

The Retief Massacre of 6 February 1838 revisited

*Jackie Grobler**

I see that every white man is an enemy to the black, and every black man an enemy to the white, they do not love each other and never will.
King Dingane to Richard Hulley, February 1838.¹

Introduction

This article represents an attempt to reconstruct a startling incident in the history of South Africa and to establish its significance. It searches for the answers to three related questions. What happened on that fateful morning of 6 February 1838 when the Voortrekker leader Piet Retief and his companions were overwhelmed at Mgungundlovu, the stronghold of the Zulu king Dingane? Why did the Zulu king order his warriors to kill Retief and his men; and what is the historical significance of this event? No reconstruction of any historical event is a simple undertaking. In this case the challenge for the historian is to establish, on the basis of a rather restricted pool of inconclusive evidence of which the trustworthiness is questionable, how and why Retief and his men were killed. It is never easy to establish beyond reasonable doubt why national leaders make specific decisions. Here the challenge is to sift through various explanations to find the most likely causes for the killing and why it was carried out in the way it was. The significance of events seems to change over time because the context in which events occur continuously change. In this case, the challenge is to establish the most lasting significance of the Retief Massacre in both the short and the long term. Only when it has been established how Retief and his companions were killed, what led to their killing and the significance of the killing, will it be possible to explain what happened at Mgungundlovu on that fateful day.

Sources

Since all the Voortrekkers who were at Mgungundlovu on 6 February 1838 were killed, no eyewitness account exists on the massacre from their side. There is indeed only one account of events by an eyewitness; he recorded it on the day of the murder and added to his report in the course of the following days. This was Francis Owen, a British missionary based at Mgungundlovu, who watched from a distance – from the safety of his mission station – as events unfolded and then wrote about it in his diary. A second non-Zulu eyewitness of the massacre was a twelve-year-old boy, William Wood. He was the son of a British trader and lived with Owen and his family. Wood understood Zulu well and often acted as interpreter for Dingane. It is unclear exactly where he was when the incident took place. His report was published in Cape Town two years after the event but where, when and how he recorded it on paper is still unknown. A third non-Zulu eyewitness was Jane Williams, who was later known by her married name, Jane Bird. She

* Jackie Grobler is a senior lecturer in History at the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies, University of Pretoria. He is currently busy with studying aspects of the history of the Great Trek and also on the commemorative landscape of South Africa.

1. R.B. Hulley, "An Account of Rev. Mr Owen's Visit to Zululand in the Year 1837", in G.E. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen, M.A. Missionary with Dingaan in 1837–38. Together with Extracts from the Writings of the Interpreters in Zulu, Messrs Hulley and Kirkman* (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1926), p 177.

was a Welsh girl who worked as servant for the Owen family. She also viewed the events from the mission station. Her report was published in the *Orange Free State Monthly Magazine* in December 1877. It is not known when she wrote it.²

There were of course many Zulu eyewitnesses, including Dingane and the warriors who participated in the massacre. They left no written reports. Owen recorded a number of statements by Dingane in his diary.³ Joseph Kirkman and Richard Hulley, who both worked as interpreters at mission stations in Zululand, also recorded statements by Dingane within several days of the massacre.⁴ A Zulu who was captured by the Voortrekkers ten months later, a few days after the Battle of Blood River, was questioned about the massacre by Andries Pretorius on 21 December 1838. Jan Bantjes recorded this interview, writing that the Zulu claimed he was only an eyewitness of the massacre, and did not participate in it since he was ill that day, but that he clearly saw what took place.⁵ A French traveller, Adulphe Delegorgue, questioned Zulu eyewitnesses about the event more than a year after it occurred and drew up a report on the basis of what they told him.⁶ Zulu oral tradition of the incident was recorded by James Stuart, but this was only done 60 or more years after the massacre, which places a question mark on the validity of the evidence.⁷ The Zulu author and traditional healer, Credo Mutwa, also recorded Zulu recollections,⁸ as did the Zulu historian J.S.M. Maphalala, who was formerly attached to the University of Zululand.⁹

The massacre of Retief and his party was a momentous event in the context of the Great Trek and is discussed in virtually every publication on the trek. In books and articles about Retief the events almost always feature; of these the following are included in this analysis: H.J. Hofstede's *Geschiedenis van den Oranje-Vrijstaat*; Gustav Preller's *Piet Retief* – a rather romanticised biography of the Voortrekker leader; and Eily and Jack Gledhill's *In the Steps of Piet Retief*. A.G. Oberholster reports on the massacre in his biography of Retief in the *South African Dictionary of Biography*. Jay Naidoo makes a number of challenging statements on the events in a chapter entitled: 'Was Retief Really an Innocent Victim?' in his book *Tracking down Historical Myths*, but this is unfortunately based largely on an analysis of secondary sources. The most intensive study of the massacre is undoubtedly A.E. Cubbin's master's thesis, 'A Study in Objectivity: The

-
2. E. and J. Gledhill, *In the Steps of Piet Retief* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1980), p 203.
 3. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, pp 110–117.
 4. J. Kirkman, "Joseph Kirkman's Story", in Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 159; Hulley, "An Account", pp 176–179.
 5. J.G. Bantjes, "Journal der Ekspeditie van de Uitgewekene Boeren, onder hunnen Hoofd-Kommandant Andreas Wilhelmus Jacobus Pretorius (voormaals van Graaff-Reinet), tegen Dingaan, Koning der Zulus, in de Maand(en) November en December 1838" (Byvoegsel tot *De Zuid-Afrikaan* [Januarie/Februarie 1839]), in G.S. Preller, *Voortrekkermense VI, 'n Versameling Oorspronklike Dokumente uit die Voortrek 1838–1852* (Nasionale Pers, Kaapstad et.al., 1938), p 69.
 6. A. Delegorgue, *Travels in Southern Africa, II*, tr. F. Webb (Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban and Pietermaritzburg, 1990), pp 63–65.
 7. This oral tradition is discussed in C. de B. Webb and J.B. Wright (eds and trs), *James Stuart Archives of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples, Volumes 1–5* (University of Natal Press and Killie Campbell Africana Library, Pietermaritzburg and Durban, 1976–2001). Hereafter, in the footnotes of this article this source is referred to as *JS.A*.
 8. C.V. Mutwa, *My People. The Incredible Writings of Credo Vusa'mazulu Mutwa* (Blue Crane Books, Johannesburg, undated), pp 189–195.
 9. J.S.M. Maphalala, "The Re-interpretation of the War of Ncome, 16 December 1838", Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, *Seminar on the Re-interpretation of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome, University of Natal, Kwa-Dlangezwa, 31 October 1998*, pp 54–63.

Death of Piet Retief. This commendable work is based on extensive research from a wide variety of sources.¹⁰

In the historiographical process a number of myths have become ingrained over time. This article aims at avoiding those myths and at establishing as closely as possible, in the tradition of the celebrated historian Leopold von Ranke, “what really happened on that day”.

