrates that:
… the Zulu army was not camped en masse in a gorge on the northern side of the Nqutu Plateau, but was bivouacked, in regiments, over a distance of about four miles, all along the Nqutu Hills and the regiments attacked in the same strung-out line as that in which they were bivouacked. This would explain why the Zulu army appeared with such speed, already fanned out four miles wide, to encircle the camp. (6)

So much for modern narratives. It can be seen that there is a wide divergence of opinion on this matter but what is the evidence? Those who would have known best were the warriors who took part and we have some evidence of that location in their own words:
On the 21st, keeping away to the eastward, we occupied a valley running north-south under the spurs of the Nqutu Hill, which concealed the Sandhlwana Hill, distant from us about four miles and nearly due west of our encampment. (7)

And again:
We slept the night before the battle in a valley rising from the Nqutu range, and running eastward towards the King’s kraal. (8)

Although the directions of the valley seem here to be contradictory, given the serpentine nature of the Ngwebeni around Mabaso Hill, and the extensive character of the Zulu bivouac, the apparent inconsistency is easily explained. The Zulu order of camping is given by the deserter: the uNokhenke
regiment was on the right, that is, it would have been one of the leading elements and would have had a position at the northern end of the ravine of the Ngwebeni, directly under Mahaso. The ingobamakhosi regiment on the other hand, to which MehlokaZulu belonged, was a part of the left centre and would thus have been located towards the rear of the bivouac, where the Ngwebeni turns right to flow towards the north-east. MehlokaZulu would naturally, therefore, describe the valley as lying east-west. (9)

In a more recent publication, Ron Lock has resiled from his earlier position and has embraced the more accepted view as to the location of the bivouac. (10) On the other hand, the latest offering of David Jackson indicates no such change of mind:

Although new information has come to light in the interval, I have seen nothing that has significantly altered my previous interpretations. (11)

He then locates the bivouac precisely where he placed it in 1965. (12) It is perhaps desirable to pause here and look more closely at the reason for Jackson’s reluctance to accept the overwhelmingly preponderant view. His opinion is largely based on the evidence of two maps which form a part of what are known as ‘the Durnford Papers’, (13) held by the Museum of the Royal Engineers at Chatham. The conflation of the two original maps (14) into one in this article shows the alleged points of origin of the various regiments and sure enough, they appear to be along the upper Ngwebeni valley. The difficulty is, however, that the alleged author of the marking of the maps, Lieutenant A.F. Henderson, commanded Hlubi’s troop of the Native Mounted Contingent, and thus was with Colonel Durnford on the plain. He could not, therefore, have had first-hand knowledge of the bivouac. One must assume, then, that Henderson was working with second-hand information since he could not have actually observed the position for himself.

Secondly, there is no reason why the map, as marked by Henderson, should not show apparent points of departure, rather than the real ones. It is almost certain that at some point during the subsequent attack, the regiments identified on the map would have passed near or through the points indicated, as part of their envelopment of the British force; if, as one must suppose, Henderson had drawn his information from his surviving fellow-officers, then they may have assumed the Zulu bivouac to be what was, in fact, reported to be their position near the time of their discovery, while the truth is that those two places may well have been widely separated. The matter of the discovery is of such crucial importance that its discussion has been deferred to a subsequent paper.

Next, a consideration of British forward observation. One of the maps to which reference has already been made has the title ‘Military Survey of the Battle-field of Isandhlwana.’ This map shows the reported location of the vedettes. Three were posted on the edge of the escarpment, from west to east, on Magaga Hill, (15) the Nyoni ridge and on Ithusi Hill, (16) and a fourth on an unnamed prominence a mile or so south-east of Isandlwana. Lieutenant Scott, Natal Carbineers, and presumably at least one other of his men, was located at amaTutshane. (17) This hill, known then as the ‘Conical Koppie’, was never a good position for a vedette proper, since its peak lies below the level of the escarpment 800 metres to the north. It was, however, the perfect location for a command post, being able to see every vedette, and able to be seen by them. The information on the map, however, is actually incomplete because it accounts for only four of the vedettes. Another vedette was posted further out on the plain to the direct front of the camp; the post was beyond the range of the map, on what is known as Qwabe ridge, and Troopers Barker and Hawkins were located here. (18) Based on the evidence of the Mansel letter, another was located on a low prominence to the south-east of Isandlwana and this was probably the one shown on the Anstey map.

