

# The Excavation and Re-interment of Mortal Remains from Cairn 27, Isandlwana Battlefield Zululand, South Africa.

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## ABSTRACT

The mortal remains of soldiers who fell at the Battle of Isandlwana on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1879 have since the first interment been repeatedly re-exposed by natural erosion processes on the site. This report summarises the activities of successive burial parties between January 1879 and March 1883 and later re-interments of mortal remains prior to the proclamation of the Isandlwana Historical Reserve in 1992.

The excavation of a single cairn that was slumping into a donga as a result of headward stream-course erosion is described and recommendations are made for the future conservation of such cairns on the battle-site. These recommendations may be applicable at other historical sites in the region that are experiencing similar problems.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the four-year period, 1987 – 1991, numerous cases of blatant grave robbing were reported from the Isandlwana Battlefield. In each case the motive appeared to be an attempt to obtain military memorabilia for resale (Van Schalkwyk 1992). After each reported case KwaZulu Monuments Council (KNC) staff reinterred all exposed human remains and repacked the cairns. At the time of these re-interments the fragmented and weathered nature of the bone residues was commented upon.

Subsequent police investigations located a number of hoards in the possession of relic collectors, both in South Africa and the United Kingdom. However, according to the collectors questioned, most of these hoards do not emanate from graves, but comprise surface finds from the battlefield. As such surface finds become inevitably more scarce, it would appear that sellers of memorabilia are now beginning to access burial sites in their attempt to satisfy market demands.

In an effort to stamp out these practices and effect suitable control and management at the battlefield, the KwaZulu Government proclaimed the Isandlwana Historical Reserve in 1989 and KwaZulu Monuments Council (KMC) then appointed an officer-in-charge in 1992. Access onto the Reserve and battlefield is now controlled and visitors are accompanied over the site by resident KMC staff. A major refurbishment of all existing graves and memorials is currently in progress and the arresting of severe soil erosion on the battle-site is receiving attention. With these management strategies in place the status and preservation of the white-washed burial cairns now needs to be addressed.

For some years now various parties have expressed concern over the stability and long term survival of those cairns on the battle site that are located within areas of active headward erosion and which are especially vulnerable to undercutting and subsequent collapse. We thus suggested that those cairns with the greatest potential for collapse be excavated, and the contents be re-interred on more stable ground close by. Critics of this, however, felt that further disturbance by excavation was in breach of the sanctity due to the site, as the cairns marked the places where men had fallen in battle. As custodians of the integrity of the site we were unable to reconcile ourselves with these sentiments.

Further, the research potential of a large scale archaeological investigation of the entire battlefield has long been a point of debate, particularly in the light of the detailed results that were obtained from the archaeological investigations at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in the USA. If such a research project were to be initiated the burial cairns might well become a focus of investigation, and the nature of their contents would thus have to be ascertained. In order to obtain a better understanding of these cairns a study was undertaken by one of us (MT).

Background to the cairns at Isandlwana  
1879 – 1883

On the 14<sup>th</sup> March 1879, seven weeks after the battle, the first official visit to the battle-site took place. The party comprised Major W. Black, Commandant Cooper and Major J.G. Dartnell, accompanied by officers of the 24<sup>th</sup> of Foot, the Natal Native Contingent, and a party of the Natal Mounted Police. They had hardly arrived on the site when they came under fire and had to retire hastily to Rorke's Drift, having accomplished nothing more than a quick glimpse of the scene of destruction and death (Knight 1992:124).

On the 15<sup>th</sup> May, Black (recently promoted Lieutenant – Colonel) led a second party, this time from Fort Melvill, to Isandlwana. They stayed only twenty minutes, barely long enough to count and assess the condition of the wagons, before following the Fugitives' Trail to the Buffalo River, where the body of Major Stuart Smith was found and covered with stones (Knight 1992:125).

On the 21<sup>st</sup> May General Frederick Marshall, under orders from Lord Chelmsford, led the Cavalry Brigade to Isandlwana to bury the dead and to recover the wagons. While many bodies were identified, only those of the Volunteers and the Artillery were given a hasty burial. Colonel Glyn of the 24<sup>th</sup> had asked that his regiment be allowed to bury their own dead at some later date (Knight 1992:128). This task had to wait until 20<sup>th</sup> June 1879, when a party of the 2/24<sup>th</sup> under Lieutenant Colonel Black worked until the 26<sup>th</sup> June, digging shallow graves to receive the remains of their colleagues. Although stones were placed on the graves, it was not long before reports were received that further work would be required (Knight 1992:130).

On instructions from General G.P. Colley, Brevet Major C.J. Bromhead camped at Isandlwana on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 1879. Bromhead claimed that his party had cleaned up the debris which was then burnt or buried, had reburied those bodies which had become partially exposed, and had buried those found still lying in the open. Three large stone cairns were built where the largest number of bodies had been found together (Knight 1992:130).

