
ALLEGED MASS GRAVES AND BURIAL SITES OUTSIDE A FORMAL CEMETERY AT THE ORANGE RIVER CONCENTRATION CAMP, SOUTH AFRICA

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The South African or Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) Orange River Concentration Camp on the farm Doornbult, close to Hopetown in the Northern Cape Province, is one of the best preserved Camps from this War. The history of the Concentration Camp at Doornbult is characterised by its occurring in two phases. At first, from April 1901 to the end of July 1901, the camp was under military control but later, from 1 August 1901 until November 1902, it was placed under civil control. It is known that several people died during the first phase. It was only during the second phase that a formal cemetery was laid out and burials occurred in an organised way. Graves situated outside the formal cemetery were investigated during May 2007 as part of an archaeological project of the Heritage Foundation. About 17 graves were found outside the perimeters of the formal cemetery, and it was clear that these were formal, or organised, burial sites. It presently still remains unclear why these burial sites are located outside of the formal cemetery. It may be connected to a custom that prematurely born or unbaptized children were buried outside cemeteries. The only grave that was completely excavated contained the remains of a prematurely born child, whose remains were buried formally. No evidence was found of existence of mass graves at the Orange River Concentration Camp at Doornbult.

Keywords: Anglo-Boer War, South African War, Orange River Concentration Camp, Doornbult, graves, cemetery, burial customs, mass graves, unbaptized children, premature and stillborn children.

Beweerde massagrafte en grafte buite 'n formele begraafplaas by die Oranjerivierkonsentrasiekamp, Suid-Afrika

Die terrein van die Oranjerivier Konsentrasiekamp op die plaas Doornbult naby Hopetown in die Noordkaap Provinsie, wat uit die Suid-Afrikaanse of Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899-1902) dateer, is een van die bes bewaarde Konsentrasiekamp-terreine van die Oorlog. Die geskiedenis van die Konsentrasiekamp bestaan uit twee fases. Aanvanklik was die kamp onder militêre beheer (vanaf April 1901), maar later (vanaf 1 Augustus 1901 tot November 1902) is dit onder burgerlike beheer geplaas. Dit is bekend dat verskeie mense in die eerste fase in die kamp dood is. Eers in die tweede fase van die kamp se bestaan is 'n formele begraafplaas aangelê en daarna het begravinge op 'n geordende basis plaasgevind. Grafte buite die formele begraafplaas is gedurende Mei 2007 as deel van 'n groter argeologiese projek van die Erfenisstigting ondersoek. Sowat 17 grafte is buite die formele begraafplaas gevind en dit is duidelik dat die informele gedeelte wel blootgestel is aan 'n formele begravingproses. Tans is dit onbekend waarom hierdie grafte buite die formele begraafplaas aangelê is. Die vermoede bestaan dat dit verband mag hou met 'n eertydse gebruik om vroeggebore en ongedoopte kinders buite 'n formele begraafplaas te ruste te lê. Die enigste oorskot wat volledig opgegrawe is, is dié van 'n vroeggebore baba, van wie die oorskot formeel begrawe is. Geen aanduidings van die bestaan van massagrafte is by die Oranjerivier Konsentrasiekamp op Doornbult gevind nie.

Sleutelwoorde: Anglo-Boereoorlog, Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog, Oranjerivier Konsentrasiekamp, Doornbult, grafte, begraafplaas, begravinggebruik, massagrafte, ongedoopte kinders, vroeg- en doodgeborenes.

Introduction

The Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) Orange River Concentration Camp at Doornbult, close to Orange River Station in the Northern Cape Province, is one of the best preserved but also possibly one of the least known camps from this War. Interest in and research on the camp has increased markedly through the involvement of Rina Wiid, wife of the current owner of the farm Doornbult, and collaboration with the Heritage Foundation.¹ The concentration camp is associated with the Orange River Station and the British Military Camp with its associated structures. This is one of the only camps of this nature that was associated and integrated with a military camp

¹ R. Wiid & W. West, *Die Oranjerivierkampe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902* (Pretoria, 2002), pp. 7, 14; R. Wiid, *Die Doornbultkonsentrasiekamp Oranjerivierstasie* (Pretoria, 2005), p. 30.

