

A historical-archaeological investigation of an Anglo-Boer War British outpost in the Kruger National Park

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During the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) a voluntary British military unit called Steinaecker's Horse, operated in the Lowveld and Swaziland. The commander of the unit, colonel Ludwig von Steinaecker, was an important historical figure in this area. The unit established a number of outposts in an area today known as the Kruger National Park. One of these outposts was archaeologically investigated in order to recover any remains that may be associated with this unit and to form some idea of their lifestyle. Although no historical information on this particular outpost was found, the archaeological excavations revealed some interesting evidence. The disturbance of the site and the number of visible cultural material, indicated that it was used in recent times. The large refuse middens show that a reasonably large number of people occupied the site. Most of the artifacts found can be linked to the diet and articles of everyday use of the inhabitants. The conclusion is that the site was probably occupied by both a garrison of the Steinaecker's Horse military unit and some troops of the Native Police unit. Based on the distribution of different types of artifacts on the site a social differentiation between the members of these two units is assumed.

Key words: historical archaeology; Anglo-Boer War; Kruger National Park; Steinaecker's Horse; Native Police; social differentiation.

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Introduction

The existence of a voluntary British military unit called Steinaecker's Horse, which operated in the Lowveld during the Anglo-Boer War (1899 - 1902), is well-known (e.g. Bornman 1994; Pienaar 1990; Paynter 1986). This unit established a number of outposts in an area included into the Kruger National Park. Colonel Ludwig von Steinaecker, the commander of the unit, was an important historical figure in the Lowveld and the history of his unit, Steinaecker's Horse, is filled with legends and controversy.

However, in the decades following the Anglo-Boer War, the story of Colonel Von Steinaecker, his unit and their activities became shrouded in the mists of time, especially to people living outside the Lowveld

area. For a number of years the localities of the different outposts in the Kruger National Park were also unknown. In 1990 Pienaar published a photograph, taken on 17 July 1984, of artifacts found at a site known to be the location of Steinaecker's Horse northernmost outpost.

During 1995/96, two researchers of the National Cultural History Museum surveyed the remains of British blockhouses in the former Transvaal (Van Vollenhoven & Van den Bos 1997). This included a survey of military-historical sites in the Kruger National Park. Only one person of the present staff in the park, chief ranger B. Bryden, had a vague idea of where the particular site was. With his help and that of district ranger J. Oelofsen, the site was located in February 1996 (Van Vollenhoven *et. al.* 1996).

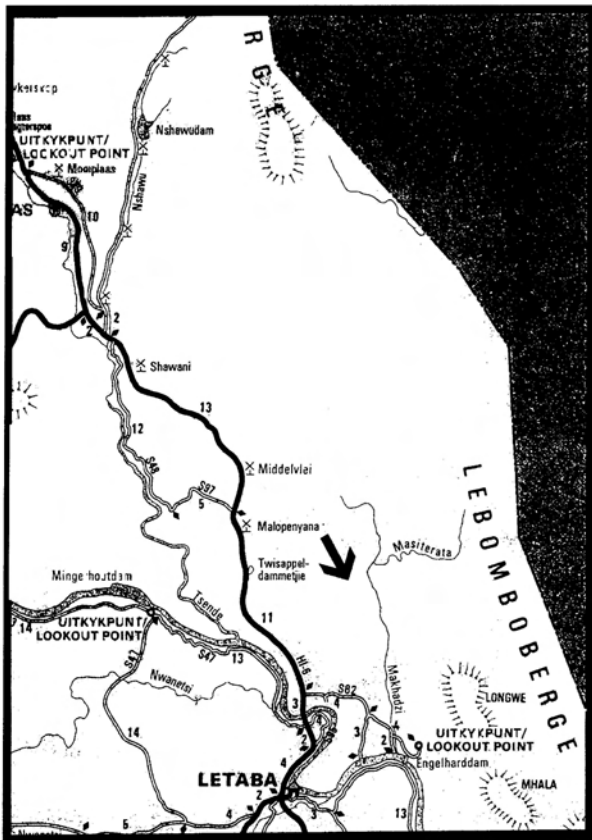


Fig. 1. Location of the site.

The northernmost outpost of Steinaecker's Horse is situated approximately 15 km north-east of the Letaba rest camp (Fig. 1) in the Mopani game ranger's district, which is part of the Letaba district. The GPS (Global Positioning System) coordinates of the site are 23°43'08"S and 31°36'59"E. It is found on map 2331 DA, Shilowa of the South African 1:50 000 topographic series. The site is located approximately 1 km north of the Zombe water hole and a few hundred metres from the north bank of the Makhadzi spruit. Although it is accessible by road, it is not on the tourist route and can only be reached by vehicles with a high chassis.

