**Research Article**

# A WAR UNCOVERED: HUMAN REMAINS FROM THABANTŠHO (MALEOSKOP), SOUTH AFRICA

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**ABSTRACT**

*Thabantšho (also known as Maleoskop) was a royal village, situated near the modern town of Groblersdal, Limpopo Province in South Africa. It is known to have been the residence of the Bakopa chief, Kgoši Boleu. Conflict led to an attack by a Swazi regiment, accompanied by an element of ZAR (Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek = South African Republic) soldiers on the Bakopa on 10 May 1864. Boleu himself, several members of his family and many Bakopa soldiers, women and children were killed in the battle, or taken captive. Remains of a rectangular building on Thabantšho were excavated during 2003, 2004 and 2006. Archaeological evidence indicates that this building had been burned down. During excavations human remains were found in several areas in and around the building. Outside, the remains of at least five individuals were found. West of the building the bones were totally disarticulated, but the remains probably represented two individuals – a young adult male and an adult female. South of the building, lying very close to each other and against the wall, the largely articulated remains of three individuals were discovered. These probably belonged to two males and a female. All bones found inside the building were disarticulated, fragmented and severely burned. A minimum number of individuals, based on mandibles or partial mandibles, indicated that the skeletal remains represented at least seven individuals. In addition, some very small bones may have belonged to a baby, which means that at least eight individuals were inside the building when it was burned down. The remains of a small dog* (Canis familiaris) *were also found in the building. At least 13 people thus died in and around the building on the day of the battle. These results confirm the archival information that the missionaries and survivors were not allowed to bury the dead. The remains were buried at Thabantšho with great public interest on 3 December 2006 by members of the Bakgaga-Bakopa community.*

Keywords: later Iron Age, Limpopo Province, South Africa, Thabantšho, Northern Sotho, colonial resistance wars, human skeletal remains.

## INTRODUCTION

The Maleoskop Archaeological Project includes research on various archaeological sites on the farm Rietkloof 166JS, situated near the modern town of Groblersdal, initially in Mpumalanga, but recently included in the Limpopo Province as part of the Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality (Fig. 1). One of the sites is a historical settlement at the foot of Thabantšho (Black Mountain, also known as Maleoskop). From Bakopa oral tradition and missionary writings it is known to have been the residence of the Bakopa chief, Kgoši Boleu, at the time when the Berlin Mission Station Gerlachshoop was active between 1860 and 1864 (Wangemann 1868b: 49–104). This history was previously dealt with and published in an article by one of the current authors (Boshoff 2004: 447–471).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the contexts of the human remains and related material culture found in and around the ruins of a building which was burned down during the conflict in 1864. We will present an interpretation of the human remains.

A complex political situation existed in this area during the second half of the 19th century. The history of the Bakopa has to be seen in the context of the various political groups active in the area: the Ndzundza-Ndebele under Mabhogo, the Bapedi under Sekwati and later Sekhukhune, the Lydenburg Government, the Government of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) and the Bakopa themselves (Merensky 1888: 48–52; Grützner 1900: 37–39). Limited resources and opposing claims to the land led to conflict. Both the Bapedi and the Ndzundza-Ndebele viewed the Bakopa as subordinate, but Boleu maintained an independent stance. Bakopa independence was also threatened by the growing presence of the Boer Republics, initially Lydenburg and later the ZAR. Alliances were weak and often under serious tension (*Berliner Missionsberichte* 1864b: 121; 1865a: 67–76 – hereafter referred to as *BMB*).

At Thabantšho, where the Bakopa settled during or before the 1840s, three hilltops were fortified with dry stone walls, with loopholes. Many of these walls are still intact (Boshoff *et al.* 2001: 9–12). Cattle theft and attacks on farms, for example, led armed Boers to patrol the area. The situation culminated in an attack by a Boer commando on the Bakopa fortifications during November 1863. The Bakopa defended their position successfully, an event which boosted Boleu's self-confidence significantly (Endemann *et al.* 1980: 11; Boshoff 2004: 460–461).

The animosity between the Bakopa and the Boers intensified. Collaboration between the Boers and the Swazi led to a final conflict. On 10 May 1864 a Swazi regiment, accompanied by a few Boers, successfully attacked the Bakopa in their fortified positions. Boleu and several members of his family, as well as approximately 850 of his soldiers died while defending their positions. Moreover, a large number of women and children were killed in the battle, or were taken captive. The Swazi allowed neither the missionaries, nor the Bakopa survivors to bury the dead. The survivors were either taken captive by the Swazi or dispersed to the neighbouring farms and settlements (Grützner 1900: 44–48; Wangemann 1877: 122). These figures are increased in the Mmitse-Kgono Land Claims Association document (n.d.: 3), where it is stated that "with 3694 dead and hundreds taken to Swaziland", the Kopa kingdom collapsed. The missionaries, Grützner and Moschütz, who witnessed the event, were allowed to tend to the injured, but were not allowed to bury the dead (*BMB* 1864a,b; Wangemann 1868b: 94–101).