Background

By the beginning of 1838, Dingane ka Senzangakona had been king of the Zulu for nine years. The centre of his kingdom was in the northern half of South Africa’s province now called KwaZulu-Natal. Mgungundlovu was his stronghold and royal capital. Dingane was firmly in control and had managed to ward off threats from all possible enemies. However, the spread of Western colonisation was closing in on him. English traders had settled at Port Natal during the reign of his predecessor, King Shaka, and missionaries had entered his kingdom soon afterwards. Their numbers were small, however, and they posed no direct threat. In 1835 Dingane even signed a treaty with the British residents in Port Natal in which he consented to “waive all claim to the persons and property of every individual” living in that settlement.¹¹

In 1835–36, Dutch-speaking farmers who were discontented with British authority began to move out of the eastern districts of the Cape Colony. This migration is known in history as the Great Trek and its participants as the Voortrekkers [the first ones to trek]. The Voortrekkers were not a close knit unit and their leaders found it difficult to control the migration. In 1837, a prominent farmer and former military commander on the Cape eastern frontier, Piet Retief, joined their ranks. He was subsequently elected as overall leader of the Voortrekkers with the rank of governor. Even before his arrival, some of the Voortrekkers who were at that time in the northern half of the present Free State province, became involved in clashes with the Ndebele of chief Mzilikazi, former regimental commander of King Shaka but since 1821 an arch-enemy of the Zulu nation. After initially suffering reverses, a fairly small commando of Voortrekkers mounted on horseback soundly defeated the prime of the Ndebele forces in November 1837 and drove them to the north over the border of the present South Africa.¹²

-
10. A.E. Cubbin, “A Study in Objectivity: The Death of Piet Retief”, MA dissertation, University of the Orange Free State, 1980. The works consulted include, H.J. Hofstede, *Geschiedenis van den Oranje-Vrijstaat, in Verband met eene Korte Geschiedenis der Aangrenzende Kolonien, Vooral der Kaapkolonie, Volgens Bezwoeren Verklaringen der Voortrekkers, en de Archieven, Documenten en Proclamatien, met Schetsen en Kaarten Opgekluiserd* (D.A. Thieme, ’s Gravenhage, 1876); G.S. Preller, *Piet Retief: Levensgeskiedenis van die Grote Voortrekker* (Nasionale Pers, Kaapstad et al., 1930); Gledhill, *In the Steps of Piet Retief*; A.G. Oberholster, “Retief, Pieter”, in W.J. de Kock en D.W. Krüger (reds.), *Suid-Afrikaanse Biografiese Woordeboek, Deel II* (RGN, Kaapstad en Johannesburg, 1972), pp 601–605; J. Naidoo, *Tracking down Historical Myths: Eight South African Cases* (Ad. Donker, Johannesburg, 1989).
 11. J.C. Chase, *The Natal Papers. A Reprint of All Notices and Public Documents Connected with that Territory Including a Description of the Country and a History of Events from 1498 to 1843 in Two Parts* (R. Godlonton, Grahamstown, 1843. Reprint: C. Struik, Cape Town, 1968), Part 1, p 40.
 12. P.J. van der Merwe, “Die Matebeles en die Voortrekkers”, *Argiefjaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis* 49, II, (Staatsdrukker, Pretoria, 1986), pp 220–226; P. Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa: From the Early Iron Age to the 1970s* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1986), p 54.

Some of the Voortrekkers wanted to settle on the central South African highveld, but Retief and his followers had set their sights on that part of Natal that lay immediately south of the Zulu kingdom, including Port Natal harbour (the present Durban). In the same month that his compatriots defeated Mzilikazi's Ndebele, Retief and a few of his party crossed the Drakensberg and visited Dingane at Mgungundlovu. The details of that visit are not of importance here. What is relevant however is that Retief made it clear to Dingane that he intended settling in Natal and wanted to sign an agreement, similar to the agreements between the British authorities and Xhosa chiefs on the Cape eastern frontier, in which Dingane would grant land to the Voortrekkers so they could settle there. Retief gained the impression that Dingane was willing to negotiate, but only if Retief agreed to bring him the cattle that were, as far as could be established at the time, stolen from the Zulu by the Tlokwa of Chief Sekonyela who lived west of the Drakensberg. It seems, however, that Dingane wanted more than merely a herd of recaptured cattle.

Retief returned to his people with the promising news that Dingane would negotiate. As witnessed by Zulu indunas who accompanied him, Retief then managed to recapture the Zulu cattle from Sekonyela. He also took some rifles and horses from the Tlokwa chief. The indunas drove the cattle to Dingane, but Retief kept the horses and some of the cattle. At the beginning of February 1838, Retief returned to Mgungundlovu, accompanied by about 70 Voortrekker men and boys, including his own fourteen-year-old son Pieter Cornelis, and about 30 servants. His aim was to re-enter negotiations with Dingane who had in the meantime received detailed reports about the defeat of the Ndebele and the way Retief had regained the cattle from Sekonyela.

Retief wasted no time in sounding out Dingane on the granting of land by means of a treaty. The Zulu monarch seemed willing to agree. However, in retrospect it is highly unlikely that he ever seriously contemplated granting the land which Retief wanted from him, namely the area between the Drakensberg in the west, the Thukela River in the north, the Indian Ocean in the east and the Mzimvubu River in the south. According to Maphalala, in terms of Zulu law, Dingane was not empowered to give away tribal land; it was inalienable and an inheritance from Mvelinqangi (God). The king was merely the guardian of the land. The furthest that he could go was to grant *izizya* or use of the land to specific people where they could erect huts for themselves and plant crops.¹³ The 1835 treaty between Dingane and the British residents of Port Natal, referred to previously in this article, made provision for such use of the land. There is no mention in the agreement of the transfer of land.¹⁴ However there is strong evidence that on 4 February 1838 both Dingane and Retief signed a written deed of land transfer – the so-called Retief–Dingane Treaty. This document specifically made provision for the transfer of the land which the Voortrekker wanted.

In the past, a number of historians have questioned the authenticity of the treaty. The first prominent figure in this regard was Sir George Cory, in 1923. He soon entered into a public debate with Gustav Preller and W. Blommaert on the issue. This ended in Cory conceding that the treaty was real.¹⁵ Latter day historians who nevertheless believe

13. Maphalala, “The Re-interpretation of the War of Ncome”, p 57. See also O.D. Dhlomo, “A Zulu Perspective of the Battle of Blood River”, *The Daily News*, 21 January 1988, p 19.

14. Chase, *Natal Papers*, Part 1, p 40.

15. S.F.N. Gie (red.), *Die Retief-Dingaan Ooreenkoms* (Nasionale Pers, Kaapstad, 1923), pp i–v.

that the Retief–Dingane Treaty is a fake, include Maphalala and Naidoo.¹⁶ However, there is virtually irrefutable evidence that such a treaty did exist. The missionary Owen, who was an eyewitness of the events, wrote about the incident in his diary.¹⁷ He had no reason to make it up. Cubbin believes that even though the treaty is dated 4 February, it was only signed on 6 February, less than an hour before Retief and his men were killed.¹⁸ The treaty that exists today is a copy – the original no longer exists. Nevertheless, there is overwhelming evidence that there was indeed a treaty and that Dingane signed by making his cross on it. The treaty appears to have had very little influence on the Retief massacre. Dingane almost certainly only signed to placate Retief and his companions; his decision to have them murdered was already taken and he even informed Owen of this plan beforehand.¹⁹

The massacre of Retief and his companions

An obvious question that arises on the events of 6 February 1838 is: why did Retief and his men not leave Mgungundlovu immediately after the treaty had been signed (if it was indeed signed on 4 February); why was he still there two days later? Oberholster claims that Retief believed that 5 February was a Sunday (it was a Monday) and that was why he decided to postpone his return to the Voortrekker laagers on the Upper Thukela to the following day.²⁰ The interpreter Hulley claimed that Dingane had told him a few days after the massacre that he went out of his way to delay Retief and his men at Mgungundlovu for as long as possible. His reason was that he had written a letter (Owen actually did the writing) to Captain Gardiner and John Cane a few days earlier to request them to be present at his negotiations with Retief. When Gardiner and Cane did not arrive and Dingane could no longer hold back the Voortrekkers, he, according to his own statement to Hulley, had them killed.²¹

All the evidence suggests that the Voortrekkers suspected no foul play and thus felt no urgency to leave Mgungundlovu. Wood claims that he warned a group of Retief's men on the morning before they were murdered that Dingane intended to act against them.²² Nobody seems to have taken the twelve-year-old boy seriously. Owen wrote in his diary on the day of the slaughter that two Voortrekkers had visited him early that morning a few hours before the massacre. When questioned by Owen what they thought of Dingane, the two men replied that he was a good man and that this was proven by the huge tract of land that he had granted to the Voortrekkers.²³

The next question that arises is: why did Retief and his men go into Mgungundlovu that morning and why did they enter unarmed? Oberholster suggests that early that morning, while the Voortrekkers were preparing themselves for the return trip

16. Maphalala, "The Re-interpretation of the War of Ncome", p 62; Naidoo, *Tracking down Historical Myths*, pp 82–105.

17. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 108.

