

Human skeletal and mummified remains from the AD1854 siege of Mugombane, Limpopo South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In 1854 Chief Mugombane and members of his Kekana Ndebele chiefdom took refuge in what is now known as Historic Cave, in the Makapan Valley, South Africa. The chiefdom retreated into the cave following an attack on a party of Trekboers. The subsequent siege of the cave, which lasted just under a month, ended in the death and surrender of its occupants and their dispersal among the Trekboers and their African auxiliaries. However, the number of people and the composition of the group that hid in the cave, as well as factors that led to the demise of the Kekana became blurred in the various renderings of the historical event. During the 1980s researchers began to cast doubt on the original Trekboer documents and the magnitude of the event when it became apparent that the Kekana oral histories remained silent on the matter. Between 2001 and 2007 the material remains of the siege were excavated to provide new data from which to judge the scale and impact of the siege event. Human remains, the primary focus of this paper, afford this perspective. This paper provides the result of the analysis of the human remains excavated from the cave, as well as an account of those remains that have been recorded or are housed in collections. The study of two naturally mummified individuals removed from the caves and stored in collections is also presented.

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1. Introduction

During the early 1800s Trekboers from the Cape Colony (settlers of Dutch extraction) began to move into the northern reaches of South Africa (see Fig. 1). They were attracted by prodigious herds of elephant and the possibility of seizing control over the highly lucrative ivory trade. But the potential for setting up profitable trade relations with the Portuguese on the east coast, not only held promise of wealth, it also offered them total independence from British rule in the Cape (Ferreira, 2002: 50).

The first decade of Trekboer occupation of the interior was characterised by a demand for labour and tribute (Bonner, 1983: 69). Trekkers living in the Zoutpansberg, for example, divided African communities in the area into two categories, *diensdoende kaffers* and *opgaaf kaffers*. The former lived in close proximity to the whites and were required to provide labour, while the latter were expected to pay tribute (Boeyens, 1994: 195). Once however,

African societies gained access to guns these chiefdoms began to protect themselves against expropriation and no longer bowed down to demands for labour (Bonner, 1983: 69). This then led to 'high levels of sporadic coercion coupled with acts of direct personal violence in an attempt to entrench Trekker power and authority' (Delius and Trapido, 1983: 64), as well as explosions of resistance.

In addition to ivory, trade in children and women formed an important part of the local and regional economy (Bonner, 1983: 80–82; Delius and Trapido, 1983: 65). Hunting and raiding, which were dominant forms of both the Trekker and the local African economy, ensured a supply of captives (Delius and Trapido, 1983: 62; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 164). Mooi River Dorp (later known as Potchefstroom), Pretoria (after 1855) and Magaliesberg (Rustenburg) formed slave-trade centres (Morton, 2005: 201) (Fig. 2), where children were registered and sold as apprentices (*inboekselings*) (Morton, 2005). Trekboer commandos, with the support of African auxiliaries, captured many of these slaves from the Kekana, Langa and Sebetiela Ndebele, as well as, other Khoe, Venda, Kwena and Gananwa groups in the Zoutpansberg, Blouberg and Waterberg regions (see Morton, 2005). Slaves also formed part of the external trade market and were exported from Portuguese

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Fig. 1. Map of South Africa, modern boundaries and names are in grey.

ports. In July 1844 Commandant-general A.H. Potgieter and twenty-four mounted Trekboers marched 300 slaves burdened with ivory to Delagoa Bay where they did business with the Portuguese (Ferreira, 2002: 42). Once A.H. Potgieter settled in Schoemansdal a lively slave-trade continued to be carried out between the Portuguese and the Zoutpansberg (Ferreira, 2002: 42). Trafficking in humans was not the sole preserve of the Trekkers. The Swazi provided the Trekboers with children to cement alliances (Bonner, 1983: 80–82), and African auxiliaries received cattle and women captured during raids in return for their military support (Morton, 2005: 204). The Trekboers were moreover highly dependant on African marksmen to hunt elephant, especially within the malaria and tsetse belt (Boeyens, 1994: 198). These marksmen also participated in the child trade and assisted the Boers in skirmishes against recalcitrant chiefdoms (Boeyens, 1994: 198).