During the weeks following the events, small groups of Bakopa returned to Gerlachshoop in order to continue normal life. Rammupudu, one of the surviving sons of Boleu, was designated new Kgoši of the Bakopa, at a meeting called by

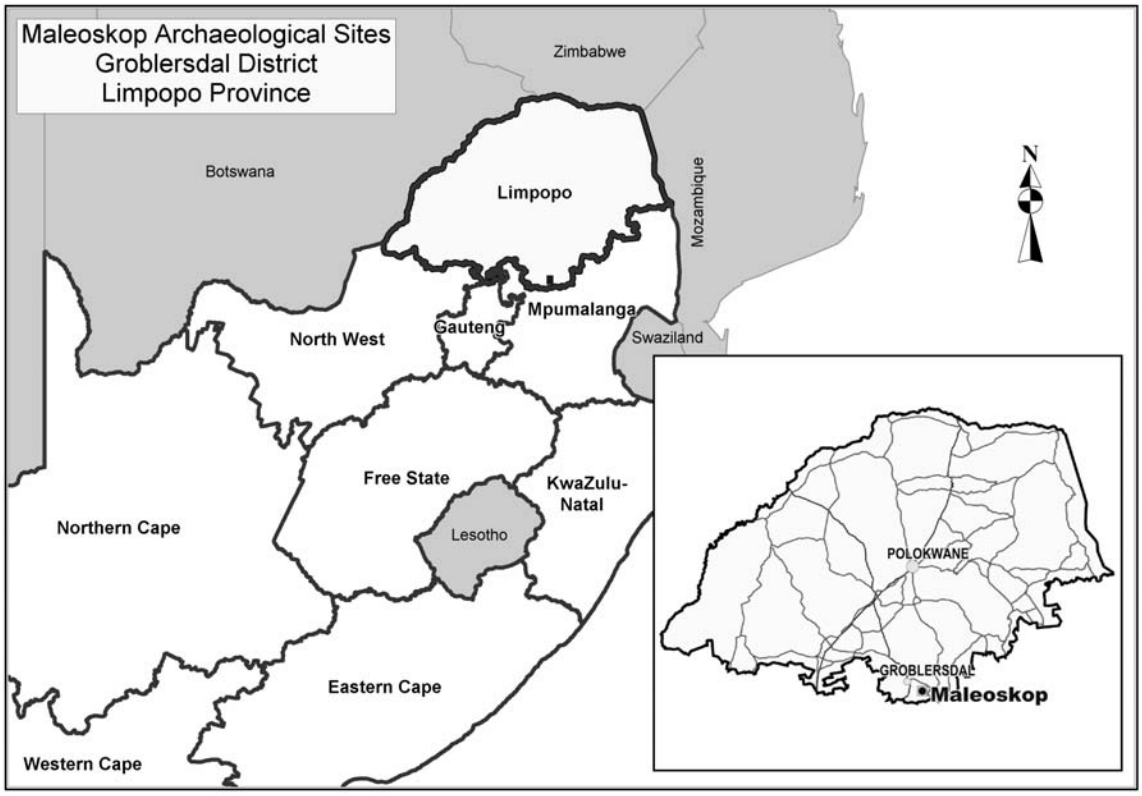


**FIG. 1**. *Location of Maleoskop in Limpopo Province, South Africa (Erika Krüger).*

Commandant Piet Nel a few days after the battle (*BMB* 1864c: 381–383). Conflict with both Mabhogo and the Pedi chief, Sekhukhune, led to the final dispersal during December 1864 of the Bakopa who remained on the farm Rietkloof. The Bakopa departed in three groups: a small party joined Maserumule (a Pedi chief to the northeast), another group joined Nkotoloane (or Malok), to the west, and another group found refuge with farmers on the Highveld (*BMB* 1865b: 208). The Christians converged under Rammupudu, and during 1865 they settled at Botšhabelo, a mission station founded by Alexander Merensky in January 1865 (Kratzenstein 1893: 204–205). Another section of the Bakopa had previously chosen to follow Matsepe, a half brother of Rammupudu, who settled at Mmitse. Slightly different versions of the dispersal are contained in a report for the land claim of the Bakgaga-Bakopa (Department of Land Affairs 1995: 10–11) and documents based on oral traditions compiled by Kgoši Boleu Matsepe Kopa (Mmitse-Kgono Land Claims Association n.d.: 3–6) as well as in an internet source compiled in collaboration with the Bakgaga-Bakopa Tribal Authority (Bakopa ba ga Rammupudu 2006).

The area surrounding Thabantšho was never resettled. When a group of Bakopa under Kgoši Rammupudu returned to the area during 1897, they settled to the west of Thabantšho and stayed there until their forceful removal to Tafelkop, during 1962. The site of the traditional village of Boleu, and especially Thabantšho itself, was out of bounds for children growing up in the area during the 1950s (Moleke, pers. comm. 2001)

## THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF THABANTŠHO

Thabantšho forms a prominent feature in the landscape (Fig. 2). The hill has a commanding view of a very large surrounding area and is well positioned for defence It is probably for this reason that the hill and the area surrounding it were selected for settlement. The director of the Berlin Missionary Society, Theodore Wangemann (1868b: 58), who visited Gerlachshoop and Thabantšho during May 1867 made sketches of both sites and described the hill in the following way:[1]

> The summit of the hill is overgrown with aloes, sweet thorn and tree size euphorbia, which were naturally impenetrable, but were strengthened even further by massive stone wall fortifications (our translation).

A systematic survey of all surface features confirmed the existence of elaborate stone walls along the slopes and on the summit of Thabantšho as well as on two adjacent hills: Shukurwane to the west and a small hill to the north, Ramohlanghlang. The stone walls at the top encircle the summit of Thabantšho, with a central 'courtyard' and 'rooms' extending to the western, southern and eastern sections of the hill. According to oral tradition Boleu had his residence on the summit, but very meagre archaeological remains were found there. In the annotation of his drawing of "Maleo's Felskopf", Wangemann (1868a: 634) made the following telling remarks:[2]

> On the central hill, at the bottom, one finds, under a dark forest patch that stretches upwards from left to right, a tree just above the last huts. This indicates the site where Maleo's hut was situated, where the brothers preached and where, later on, Maleo's dead body was found (our translation).

It is unfortunately not easy to relate this detailed description to the site today, primarily because the hill is largely overgrown.