18. Cubbin, "A Study in Objectivity", p 127.

19. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 108.

20. Oberholster, "Retief, Pieter", p 603.

21. Hulley, "An Account", pp 176–177.

22. W. Wood, "Statements Respecting Dingaan, King of the Zulus, with Some Particulars Relating to the Massacres of Messrs Retief and Biggar", in J. Bird, *The Annals of Natal: 1495–1845, 2 Volumes* (P. Davis & Sons, Pietermaritzburg, 1888), p 380.

23. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 108.

to their wives and families, they were invited to a feast in their honour²⁴ and were asked to bring their servants too.²⁵ Hulley wrote that he heard a few days after the massacre that Dingane himself requested Retief and his companions to enter his stronghold to bid farewell to him and to drink to his health, after which they could return to their wives and children. A request that accompanied the invitation was that they should leave their firearms outside the stronghold. That was why the Voortrekkers placed their rifles outside against the kraal fence before entering.²⁶ Magidigidi ka Ndobede recalled many years after the event that the Voortrekkers left their rifles at the euphorbia trees in front of the entrance to the kraal.²⁷ Oberholster merely explains that the Voortrekkers and their servants approached the Zulu king, as was the custom, as unarmed guests.²⁸

According to Wood, Retief sat down with the Zulu king and his captains. The other Voortrekkers and their servants seated themselves a short distance away. The king offered them *tywala*, a type of beer and they all accepted. While they were drinking, on the order of the monarch, a few Zulu warriors began to dance.²⁹ It is not clear whether these warriors were armed.

The interpreter Hulley wrote on the basis of what he was told by Dingane himself and by other eyewitnesses, that Retief and his men were overpowered by a force of about one thousand Zulu warriors who were brought into Mgungundlovu the previous night under cover of darkness.³⁰ The oral tradition of the Zulu concurs. Nduna ka Mangina related in 1910 that Dingane ordered his military commander, Ndlela, to mobilise the Zulu army. In order to have the advantage of surprise and to ensure that the Voortrekkers would not become suspicious, the warriors were unarmed and had no assegais and battle shields (*izibhangu*); they only had short sticks (*isiquwayi*) and dance shields (*amabau*). Dingane indicated that he would say to Retief and his men: “I will hold a war dance for you. You have to come and watch. Afterwards I will give you cattle and you can then leave with that.”³¹

Three days after the massacre, the missionary Owen wrote in his diary that Dingane had told Hulley the following about the events on 6 February:

He [Dingane] invited all the Voortrekkers into the cattle kraal to take leave of them. His subjects were then ordered to dance. They formed, as they usually do, a half moon and danced closer and closer to the Voortrekkers until he ordered them to attack the unsuspecting victims.³²

Lunguza ka Mpukane was a Zulu youth and member of the regiment present at the massacre in 1838, but according to him he took no part in it. He said 70 years later that the warriors who danced and then fell upon the Voortrekkers, were unarmed.³³

24. Oberholster, “Retief, Pieter”, p 604.

25. Gledhill, *In the Steps of Piet Retief*, p 208.

26. Hulley, “An Account”, pp 177–178.

27. Magidigidi ka Nobede, statement, 8 May 1905, *JSA, Volume 2*, p 91.

28. Oberholster, “Retief, Pieter”, p 604.

29. Wood, “Statements Respecting Dingaan”, p 380.

30. Hulley, “An Account”, p 178.

31. Nduna ka Mangina, statement, 27 April 1910, *JSA, Volume 5*, p 7.

32. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 112.

33. Lunguza ka Mpukane, statement, 14 March 1909, *JSA, Volume 1*, p 319.

Ndukwana ka Mnegwana, on the other hand, said that the Zulu dancers who attacked Retief and his companions were armed with short, thick sticks.³⁴

According to Delegorgue, Zulu eyewitnesses told him that Retief had requested Dingane to tell his warriors to dance somewhat further away from them. The Zulu king nodded affirmatively and stood up. He then began singing the following words in Zulu, a language which the Voortrekkers could not understand: “Drink, o drink the beer, your burning throats long for it – drink as much as you can, since tomorrow you will no longer drink.” Dingane then whistled, as the Zulus do when they attack, and shouted: “For me, my warriors – grab them, grab hold of them, and kill, kill the wizards!”³⁵

Nduna ka Manqina stated in 1910 that Dingane told his army chief, Ndlela, beforehand: “Tell the warriors to sing two songs. With the second I will wave my left hand over my shoulder.” When Dingane gave the sign with his left hand, the warriors stormed into the *isigodhlo*.³⁶

Wood wrote that the Voortrekkers had been sitting for only about fifteen minutes when Dingane shouted out the order: “Grab them!” A mass of warriors fell upon Retief’s men before they could rise to their feet.³⁷ Many of the Voortrekkers instantly fought back. According to Wood one of the Voortrekkers cut a Zulu up with his pocket knife.³⁸ The Zulu man who was captured by Pretorius after the Battle of Blood River also declared that although the Voortrekkers were unarmed, they defended themselves with their pocket knives. According to this same witness they cut a route for themselves through one Zulu regiment and a second one was needed to subdue them. A total of 20 Zulu warriors were killed and a large number wounded.³⁹ Ndukwana ka Mbengwana also stated that the Voortrekkers defended themselves with long knives. Lunguza ka Mpukane added that they cut open the stomachs of their attackers with those knives. In 1910, Nduna ka Manqina said that one warrior was killed for every Voortrekker that died.⁴⁰

Hulley wrote on the grounds of his conversations with Dingane and other eyewitnesses that immediately after the Voortrekkers were overpowered their necks were broken by their attackers in order to end their stout resistance. Their bodies were then carried to the hillock to be mutilated and allowed to rot.⁴¹ Lunguza ka Mpukane also stated that the warriors grabbed the Voortrekkers and broke their necks with their bare hands.⁴²

34. Ndukwana ka Mbengwana, statement, 18 October 1897, *JSA, Volume 4*, p 263.

35. Delegorgue, *Travels in Southern Africa, II*, pp 63–65.

36. Nduna ka Manqina, statement, 27 April 1910, *JSA, Volume 5*, p 7.

37. Wood, “Statements Respecting Dingaan”, pp 380–381.

38. Wood, “Statements Respecting Dingaan”, p 381.

39. Bantjes, “Journal der Ekspeditie”, pp 69–70.

40. Ndukwana ka Mbengwana, statement, 18 October 1897, *JSA, Volume 4*, p 263; Lunguza ka Mpukane, statement, 14 March 1909, *JSA, Volume 1*, p 319; Nduna ka Manqina, statement, 27 April 1910, *JSA, Volume 5*, p 7.

