

Nothing of Value

The British soldier and loot in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879

Writing home to his wife shortly after the Battle of Ulundi, the last great confrontation in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, Major Philip Anstruther of the 94th Regiment, described his part in the battle. Referring to a Zulu attack directed against the section of Lord Chelmsford's square occupied by his men, he commented:

There was one nice little spruit just 28 yards off our rear faces where we were and there were 6 [dead Zulus] lying behind it. They had died very pluckily and I took one of their shields but it is rather a dirty piece of goods and nothing to compare with 4 that I got from the [King's] kraal . . .¹

This casual reference to the taking of weapons as trophies from the Zulu dead is typical of many such remarks to be found in the letters, journals and memoirs of British soldiers who fought in the campaign. Individually, they represent nothing more than an intriguing insight into the personal behaviour of the men concerned: collectively, however, they provide a considerable body of anecdotal evidence which suggests that the British practice of looting was widespread in Zululand. Indeed, during the latter stages of the campaign, they indulged this inclination without restraint. The implications for historians with an interest in the material culture of the Zulu kingdom are quite exciting, for, although only a small proportion of the material concerned has survived, often in public and private collections in the United Kingdom, it represents a surprisingly wide cross-section of Zulu artefacts, taken, by definition, from the kingdom in the very twilight of its pre-Colonial independence.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the British army had a decidedly ambivalent attitude towards loot. It professed to despise the looting of civilian property for the soldiers' personal gain, and prohibitions on looting were often vigorously enforced by means of the lash. Nevertheless, the practice was sometimes officially sanctioned in cases where the enemy's culture was considered sufficiently wealthy in recognisable Western terms to offer booty which could be used to offset the cost of the campaign. In both China in the 1860s and Asante in West Africa in 1873–74, Prize Agents were sanctioned to seize valuables on behalf of the Crown. No such practice was followed in Zululand: King Cetshwayo's kingdom boasted none of the fabulous gold



Lord Chelmsford greets his wife on his return from the Anglo-Zulu War.
Note the Zulu weapons carried by the officer on the right.

(Photograph: The Graphic)

artefacts of the Asante, and, on the whole, the British considered the Zulu kingdom to contain nothing of value. Even the country's impressive cattle resources were ravaged primarily for practical and political reasons — to sustain the British troops in the field, and to impoverish the Zulus — rather than to repair the damage to the British exchequer. Nevertheless, the mid-nineteenth century was a time when curiosity was rife in Britain, and the British army was full of amateur naturalists and anthropologists with a passion for collecting specimens of every sort: a recent exhibition at the National Army Museum in London celebrated these achievements.²

Against such a background, it is hardly surprising that the desire to procure souvenirs of the war was rife in the British ranks. Many, of course, were simply interested in military trophies, but the evidence suggests that the troops' curiosity led them to purloin a wide range of artefacts: anything, indeed, which seemed to them 'exotic' and redolent of the Zulu lifestyle. The circumstances under which they were acquired often strike the modern student of the war as bizarre: to take trophies in the aftermath of victory is a practice as old as warfare itself, but the British snatched the opportunity in some quite extraordinary situations. One might think that in the immediate aftermath of the disaster at Isandlwana, where the camp of Lord Chelmsford's invading Centre Column was destroyed by the Zulus on 22 January — just eleven days after the war began — the troops had sufficient to occupy their minds without their thoughts turning to loot, yet it apparently did happen. Amongst those who were present with Lord Chelmsford's surviving force, which spent an awful night on the devastated battlefield, was Lt Nathaniel Newnham-Davis of the Buffs, who was serving with the Mounted Infantry. Wandering about the battlefield, Newnham-Davis came across the body of a sailor named Aynsley, who had

been the servant of one of Lord Chelmsford's ADCs, Lt Milne. Newnham-Davis took a number of personal items from Aynsley's body, which he gave to Milne to return to the man's family. He also took Aynsley's cutlass, which he kept as a souvenir.³

Commandant Rupert Lonsdale of the 3rd Regiment, Natal Native Contingent, was also with Chelmsford's force. He had a lucky escape that day: having become separated from his men, he had returned to the camp at Isandlwana only to find that it was in the possession of the enemy. Lonsdale had only just managed to turn his horse and ride off with the Zulus firing after him. He also felt the need to procure a souvenir of this extraordinary event and a Zulu *knobkerrie* exists in a private collection with a carved inscription which links him to the battle. Sadly, there is no written account to suggest whether he acquired it when Lord Chelmsford returned to the battlefield that night, or on some later occasion.