A second stone wall encircles the hill lower down. A number of smaller stone wall enclosures were found between the base of the hill and the lower stone wall (Boshoff *et al.* 2001: 9–12). The circular stone walls around the summit and lower down around Thabantšho, and the circular walls around the other two hills played a defensive role. Oral tradition has it that the smaller stone enclosures lower down were used to keep livestock. The walls on the slopes of Thabantšho were constructed mainly of magnetite rocks, which abound in the area.

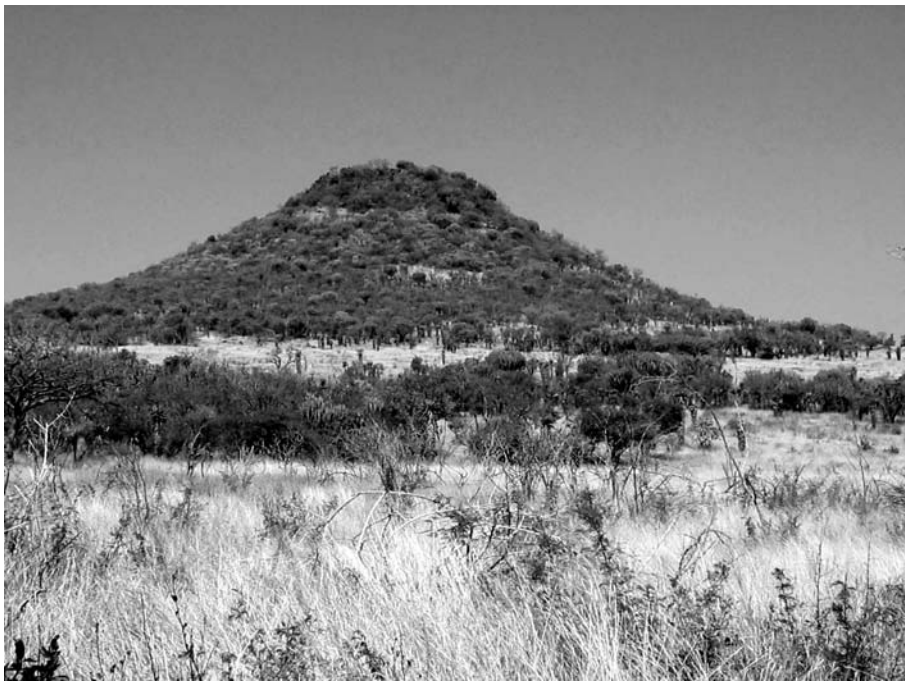

**FIG. 2**. *Thabantšho (Maleoskop).*

Along the northern slope of the hill, above the lower circular wall, remains of built structures (BOL 1/6) were found and recorded in a grassy spot on an overgrown terrace during the first season of excavations in 2001. The isolated position, layout and building style appeared unusual. Four built structures were identified. Three were built with undressed stone, mostly magnetite, and seem to have been plastered with red clay, while the fourth building was rectangular in form and was built with burnt clay bricks (Boshoff *et. al.* 2001: 11). The latter was excavated during 2003, 2004 and 2006 as BOL 1/6(b) (Fig. 3), and yielded various finds like glass beads, metal objects, bone and household vessels, as well as the hammer of a musket gun. This suggested normal human habitation, but also seemed to represent a high status residence. The glass beads were more numerous than anywhere else in the excavations, but concurred with what would be expected in an 1860s Kopa home-