41. Hulley, “An Account”, p 178.

42. Lunguza ka Mpukane, statement, 14 March 1909, *JSA, Volume 1*, p 319.

The events on Kwa-Matiwane

The most reliable evidence on the events of 6 February 1838 indicates that Retief, his companions and their servants were overpowered in Mgungundlovu but were only killed on the hill of execution, Kwa-Matiwane, after being dragged there. Kwa-Matiwane is a rocky outcrop on a hillock called Hlomo Amabutho, about 800 metres north of Dingane's stronghold.⁴³ Owen claimed that it was Dingane himself who had earlier explained to him the origin of the name Kwa-Matiwane. It was the domain of the Amagwane chief, Matiwane. Dingane had ordered Matiwane's execution on that same hillock and had posthumously appointed him chief of that particular place, which he described as the spot where bad people are killed.⁴⁴

Owen wrote on the day of the massacre that the unarmed Voortrekkers were dragged to Kwa-Matiwane by nine or ten Zulus.⁴⁵ The next day he added, in a further comment, that a number of young boys, some of whom were less than eleven years old, were with their fathers and were also killed. The Voortrekkers' Khoikhoi servants were also killed, as were Thomas Halstead, the Voortrekkers' interpreter, and his servant. The number of people massacred was therefore closer to 100 than to 70.⁴⁶

Wood's report is very similar to Owen's. He wrote: "The farmers were then dragged with their feet trailing on the ground, each man being held by as many Zulus as could get at him, from the presence of Dingaan, who still continued sitting and calling out 'Bulala abatagati' [kill the wizards]."⁴⁷ This report of events by eyewitnesses places a question mark over Gustav Preller's version of events:

Outside the circle of huts the victims were tied up with thongs; and then, while they were still alive, a sharpened pole was driven [from below] into their bodies, with the point ending in their chests, and the victims were carried upright on the poles, which made it easier to hit out at them.⁴⁸

Preller probably based this allegation on the memoirs of Sarel Cilliers, who as a member of Pretorius's commando that defeated Dingane's forces at Blood River in December 1838, buried the remains of Retief and his companions at the foot of Hlomo Amabutho.⁴⁹ The Afrikaans historian Ben Liebenberg believes that the Voortrekkers could have been impaled, since it was a common form of torture practised by the Zulu.⁵⁰ The South African/American historian Leonard Thompson also mentions the possibility of impalement.⁵¹ No eyewitness account or Zulu report mentions, or even hints at impaling.

43. Oberholster, "Retief, Pieter", p 604.

44. Hulley, "An Account", p 174.

45. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 107.

46. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 111.

47. Wood, "Statements Respecting Dingaan", p 381.

48. Preller, *Piet Retief*, 276. Quotation translated.

49. Hofstede, *Geschiedenis*, p 61.

50. B.J. Liebenberg, *Andries Pretorius in Natal* (Academica, Pretoria en Kaapstad, 1977), p 41.

51. L. Thompson, "Co-operation and Conflict: The Zulu Kingdom and Natal", in M. Wilson and L.M. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford History of South Africa, I* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1969), p 360.

Wood wrote that the Zulus began clubbing Retief's companions to death on the way to Kwa-Matiwane by hitting them on the head with knobkerries. Retief was held upright to be a witness to the slaughter of his companions before he too was killed.⁵²

Zulu oral tradition provides conflicting versions on the exact fate of the Voortrekkers. This is understandable, because the recollections were only recorded a lifetime or more after the event. Some Zulu recalled that as a sign of humiliation they were killed with sticks and stones – the fate of dogs – rather than being killed with spears or knobkerries, as would be the case if warriors were the victims. The bodies were left on Kwa-Matiwane to be devoured by vultures.⁵³ Paulina Dlamini, however, declared that her father, who claimed to belong to the iHlaba regiment that was charged with killing Retief and his men, agreed that they were beaten down with sticks. He went on to say that the bodies were thrown into a donga some 200 paces from Kwa-Matiwane and that the sides of the donga were then collapsed to cover the bodies with earth and stones. Only the corpses of the Voortrekkers' servants were left on Kwa-Matiwane.⁵⁴ This seems questionable, since no other victims of King Dingane's wrath were ever, as far as could be established, buried near Kwa-Matiwane.

Wood reported that Dingane gave the following order after the Voortrekkers had been dragged away: "Cut the heart and liver of the king of the Boers out and bury it on the road of the Boers."⁵⁵ According to Zulu oral tradition, Retief's heart and liver were removed and buried on the road he had used to approach Mgungundlovu. The Zulus believed this would cause disaster for the Voortrekkers if they ever dared to return to exact revenge.⁵⁶ Wood alleged that Retief's heart and liver were duly cut from his body and taken to Dingane wrapped in a cloth.⁵⁷

The Zulu who Andries Pretorius questioned ten months after the massacre, related that one of Retief's men who was particularly tall and could run very fast, managed to flee from Mgungundlovu. He crossed the river which means, according to Bantjes' calculations, that he ran about two kilometres, but he was captured by a large group of warriors before he was able to reach the Voortrekker horses. He then defended himself with stones until he became too exhausted and was overpowered.⁵⁸

According to one of the Zulu warriors who was present as a young man, Lunguza ka Mpukane, a Khoikhoi servant, a youngster known as Lomama, also managed to escape. He was on the outside of the stronghold near the rifles and succeeded in jumping on a horse and getting away. In later years he lived with Stoffel [?] near Weenen.⁵⁹ Nduna ka Manqina also mentioned a Voortrekker servant who escaped. According to him, it was a San man (*uBusumana*) who, according to Zulu oral tradition, was standing with the horses. When he realised what was happening, he jumped on a

52. Wood, "Statements Respecting Dingaan", p 381.

53. Oberholster, "Retief, Pieter", p 604.

54. P. Dlamini, *Servant of Two Kings*, comp. H. Filter; ed. and tr. S. Bourquin (Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban, 1986), pp 13–14.

55. Wood, "Statements Respecting Dingaan", p 381.

56. Oberholster, "Retief, Pieter", p 604.

57. Wood, "Statements Respecting Dingaan", p 381.

58. Bantjes, "Journal der Ekspeditie", p 70.

59. Lunguza ka Mpukane, statement, 13 March 1909, *JSA, Volume 1*, p 312.

horse and managed to get away.⁶⁰ Paulina Dlamini alleges that two white youths also escaped, one of them on the back of a white horse.⁶¹ This seems highly unlikely, because it is not confirmed by any other report.

Owen and his household witnessed the events from a distance. He wrote in his diary that same day, that he was sitting in the shadow of his wagon reading his Bible early that morning when a messenger from Dingane arrived. The news he brought was frightening – Dingane was going to kill all the Voortrekkers. He gained the impression that the king did not intend to harm his (Owen's) group. The messenger furthermore said that Dingane wanted to know what Owen thought of his plans. The missionary was in a quandary. He did not want to justify the murder, but he realised it would be dangerous to give Dingane the impression that he was on the side of the Voortrekkers; that might place his entire household in danger. He felt that he had to warn the Voortrekkers somehow, but before he could decide on what he should do, the orgy of killings had begun.⁶²

Events immediately after the massacre

When the entire Voortrekker party had been massacred, the horde of Zulus returned to their king and hailed him by shouting repeatedly. In his report of events, Owen noted that he had seen with his binoculars that Dingane had remained seated near the centre of his stronghold for most of the morning while an army comprising numerous regiments had gathered before him. According to Wood, the commanders of the Zulu regiments, Ndlela and Dambuza, were at this time conversing with Dingane. After about two hours, around noon, the whole army started trotting off in the direction from which Retief and his men had approached Mgungundlovu. Owen's conclusion, as he noted that day in his diary, was that the Zulu aimed to wipe out all the Voortrekkers they could find on the upper reaches of the Thukela River. Wood adds that as they moved out of the kraal, the warriors chanted Dingane's praises and honoured him with lofty titles, occasionally calling out: "We will go and kill the white dogs!"⁶³ Hulley wrote in his report that Dingane told him a few days after the massacre that he had dispatched half of his entire military force to attack the Voortrekkers' camps. They were instructed to kill all the men, women and children and bring their possessions back to their king.⁶⁴

Why did Dingane order the massacre?