The defeat of the Centre Column at Isandlwana had a very detrimental effect on British morale in the region, and it was some months before the first burial patrols returned to the field. They found it still strewn with all the pathetic paraphernalia of camp life: torn letters and scattered photographs, broken equipment, ransacked boxes and portmanteaux, discarded boots and brushes, even a pair of cricket pads. Despite the macabre circumstances, there was clearly a hunt for souvenirs. Many of the more personal items were collected and returned to the relatives of the dead, but some of the men poking about the site took items for themselves. Trooper Fred Symons of the Natal Carbineers hoped to find a Zulu spear as a souvenir, and was bitterly disappointed to find that there were none: presumably the Zulus had collected them up, either before they withdrew after the battle, or in the months when the site was deserted. Symons had to be content with a pile of books he found lying amongst the grass.⁴

In the aftermath of victory, the British were obviously in a far better position to collect souvenirs. The battle of Rorke's Drift, where a garrison of little more than a hundred British troops defeated some 4 000 Zulu after ten hours of fighting, was perceived by them to be an extraordinary event, even at the time. It is not surprising, therefore, that many who partook in the fight sought out souvenirs. The officer in command of the garrison, Lt John Chard, RE, commented in his official report that the morning after the fight, he sent out patrols to gather up discarded Zulu weapons.⁵ What happened to them? Many were no doubt broken or burnt, as they were after subsequent battles, but there is evidence to suggest that some were kept by the soldiers as souvenirs. At least two Zulu *knobkerries* exist in private collections in the United Kingdom which are mounted with small silver shields indicating that they had been presented by the senior officer of the 24th Regiment present at the battle, Lt Gonville Bromhead, to friends and colleagues. Major W. Dunbar, 2/24th, who was amongst those of Lord Chelmsford's force which relieved Rorke's Drift the morning after the fight, also collected an impressive trophy of arms. It consisted of a war shield of the *umbhumbulosu* type, with a stabbing spear and throwing spear wired to the face. To complete a symmetric design, a replica throwing spear, clearly not of Zulu origin, has also been added. A small brass shield — similar in design to those used by Bromhead, suggesting, perhaps, that this was a favourite type amongst the 24th — confirms the trophy's origin and the link with Dunbar.

It seems unlikely that these were the only such trophies taken after Rorke's Drift. Indeed, an anecdote by George Edward Orchard — who had enlisted in

the 24th under the name of George Edwards — suggests that there was some competition for such souvenirs. At one point during the battle, Orchard fired at a Zulu commander who was leading the attack mounted on a horse. The Zulu fell, and Orchard, who had noticed that he was wearing a distinctive cloak, made a mental note to claim it after the battle. When he went to look for it the next morning, however, someone had beaten him to it, and the cloak had gone.⁶ Charles Norris-Newman, who accompanied Chelmsford's forces as the correspondent for the *London Standard*, confirms that Orchard's behaviour was not unusual. Describing the battle of Gingindlovu, which took place on 2 April, he relates how he joined in the fight with a civilian wagon-conductor named Palmer. Noticing that several Zulus firing from a thick bush were causing particular damage,

. . . we both arranged to wait quietly until the Zulus fired again, and then taking good aim we fired together just as the two of them had raised themselves on their knees to get a fair aim. The one aimed at by Palmer sprung up high in the air, with outstretched arms, and fell backwards dead, shot clean through the forehead, as we found out afterwards. The one I aimed at was only wounded, but in a little while both he and the third Zulu were killed by some of the 99th. After the battle the three were found close together, and Palmer and I took and divided the trophies of war, including their native dress, arms, and accoutrements: and we keep them yet, as most hardy-won spoils.⁷

A gruesome anecdote recalled by Trooper George Mossop of the Frontier Light Horse [hereafter FLH] suggests that some were prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to acquire souvenirs, even in the heat of battle itself. Mossop took part in the battle of Khambula, the decisive action of the campaign, fought on 29 March when the Zulu forces began to retire after several hours of desperate fighting, the British cavalry, including the FLH, were sent in pursuit. Said Mossop:

A short distance outside the laager I saw a dead Zulu. He was on his back, and a good portion of his head was blown away. He was a big powerful fellow, and from his neck was hanging a large, beautifully-carved horn snuff-box, attached to a thin rope of sinew. Dismounting, I went to him, and as I was putting out my hand to secure the snuff-box, he suddenly drew up one leg, and with the sole of his foot kicked me in the pit of my stomach, bowling me over and knocking the breath from my body — but that was not as bad as the fright I got from being kicked by a dead man ! However, I was not going to be kicked and frightened to death for nothing, and setting to work more cautiously, I secured the snuff-box.⁸

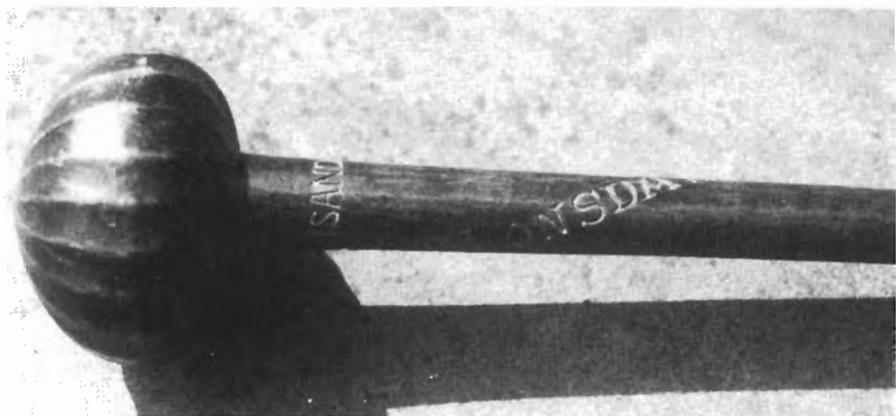
The death of the Prince Imperial of France, killed in a skirmish on 1st June, also produced a rush for souvenirs. Several collections in both France and Britain include spears allegedly found near his body. The Royal Artillery Museum in Woolwich includes one with a broken spear-point — the implication being that it snapped off on impact in the Prince's body — with an ornate silver band bearing an inscription recording where it was found.

Clearly, anecdotal evidence suggests that both officers and other ranks freely searched out souvenirs. The letters of Lt-Col Arthur Harness, who commanded N/5 Battery, RA, throughout the War, suggest that an officer's

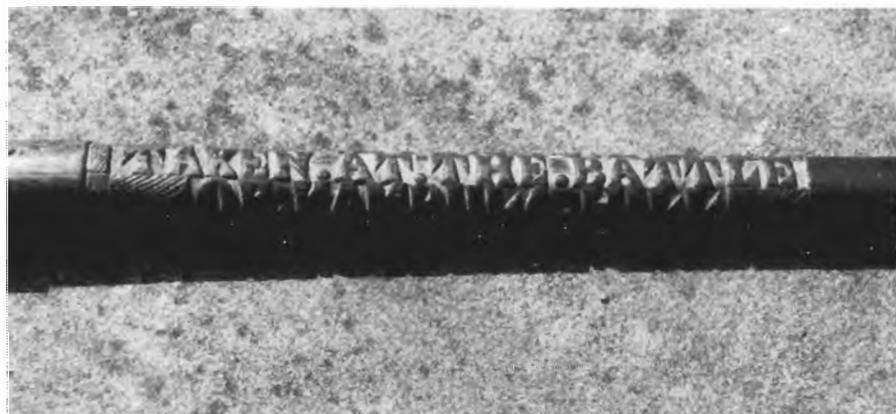
Examples of carved Zulu sticks



1. Capt. Laye's stick



2. Stick carved with name of Capt. Lonsdale and the Battle of Isandlwana



3. Stick taken at the Battle of Khambule

(Photographs: The author)

permission was necessary before trophies could be taken.⁹ However, if that was the case, it appears that it was seldom refused. Presumably the troops were allowed to indulge themselves to foster good morale. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the other ranks would have had the practical facilities to store or transport large or cumbersome artefacts in any quantity, since they did not have the advantage of the generous baggage allowances granted to the officers. One wonders if many of the souvenirs collected in the early battles of the campaign survived to the end of the war without being broken, discarded or lost.