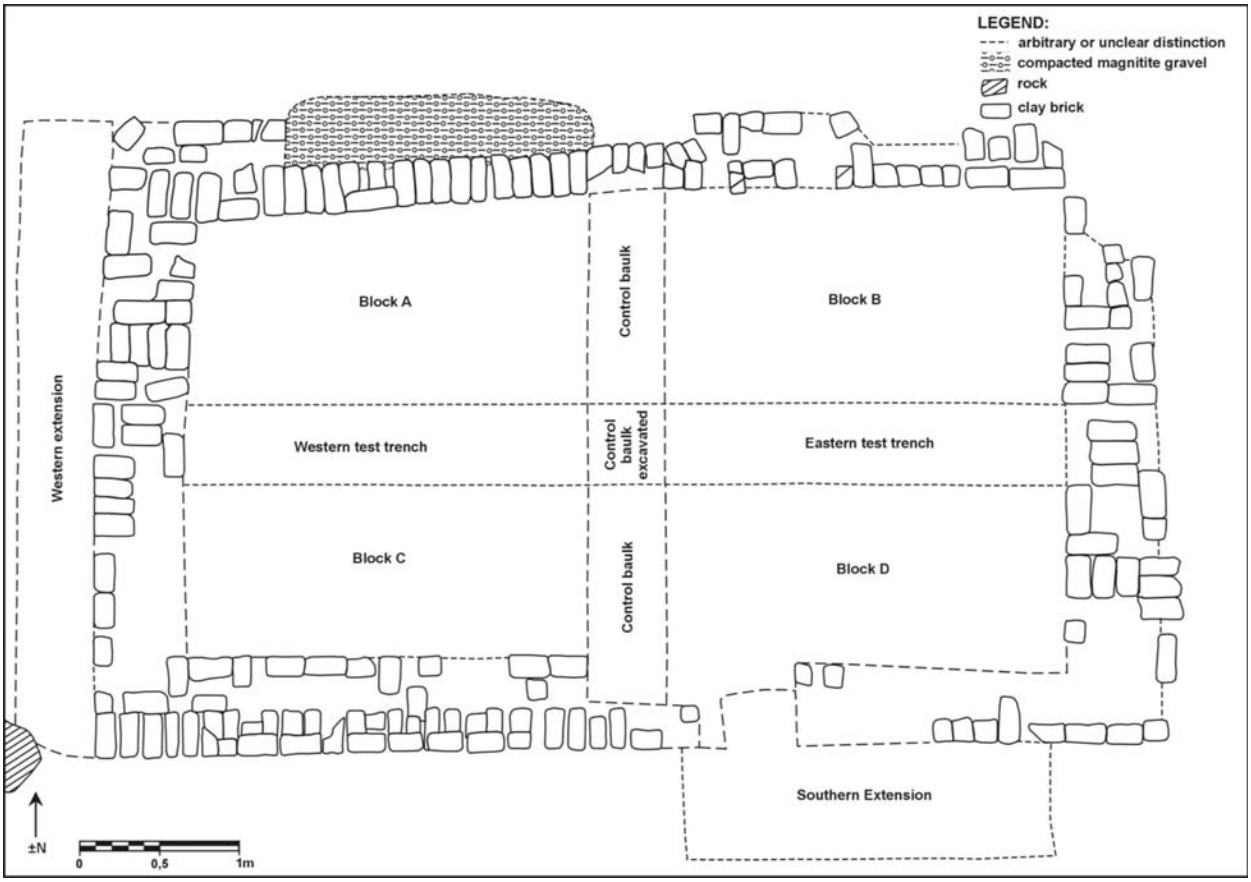


**FIG. 3**. *Plan of building structure BOL 1/6(b), indicating the excavated areas (Marinda Pretorius).*

stead (Woods 2007: 11). To find the hammer of a musket was also not totally unexpected. Loopholes were structurally part of the fortification walls on Thabantšho and the surrounding hills, suggesting that the defenders had guns. Grützner also refers to the presence of guns, and on the fateful day of the battle in 1864, he suspected that the shooting they heard formed part of "some heathen feast" celebrated in Boleu's village (Grützner 1900).

No clear explanation for the unusual character of this building emerged from the collected oral traditions. The residence of Boleu is consistently referred to as situated on the hilltop. Interestingly enough, the German missionaries also did not mention the existence of a brick building on the northern slope of Thabantšho.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the building had been burned down. Exploratory excavations of the structure were first conducted during August 2003 by means of a test trench through the middle of the building, from east to west. The test trench yielded constructional rubble of the collapsed building, but also a well defined ash layer and the remains of a dung floor. Between the two, a layer of soil was found. Almost all cultural and faunal finds in the building were contained in this soil layer. Apart from potsherds, metal objects and bone fragments, a metal bangle around a fragment of a human ulna was found in the eastern section of the test trench. As soon as the presence of human remains at the site was confirmed, excavations were stopped and a request for the continuation of the research was referred to Kgoši Rammupudu Boleu II of the Bakgaga-Bakopa and his council for their consideration. Previously, during initial discussions, the probability that human remains would be found, was raised. At that early stage, the council was of the opinion that all finds should be studied, but if human remains were found, they had to be returned for burial or reburial after the research had been conducted (see conclusion below). As soon as permission to excavate and study the remains associated with this structure were granted by the Tribal Authorities, a permit was applied for and granted by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). Subsequent excavations were undertaken as a joint project between the UNISA team and members of the Department of Anatomy, University of Pretoria.

## ARCHAEOLOGY OF STRUCTURE BOL 1/6(b)

BOL 1/6(b) is a rectangular structure, measuring approximately 6.9 × 4.1 m on the outside, with thick brick walls (mostly five bricks wide), and an internal measurement of 5.6 × 2.8 m (15.58 $m^2$). It seems to be part of a complex of four buildings or structures, situated on a single terrace on the northern slope of Thabantšho, almost three quarters up the steep hill. From east to west the structures were numbered BOL 1/6(a), (b), (c) and (d). The excavated brick building was the second from the east, therefore referred to as BOL 1/6(b). It was selected for excavation due to its extraordinary character, both in terms of form and building material.

Human skeletal remains were found in several areas in and around structure BOL 1/6(b). Excavations were conducted in several areas, as indicated in Fig. 3:

- The western extension of BOL 1/6(b) (BOL 1/6(b) WE), October 2003.
- The southern extension of BOL 1/6(b) (BOL 1/6(b) SE), October 2003, August 2004.
- The western test trench of BOL 1/6(b) (BOL 1/6(b) TtW), August 2003, October 2003, August 2004.
- The eastern test trench of BOL 1/6(b) (BOL 1/6(b) TtE), August 2003, October 2003, August 2004.

**FIG. 4**. *The hammer of a "Brown Bess" musket (photograph: Marius Loots).*

- Excavated control baulk (BOL 1/6(b) CB), August 2003, October 2003.
- Block A of BOL 1/6(b) (BOL 1/6(b) A), May 2006.
- Block B of BOL 1/6(b) (BOL 1/6(b) B), October 2003, August 2004.
- Block C of BOL 1/6(b) (BOL 1/6(b) C), October 2003, August 2004.
- Block D of BOL 1/6(b) (BOL 1/6(b) D), May 2006.

A control baulk between blocks A and B and between blocks C and D was left intact.

The site is characterized by a single habitation layer. All the cultural material occurs between the dung floor and an ashy layer that runs almost uniformly throughout the structure of BOL 1/6(b), with a concentration in the central section of the building. This ash layer most probably resulted from the fallen thatch roof. The human remains were scattered throughout the structure and no articulated remains could be found inside the building. However, human remains were also found on the outside of the structure, both on the western and southern sides (Fig. 3).