The Voortrekkers intended to kill him

This reason was given by Dingane himself when he sent a messenger to Owen a short while before the massacre to inform him that he was going to kill Retief and his men. Owen recorded in his diary that very day: "The reason assigned for this treacherous conduct was that they [the Voortrekkers] were going to kill him, [Dingane] that they had come here and he had *now* learned all their plans."⁶⁵ On the morning after the massacre

60. Nduna ka Manqina, statement, 27 April 1910, *JSA, Volume 5*, p 7.

61. Dlamini, *Servant of Two Kings*, p 14.

62. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, pp 106–107.

63. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 107; Wood, "Statements Respecting Dingaan", p 381.

64. Hulley, "An Account", p 177.

65. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 106.

Dingane sent two indunas to Owen to reassure him once again that he and his household would not be attacked. They repeated the reason that the messenger had given Owen the previous day – that Dingane had ordered the massacre because he had found out that the Voortrekkers planned to kill him. The Zulu king advanced two explanations for this allegation, namely that the muzzle-loaders of the Voortrekkers were loaded on the fateful morning; and that Retief and his companions had attempted to encircle Mgungundlovu on a number of occasions.⁶⁶

As for the first allegation, Owen wrote in his diary on 9 February, three days after the massacre, that Dingane himself had told Hulley, the interpreter, the following:

He declared that if he did not wipe out the Boers, they would have fired on him and his people before they left. When their muzzle-loaders were examined after the massacre, it was established that they were all loaded with shot.⁶⁷

On 10 February, four days after the murders, Dingane requested Owen to write a letter to the Cape governor on his behalf to explain why he had killed Retief and his companions. He then explained that the Voortrekkers had indicated that they wanted to fire a salute in farewell greeting to Dingane as they left, using gunpowder only, but that their real intention was to kill him. The evidence was clear, he said – when their rifles were examined after the massacre, it was found that they were loaded with shot.⁶⁸

As for the second allegation: the interpreter Joseph Kirkman wrote later that he was at the American mission station with G. Champion when a messenger arrived from Dingane to inform them that the Zulu king had ordered his warriors to kill Retief and all his companions. According to this messenger, Retief's men had made three nocturnal attempts to encircle Dingane's stronghold, but had failed to accomplish this because of their limited numbers.⁶⁹

With time, the allegation that Retief and his men had tried to encircle Mgungundlovu became accepted as a certainty in Zulu oral tradition. Mkebeni ka Dabulamanzi related in 1921 that according to Zulu traditional belief, during Retief's second visit, his commando had attempted to encircle Mgungundlovu. The proof was the hoof marks of their horses. However, the stronghold was so big that they failed.⁷⁰ Mtshapi ka Moradu,⁷¹ Mdukwana ka Mbengwana,⁷² Meshach Ngidi⁷³ and Mtshayankomo ka Magolwana all agreed that this was the most important reason why Dingane decided to have Retief and his men killed. Mtshayankomo indicated that his father, Magolwana, had told him that Dingane believed that Retief and his men wanted to encircle Mgungundlovu and then shoot him. He gained that impression since the Voortrekkers did indeed encircle the stronghold one night and had taken measurements of it while the Zulus were asleep, so as to ascertain its size. One could see, he said, that they had surrounded the stronghold because there was horse dung at two places and the hoof

66. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, pp 110–111.

67. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 112.

68. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, pp 116–117.

69. Kirkman, "Joseph Kirkman's Story", p 159.

70. Mkebeni ka Dabulamanzi, statement, 19 September 1921, *JSA, Volume 3*, p 205.

71. Mtshapi ka Noradu, statement, 6 April 1918, *JSA, Volume 4*, p 73.

72. Ndukwana ka Mbengwana, statement, 15 September 1900, *JSA Volume 4*, pp 275–276.

73. Ngidi, Meshach, statement, 29 November 1921, *JSA, Volume 5*, p 118.

marks indicated that the horses had moved around Mgungundlovu's perimeter. Dingane himself watched through one of the openings on the upper side of Mgungundlovu. He then called his councillors together and informed them that he had no doubt of the Voortrekkers' evil intentions – his councillors could verify this themselves by looking through the openings. The councillors returned and confirmed that the horses were not merely grazing – there were riders on their backs. That was when they convinced Dingane to act.⁷⁴

Nduna ka Manqina related in 1910 that according to Zulu oral tradition, Dingane called his officials and his *izinduna* and his military commanders together and told them: "You must give me advice. The Boers are trying to deceive me." After dark, he took them to the *isigodhlo* and told them: "Now you will see, in the night." In the dark they could see how the Voortrekkers (again unsuccessfully) attempted to encircle Mgungundlovu. Dingane then asked: "Did you see?" The warriors answered: "Let them be killed."⁷⁵

In 1988 Oscar Dhlomo, who was the secretary-general of the Inkatha movement at the time, expressed the opinion that the "execution" of Retief and his companions could be ascribed to a tragic clash of cultures and traditions. He claimed that Retief had sent out scouts to ascertain the best route to the Zulu stronghold even before his first visit to Dingane in November 1837. Those were the scouts that had been seen outside Mgungundlovu by the Zulu guards. The Zulu reaction was that scouts who moved about at night were wizards who would cause disaster to the king and his nation. This explains why Dingane shouted *Bulalani abathakati* ("Kill the wizards") when he ordered that Retief and his companions be wiped out.⁷⁶

The Zulu historian Maphalala explains events somewhat differently. According to him, on the night of 5/6 February, Retief and his men attempted to encircle and then attack Mgungundlovu. He adds that they were unaware that the royal guards, the *oGqayinyanga*, watched over the stronghold every night. The guards' report on these activities caused great excitement. The king-in-council, which consisted of Dingane himself, Ndlela, Dambuza, Maphita and a few other highly ranked officials, met to discuss the report. The general consensus was that the Voortrekkers were enemies and the unanimous decision was that Retief and his companions had to be killed.⁷⁷ Indeed, a few days after the massacre, Dingane indicated through his indunas to Owen that the Voortrekkers had approached Mgungundlovu like an army and acted against him. It was his policy to wipe out all military forces that entered his territory.⁷⁸

There can be little doubt that Dingane and his councillors deliberately decided to wipe out Retief and his men; they had convinced themselves that the Voortrekker leader planned to kill them. However, it is highly unlikely that Retief had this in mind. No source from the Voortrekker side even vaguely hints that this was ever contemplated. To attempt to kill Dingane at that particular stage would have been extremely risky. As the

74. Mtshayankomo ka Magolwana, statement, 11 January 1922, *JSA, Volume 4*, p 112.

75. Nduna ka Manqina, statement, 27 April 1910, *JSA, Volume 5*, p 7.

76. Dhlomo, "A Zulu Perspective of the Battle of Blood River", *The Daily News*, 21 January 1988, p 19.

77. Maphalala, "The Re-interpretation of the War of Ncome", pp 58–59.

78. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, pp 110–111.

Zulu sources quoted above concede – there were too few Voortrekkers to go on the attack. It was moreover against the nature of the Boers to undertake actions in which the risks were high. In addition, Retief had his treaty and would have been satisfied with the outcome of the negotiations.