Lock states as part of his principal argument that the furthest vedettes were withdrawn. This assertion, he says, is supported by the testimony of Inspector George Mansel of the Natal Mounted Police, in the letter to which reference has already been made. This is not quite the case because what Mansel actually says is that he was ordered by Major Clery, Staff Officer to Colonel Glyn, to withdraw the furthest vedettes. Mansel began to comply but only went to the vedette to the right front to bring it in. There he was diverted by the capture of an old Zulu, the vedettes were not withdrawn and as a result:

I brought the videttes in at dark and was off again with Dartnell before daylight that morning. (19)

On the following day, the day of the battle, the vedettes appear to have been posted, as they were the day before, with advanced vedettes on Qwabe ridge and Ithusi Hill. (20)

Next, consider the physical space that the impi would have required in bivouac, setting the minimum size of the army at an arbitrary 20,000, a figure which is generally accepted. Each warrior would have been armed with his shield, stabbing assegai, several throwing spears and perhaps a firearm of some description. In addition, there would have been at least some cattle to sustain the warriors. It is not, therefore, too much to demand an average area of about five square metres per warrior (or a square
just a little over 7 feet a side). Simple arithmetic will then derive an area of some 100 hectares as the minimum area to contain this multitude. Looked at another way, assuming a depth of 50 warriors, the area required to contain the *impi* would be about 110 metres by about 900 metres. This is not a small area, being almost as large as that occupied by the British camp, and not a small number of warriors to conceal. (21)

If one excludes any areas of bush or trees, of which there are precious few on the Nqutu plateau, there is a view north to the Ngwebeni stream from two of the three vedette posts on the edge of the escarpment, the single exception being that on Magaga. (22) In particular, a vedette posted on Ithusi Hill would have had a perfect field of view to the hills, which rise on the other side of the stream. Would a sensible army commander place his men in such an exposed position for even a short time? The answer is: almost certainly not.

It would be virtually impossible to conceal 20,000 warriors along the slight depression to the north of Isandlwana from the view of the vedettes. Only to the north-east, where the stream flows behind the Mabaso Hill, would their scrutiny be hindered. This area is sufficiently remote, and sufficiently large to conceal the *impi* because immediately below Mabaso, the narrow valley (the ‘ravine’) opens up to a considerable extent, and could hold the army with ease, being in excess of two kilometres long.

From the Zulu point of view, their commanders would have chosen a secure location for the bivouac, where their presence would remain undetected. The principal reason for such caution is that originally the army was to rest there for two nights, it being stated by many Zulu participants that the attack would not take place on 22 January due to the inauspicious new moon. (23) The reason for the delay was not the eclipse which occurred during the afternoon of 22nd. (24) The bivouac, therefore, had to be far enough away from the British camp to remain undetected by both the vedettes and any mounted patrols, while at the same time being close enough to enable a sudden descent on the camp.

The Zulu leadership was not without intelligence and the British camp would have been under close observation by their scouts from the moment the troops arrived. These same scouts would have noted the placement of vedettes and piqûets, and the movement of any patrols. The original Zulu plan, then, was to remain hidden during the daylight hours of 22 January and to advance along the upper Ngwebeni stream during the following night to launch an attack on the camp on the morning of 23 January. (25)

Next, let us consider distance. David Jackson does not explain how the Zulu were able to be in front (to the east) of Colonel Durnford after he had left the camp and travelled a distance which we may estimate at some nine kilometres, arriving somewhat to the west of Nyzezi Hill. (26) If the Zulu were attacking the camp at Isandlwana from anywhere along a four-mile position along the upper Ngwebeni stream, not one warrior would have chosen to go via the southern side of Mabaso Hill.