Cultural remains found inside the building include glass and bone beads of various sizes, metal bangles, a metal box, the hammer of a "Brown Bess" musket (Lategan & Potgieter 1982: 26–28) (Fig. 4), potsherds and a small clay cup. In BOL 1/6(b) C, the southwestern block excavated in the building, remains of a clay structure were found that may have been a feature inside the building. Pole impressions of wooden structural elements that were burnt were visible in the remains of the feature. It is, however, also possible that the clay remains could have been part of the roof structure, for example it could have been the packed clay where the roof rested on the walls. Due to the poor state of preservation of the feature, no conclusive interpretation can be offered at this stage.

## HUMAN SKELETAL REMAINS

As mentioned before, human skeletal remains were found outside on the southern and western sides of the structure BOL 1/6(b), as well as inside the ruins. All remains were analysed using standard anthropological techniques. The analyses were complicated by the fragmentary and commingled nature of the remains, especially those found inside the structure. Standard methodology was used, taking the commingling into account, with the main aim being to determine the minimum number of individuals (MNI) represented (e.g. Ubelaker 2002; L'Abbé 2005). Where isolated bones were found, they were measured and the values compared to existing

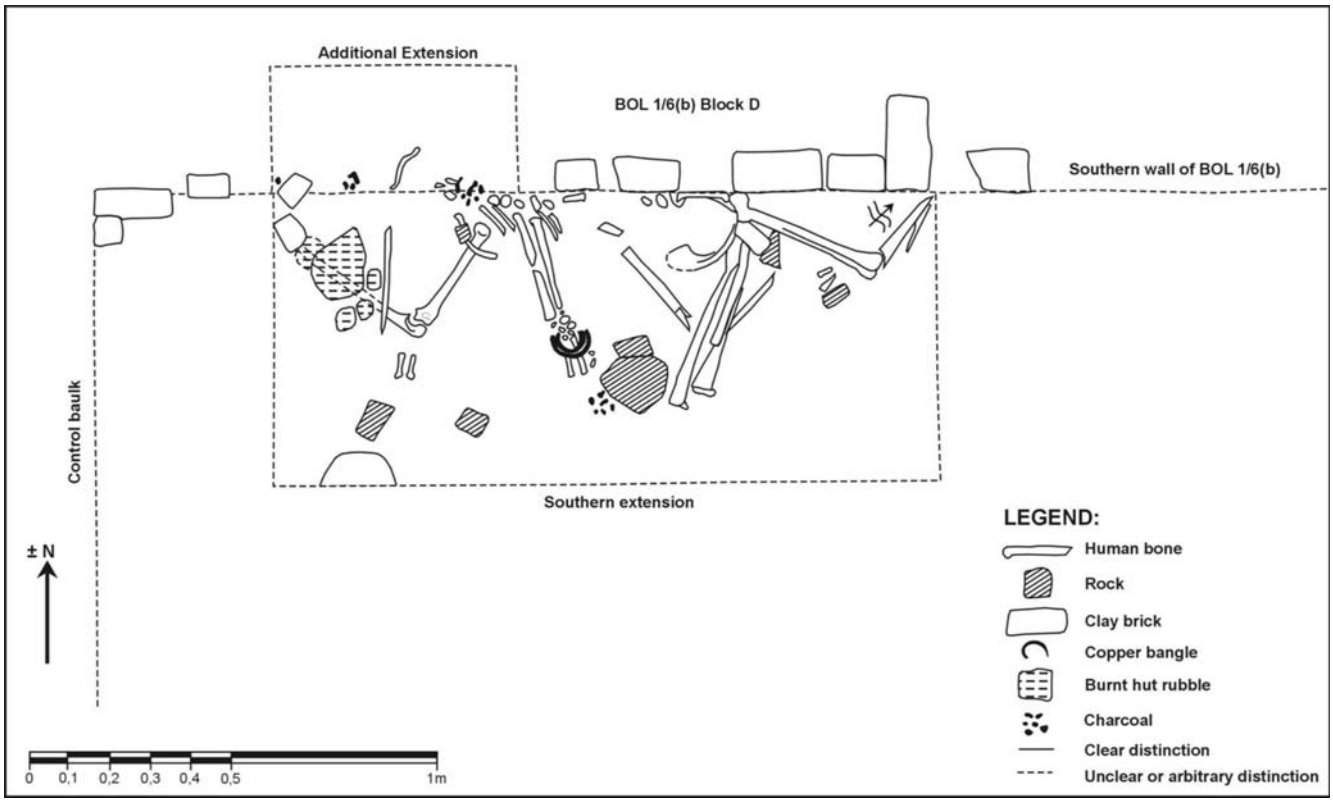


**FIG. 5**. *Plan drawing of two individuals found in the Southern Extension (Marinda Pretorius).*

data in order to determine the sex of individuals represented in the remains (e.g. Steyn & İşcan 1999; Loth & İşcan 2000).

THE SOUTHERN EXTENSION (SE) OF BOL 1/6(b)

Human remains were found on the outside of the southern wall of structure BOL 1/6(b). The remains of three individuals were present, numbered Individuals SEA, SEB and SEC. Individual SEA was fairly complete, while Individual SEB was represented by two long bones and a patella only. The limbs of these two individuals were intertwined, making distinction between them fairly difficult. Some remains (mostly fragmentary) could therefore not be assigned with any certainty to one of the two individuals. Individual SEC was found slightly more to the west, and was represented by some long bones, fragments of both os coxae, five metatarsals, one rib and several other fragments. The presence of five femora from this area undoubtedly confirmed the presence of at least three individuals.