After the battle of Ulundi, on 4 July, however, it was a different matter. It was immediately apparent to the majority of the British troops that the dispersal of the Zulu army and the razing of the king's residence, Ulundi (Ondini), spelt the effective end of the war. Many expected that a speedy return to the United Kingdom would follow, and they were concerned to procure souvenirs before it was too late. Anstruther wrote to his wife:

We walked about burning the whole place and picked up shields and assegais. I got 5 shields & 2 assegais — could not carry more.¹⁰

Later, he added:

I am sending you 5 shields, some assegais, 3 or 4, I forget which, a mat, and a couple of sticks I cut in the Kwamagwasa gardens. One of the sticks is a blue gum, a huge weapon which I think would do for Uncle P. and the other is an almond, I think, which you might keep. The shields, I think, would do for fire screens for a dining-room. 4 of them are quite new and are made out of the king's cattle and are the ones chiefs carry. They all came out of Ulundi except the little one that I picked up close to our square, in fact I picked up a lot of shields, assegais & guns but could not carry them and had to drop them all again except the small shields and assegais. The big shields are about 5 ft long, huge fellows and you will find 2 long sticks that belong to them.¹¹

Arthur Harness commented somewhat sourly that the royal residence was something of a disappointment, and contained nothing of beauty or value, only a large number of 'ugly' cowhide shields. A day or two later he noted indignantly that these had all but disappeared, and that soldiers had taken far more than they could realistically carry. Indeed, a correspondent of the *Natal Mercury* noted that one officer stationed at Fort Evelyn returned from a foraging expedition so laden with loot that he lost his balance holding it, and fell off his horse!

Lt H.C. Harford, attached to the Natal Native Contingent [the NNC], described his own somewhat mixed experiences:

In my spare time I went over the battlefield of Ulundi and picked up one or two relics in the shape of shields, assegais, etc. A few days after we arrived, Jim [his African servant] came to me to say that he knew the spot where [Cetshwayo's] crown and other paraphernalia presented to him on the occasion of his coronation by 'Somtseu' [Sir Theophilus Shepstone] were buried, and asked if he might go and make a search. I told him certainly . . . However, it turned out that they had been removed, and

squatting down, snapping his fingers to emphasise matters, he declared that it had only been done that very day, as the earth from the hole was quite fresh.¹²

It is interesting to consider which artefacts the British considered suitable souvenirs. War-shields and spears were clearly favourites, since they had obvious military connotations, and were readily identifiable as Zulu in origin. Curiously, most of the spears derived from this source and which still survive are of the throwing variety: stabbing spears of the famous Zulu pattern are scarce. No doubt throwing spears were more plentiful on battlefields — warriors flung their throwing spears in action but retained their stabbing spears, even in retreat — and perhaps their smaller blades made them in any case easier for the British to carry. Of the war-shields, the man-sized *isihlangu* type — Anstruther's '5 ft long, huge fellows' — were more impressive, though there is a clear impression that most of these were recovered from stores in the royal homesteads (*amakhanda*) rather than on the battlefield. Historians have long pondered whether these or the smaller *umbhumbhulosu* variant were more often carried into battle by the Zulus: Anstruther's remarks suggest that the smaller shields were found on the field whilst the larger ones were looted from Ulundi. It is interesting to note that many of these shields



Large *isihlangu* (war-shield) taken from Ulundi after the battle by officers of the Royal Artillery. Both the size of the shield and the colour — white with red/brown spots — are typical of surviving examples taken as souvenirs by the British.

(Photograph: Royal Artillery Museum, Woolwich)

now in British collections have the white face and red spots traditionally associated with the uThulwana *ibutho*, which was quartered at Ulundi. A study of surviving shields reveals that they were well-made and robust, with a surprising uniformity of size and style. The author has examined at least a dozen *umbhumbhulosu* shields in private and public collections in the United Kingdom and all have varied no more than an inch or two from a standard specification of 40 inches tall by 20 inches wide. The shape is also clearly standardised, with the points at the top and bottom of the oval carefully rounded off. More variation is evident in the *isihlangu* type which, being intended to cover a man's full body, differed slightly between individual examples to take into account personal stature. Several examples examined by the author were around the 48 inches by 25 inches mark, though examples as large as 59 inches by 29 inches are not uncommon.

