

Research Article

THE GRAVE OF KING MGOLOMBANE SANDILE NGQIKA: REVISTING THE LEGEND

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ABSTRACT

King Mgolombane Sandile Ngqika led the Gaiga ama Rharhabe Xhosa in the Seventh to Ninth Frontier Wars and died during the Ninth Frontier War (1878) after being ambushed. Several legends surrounding the death of King Sandile exist, one of which states that his skull was taken to England as a trophy by Lieutenant Carrington. Historically it is known that King Sandile died of a gunshot wound to the trunk, and was buried at Izidenge, between two British soldiers. The present king wanted the grave investigated to confirm the identity of the individual buried here, and to establish whether the skull is present. The grave was excavated and the remains analysed in situ in 2005. Preservation of the remains was generally poor, but a skull and mandible were clearly visible. The skeleton was that of an older male individual of Negroid descent. The feet could not be observed, but the left tibia showed some abnormalities probably indicating weakness of the left leg. Historically it is known that King Sandile had a "withered left leg" and walked with a limp. All aspects of the grave and remains observed are consistent with known historical facts on King Mgolombane Sandile Ngqika and the manner and circumstance of his death and burial. There were no indications that this was not his grave, nor that he was beheaded and his skull removed. Several examples of trophy taking by British soldiers during the late nineteenth century exist. Although this was not the case with King Sandile, per se, the existence of the legend most probably indicates that this kind of atrocity was committed during the Xhosa Frontier Wars.

Key words: skeletal analysis, public archaeology, decapitation, Xhosa Frontier Wars, King Sandile, human remains, trophies of war.

INTRODUCTION

King Mgolombane Sandile Ngqika was born around 1820, and was the leader of the Gaiga ama Rharhabe Xhosa. He led them in the Seventh, Eight and Ninth Frontier Wars against the British. He died in May 1878 during the Ninth Frontier War, or War of Ngcayichibi. Different legends regarding the death of King Sandile exist, one of which states that he had been decapitated before burial and that his skull was taken to England by a certain Lieutenant Carrington as a trophy.

According to this version of events the skull was eventually buried in a garden of a farmhouse in Colesbourne Park, Gloucestershire, where a headstone was erected. Questions arising from the conflicting legends and traditions around the death of King Sandile, the circumstances of his burial and the state of the remains have been considered by the Sandile Traditional Council. Speculation in local newspapers (Titi 2000a,b) as to whether the skull of King Sandile is present in the grave, or whether it was taken to England, also showed public interest in the matter.

The (King) "Hintsas's Head" incident has also caused embarrassment in traditional circles in the Eastern Cape, where legends of human remains from prominent leaders allegedly taken as trophies of war form a recurrent theme in the

indigenous history of various Xhosa groups, to the extent that it has become part of the Xhosa identity. These legends seem to represent the taking of land and the destruction of a way of living by Imperial Britain during the colonial era in South Africa and vilify the British as disrespectful to the Xhosa to the extent that not even the mortal remains of their leaders were sacrosanct (Edgar & Sapphire 2000).

The descendants of King Sandile were advised by various agencies and institutions to pursue the issue without causing another embarrassing situation similar to the Hintsas's Head incident. Accordingly, Prince Zolile Burns-Ncamashe visited Colesbourne Park where King Sandile's head is alleged to have been buried, to determine if the head was there or not. For various reasons this could not be determined during the visit. In 2004 the Traditional Council decided to exhume the body of King Sandile to determine if his head was with the rest of his remains, before they embarked on a further search for the skull in England. King Sandile's descendants also felt that he should have a dignified, decent, royal burial ceremony since a strong sense of indignation regarding the way in which his remains were treated by the British still exists. They believe he will then rest in peace in the company of his forefathers and his people.

In order to ensure that the correct legal and scientific procedures were followed, the King Sandile Development Trust enlisted the help of the Department of Anatomy, University of Pretoria, after initially approaching Dr J. Binneman of the Albany Museum. After discussions with the family as to requirements for the assessment and exhumation and re-burial of the remains it was decided to first investigate the remains *in situ* and then, based on the information gathered, pursue further measures.