Finally, we should return to the maps we have identified earlier. The second map is a companion to the first and is entitled ‘Military Survey of the Country around Isandhlwana.’ (27) This map clearly shows the location of the hidden Zulu force, using the identifier ‘a.a.a.a.’. This is noted in the references as ‘Valley in which the Zulu army bivouacked on the night of Jan2 21st-22nd.’ This is, I submit, irrefutable evidence of the location of the bivouac.

On the basis of all the evidence then, it would seem that the orthodox view should prevail. There is no evidence that the Zulu bivouac was anywhere other that where the Zulu said it was: in the Ngwebeni valley below Mabaso Hill.

References.

2. R. Drooglever, *The Road to Isandlwana*, London, 1992, p. 196. Drooglever dates the Zulu movement one day earlier than it actually took place. They spent the night of 20/21st north of Isiphezi Hill and moved to their Ngwebeni valley bivouac on the afternoon and evening of the 21st.
5. A letter from Inspector George Mansel of the Natal Mounted Police to Edward Durnford, Colonel Anthony Durnford’s brother, dated 1st November, 1879: Wood Papers, KCM 89/9/32/1, Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban. Mr Lock is in error in identifying Colonel Edward Durnford
as Anthony’s father. Although they shared the same forename, the Edward in question was Anthony’s brother, as the Mansel letters make clear.


7. Evidence of a Zulu deserter of the Nokhenke regiment in Public Record Office, Kew (hereafter PRO), WO 33/34, Enclosure 2 in No. 80.


9. These dispositions are shown quite precisely on the map in Laband, p. 77.


12. Ibid., p. 25. The map on p. 30 is rather more ambiguous.

13. These have been edited and annotated by F.W.D. Jackson and Julian Whybra in ‘Isandhlwana and the Durnford Papers’, Soldiers of the Queen, No. 60, March, 1990.

14. The maps were drawn by Captain T.H. Anstey, Royal Engineers, in November, 1879 and were published in Narrative of the Field Operations Connected with the Zulu War of 1879, (compiled by Captain J.S. Rothwell,) War Office (Intelligence Branch), first published London, 1881, re-published Greenhill: London, 1989. Only one of the maps is reproduced in the re-printed version.

15. This has also been called Magaga Hill. See Lock and Quantrill, Zulu Victory, p. 133.

16. This was one of the most advanced vedettes. Narrative of Field Operations, p. 30 and note.


18/19/20 Ibid.

21. There is ample evidence that many groups of warriors were observed wandering around on the plateau on the morning of 22nd.

22. This vedette may well have been replaced by Captain Barry’s 5 Company, 2/3rd Regiment NNC, which acted as a piquet there on that day.


24. As expounded by Drooglever, p.196; the Zulu, and perhaps even the British, were quite ignorant of the forthcoming phenomenon.

25. Mehlokazulu.

26. Lieutenant W.F.D. Cochrane, Transport Officer to Colonel A. Durnford, Supplementary Report, The National Archive (Public Record Office), Kew, (hereafter, TNA (PRO), WO 33/34 Enclosure 1 in No. 80. Cochrane is clear that the advancing Zulu were both to their front and to their left. This is confirmed by a warrior of the Uve regiment, who describes how his regiment left the bivouac to confront Durnford’s force. See the account of Nzuzi and two other warriors, Killie Campbell Africana Library, KCM 42313. See also Lieut. H.D. Davies, TNA (PRO), WO 33/34, Enclosure 2 in No. 96: ‘We looked up to the ridge on our front.’

27. This map is not reproduced in the re-print of the Narrative. A copy is to be found in the Talana Museum, Dundee, KwaZulu-Natal.

The Ngwebeni Valley, north of Isandlwana.