Despite these efforts, reports of exposed bodies continued to be received. On the 20<sup>th</sup> February 1880 General Sir Garnet Wolseley instructed Lieutenant M. O'Connell of the 60<sup>th</sup> Rifles to attend to the battlefield. This party was at Isandlwana from 13 – 26 March and collected and buried all visible bones. The cairns which were built mark the spots where the bones, collected over a wide area, were buried, and not the places where individual men fell. Similarly, the bones of some soldiers who had been buried in dongas and watercourse and had become exposed, were reburied on higher ground (Knight 1992:130).

Over the next two years visitors to Isandlwana repeatedly commented that human bones were still to be seen, and Alfred Boast, a civil servant, was put in charge of a party, instructed by the Lieutenant-Governor, to see that all the remains were properly interred. This was carried out between 12 February and 10 March 1883, and Boast submitted a report from Greytown on 13 March in which he described how 298 graves were dug, containing between 2 and 4 skeletons each. Cairns were built on the graves, and where possible, the identity of the fallen was marked (Paper 1078/1883, Natal Archives).

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Following the 1992/93 rainy season one of us (MT) observed accelerated lateral erosion in a particular donga that threatened to collapse two cairns. One of the cairns was already beginning to slump down the donga slope and spilled bone fragments from the underlying burial pit were being exposed. The possibility of exposed human remains washing away downstream in full public view was sufficient motivation for us to recommend exhuming their contents and re-interring these in a more stable area nearby.

The KwaZulu Monuments Council was requested to authorise these excavations, and the subsequent re-interment of any mortal remains. This was approved subject to the obtaining of a letter of *No Objection* from the Ministry of Interior and the requisite notification of interested and affected parties.

## THE EXCAVATIONS

The two cairns in question are located between two actively eroding dongas below the access road that traverses the battlefield. They are according to the Isandlwana Battlefield Site plan 10155/1 (dated 22.10.1986, Natal Provincial Administration Works Department) designated Cairn 27 (C27) and Cairn 28 (C28).

The laying out of a 1x3m grid with 50cm intervals and the removal of all the rocks that made up the cairn preceded excavations. Once the top of the burial pit had been exposed the surrounding top soil was removed in 5cm spits. Ten centimetres below the surface bone fragments began to appear in the soil that was being sieved.

The +/- 10cm overlay of soil was then removed over an area of 1m square to expose the edge of the burial pit. We were then able to trace the lip of the pit to where it had begun to slump into the adjacent donga. The contents of the pit were then removed in further 10cm spits and sieved. These comprised a brown loam soil with visible bone fragments adhering to the matrix. The pit-edge was defined by an observable fall-off in bone residues and a more compact substrate. Spillage out of the confines of the pit was evident where it abutted with the donga wall. This comprised a lighter, grey soil matrix and a greater concentration of bone fragments than in the pit itself.

At the 20cm level, two rocks, probably comprising a part of the original infill, were removed from the slump side of the pit. In removing the next 10cm spit we observed a marked drop-off in bone fragment frequency at the sieve. At 30cm below the surface the soil became hard and closely compacted and no further bone remains were evident. Spillage out of the side of the pit also ceased at this level. Excavations were then terminated on this sterile base and the sieve contents and sieved matrix were re-interred. The cairn was the re-erected on its original location.

## THE FINDS

In the 10cm surface overlay a metal screw and two iron nails were retrieved at the sieve. In the following spit various pieces of miscellaneous metal fragments were retrieved. However, because of their fragmented and distorted nature, positive identification was not possible. The only diagnostic objects were a soft-metal backing platform from a four-eyed button and a shrapnel piece.

The majority of the bone material we retrieved at the sieve was in the size order of 5-15mm, much of it in fact falling through the 5mm mesh of the sieve in use. A few larger but adiagnostic pieces were also retrieved. The only identifiable fragments were a possibly piece of the articular process of a mandible, a phalange and a fragment of an indeterminable limb bone. No other artefacts or any other diagnostic human skeletal material was evident.

## CONCLUSION

Our desk study shows that the battlefield was visited by a number of burial parties in the four years post the battle. Many of the cairns visible at Isandlwana today are likely to be the results of Boast's work, superimposed on and modifying the efforts of the earlier burial parties. It is likely that only those graves in the Colonial Cemetery mark the burials of known individuals, the others being the repositories of partial remains collected from the open, from earlier incomplete interment, and from the dongas. Most of the cairns cannot be seen as marking the place where a soldier fell.

The fragmentary nature of the bone residues is a consequence of their reported long exposure to the elements post the battle, and their successive re-interments. The soils in the region are known to be acidic and together with the former these have accelerated the natural processes of decay. The dearth of artefacts, the adiagnostic nature of the skeletal remains and the re-interment procedures that have occurred, collectively suggested that Boast's cairns have limited archaeological value. They would thus not warrant focused attention in the event of a large scale archaeological investigation of the site. We conclude therefore, that as a management strategy, any future erosion threat to the cairns at the battlefield be countered by the following:

Firstly, any slumping cairn should be stabilised *in situ* by the packing of further rocks around its base, and secondly, attempts should be made to stem the rate of erosion by recognised donga reclamation techniques. These means are probably justified at most other historical sites in the region that are experiencing similar problems. By these actions, the integrity and sanctity of the site can best be preserved.

## Acknowledgements.

Knight, Ian. 1992. *Zulu. Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1879*. London. Withdraw & Greene.  
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