The aim of this research was thus to investigate the grave historically indicated as that of King Mgolombane Sandile Ngqika, and to establish (a) whether the remains buried there are indeed those of King Sandile, and (b) to determine whether the skull is present or not.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

King Sandile was the son of Ngqika (father) and Suthu (mother). He was known for his physical disability since he had a withered left leg, which may have been the result of a club foot or a childhood illness. He took over the chieftainship of the Ngqika and paramony of the Rharhabe in 1841, but was despised by his brothers because of his disability. His brothers saw him as weak and vacillating and spread the word that he was not a suitable leader. He was, however, described by others as a tall, fine-looking man (Fig. 1), although walking with a slight limp. King Sandile was respected and loved by his people and was popular among the other Xhosa chiefs. He led his people in the wars of 1846–47 (Seventh Frontier War), 1850–53 (Eighth Frontier War) and 1877–78 (Ninth Frontier War) in which he was killed (Hummel 1988; Weldon 1993). According to historical accounts he excelled as leader during the Ninth

Frontier War and it was in this phase of his life that he became a Xhosa legend (Hummel 1988).

Much uncertainty surrounded his death following an ambush by a British Native Forces Mfengu patrol under Captain Massey-Hicks at Tyusha Forest (Peri Bush) in May 1878 (Hummel 1988), giving rise to legends and traditions regarding the event. Some believed that he was buried in the natural fortress of Ntaba ka Ndoda, and that he would stay there until the time comes for him to rise again. According to a European settler oral tradition, his body was seen being brought into Stutterheim where it was buried near the site of Döhne Post Fort (Hummel 1988; Mbangela 2003). No historical evidence to support either of these traditions exists.

The best known oral tradition is that King Sandile was decapitated before burial and that his skull was taken to England by Lieutenant Carrington, as a trophy. According to this legend Carrington then buried the head in 1905 in a wooden casket, lined with lead, in the garden of a farmhouse in Colesbourne Park, Gloucestershire. He reportedly erected a stone at the site with the inscription: "Here lies the head of Sandilli (*sic*) chief of the Gaika Nation killed in action at the Peri (*sic*) Bush King Williams Town 1878" (Hummel 1988).

According to Hummel (1988) Carrington left the Ciskei in April 1878, thus before the death of King Sandile, and was sent to command the Transvaal Volunteer Force against Sekhukune, the Pedi chief. Furthermore, there is no written record to support the idea that the body of King Sandile was decapitated (Hummel 1988).

Another description of the circumstances surrounding the death of King Sandile is found in the Frontier War Journal of Major John Crealock. According to Crealock (Hummel 1988) there was a skirmish between King Sandile and his party, and two companies of Captain Lonsdale's Mfengu on 29 May 1878. King Sandile and his party were surprised on Isidenge Hill (Mount Kemp) and he was wounded in the skirmish (Hummel 1988). Crealock's account claims that King Sandile's body was found a few days later by one of his counsellors named Guba. Guba was captured by the British and Captain Johan Landrey and a party was led by Guba into the Isidenge forest area to retrieve King Sandile's body. The body was eventually found on 7 June 1878 by a group of searchers that had lost contact with the main search party. It was wrapped in a blanket and taken to the military camp at Isidenge while the group led by Guba was still searching for the remains (Hummel 1988). Here the body was examined by Herbert Everitt, who was captain of the Tarkastad Volunteers and a medical officer at Stutterheim hospital. The conclusion was that the time of death was four days earlier. The left side of King Sandile's face, left orbit and right arm and other smaller patches had been eaten away by wild animals. A bullet wound that entered posteriorly in the right hypochondrial region, above the right loin, was also found. Its aperture of exit was three inches (approximately 75 mm) anterior to the right of the ensiform cartilage, through the seventh and eighth ribs. The bullet fractured the ribs extensively. Everitt's examination also found an injury to the right lobe of the liver and fragments of ribs that were driven into the abdominal cavity. The wound also showed signs of inflammation and extravasation. Everitt concluded that the injury had been received some days before death and according to his knowledge was caused by a Snider bullet (Hummel 1988).

Crealock's account states that King Sandile was buried in a wagon sail on 9 June 1878 on the farm Schuch (Fig. 2). According to Commandant Schermbrücker's report he was decently buried, but without any military consideration. A volley was, however, fired over the grave. He was buried between two



FIG. 1. Historical photograph of King Sandile (Weldon 1993).

British troops, Joseph Dicks of the Wodehouse Blues, a member of the Dordrecht Volunteer Force and Frank Hillier of Bowker's Reserves. The grave was in later years identified by a collection of broken bottles and a weeping willow tree (French 1980; Hummel 1988).