in this way. All British soldiers, horses and supplies for the West Front were stored and deployed from here and the military camp played a major role in the war on that front.² Several different British regiments were stationed here during the course of the war. A block house (to protect the train bridge across the Orange River), a camp for black labourers, a prisoner of war camp, a cemetery for British soldiers and several roads and other placements formed part of the complex.³

Historical context

The history of the Concentration Camp at Doornbult is characterised by two phases. At first the camp was under military control and was not well appointed or administered.⁴ Boer refugees from the southern and eastern Free State had to be temporarily accommodated when the concentration camp at Kimberley, where they were headed, was placed under quarantine. The trains transporting these woman and children were held at Orange River Station and the only solution was to erect a camp in the vicinity of the military camp, and at some distance from Hopetown, the closest village to Orange River Station.⁵ Initially, from April to July 1901, the camp was under the administration of the military commander at Orange River Station.⁶ Historically, many people are known to have died during this phase and were probably buried in graves outside the formal cemetery that would later be established. It was only after the camp was placed under civil control (the second distinct phase of its existence from 1 August 1901 to November 1902⁷) that conditions improved, a formal cemetery

² J. H. Breytenbach, *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid Afrika, 1899-1902. I: Die Boere-offensief Okt.-Nov. 1899* (Pretoria, 1969), pp. 459-462; J. H. Breytenbach, *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid Afrika, 1899-1902. IV: Die Boereterugtog uit Kaapland* (Pretoria, 1983), pp. 107-113; R. Wiid & W. West, *Die Oranjerivierkampe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*, 2002, pp. 83-106.

³ J. Hattingh & A. Wessels, *Britse fortifikasies in die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899-1902)* (Bloemfontein, 1997), p. 67; W.S. Boshoff & J. Esterhuysen, *Doornbult, Noordkaap. 'n Verslag aan die Erfenisstigting van 'n argeologiese terreinopname van terreine op die plase Doornbult 86, Doornbult Outspan 87, Farm 275 distrik Hopetown ten weste van die spoorlyn by die Oranjerivierstasie*. Unpublished Report for the Heritage Foundation, 2005.

⁴ This situation is discussed by S. B. Spies, *Methods of barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and civilians in the Boer Republics: January 1900 - May 1902* (Pretoria, Cape Town, 1977), pp. 190-196; E. van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: a Social History* (Auckland Park, 2013), pp. 78-84.

⁵ E. van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: a Social History*, 2013, p. 92.

⁶ R. Wiid & W. West, *Die Oranjerivierkampe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*, 2002, pp. 69-70; C. Reynolds, *Konsentrasiekampsterftes gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902* (Pretoria, 2013), p. 43.

⁷ C. Reynolds, *Konsentrasiekampsterftes gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*, 2013, p. 43.

was laid out and burials took place in an organized way. According to Wiid and West there are in excess of 422 graves at Doornbult. Apart from six recorded names and a single British reference to three deaths that might have been buried outside the formal cemetery, there is very little historical evidence as to the burial of people who died during the first phase of the existence of the Camp.⁸

Structures outside the cemetery have been interpreted as 61 graves (two of which were thought to be multiple-, or mass burials). As many as 21 of these “graves” were indicated to occur in an area adjacent to the fenced cemetery.⁹ None of these graves were marked or had headstones, but they were situated very close to the formal, fenced cemetery.

Raath and Louw reported on a separate cemetery, which, according to tradition, was used for unbaptized children at the Springfontein concentration camp.¹⁰ The cemetery is situated northwest of the camp, in close proximity to the town. They indicate that unbaptized children were buried here by Reverend Christoph Sandrock, a missionary of the Berlin Missionary Society, who worked at a mission station at Springfontein.¹¹ Sandrock does not mention the separate cemetery in connection with deaths of children in the concentration camp in his diary, but he refers to the regular occurrence of deaths and to burials that he conducted.¹² On 19 March 1901 Sandrock noted in his diary that almost not a day passed in Springfontein without a burial.¹³

⁸ R. Wiid & W. West, *Die Oranjerivierkampe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*, 2002, pp. 26-27. However, C. Reynolds, *Konsentrasiekampsterftes gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*, 2013 p. 43 indicates 238 deaths between April 1901 and November 1902, while J.C. Otto, *Die Konsentrasiekampe* (Pretoria, 2005; originally Cape Town, 1954) p. 160 reports 199 deaths.