In the days immediately following the massacre, Dingane mentioned a number of other reasons for his decision.

The British, not the Boers, were his people

On 7 February, the day after the massacre, the two Zulu indunas who visited his mission station told Owen they were sent by Dingane to assure him that the king planned no action against the missionaries, since there were only a few of them. Consequently the king could live in peace with them; they were his people. All the subjects of George (the British king) were his people, but the *Amaboro* (the Boers) were neither his people nor George's people.⁷⁹ In February 1838 Dingane was probably unaware that King George IV had died in 1830; that his brother King William IV had ruled from 1830 to 1837; and that Queen Victoria had been on the throne since 20 June 1837.

The Voortrekkers did not extradite Sekonyela

Dingane's indunas supplied a fourth reason for the killing when they spoke to Owen on the day after the massacre, namely that Retief did not extradite Sekonyela and his men and deliver them as prisoners to Dingane.⁸⁰ Nor did Retief hand over all the cattle, the horses and firearms that he took from Sekonyela. Dingane made it known to Owen more than a week before the massacre that he was furious about this, and Owen had to write a letter to Retief to inform him of Dingane's anger.⁸¹ The interpreter Hulley wrote in his report that Dingane made the following statement to him a few days after the massacre: "I find fault with the Boers since they ignored my orders. They allowed the headman whom I said they should deliver to me [Sekonyela], to escape."⁸²

Clash between the Voortrekkers and the Zulus about cattle

In the letter that Owen wrote on his behalf to the Cape governor, Dingane alleged that the Voortrekkers took some of his cattle; he claimed that it was cattle which he had taken from their common enemy Mzilikazi, who originally took it from the Voortrekkers. Dingane admitted that he had become involved in an argument with them over this issue and therefore decided to have them killed.⁸³ Nmemi ka Nguluzane stated in 1904 that the Voortrekkers claimed back cattle which originally belonged to them but which the Zulus took from the Ndebele of Mzilikazi a few months earlier. Mzilikazi had previously taken the cattle from the Voortrekkers.⁸⁴ Nduna ka Monqina also spoke about Retief's irritation about cattle which the Zulus captured in 1837 from the Ndebele but which the Ndebele had previously captured from the Voortrekkers. Retief wanted the cattle back.⁸⁵ The Zulu

79. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 110.

80. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, pp 110–111.

81. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, pp 100–101.

82. Hulley, "An Account", p 177.

83. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 116.

84. Mmemi ka Nguluzane, statement, 19 October 1904, *JSA, Volume 3*, pp 257–258.

85. Nduna ka Manqina, statement, 27 April 1910, *JSA, Volume 5*, p 7.

historian Maphalala also alleges that Dingane regarded the Voortrekkers as enemies as a result of the cattle issue. According to Maphalala the Zulu army was on their way back to Zululand after their campaign against the Ndebele in 1837, driving the cattle which they captured, when the Voortrekkers attempted to take the cattle from the *amabutho* (warriors). The warriors defended their cattle, but the incident led to deep-running enmity.⁸⁶

The Voortrekkers intended settling in Dingane's territory

Another reason which Dingane advanced for having Retief and his companions killed was that the Voortrekkers intended settling on what he regarded as his territory. In the letter that he wrote on Dingane's behalf to the Cape governor a few days after the massacre, Owen had to add that Dingane would not allow any white people to build houses in his territory.⁸⁷ This reason for the murder is also mentioned in Zulu oral tradition. Mmemi ka Nguluzane claimed in 1904 that the Zulus decided to kill Retief and his men because the Voortrekkers were approaching in large numbers with many wagons.⁸⁸ The Zulu historian Maphalala alleges that the Voortrekker settlement on the upper reaches of the Thukela River near Nobamba (which the Voortrekkers called Weenen) was irritating to Dingane. The land in that vicinity was especially important to the Zulu because King Shaka had previously erected a royal settlement, Mnkangla, in that area. In addition it was alleged that the Voortrekkers took possession of a Zulu maize field without Dingane's permission.⁸⁹

These additional reasons supplied by Dingane and backed up by Zulu oral tradition probably contributed to the Zulu decision to wipe out Retief and his men. An important belief in Zulu oral tradition was the so-called prophesy of Shaka, namely that Zululand would after his death be overrun by whites.⁹⁰ Dingane was certainly aware of that prophesy and could have been driven by a desire to ensure that it would not come true. A second prophesy can be added to that of Shaka, namely Jacob Hlambamanzi's vision. He was a Xhosa by birth and came in contact with whites on the Cape eastern frontier as a young man, when he was convicted of cattle rustling by the colonial authorities and sentenced to imprisonment on Robben Island. He was subsequently released to become an interpreter for a British expedition on the African east coast and eventually became a minor chief in Zululand. It is said that Hlambamanzi convinced Dingane and his councillors Dambuza and Ndlela that white people who were evil wizards would send an army with guns and cannon and houses that float; they would then drive the Zulu into the hinterland and would eventually kill their king.⁹¹ It is possible that when Dingane gazed upon Retief and his men, he sincerely believed that this was the vanguard of the army that would come and take his land, just as they had taken the lands of the Xhosa on the eastern frontier and those of Mzilikazi's Ndebele in the central interior.

The Voortrekkers also attempted to make sense of the murders. Their suspicion was that there was involvement by Britons.

86. Maphalala, "The Re-interpretation of the War of Ncome", p 57.

87. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 117.

88. Mmemi ka Nguluzane, statement, 19 October 1904, *JSA, Volume 3*, pp 257–258.

89. Maphalala, "The Re-interpretation of the War of Ncome", p 57.

90. Cubbin, "A Study in Objectivity", p 77.

91. R.U. Kenney, *Piet Retief: The Dubious Hero* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town and Pretoria, 1976), pp 142–145; J.C. van der Walt, *Zululand True Stories 1780–1978* (Author, Richards Bay, 2007), p 26.

Dingane was incited by Englishmen from Port Natal

In the months following the death of Retief a rumour spread through the Voortrekker camps that Dingane had been incited by Englishmen from Port Natal to commit the murders. The origins of this rumour almost certainly date back to a visit that the well-known Hans de Lange and six other Voortrekkers paid to Port Natal in April 1838. On their return on 2 May the Reverend Erasmus Smit wrote the following in his diary (free translation):

They informed us that Dingane had sent a letter to Captain Gardiner in which he asked what he should do with Retief and the other Boers when they returned from Sekonyela; and that Gardiner answered that the Boers were a people who had fled from their king [the British monarch] and that he could do with them what he would do with his own people if they fled from his power. Captain Gardiner, Stubbs and Blankenberg, subsequently spoke directly to Dingane about the killing of the Voortrekkers. Captain Gardiner and another three Englishmen egged Dingane on by telling him that the Boers were bad people and that he had to kill them. Dingane's spies who are in our laager attest to the same ... [those Englishmen] have on their account more than 400 souls of our people, in addition to the souls of black people who died as a result of Dingane's false peace and wilful war. The white English captains and Blankenberg, the renegade Afrikaner, were the tools that helped killing Retief and his sixty men.⁹²

Ferdinand van Gass, who was as a young boy present in the laager of Hercules Malan at the time of the Retief massacre, wrote in his memoirs many years later that a Zulu warrior who was wounded in the battle of Veglaer in August 1838 and was taken as a prisoner of war by the Voortrekkers, told them that Dingane had never intended killing Retief and his men, but that white people incited him to do it. Those whites convinced Dingane that the Voortrekkers had fled from the power of the British king and were now vagabonds who survived by plundering and stealing. They warned him that he would share Mzilikazi's fate if he allowed the Voortrekkers to settle in his territory. According to the wounded Zulu, those whites came from Port Natal and only managed to convince Dingane after he had agreed to sign a treaty granting land to the Voortrekkers. The Zulu did not believe that Dingane would have acted as he did if the British settlers had not egged him on.⁹³

It was probably on the grounds of these rumours that Preller wrote that he had no doubt that Captain Gardiner was responsible for the murder of Retief and his companions and also for the killing of the Voortrekker women and children at Bloukrans some ten days later.⁹⁴ It is, however, highly unlikely that either Gardiner or any other white person had anything to do with the massacre. Owen, who knew Gardiner well and was at Mgungundlovu throughout this whole period, makes no mention of any visit by Gardiner to Dingane or a message sent by him to Dingane after Retief's first visit.