A bronze plaque was erected at the grave by the Historical Monuments Commission in 1941. In 1972 Paramount Chief Apthorpe Mxolisi Sandile and his family requested a more appropriate memorial, and a sculpture of King Sandile by Maureen Quin was erected at the grave and unveiled in December 1972 (Hummel 1988). The grave is presently still dressed in this way (Fig. 3).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The grave was located at 32°40'26.1" South and 027°17'52.2" East (see Fig. 2), and its dressing consisted of a concrete foundation wall on which rest dressed granite side blocks and a granite slab with a bronze plaque supporting the memorial stone and statue. The slab and memorial stone is positioned in the middle (on the north–south axis) of the side blocks with the memorial at the western side of the slab. The memorial stone is decorated with a crossed spear and knobkerrie engraved above the following inscription:

IN MEMORY OF PARAMOUNT CHIEF SANDILE, (A.A. MGOLOMBANE) SON OF NGQIKA, BORN IN 1820, DIED AND BURIED ON THE 9TH JUNE 1878.

THIS TOMBSTONE IS LAID BY PARAMOUNT CHIEF A.M. SANDILE, IN 1972.

AMARARABE R.I.P.

A bronze plaque on the eastern end of the granite slab has the following text:

SANDILE CHIEF OF THE GAIKAS. BORN ABOUT 1820 KILLED IN THE NINTH KAFFIR WAR 1877–78 AND BURIED HERE ON 9.6.1878 ERECTED BY THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS COMMISSION

The text is repeated in Afrikaans and Xhosa.

Also on the western side of the grave dressing, but outside the concrete foundation wall and granite side blocks, two sandstone crosses occur on both sides of the central granite memorial. Neither of these crosses is inscribed, but they most probably mark the graves of the British soldiers buried here.

The grave was excavated according to archaeological techniques used to investigate historical graves as described by