⁹ R. Wiid & W. West, *Die Oranjerivierkampe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*, 2002, pp. 69-70, W.S. Boshoff & J. Esterhuysen, *Doornbult, Noordkaap. 'n Verslag aan die Erfenisstigting van 'n argeologiese terreinopname van terreine op die plase Doornbult 86, Doornbult Outspan 87, Farm 275 distrik Hopetown ten weste van die spoorlyn by die Oranjerivierstasie*, 2005.

¹⁰ A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die konsentrasiekamp te Springfontein gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902* (Bloemfontein, 1991), pp. ix, 59.

¹¹ L. Zöllner & J.A. Heese, *Die Berlynse sendelinge in Suid-Afrika en hul nageslag* (Pretoria, 1984), p. 403.

¹² Archives of the University of South Africa (hereafter Unisa Archives), Hesse Collection, 266.4168092 SAND SAND: Christoph Sandrock (1845-1930) Berliner Mission, Vol. 3: 1894-09-11 – 1918-08-19. Unpublished, transcribed and typewritten diary and reminiscences, pp. 49-50. However, before the concentration camp was established, Sandrock relates a case on 4 December 1900 when he was forced to allow the burial of a heathen woman in the church cemetery. (“Gestern wurde ein heidnische <Frau>, die in Ehebruch lebt und im Militärkamp wohnt, vom Blitz erschlagen, trotzdem ich einen Begräbnisplatz, da wo auch andere Heiden begraben werden, angewiesen hatte, wurde das Begräbnis auf unserem Gottesacker mit Militärgewalt erswungen...”), p. 46. It could be this heathen cemetery that was later used for the burial of children who were not baptized.

¹³ Unisa Archives, Hesse Collection, 266.4168092 SAND SAND: Christoph Sandrock (1845-1930) Berliner Mission, Vol. 3: 1894-09-11 – 1918-08-19, p. 50. “...fast kein Tag vergeht an welchem nicht jemand in Springfontein begraben wird...”.

During the first two months after the establishment of the camp in February 1901, Rev Sandrock conducted several burial services at the camp.¹⁴

According to Raath and Louw all other deceased (except the unbaptized children) were buried in the military cemetery at Springfontein, situated approximately two kilometres from the concentration camp and to the east of the railway line.¹⁵ The camp was situated to the west of the railway line.¹⁶ Raath and Louw ascribe the fact that unbaptized children were buried separately to what they describe as the Berlin Missionary Society's apparent adherence to some Roman Catholic customs relating to baptism.¹⁷ These customs do not allow unbaptized children to be buried in the general cemetery.¹⁸ A list of 37 unbaptized children who died between 2 April 1901 and 6 September 1902 is supplied by Raath and Louw (1991:207).¹⁹ All these deaths apparently occurred after Sandrock's involvement at the Springfontein camp.

Aims of the archaeological research

Elizabeth van Heyningen states that the history of the camps has been very neglected and that relatively little actual research has been conducted on several aspects of camp life.²⁰ She argues that, in a sense, a number of narratives developed around these camps and that these became ingrained in the minds of many South Africans. This created a kind of "mythology", with many of the assumptions remaining untested.²¹ This "mythology" leads to reactions such as the books by A. C. Martin²² and J. C. Otto.²³ The current research attempts to deal archaeologically with one of these myths and untested assumptions, namely that some individuals were not buried properly and that, in fact, some bodies were buried in mass graves. Archaeological research on sites related to the Anglo Boer War is scarce. Grave relocations lead to some relevant excavation reports.²⁴ In an article on the concentration camps at Allemans

¹⁴ A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die konsentrasiekamp te Springfontein...*, p. 59.

¹⁵ A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die konsentrasiekamp te Springfontein...*, p. 57.

¹⁶ A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die konsentrasiekamp te Springfontein...*, pp. 57, 87.

¹⁷ "Blykbaar het die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap nog vasgehou aan sommige Roomse opvattinge aangaande die doop. Om hierdie rede is ongedoopte kinders wat gesterf het nie in die algemene kerkhof begrawe nie". A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die konsentrasiekamp te Springfontein...*, p. 59.

¹⁸ A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die konsentrasiekamp te Springfontein...*, p. 59.