92. E. Smit, *Joernaal van 'n Trek: Uit die Dagboek van Erasmus Smit*, G.S. Preller (red.) (Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 1988), p 135.

93. G.S. Preller (red.), "Herinneringe van Ferdinand Paulus van Gass", in *Voortrekkerkernse, Deel 1*, 2de druk (Nasionale Pers, Kaapstad et al., 1920), pp 43–44.

94. Letter from Preller to Hess, undated, quoted in Cubbin, "A Study in Objectivity", pp 60–61. No Afrikaans historian supports Preller's opinion as expressed in that letter.

Indeed, Owen writes that Gardiner avoided Dingane at that time.⁹⁵ No other “Englishmen” visited Dingane or attempted to goad him into eliminating Retief and his party.

Dingane’s councillors convinced him to have Retief and his men killed

Mmemi ka Nguluzane claimed in 1904 that it was Nzobo (Dambuza) kaSobadli of the Ntombela clan, one of Dingane’s chief indunas, who proposed that the Zulu should present a show of dancing to the Voortrekkers and then kill them. He added that the Zulus were suspicious because so many Voortrekkers accompanied Retief and this gave the impression that he was planning some vile deed against them. Their suspicions grew when the Voortrekkers offered on their arrival to stage a show for the Zulu people. There was nothing wrong with the offer per se, but when the show involved the Voortrekkers firing their muzzle-loaders and gunpowder smoke hung all over Mgungundlovu and mounted Voortrekkers were galloping around the stronghold as if they were encircling it, it looked as if the Voortrekkers were preparing for a confrontation. Nzobo’s proposal that the Voortrekkers should be overpowered while the dancing was under way was made to ensure that the plans of the Voortrekkers would not be implemented.⁹⁶

Dingane’s senior indunas or chief councillors certainly had considerable influence over him.⁹⁷ The respected historian John Laband believes that it was Dingane’s councillors who convinced him that if the Zulu wanted to avoid the fate of the Ndebele, they had to wipe out Retief and his companions. He claims that according to Zulu oral tradition, it was especially the military chief, Ndlela ka Sompisi, who convinced the Zulu king that it was his royal duty to not only eliminate Retief and his party of about 70 men, but indeed all the Voortrekkers who had crossed the Drakensberg.⁹⁸ Paulina Dlamini claims that this is exactly what her father told her – that it was Ndlela who persuaded Dingane to kill Retief and his companions.⁹⁹ According to Zulu oral tradition, Ndlela even called in the help of diviners to convince Dingane that Retief and his companions were wizards who wanted to occupy Zululand.¹⁰⁰

Halstead’s fate

Credo Mutwa puts all the blame for the murder of Retief and his men on the shoulders of the youthful Thomas Halstead, who accompanied the Voortrekkers as interpreter. According to Mutwa, Halstead was known by the Zulu as the “Curious Peeper”. On the evening before the murder Halstead is said to have peered over the fence of the royal harem. One of Dingane’s wives, who was pregnant, saw him and was so frightened that she suffered a miscarriage. According to Zulu law it was a crime punishable by death for any man to approach the vicinity of the royal harem. Mutwa writes that Dingane was beginning to harbour thoughts that his white visitors had vile intentions, as one could

95. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 111.

96. Mmemi ka Nguluzane, statement, 19 October 1904, *JSA, Volume 3*, pp 257–258.

97. Cubbin, “A Study in Objectivity”, p 75.

98. J. Laband, “The Military Significance of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome”, in Dept. Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, *Seminar on Re-interpretation of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome*, p 26.

99. Dlamini, *Servant of Two Kings*, p 13.

100. P.J. Schoeman, “Wat die Zoeloes Vertel”, *Die Huisgenoot*, Gedenkuitgawe, Desember 1938, p 135.

expect from wizards, and were targeting his wives. That was why he had them murdered and why he shouted “Kill the wizards”.¹⁰¹

According to Wood, Halstead was sitting among the Voortrekkers when the dancing Zulu attacked. He called out: “We are done for!” He added in the Zulu language: “Let me talk to the King!” Dingane heard this but rejected his request with a wave of his hand. Halstead thereupon pulled out his knife, cut open one assailant and slit another’s throat before he was overpowered.¹⁰²

Mutwa’s allegation regarding Halstead is probably untrue. The messenger that Dingane sent to Owen to inform him that he was going to kill Retief and his men specifically added that the interpreter of the Voortrekkers, an English-speaking man from Port Natal [Thomas Halstead], would not be killed.¹⁰³ Three days after the massacre Owen wrote in his diary that Dingane himself had told Hulley that Halstead, who was sitting with the Voortrekkers, was killed against the wishes of the Zulu king; that he was accidentally killed in the confusion. According to a remark that Owen made in his diary one day after the massacre, Dingane informed the missionary Venable that he gave orders that Halstead should not be murdered, but that his warriors did not recognise Halstead in the midst of the Voortrekkers. Owen also added that it was Dingane’s custom to blame his subjects when he did something of which he felt ashamed.¹⁰⁴ Hulley also referred to the fate of Halstead in his report. He recorded that he asked Dingane a few days after the massacre about why Halstead had been killed. According to him the Zulu king replied: “He is dead. In the mayhem of the massacre he was killed with the others. I am sorry about it. I did not mean to take his life.”¹⁰⁵

Significance of the Retief Massacre

The massacre took place on 6 February 1838. According to Dhlomo it was the main cause of the Battle of Blood River, since the surviving Voortrekkers demanded revenge. They regarded the murder of Retief and his men as a treacherous deed by Dingane. On the other hand, the Zulus regarded the Voortrekkers as calculating land-grabbers who intended to take their land.¹⁰⁶ Mutwa also draws a direct line between the murder of Retief and the Blood River events. He describes the Battle of Blood River as the punishment which the Zulus received for the bloodbath when Retief and his men were killed on the orders of Dingane.¹⁰⁷

Owen also called Dingane’s actions treacherous. He recorded his opinion on why the Zulu king gave the order to kill in his diary on the day of the massacre: “Dingane’s actions are fitting for the barbarian that he is. It is lowly and treacherous, to say the least

101. Mutwa, *My People*, pp 193–194.

102. Wood, “Statements Respecting Dingaan”, p 381.

103. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 107.

104. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, pp 111–112.