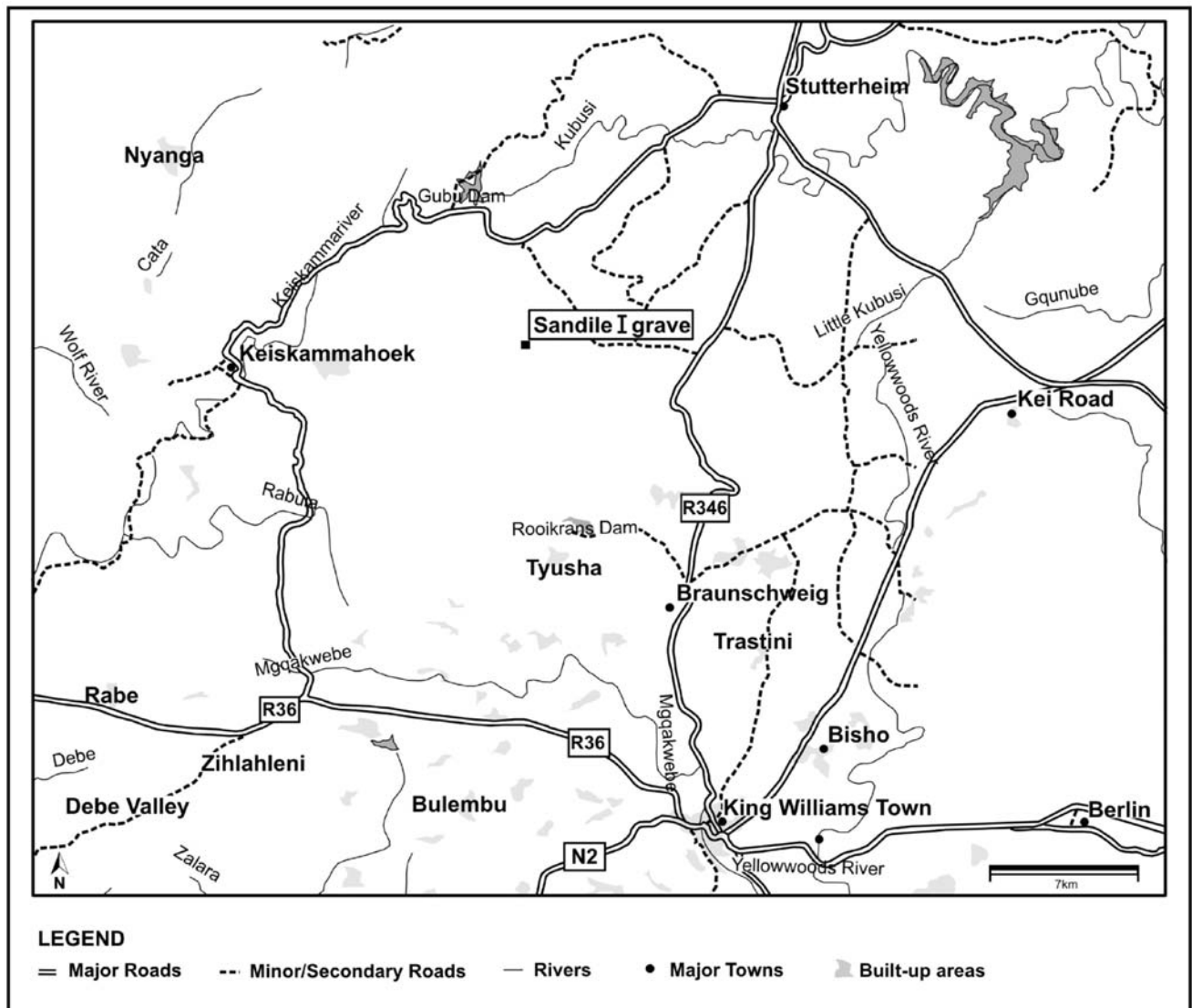


FIG. 2. The location of King Sandile's grave.

Nienaber (1997), Nienaber and Steyn (1999) and Nienaber and Steyn (2002). Members of the Sandile Traditional Council were present at the excavation, and they were continuously informed and consulted as the excavations proceeded. The green gravel covering the concrete slab on which the granite memorial rests was removed and stored to one side so that it could be replaced on completion of the investigation. The memorial stone contractors Crenshaw Monumental of Queenstown (appointed by the King Sandile Development Trust) moved the memorial stone and granite slab to the sides so that the excavation could continue in the area directly below where they were located.

After the remains were exposed by means of archaeological methods they were analysed *in situ*, and only the bones of the lower legs were disturbed during the procedure. The two tibiae were turned around, assessed and replaced in their original positions. Standard anthropological methods were employed to analyse the remains (e.g. Ferembach *et al.* 1980; Krogman & İşcan 1986; Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994) and where possible South African standards were used (e.g. De Villiers 1968; Lundy & Feldesman 1987; Loth & İşcan 2000).

After the remains had been analysed, they were covered with a layer of excavated material. A layer of white sand was then placed in the grave. The purpose of this was to mark the depth at which the remains occur in order to prevent damage

to them in the event that the grave is excavated to exhume the remains for re-interment. The grave was backfilled and the stone cairn re-constructed. Crenshaw Memorials re-erected the grave dressing and memorial stone as it was before the investigation was conducted.

RESULTS

Under the granite dressing a concrete slab was found, below which a stone cairn containing various fragments of broken bottles was exposed. The shards represented several broken bottles of various shapes and at least five different colours. Where bottle necks were recovered these were of the marble stopper and cork type rather than screw-top bottles, indicating that they were of considerable age. In the grave matrix below the stone cairn eight corroded cartridge cases were recovered.

At approximately 20 cm below the surface, colour and compaction differences in the matrix indicated the presence of a burial pit. The infill of the burial pit was grainy and rust-brown in colour in comparison with the sticky, dark-grey, hard and homogenous clay that constituted the surrounding matrix. Some bottle shards and cartridge cases, in addition to those found amongst the rocks of the stone cairn, were recovered in the upper part of the excavation.

The human remains were found in an extended position

with the body lying on its back, approximately 160 cm below the surface dressing of the grave. It was oriented from east to west with the skull at the eastern side. The neck was rotated so that the skull rested on its left side. The right upper limb was flexed with the forearm on the abdomen and the left arm was extended along the left side of the body. Both lower limbs were extended and next to each other (Fig. 4). The feet could not be observed since they were not exposed. This resulted from the fact that the memorial that was built over the remains was not positioned directly above the buried body.

Preservation of the remains was generally poor. The skull and mandible were clearly visible, but none of the long bones was complete. All their ends were eroded away. All four limbs could be observed, but very little could be seen of the ribs and vertebrae. Because the remains were left *in situ*, and because of the brittleness of the bones, it was also decided that it was not necessary to completely expose the hands, thorax and spinal column in order to accomplish the aims of the investigation.

Owing to the fragmentary nature of the remains and the fact that the analysis had to be done *in situ*, the age of the buried individual was difficult to determine. No ribs could be assessed. A complete set of permanent teeth had erupted, and advanced wear with large dentine patches was evident. Only two cervical vertebrae could be observed, and it seemed as though some age-associated changes were present on the vertebral bodies. These characteristics probably indicate an individual older than 40 years.