The state of preservation at the site was a concern to the researchers. The refuse middens that contain valuable archaeological evidence showed signs of erosion by surface

rain water, while burrowing by small animals also damaged the deposits. This was one of the main reasons for initiating an archaeological investigation of the site. Permission was obtained from the National Cultural History Museum and the National Parks Board, and excavation commenced in September 1997. Little is known about the everyday life and circumstances of the unit. The main objective to excavate the middens was to try to reconstruct aspects of the daily life at this outpost.

Method

A survey of literature sources was done in order to obtain as much information as possible on the history of Steinaecker's Horse. This was supplemented by archival research. Unfortunately no specific information on the northernmost outpost could be obtained, but valuable knowledge on the unit, members thereof and the unit's relationship with the British Army was obtained.

This was followed by the archaeological excavations. No grid was laid out as specific features were to be excavated. Base points were established and located by GPS on the site plan, which will enable researchers to locate these in future. Only one fixed base point was established by driving a metal peg in between two large fixed rocks, in order not to endanger any wildlife. The coordinates of this base point were also established by means of the GPS and other base points were referred back to this primary one so that it could be relocated in future.

As a result of bad weather, only five excavations were carried out (Fig. 2). Almost a third of the fieldwork time was lost due to rain. Two trenches were excavated at the central refuse midden, and a single trench at each of the small refuse middens and the largest one. A concentration of hut debris, 10 m to the south of the central midden, was also excavated. Surface material was collected, as much of this material was in danger of being washed away soon.

The central refuse midden

The objective of the excavation was to uncover cultural material and to determine the extent and depth

of the midden. The two excavations were laid out perpendicular to each other.

The soil texture was very fine with a greyish to light brown colour. Where the midden was at its highest (the central part of the excavation and midden), the soil was soft and ashy and was easily removed, probably being the point where the dumping originally started.

The midden was 32 cm at its deepest level. Ceramics, glass, metal and bone, were uncovered.

South-eastern refuse midden

A large concentration of metal artifacts was found on the surface of this midden, and it was excavated in order to investigate it. The soil was dark brown and hard with patches of charcoal. The deposit was a mere 15 cm deep and in addition to the metal artifacts, ceramics (Iron Age type pottery), glass, glass beads and bone were found.

South-western refuse midden

This was the largest midden on the site and was excavated as a control measure for the central midden. A single excavation indicated that the deposit was 43 cm deep. The soil was a mixture of light brown and light grey in colour. Cultural material consisted mainly of Iron Age type ceramics, glass, metal and a large number of bones.

Hut debris

The purpose of the excavation was to look for a possible hut floor, and cultural material to determine the function of the structure. A shallow deposit of 9 cm revealed burnt patches on the original soil. It seemed as if the occupants used the original soil surface as a floor for the structure.

Results

Historical background

Francis Christiaan Ludwig von Steinaecker was born on 28 September 1854 in Berlin (NAD, MHG 32062). He was the son of colonel Baron von Steinaecker and Baroness Von Thumen of Liegnitz. He began his military career in 1871, when he entered the Prussian Army as a member of the Leiz Grenadiers. Eight years later he resigned and

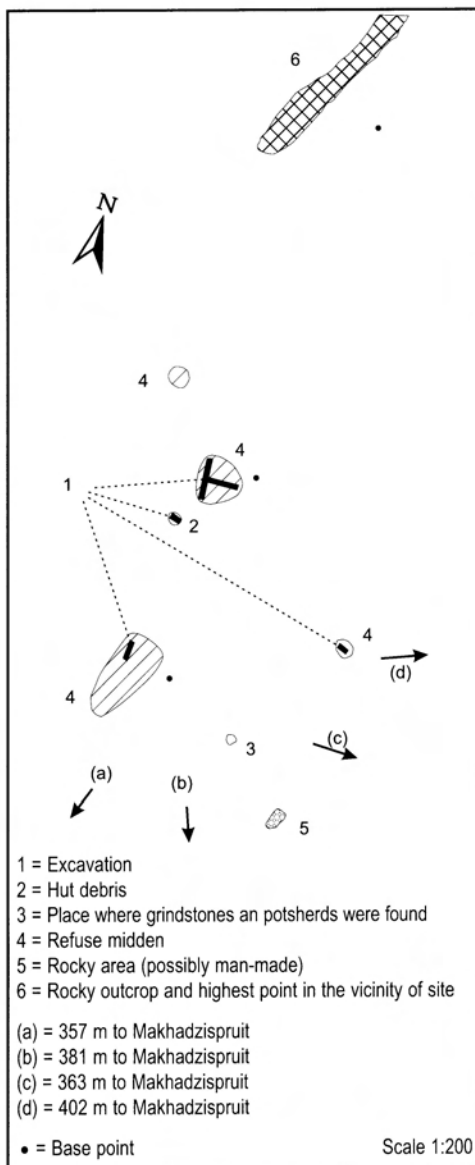


Fig. 2. Site map of Steinaecker's Horse's northernmost outpost.

joined the ruling prince of Battenberg (Bulgaria), Prince Alexander in his military exploits. During the years 1886–1888 he was in German South West Africa where he led an exploring expedition and drafted a map of the country (Conway 1978).