In 1854 the Kekana Ndebele, under Chief Mugombane (also known as Mokopane or Makapan), who had fallen victim repeatedly to Trekboer raids, demands and various acts of cruelty, murdered a number of Trekkers passing through their territory.

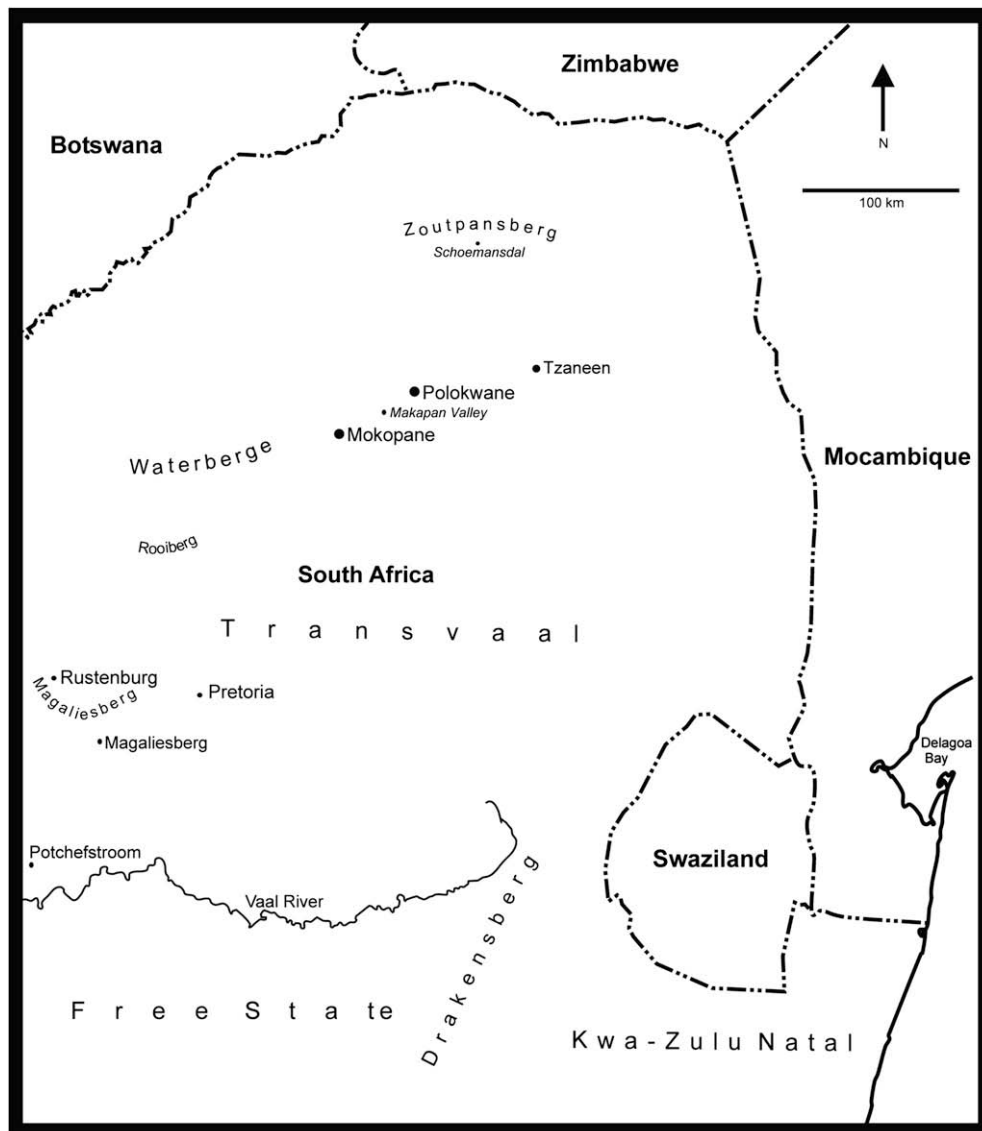


Fig. 2. Location of places mentioned in the text.

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