The pelvis was very fragmentary and not completely exposed, and could thus not be used in sex determination. However, the skull was quite robust with large mastoids, a sloping forehead, prominent brow ridges and rounded orbital margins. The mandible was also robust with a broad ramus. These characteristics indicate a male individual. The individual was very prognathic, with a broad nasal aperture. This indicates an individual of Negroid descent. It was not possible to take cranial measurements that could be used in further analysis. None of the long bones was complete enough to be measured. An estimate of the length of the right humerus of about 345 mm was made. Using the formulae of Lundy & Feldesman (1987), this would indicate a stature of about 170.7 ± 3.834 cm. This is an average height in a person from this population group (Steyn & Smith 2007).

Only the right side of the face could be seen. In this area, the



FIG. 3. The grave with the bust of King Sandile.

complete set of permanent teeth had erupted, and all teeth were present and healthy as far as could be ascertained. Advanced dental wear was evident.

Assessment for the presence of trauma and/or pathology was hampered by the poor preservation and the fact that the skeleton had not been completely excavated. Because it is known that King Sandile had a possible club foot or other abnormality on the left side and walked with a limp, the lower legs and feet were of particular interest. As explained before, the feet could not be observed. Neither of the two tibiae was complete, but they were lifted from the soil and assessed. The left tibia had an unusual shape, being slightly more rounded than usual. Its nutrient foramen was on the lateral surface of the bone, whereas it is usually situated on the posterior side of the bone, close to the soleal line. In addition, the soleal line (where the soleus muscle is attached) was poorly developed relative to that of the right tibia. This probably indicates an abnormality/weakness of the left lower leg.

DISCUSSION

A literature study on the circumstances of King Sandile's death and burial was undertaken before excavation, and pertinent historical facts could be tested with the archaeological evidence encountered. The correct location of the grave



FIG. 4. The human remains in situ. The arrow indicates north.

(French 1980; Hummel 1988) was confirmed by the stone cairn over the grave, directly below the granite grave dressing. The presence of glass bottles at the grave is ascribed to the common cultural practice of placing offerings of food and luxury goods at a grave, marking this as the grave of a Bantu-speaking person, possibly of high status. The placing of bottles at the grave at the time of burial is also briefly described in some historical newspaper reports (French 1980; Hummel 1988). Cartridge cases associated with the grave can be ascribed to an historical account of gunshots being fired as a salute at the time of burial (French 1980; Hummel 1988).

The findings from *in situ* physical anthropological analysis of the remains were exactly compatible with our historic knowledge King Sandile: an adult male of negroid descent, older than 40 years, about 171 cm tall, with a probable abnormality/weakness in the left lower leg.

The orientation of the remains with the head to the east (the wrong way around in the Christian-Western style of burial) may indicate that King Sandile was perceived as a heathen by those who buried him. He was buried in the same manner as other individuals who were doomed to eternal damnation (homosexuals, witches and suicides) according to the Victorian worldview (Cope 1959; Rutherford 1980; Nathan 1989; Neeleman 1996; Bowen 2004).

It was thus concluded that all aspects of the grave and remains observed are consistent with known historical facts on King Sandile and the manner and circumstance of his death and burial. There were no indications that this is not his grave, or that he was beheaded and his skull removed.

CONCLUSION

The legend of the decapitation of King Sandile and the removal of his skull as a trophy of war must therefore be reconsidered. To do this objectively, the context of this and other similar legends must be taken into account. A similar oral tradition exists for King Hintsa (1790–1835) and it is known historically that at least his ear, and possibly his head, was taken when he died in an attempt to escape from the British during the Sixth Frontier War (1834–1835) (Le Cordeur 1991). It is also known historically that the practice of trophy taking was well established in the British Military during the late nineteenth century and occurred even amongst the highest ranks. The skull of the Madi Mohamed Ahmed was used as an inkstand by Lord Kitchener (who commanded the British forces in South Africa during the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902) after he was killed during the Sudanese Rebellion of 1881. It was only after the Queen professed herself shocked by this practice that the skull was buried at Wadi Halfa (De Villiers & Hirtle 2002). The fact that Lieutenant Carrington clearly believed that he had buried the skull of King Sandile in England, as evidenced by the inscription on the headstone, supports the view that Xhosa skulls were taken as trophies.

Although this investigation indicates that the skull of King Sandile was not taken as a trophy, the existence of the legend of his decapitation and other historical facts indicates that Xhosa skulls were taken as trophies during the Frontier Wars. The uncertainties around King Sandile's death and the recovery of his body, as well as the autopsy that was performed, most probably gave rise to rumours that his body was mutilated and that trophies were taken. King Sandile, through this legend, became a symbol of the atrocities committed against the Xhosa people during this time of British colonial rule.

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