¹⁹ A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die konsentrasiekamp te Springfontein...*, p. 207.

²⁰ E. Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War...*, p. 1.

²¹ E. Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War...*, pp. 2-12.

²² A.C. Martin, *The Concentration camps 1900-1902: Facts, figures, and fables* (Cape Town, 1957).

²³ J.C. Otto, *Die Konsentrasiekampe*, 1954.

²⁴ W.C. Nienaber, Exhumation and reinternment of burgher C.G. Naudé, *South African Journal of Cultural History* 11(1), 1997, pp. 123-133; E.A. Voigt & E.J. Watson, Evidence from the grave: The Joubert family of Elandspruit, Lydenburg District, *South African Journal of Cultural History* 2(2), 1988, pp. 42-49.

and Brandfort, Dreyer and Looock report briefly on a surface survey that led to the identification of the two camps. They recommend historical documentary research, combined with good excavation methods and careful surveying as elements of research that can add a new dimension to the research.²⁵

In May of 2007 archaeological fieldwork as part of the Orange River Camps Archaeological Project of the Heritage Foundation investigated the structures on the outside of the formal concentration camp cemetery with the aim of studying the remains and then relocating the burials to the formal cemetery, while at the same time investigating the existence of an alleged mass grave.

Archaeological investigations

The structures indicated as possible mass graves or multiple burials were surveyed (Fig. 1) and mapped (Fig. 2). The survey indicated a low mound of calcrete gravel and several smaller calcrete mounds and rock cairns. All of these were interpreted as possible surface indications of the presence of graves. The long low mound (Refer Fig. 2) was excavated in several places where it was thought likely (as indicated by surface anomalies) to contain human remains. None were found. It is most likely that the mound visible on the surface in this part of the site is an indication of the eroding edge of a calcrete bank on the slight slope leading away from the formal cemetery, rather than the surface indications of a trench dug to conduct a mass burial.

The smaller structures outside of the formal cemetery (Refer Fig. 2) were assessed and categorised according to size and appearance. Structures representing possible single and multiple burials were selected and excavated in an attempt to understand the mode of burial and the sub-surface characteristics of different types of graves at this site. Structure 2 proved to be the formal burial of a small infant buried in a wooden coffin (Fig. 3), while Structures 18 and 19 proved to be respectively a full sized grave and a partially dug burial pit containing no human remains (Fig. 4). It is possible that Structure 19 was an attempt at digging a full sized grave which was abandoned when the very solid calcrete bank below the surface was reached. This bank was also reached during the excavations. Structures 18 and 19 were selected for excavation since the surface features indicated a large mound of calcrete and therefore possibly a multiple grave. The investigation of these structures, however, indicated that these were two separate structures of which the surface mounds have merged through erosion.

²⁵ J. Dreyer and J.C. Looock, Die konsentrasiekampe en begraafplase by Allemans en Brandfort, in F. Pretorius, *Verskroeiende aarde* (Kaapstad, Pretoria, Johannesburg, 2001), pp. 154-167.



Figure 1. Surface structures indicated as possible mass graves and graves outside the formal cemetery at the Doornbult Concentration Camp site.
(Photograph: W.C. Nienaber, Orange River Camps Archaeological project).

Test excavations were conducted in the adjacent property to ascertain the possible presence of graves. No indications of any graves, other than those indicated in Fig. 2, were found.