105. Hulley, “An Account”, p 178.

106. Dhlomo, “A Zulu Perspective of the Battle of Blood River”, *The Daily News*, 21 January 1988, p 19.

107. Mutwa, *My People*, p 195.

– the result of cowardice and fear.”¹⁰⁸ A day later he repeated his allegation: “Dingane planned the murder in advance since he feared the power of the Voortrekkers.”¹⁰⁹

It was not only the Voortrekkers and Owen who regarded Dingane’s actions as treacherous. Mtshapi ka Noradu of the Magwaza-clan declared in 1918, in reaction to Dingane’s wiping out of the headman Dube and his Nyuswa community, that it was carried out in the same deceptive fashion as the Retief massacre. Dube and his people were invited into Mgungundlovu under false pretences and when they were all inside they were overpowered and killed – the same fate that befell the Voortrekkers.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

One can conclude that on 6 February 1838 at Mgungundlovu, Piet Retief and his companions became the target of a pre-emptive strike launched in a decidedly treacherous way by Dingane. The bulk of the Voortrekkers under the leadership of Retief had decided in the last quarter of 1837 that their future land would be the southern half of the present KwaZulu-Natal province. That area lay immediately south of the heartland of Dingane’s kingdom and was only sparsely populated by his direct subordinates. Retief wanted to legitimise Voortrekker possession of that area through a written agreement with Dingane, which would also ensure peaceful co-existence of the Voortrekker and Zulu communities. During his first visit to Dingane in November 1837 he gained the clear impression that the Zulu king was willing to grant his wishes. The Voortrekkers then began crossing the Drakensberg and pitched camp on the upper Thukela while waiting for the finalisation of the negotiations. Was this an invasion of Zulu territory? By negotiating with Dingane about permission to settle there, Retief certainly gave the impression that he acknowledged that Dingane had some form of control over the area. The Voortrekkers had no valid claim to the land.

The Zulu had reason to regard the movement of Voortrekkers into land under the sway of their king before a final agreement had been reached, as an invasion. Would the Voortrekkers willingly have moved out of the area again if the negotiations between Retief and Dingane failed to produce a treaty? Almost certainly not. Retief had only superficial control over his compatriots. Each household moved on its own when they decided to do so and went in whatever direction they wished. Retief found it difficult to convince a large number of them to move to Natal (the majority were still west of the Drakensberg when Retief was killed). To convince them to undertake the onerous task of hauling their heavy ox-wagons back across the Drakensberg Mountains again would almost certainly have been beyond his powers of persuasion.

It is unlikely that Dingane was aware of Retief’s limited control over his fellow Voortrekkers. There is no mention in any source that the Zulu king was aware of this. That he regarded the Voortrekkers’ crossing of the Drakensberg into KwaZulu-Natal as an invasion of his domain is certain. The news that the Voortrekkers had managed to rout the forces of Mzilikazi’s Ndebele, who were arch-enemies of the Zulu, would in the context of the ‘invasion’ have been sobering. It is under these circumstances that Dingane and his councillors decided that a clash of supremacy in KwaZulu-Natal

108. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 108.

109. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. Francis Owen*, p 111.

110. Mtshapi ka Noradu, statement, 2 April 1918, *JSA, Volume 4*, pp 66–67.

between them and the Voortrekkers was inevitable. Furthermore, for the Zulu to underestimate the fighting power of the Voortrekkers would be catastrophic. They were few in number, but they were formidable warriors; they had proved this against the Ndebele. In the clash that was at hand it would make strategic sense for the Zulu to strike the first blow. If they could manage to eliminate the leader of the Voortrekkers and a number of his men, and then follow this up with a successful surprise attack on the camps of their compatriots on the upper reaches of the Thukela, the Zulu would be in a very strong position. That was what decided the fate of Retief and his men.

What happened at Mgungudlovu was not – as was written in old Eurocentric history books that were overly sympathetic towards the Voortrekkers – the savage murder by a barbaric African monarch of well-meaning, peace-loving Christians. Instead it was a well-planned pre-emptive attack by the Zulus on the Voortrekkers. That is the importance of the event. This does not whitewash Dingane and his councillors. The massacre of Retief and his companions was certainly done in a most brutal way, after luring the Voortrekkers into a deadly trap. Dingane was undoubtedly guilty of foul play, even treachery. Nobody can be excused for murdering a visitor and his companions in cold blood after signing an agreement with them and then inviting them to a farewell feast. But that was how Dingane's personality operated. He had previously, to mention only one example, gained supreme power in the Zulu kingdom when he murdered his half-brother Shaka by stabbing him in the back.

The unsuspecting Retief's failure to fathom the distrust the Zulu felt about the intentions of the Voortrekkers was largely to blame for the fact that Dingane was able to carry out this treacherous attack. It was essential for Dingane to ensure that Retief would not be suspicious of his real intentions. The signing of a treaty made perfect sense, since it would become irrelevant anyway. The importance of the events of 6 February 1838 has little to do with the treaty, or with the detail of the massacre. It was the first salvo in what became a two-year battle for supremacy between Zulu and Voortrekker in southern KwaZulu-Natal.

Abstract

This article has a threefold purpose. Firstly, it reconstructs the events that took place on 6 February 1838 when the Voortrekker leader Piet Retief and his companions were massacred at Mgungundlovu, the stronghold of the Zulu king, Dingane. Secondly it analyses the reasons that could have convinced Dingane that it would be wise to order his warriors to kill Retief and his men; and thirdly, it sets out to establish the historical significance of the massacre. Afrikaans historians in particular have traditionally portrayed Retief and his men as the victims of unpardonable treachery on the part of an evil barbarian. This article shows that the massacre was indeed a vile act; the brutality and the sly, underhanded way in which it was planned and executed is unjustifiable. On the other hand, the article points out that Dingane was certainly justified to look upon the Voortrekkers as a grave threat to the sovereignty of his kingdom. He and his councillors had reason to regard the unsuspecting Retief and his companions as invaders. The massacre can therefore be regarded as the first salvo in what became a two-year battle for supremacy between Zulu and Voortrekker in southern KwaZulu-Natal.

Key words: Piet Retief; Great Trek; Voortrekkers; Dingane ka Senzangakona; Mgungundlovu; Ndlela; Dambuza; Francis Owen; Alan Gardiner; William Wood; Sekonyela; Mzilikazi; Thomas Halstead; Kwa-Matiwane; Retief–Dingane Treaty.

Opsomming

Die Retief moord op 6 February 1838 - 'n herbeskouing

Hierdie artikel het 'n drievoudige doelwit: eerstens 'n rekonstruksie van die gebeure toe die Voortrekkerleier Piet Retief en sy metgeselle op 6 Februarie 1838 by Mgungundlovu, die vesting van die Zoeloekoning Dingane, afgemaai is; tweedens 'n ontleding van die redes waarom die Zoeloekoning gereken het dat dit wys sal wees om Retief en sy metgeselle te laat vermoor; en derdens 'n bepaling van die historiese betekenis van die gebeure. Veral Afrikaanse historici het tradisioneel vir Retief en sy manne kortweg uitgebeeld as die slagoffers van onverdedigbare verraderlikheid van die kant van 'n bose barbaar. Hierdie artikel beeld ook die bloedbad as 'n verskriklike gebeurtenis uit en die brutaliteit en gemeenheid van die beplanning en uitvoering daarvan as onregverdigbaar. Aan die ander kant word daar aangetoon dat Dingane beslis gronde gehad het om die Voortrekkers as 'n ernstige bedreiging vir die soewereiniteit van sy koninkryk te beskou. Hy en sy raadgewers het rede gehad om Retief, wat deur sy goedgeelowigheid in hulle hande gespeel het, en sy manne as invallers te beskou. Die bloedbad kan gevolglik beskou word as die eerste salvo in wat 'n twee-jaar-lange stryd om oppergesag tussen Zoeloe en Voortrekker in die suide van KwaZulu-Natal geword het.

Sleutelwoorde: Piet Retief; Groot Trek; Voortrekkers; Dingane ka Senzangakona; Mgungundlovu; Ndlela; Dambuza; Francis Owen; Alan Gardiner; William Wood; Sekonyela; Mzilikazi; Thomas Halstead; Kwa-Matiwane; Retief–Dingane-traktaat.