Individual SEA was found against the wall of the structure. It was clear that the skeleton had not been formally buried, and it was most probably found where the individual died (Fig. 5). The position of the skeletal elements suggests that the individual came to rest with the back pressed tightly to the southern wall of structure BOL 1/6(b). Most of the bones were still articulated. The left leg was extended at the hip joint and rotated inwards and upwards, slightly flexed at the knee with the lower left leg in an unnatural position. The right leg was flexed. The articulated left arm of this individual occurred to the west of the pelvis. Two copper bracelets were found on the wrist. In order to expose the lower arm the humerus had to be removed since the bones were partially covered with brick fragments from the adjacent structure. It was impossible to ascertain whether the humerus was still articulated with the radius and ulna due to the position in which they were found.

An articulated right arm including a scapula and clavicle occurring next to the southern wall of structure BOL 1/6(b) just west of the left arm of Individual SEA, was also assigned to this individual. The bones of the arm were found inverted and flexed at the elbow, as if the individual came to rest with his right arm rotated at the shoulder and flung upwards and backwards over the head at the time of death. A copper bracelet was found at the wrist. Several vertebrae and rib fragments also occurred along the wall of the structure and in the vicinity of the other skeletal elements. It is impossible to ascertain with any certainty whether these bones belonged to Individual SEA or SEB. Several other skeletal elements including a large number of very small unidentifiable fragments, a condyle of a femur and three human metacarpals could also not be assigned to either individual with any degree of certainty. No skull or skull fragments were found.

The poor preservation made assessment of age and sex of individual SEA difficult.

All visible long bone epiphyses were closed, and there were no signs of degenerative disease. The individual was most probably a young or middle aged individual (Krogman & İşcan 1986). The pelvic fragments were too small to use for sex determination but all bones were very robust, which indicated a male. The long bone measurements mostly fall within the ranges quoted for South African black males (Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994; Loth & İşcan 2000). Using the combined physiological lengths of the femur and tibia, antemortem stature was estimated to have been 164.1 ± 2.371 cm (Lundy & Feldesman, 1987). This is average for a male from this population group (Tobias 1972). The linea aspera of both femora were very well developed, with evidence of possible myositis ossificans on the left femur. This usually follows after injury to a muscle, with subsequent calcification in the area. No other signs of pathology were found.

Individual SEB was represented by a femur that occurred between the tibia and fibula of Individual SEA (Fig. 5), as well as a disarticulated tibia occurring diagonally just southwest of the pelvis of Individual SEA. The femur was very curved, which may have been the result of exposure to heat. It is not clear

why so few elements of this individual were found. Animal scavenging activity and other taphonomic factors such as erosion which has visibly occurred, must be considered, but does not necessarily provide a full explanation.

The long bone epiphyses were closed, indicating an adult individual. The bones were fairly robust. Although the diameter of the femur head was fairly small (±41.5 mm), the midshaft circumference was above the average for South African black males. The head of the femur was somewhat damaged. A tentative diagnosis of a male was made (Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994; Loth & İşcan 2000). Stature could not be determined. Some additional bone growth was present on the posterior aspect of the proximal third of the tibia, which probably indicates previous trauma to that area.

Individual SEC was represented by one tibia, one humerus (probably the left), both femora, fragments of both os coxae, five metatarsals, two unidentifiable long bones (probably fibulae), one rib and several other fragments. All bones were poorly preserved. All visible long bone epiphyses were closed, indicating an adult individual. Both sciatic notches were preserved, and were wide. This thus indicated a female individual (Krogman & İşcan 1986). The midshaft circumference of the right femur (78 mm) was also close to the average for South African Black females (Loth & İşcan 2000).

In summary, the remains from the Southern Extension represent three individuals. They were adults, two being male and one female. It is noteworthy that no cranial remains at all were found from this area. This may be explained by unburned cranial remains found above the ash layer in Block D, inside the building (see discussion below).

## THE WESTERN EXTENSION OF BOL 1/6(b)

This excavation, initially conducted to expose the outside of structure BOL 1/6(b) and to establish the depth and character of the foundation of the walls, was later formalized after human remains were encountered. The trench was approximately 3.75 m long and 0.5 m wide along the western wall of structure BOL 1/6(b). It was excavated in six arbitrary steps to accommodate the approximately 1:0.26 slope of the terrace on which the structure occurred (see Fig. 3).

Eleven separately accessioned sets of bones were recovered from this area, as well as some smaller bone fragments which were found spread throughout the area. It should be noted that none of the bones were articulated in any way, and that they were distributed over a fairly large area. They may, therefore, belong to more than one individual, and were clearly not buried.

Human remains found in this area included fragments of one or more skulls, two teeth, a fibula, a tibia and a femur. Some of the remains seemed to indicate a female, while others were more robust and may have indicated a male. It is thus possible that the remains represented two individuals (a young adult male and an adult female), but this could not be determined with any degree of certainty.

## THE INSIDE OF STRUCTURE BOL 1/6(b)

Initially a test trench was dug through the inside of the building and in the process some human bones were discovered. The area was then divided into four blocks, but it soon transpired that human remains were scattered throughout the inside of the building. It was thus decided to excavate the complete area in order to retrieve all human remains, with the exception of a control baulk, 50 cm wide, stretching from north to south, that was left *in situ* in the middle of the building for future reference. The findings of this area will be discussed as a whole here, although detailed descriptions of the distribution of the remains according to the four blocks are available on request. These findings were described in detail in three interim reports that dealt with the human remains from BOL 1/6(b) (Steyn *et. al.* 2004; Steyn & Van der Walt 2005; Steyn 2006).