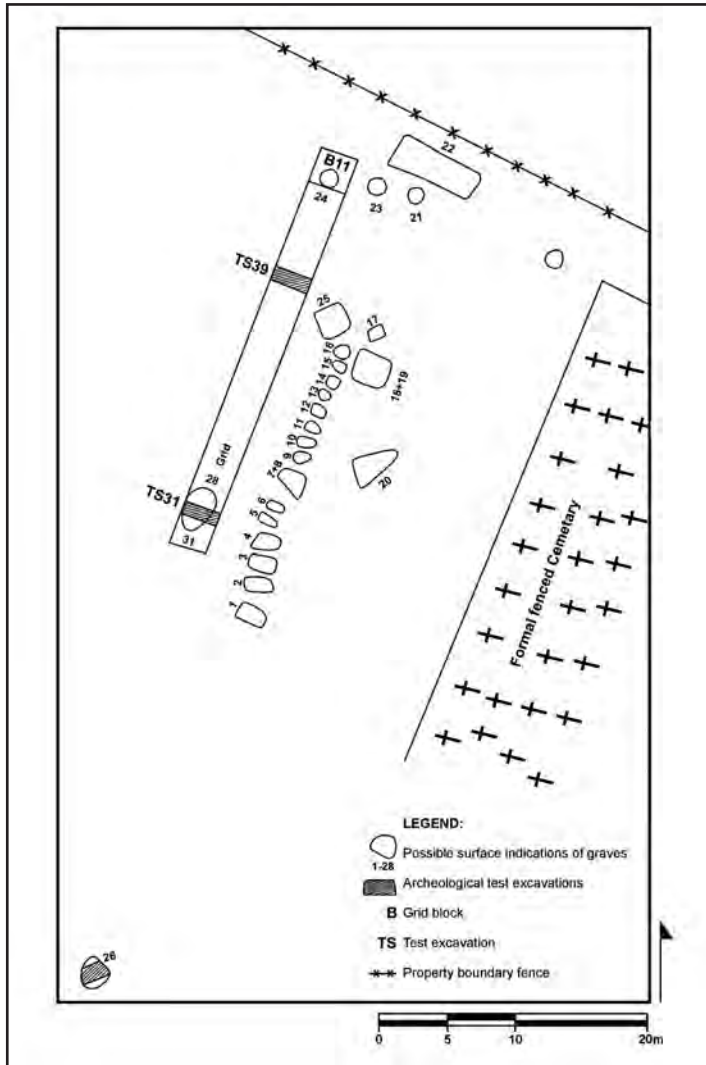


Figure 2. Map of structures outside the formal cemetery at Doornbult.
(Graphics: W.C. Nienaber and M. Pretorius, Department of Anatomy, University of Pretoria).



Figure 3. Remains of a baby found in Structure 2 at Doornbult. Here only the outlines of the small coffin are visible.
(Photograph: M. Loots, Orange River Camps Archaeological project).

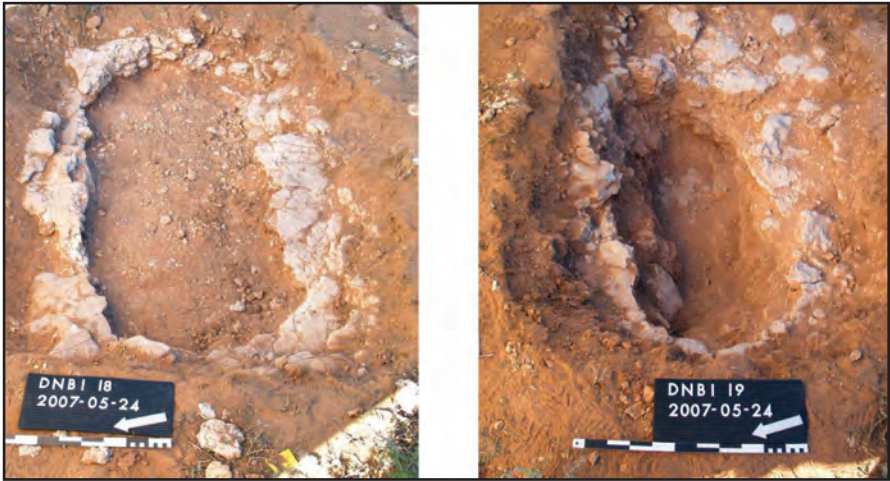


Figure 4. Structures 18 and 19 at Doornbult as excavated.
(Photograph: M. Loots, Orange River Camps Archaeological project).



Figure 5. Tool marks in the burial pit of Structure 2 at Doornbult.
(Photograph: M. Loots, Orange River Camps Archaeological project).

Skeletal analysis

The remains were found in a small coffin, and were very poorly preserved. They clearly represented the remains of one very young infant. The following bones/bone fragments were present: one unfused lamina of a vertebra, 5 rib fragments, one piece of skull (possibly an *os petrosus*), another cranial fragment possibly a piece of an occipital bone, one metacarpal/metatarsal/phalanx, one near complete tibia, one near complete femur, one fibular fragment and another unidentifiable long bone fragment. Also included with the remains, were fragments of textile, possibly a blanket or nappy; wood from a coffin, the largest piece measuring about 13 x 5.7 cm; 31 iron nails or fragments of nails of different lengths and a portion of a pin used to secure a nappy.