In 1890 he settled in the Port Shepstone district in Natal, and having become a British subject, joined the Colonial Scouts at the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899. General Buller was impressed with him due to his boasting about his countrymen's ability to effectively use explosives, and apparently gave him permission to try and disrupt the Lourenco Marques line—the railway line from Pretoria to Delagoa Bay (Forsyth 1972; Pienaar 1990).

With seven men and one pack mule laden with dynamite he travelled through Swaziland to the Crocodile River Valley. They found the Great Komati Bridge too heavily guarded for interference, but on 17 June 1900 they blasted a culvert near Malelane, wrecked a goods train and halted traffic for fourteen days (Diespecker 1996; Matsebula 1972; Pienaar 1990). Steinaecker went back into Swaziland where on 19 April 1901 he ambushed a small party of Boers at the kraal of a certain chief Mbhudula Mahlalela. Several Boers were killed and one, commandant G.M.J. van Dam of the State Artillery (ZARPS), was taken prisoner (Matsebula 1972; Diespecker 1996; Malan 1990).

After this incident Steinaecker was promoted to Major and given permission to raise a mounted unit. This unit became known as "Steinaecker's Horse" with a strength of 450 men. He made his headquarters at Lomahasha (Matsebula 1972). The unit consisted mostly of Lowveld inhabitants, such as the hunter H.F. Frances, the brothers P.W. and D.C. Willis, and people who later became game rangers in the Kruger National Park, such as Harry Wolhuter, E.G. Gray and Harold Trollope. Most of the members of the unit were, however, opportunists and adventurers who joined the unit for personal gain through plundering Boer farms and stealing military equipment issued to the unit (Pienaar 1990).

After 24 September 1900, when the Lowveld was invaded by the British forces, the headquarters of the Steinaecker's Horse unit was moved to Komatipoort (Farwell 1977;

Paynter 1986; Bornman 1994). A blockhouse was erected here and a series of outposts were established and manned. These were situated over a 200-km stretch along the Mozambique border, from Swaziland northwards, in order to prevent any trafficking of Boer forces across the border (Paynter 1986; Pienaar 1990). Much to the annoyance of the railway inspector, Jules Diespecker, Steinaecker moved into his house and made it his personal quarters (Pienaar 1990).

A large quantity of weaponry was ordered in the course of 1900 by the unit. This included a hundred thousand rounds of carbine, Maxim and revolver cartridges. Two Maxims with belts, fifty carbines with buckets and bandoliers, fifty revolvers, a tripod Maxim and a Mountain gun and six mules for carrying ammunition were ordered (Jones 1994). The war had, however, little impact on the Lowveld, resulting in a comfortable life for the soldiers of the unit (Paynter 1986).

Steinaecker's Horse caused as much annoyance as possible in Swaziland and the border area by raiding various settlements (Matsebula 1972). Bremersdorp (Manzini) was raided in March 1901 and jewellery and gold coins were stolen (Jones 1994). An amount of £6 000 were stolen from the shop of Gustav Schwab. Later they raided the store of B.B. Stewart at Ngwenya Range and stole £3 500 from him (Matsebula 1972).

While staying at Bremersdorp for three months, the Boers under command of general Tobias Smuts and commandant Hans Grobler besieged the unit on 24 July 1901. Steinaecker left for Barberton, leaving his beleaguered men to defend the village as best as they could (Matsebula 1972). After a skirmish in which some of the members of Steinaecker's Horse were killed, others wounded and some taken prisoner, the second-in-command of the unit, captain A.W. Greenhill-Gardyne, escaped with the rest (Pienaar 1990). Steinaecker talked himself out of this dilemma, resulting in the corps being increased to 600 men. Steinaecker was

also promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel (Masebula 1972).

Towards the end of the War, Steinaecker tried to have his corps retained as a permanent border guard, but it had served its purpose (NAD, SNA 321). He received the D.S.O. on 8 April 1902 and was commanded to disband his unit in February 1903 (Pienaar 1990). After his discharge in 1907 he tried to raise a permanent commission, but was unsuccessful (NAD, SNA 321). He eventually tried his hand at cotton, tobacco and grain farming, but failed (NAD, TPD 540; Bornman 1994; Pienaar 1990). He became a handyman on a farm near Acornhoek but became abusive to his employer during the First World War and was asked to leave. He refused and the police were called in to remove him. When they arrived he had poisoned himself with strychnine on the farm Champagne in the Lydenburg district and died on 30 April 1917. He is buried near Acornhoek in the Lowveld (NAD, MHG 32062; Pienaar 1990).