**FIG. 6**. *Forearm with copper bangle (photograph: Marius Loots).*

All remains found inside the building and underneath the ashy layer were extremely fragmented, and most showed signs of burning. In addition to the bones found on the surface and retrieved from the sieves, several hundred separately accessioned bags of bone fragments were excavated from the area. The findings from this area included a partial hand represented by a few phalanges with a copper bangle and glass beads approximately 68 cm from the western wall of the structure BOL 1/6(b), as well as a metal bangle and ulna fragments found in the area denoted as the eastern test trench (Fig. 6). No articulated remains were discovered, and several damaged teeth and cranial fragments were found. These teeth included the crown of one upper right deciduous molar found in Block B. Unfortunately its roots were not preserved, but this tooth indicates the presence of a juvenile aged between about 3 and 12 years.

The most complete bone found was the mandible which is shown in Fig. 7, found in Block C. Its right ramus was missing, and no teeth were intact. All teeth had been lost postmortem except for the right third molar and all the left sided molars which had been lost long before death. Some resorption of the

**FIG. 7**. *Mandible found in Block C (photograph: Louisa Hutten).*

**TABLE 1**. *MNI of individuals found inside the building at Maleoskop. This excludes the remains of one small baby.*

| Bone | | Left | Right |
|---|---|---|---|
| Maxilla | | 3 | 2 |
| Mandible | | 7 | 5 |
| Humerus: | proximal | – | 1 |
| | distal | – | 1 |
| Radius: | proximal | 2 | – |
| | distal | – | – |
| Ulna: | proximal | 2 | 2 |
| | distal | – | – |
| Femur: | proximal | 2 | 1 |
| | distal | – | – |
| Tibia: | proximal | – | – |
| | distal | – | – |
| Patella | | 2 | 2 |
| Calcaneus | | 1 | 2 |

alveolar bone was present, thus indicating an older individual. The mandible was relatively delicate, although the minimum ramus breadth (37.0 mm) was closer to the male average (İşcan & Steyn 1999).

In one area of Block B, several very thin and fragile cranial bones were found, and it is possible that these may have been the remains of a very small baby.

It is difficult to give an estimate of the minimum number of individuals (MNI) recovered from the inside of the building, as these remains are very fragmentary and severely burned. In order to make an estimate of the MNI, Table 1 indicates the frequency of some of the bones which were found to occur more frequently in the assemblage. These are the more robust bones, such as mandibles and patellae. Although they are not all paired bones, the side of the bone was noted as many were very fragmentary, for example the left half of a mandible, a fragment of the right side of the maxilla. Bones which were too incomplete to side were not included (see Fig. 8). These, for example, included fragments of long bone shafts. The most common element was mandibular fragments, indicating the presence of seven individuals, excluding the remains of one very small baby.

This brings the total number of individuals found inside the building to eight, including both males and females (based on the robusticity of the discovered bones), as well as a child between the ages of 3 and 12 years, and a very small baby.

The unburned cranial remains of one individual were found above the ash layer in Block D. It is possible that this may represent another individual, but it may also be the skull of one of the individuals found in the Southern Extension (Steyn & Van der Walt 2005). It seems possible that it may have been displaced from the Southern Extension to the inside of the building (which is downhill) after the building was burned down, possibly as the result of a heavy downpour.

Non-human remains were also found inside the building during the 2006 excavations. These were identified as the remains of one small or medium-sized dog (*Canis familiaris*).

## DISCUSSION

The remains from outside the structure were better preserved than those from the inside. The remains from the inside were very fragmented, and showed varying degrees of exposure to fire. They were also scattered throughout the inside of the building, which probably reflects something of the intensity of the fire.

During the excavations of the southern extension, the remains of three individuals were found. These were assessed to have belonged to a middle-aged male, another adult male of unknown age, and an adult female. The bones found here were still articulated, showing that the individuals died where they