It should not be assumed, however, that the British were interested only in overtly military artefacts. Any unusual or — in their eyes — ‘exotic’ items were fair game. Colonel Richard Harrison commented that at Ulundi he, ‘. . . got from there two wooden milk jugs and some assegais and shields.’¹³ Harford, a dedicated collector, procured a wooden milk pail from a homestead he searched during the pursuit of the King, and, after Cetshwayo was captured, he took ‘two very nice grass baskets filled with *utshwala* [beer]’, one of which he presented to Col Clarke, his commanding officer, and the other he kept.¹⁴ The Royal Regiment of Wales Museum at Brecon, also has a wooden milk pail brought back by a member of the 24th. In an album of photographs compiled by Lt F. Cookson of the 91st Highlanders — now part of the collection of the National Army Museum, London — there is a fascinating photograph of a trophy of Zulu artefacts taken by Cookson's regiment after Gingindlovu. The centrepiece is inevitably formed of an impressive display of a shield and spears, but mounted around it are various civilian artefacts, including wooden utensils, items of clothing, and beadwork. Sadly, it has not so far proved possible to discover the whereabouts of this trophy, or whether it has survived.

Zulu status sticks — the wooden staffs carried by men of rank — were also popular amongst the troops. Photographs of groups of officers from the 80th, 88th and 91st Regiments taken on campaign all show men carrying such sticks. In particular, the most straight forward design of stick — a staff with a small knotted head on the top — seems to have been especially sought after, perhaps because of its similarity to a European walking stick. The Royal Regiment of Wales Museum has two more ornate staffs, which were looted by officers of the 24th Regiment from the homestead of Chief Sihayo kaXongo.

A brief perusal of these accounts suggests that the British army must have returned from Zululand laden with booty. This may indeed have been the case: at least one engraving in *The Graphic* depicts troops arriving home carrying Zulu shields. Nevertheless, some of these items were large and cumbersome, and no doubt some severe measures had to be taken to find room for them in the crowded transports. Anstruther, like Harford and presumably other officers, could afford the luxury of shipping his trophies home separately, but none-the-less he resorted to a popular expedient: he removed the sticks at the back of the war-shields, and sent them home rolled up. He suggested to his wife that she ‘chuck’ water on them to make them supple before straightening them out. He also suggested that the spears he secured could be thrust down the back of the shields instead of the sticks. It is interesting to note that a number of shields in British collections either have no sticks at the back, or have spears substituted for them.

It was clearly important for the collectors that the origin of their trophies was recorded, otherwise the significance might be lost. Some spears and sticks were mounted with plaques or engraved metal bands, but by far the most popular method was to have them carved, usually with the name of the recipient and the relevant battle honour. This carving was often quite ornate: Lt Cookson of the 91st had the name of every place he visited in Zululand neatly carved in a spiral around the staff of a status stick. Capt. J.H. Laye had an ornate and florid design, featuring a sword piercing a Zulu shield, carved into a stick commemorating an action he participated in near Hlobane mountain on 24 January 1879. Often, a technique was employed whereby the artefact was carved away around the patterning, to leave the lettering raised. Many such trophies display a high degree of workmanship, which was presumably beyond the whittling skills of the troops themselves: clearly they were the work of a skilled craftsman, though it is not clear whether the work was done in the field or after the return from the front. Apart from being attractive items in their own right, and which speak volumes on the attitudes of the Victorian soldier, such items have an extraordinary historical significance, since this contemporary labelling ties them without doubt to very specific locations and incidents.

What did the British do with their trophies once they had secured them? Many no doubt adorned the walls of officers' messes across the United Kingdom, whilst the collections in Osborne House on the Isle of Wight contain no less than three shield-and-spear displays presented to Queen Victoria by officers returning from the campaign. Others were destined to finish up in the private houses of both officers and other ranks. In a feature on Sir Redvers Buller which appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in 1900, an *isihlangu* shield is clearly visible on the wall of the dining room of his country house. Anstruther suggested to his wife that his shields might be mounted on a pedestal and used as a fire screen, as described above. Clearly, they would not long have survived such treatment: nevertheless, it is an intriguing thought that the largest collection of Zulu artefacts dating from the nineteenth century might still be found, not in South Africa, but in the United Kingdom.

There is one last, darker, aspect to the British passion for collecting: one which was less openly referred to, but for which evidence nevertheless survives. On a number of occasions troops collected the skulls and bones of the Zulu dead from the battlefields, ostensibly for purposes of medical research, but often as souvenirs. Their desire for trophies led them to collect the mortal remains of the enemy dead themselves.

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