Both the femoral and tibial diaphyses were somewhat eroded, but their lengths were measured to 66.5 and 54 mm respectively and used to estimate the age of the individual. For this purpose, the formulae by Scheuer and Black were used.²⁶

For a femur of 66.5 mm:

Age (weeks) = $0.3303 \times 66.5 \text{ mm} + 13.583 = 35.5 \text{ weeks} \pm 2.08$ (standard error) or 34 to 38 weeks.

For a tibia of 54 mm:

Age (weeks) = $0.4207 \times 54 + 11.4724 = 34.2 \text{ weeks} \pm 2.12$ (standard error) or 32 to 36 weeks.

Alternatively, the two bones can be used to predict Crown-Heel Length (CHL) (Warren 1999), which is then used to establish the lunar month.²⁷ In this calculation, the femur length translates to a CHL of 43.6 indicating an 8.5 lunar month pregnancy (with 10 lunar months being a full term pregnancy).²⁸ The tibial length gives the same result.

Due to the poor preservation and immature nature of the remains, it was not possible to determine the sex or population affinity. However, it is clear that the remains were those of a premature baby, born around 34 to 36 weeks gestational age. He/she was buried in a formal grave in a wood coffin. Remains of textile and a nappy pin were found associated with the remains.

²⁶ J.L. Scheuer & S.M. Black, *Developmental juvenile osteology* (London, 2000).

²⁷ M.W. Warren, Radiographic determination of developmental age in fetuses and stillborn, *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 44(4), 1999, pp. 708-712.

²⁸ I.G. Fazekas & F. Kósa, *Forensic Fetal Osteology* (Budapest, 1978).

Conclusion

Archaeological excavations and survey of structures outside the formal cemetery at the Orange River Concentration Camp on the farm Doornbult indicated that only 17 graves occur outside the formal cemetery (Refer Fig. 2). Evidence, such as the size and layout of the graves (Fig. 3 and 4) and tool marks in the burial pits (Fig. 5), indicate that these were formal, or organized, burials. On the basis of specific Orange River Concentration Camp documents, it presently remains unknown why these burials are located outside of the formal cemetery. It may be related to the fact that the deceased was unbaptized, and therefore buried separately, as evidenced by the arrangements at the Springfontein Camp.²⁹ No evidence for the existence of mass graves at Doornbult Concentration Camp was found. The assumed presence of mass graves can possibly be ascribed to an over interpretation of scant historical facts in order to explain the absence of burials from the first phase of the existence of the camp.

Judged by the finds at the Orange River Concentration Camp at Doornbult, the motivation for the separate cemetery was probably different from Raath and Louw's suggestion. No German missionaries were involved at Doornbult, but also here it seems that an unbaptized child has been buried outside the formal cemetery. It is reported that a few young and stillborn babies were not listed in the official list of deaths in the camp.

There is still much to be learned about camp life during the Second Anglo Boer War. Considerable information can be obtained from archaeological investigation of these camp sites, as well as their associated graveyards. For example, recent excavations at the Magogwe cemetery (Mafikeng) aimed to test the proposition that the high mortality rate of especially children may have been, at least partly, due to pre-existing poor health and nutrition.³⁰ Unfortunately this research had to be terminated due to pressure from local communities. Leaders and members of local communities living in close proximity to the graveyards objected to the excavation of the graves. This pressure resulted in the permit being retracted by SAHRA, the South African Heritage Resources Agency. It is hoped that future research on the physical and skeletal remains will be possible, as there are many aspects of this period in the history of South Africa that are still poorly understood.

²⁹ A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die konsentrasiekamp te Springfontein...*, p. 59.

³⁰ S.Y van der Walt, Stress and disease in Mafeking during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902): an analysis of skeletal remains, Research proposal, MSc Anatomy, University of Pretoria, 2013. http://www.sahra.org.za/sahris/sites/default/files/additionaldocs/SVDW%20MSc_protocol_2013.11.25_2.pdf (2015-11-03). See also E. Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War...*, pp. 39-45; A. C. Martin, *The concentration camps 1900-1902: Facts, figures, and fables*, 1957, pp. 36-39.

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