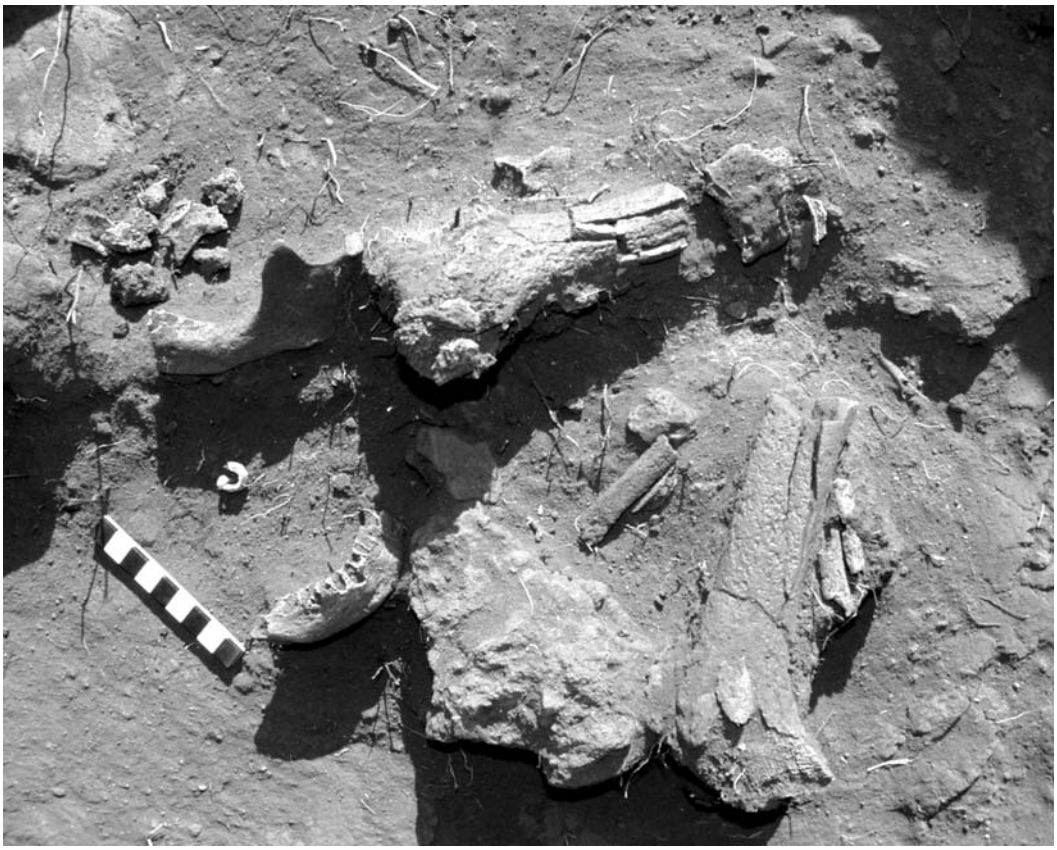

**FIG. 8.** *Mandible and other human bones in situ (photograph: Marius Loots).*

were found, or close by. No cranial remains were found in this area, and the possibility of the removal of heads/skulls shortly after the battle should be considered. It is also possible that they were displaced by taphonomic factors, as evidenced by the presence of unburnt cranial fragments found inside the building above the ashy layer. It is possible that these individuals were trapped against the back wall of the building, and that they were killed there. The possibility that they were killed slightly higher up on the slope should also be considered. This would imply that the bodies were washed down the steep slope after subsequent rain.

Human remains found in the western extension included fragments of one or more skulls, two teeth, a fibula, a tibia and a femur. Some of the remains seemed to indicate a female, while others were more robust and may have indicated a male. It is thus possible that the remains represented two individuals (a young adult male and an adult female), but this could not be determined with any degree of certainty. These remains were not articulated in any way, and they probably washed down into this area from the upper reaches of the hill.

An estimation of the number of individuals inside the building was done by counting the most common element (Table 1), and an MNI of seven was established. This excluded the remains of a very small baby, bringing the total number of individuals from this area to eight. These remains thus included adult males and females, a child, a small baby and even a dog. Other methods that may be used to estimate the number of individuals represented by a mixed assemblage include osteometric techniques (Byrd & Adams 2003) and assessment of most likely number of individuals (Adams & Konigsberg 2004; L'Abbé *et. al.* 2008). These were not employed here, due to the very fragmented and damaged nature of the bones. It thus seems that at least 13 people died in and around the building on the day of the war.

These results confirm the archival records that indicated that neither the survivors of the battle, nor the missionaries, were allowed to bury the dead, as stated above. None of the people whose remains were found in the excavations in and around BOL 1/6(b) were formally buried. On the contrary, the individuals who were found in the southern extension seem to have been found where they fell in battle, and the bodies in the building seem to have been partially cremated when the building was burned down. It is not possible to say whether they were alive or dead when the building was burned down on top of them. All the bone fragments within the confines of the building were found between the ash layer and the floor, except for the cranial remains of one individual which may have been displaced to this area after the event. The skeletal remains from the western extension were not articulated, and may have been washed down to the position where they were found.

It is not possible to establish exactly who these thirteen victims were and whether any of the remains could belong to members of the royal family of Kgoši Boleu. The question remains unanswered as to the status and use of this building and the other structures on the terrace. It is an open question whether this could have been the building of Kgoši Boleu or one of his councillors. This uncertainty may warrant the exploration of the entire complex of rectangular structures as a future project.

The remains of the people that were found, and the way in which the fragments had been scattered throughout the building, tell us something of the intensity of the battle that took place on 10 May 1864. Many people lost their lives on that day, and it is clear that nobody, not even the children or animals, was spared. Bitter recollections of that battle still survive in the collective memory of the various sections of the Bakopa people today. It is hoped that the formal burial of the remains of some of the victims may bring appropriate closure for their descendants.

## CONCLUSION

Resulting from the observations above, it would be inaccurate to describe the excavation of the human bones as being 'the excavation of ancestral graves'. There are individuals within the Bakopa community who felt that 'ancestral graves had been violated'. However, it is stressed here that none of the excavated human remains were found as formal burials.

As mentioned above, the possibility that human remains might be discovered during the project, was aired by the project team, and discussed at length by the Bakgaga-Bakopa Tribal Council. The decision was that no known graves would be excavated.

However, should other human remains be found, something that everybody knew was possible, the excavations and research could continue to gather as much information as possible. After the study of the human material, it was agreed that the remains would be returned to the Bakgaga-Bakopa community to be given a proper burial. While oral traditions were being collected, many older people remarked that they had witnessed the presence of human bones in the veld around Thabantšho during the first half of the Twentieth Century.

In accordance with community wishes, all human remains excavated at Thabantšho were transported back to the site for proper burial. This took place on Sunday 3 December 2006, under the auspices of the Bakopa-Bakgaga Tribal Council, currently the owners of the farm Rietkloof where Thabantšho is situated. The human remains were buried in three coffins, each containing the bones found in one of the three years of excavation: 2003, 2004 and 2006.

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## NOTE

[1]*...dessen Gipfel mit dichtem Gestrüpp von Aloe, Mimosen, baumhohen Euphorbien bestanden, schon von Natur unzugänglich, aber durch mächtige Schanzmauern noch mehr befestigt ist* (Wangemann 1868b: 58).

[2]*An dem mittleren Felskopf findet man unterhalb eines dunkel von links nach rechts sich aufwärts ziehenden Wäldchens hart oberhalb der übrigen Hütten einen baum markirt. Dieser bezeichnet den Ort, wo Maleo's Hütte gestanden hat, wo die Brüder gepredigt haben, und wo späterhin Maleo's Leichnam gefunden worden ist* (Wangemann 1868a: 634).

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