Although the war did not have a large impact on the Lowveld, it is clear that the unit of Steinaecker's Horse played a significant role in the area. The unit also did not escape losses due to war activities and their seclusion at some of the outposts. A total of 11 men died in battle, while 32 died of other causes, mainly malaria. Other casualties were 27 wounded in action and 42 who were captured or went missing (Pienaar 1990). In spite of all the information gleaned from historical sources, no specific data on the investigated outpost could be obtained.

The site

It is clear from the vegetation that the site was disturbed, as large open patches of ground occur between the grass throughout the area. At most of these patches cultural material was found. Small trees, especially sickle bush, were found in profusion, indicating that the site was disturbed (A. Morton *pers. comm.*). Large trees only occur along

the Makhadzi spruit, which runs more than 300 m to the north and east of the site. The open patches seem to disappear in a radius of 50–80 m from the central refuse midden, which could be an indication of the extent of the site. It will only be possible to determine the exact perimeter of the site when the grass is considerably shorter, as the grass stands about 1 m high.

To the north-east of the site lies a rocky outcrop which is the highest point in the vicinity of the site. A few fragments of glass were found here. The site is almost flat, but slopes gently downwards towards the Makhadzi spruit (the south-east). As the area is quite open, it provides a clear view over the entire surrounding area. The Lebombo mountain range, approximately 8 kilometres to the east, is clearly visible from the site.

The nearest water source is the Makhadzi spruit, a non-perennial river. During the research period the river bed was dry. The river runs in a semi-circle around the site, from the north-east, through the east and south to the south-west (Fig. 2).

Four refuse middens were located, but there could certainly be more. Cultural material is scattered over a large area, giving the impression that refuse was not only discarded on the middens, but was thrown away anywhere. One reason for this being that Steinaecker's Horse was a voluntary unit, lacking the discipline of a conventional British military unit, where one would have expected the opposite. Another reason could be that over the years artifacts have been washed and scattered away from the refuse middens.

The first midden is located almost in the centre of the site. It has a diameter of approximately 15 metres. The second is a small midden about 50 m to the south-east of the central midden. It is almost 4 m in diameter. The third midden is situated 20 m to the north-west of the first and is also 4 m in diameter. The latter is the largest, between 30 m and 40 m in diameter, and approximately 25 m to

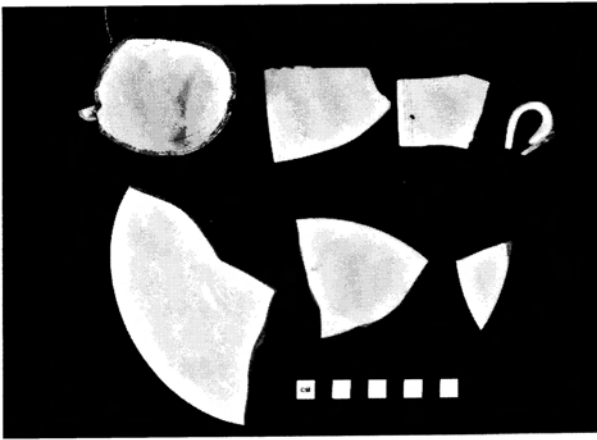


Fig. 3. White porcelain excavated at the site.

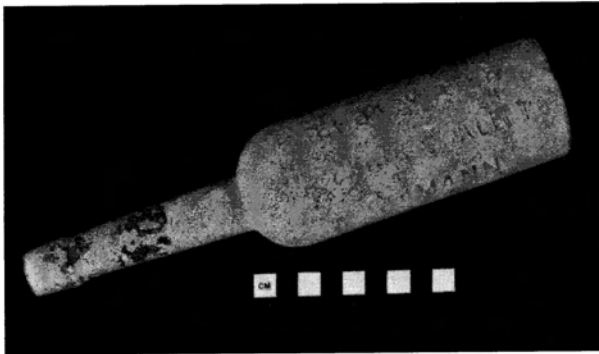


Fig. 4. Complete glass bottle from the site which contained some non-alcoholic beverage.



Fig. 5. Parts of food tins found at the site.

the south-west of the central midden (see Fig. 2).

Hut clay was found approximately 10 m to the south of the central midden. At some of the open patches grinding and hammer stones were found. Middle Stone Age tools were also identified on the site. Cultural material found on the surface includes pieces of metal, fragments of ceramics, glass and shell.

The excavations

The following cultural material was uncovered by the excavations:

Ceramics:— Porcelain, stoneware, earthenware and potsherds (mostly undecorated) were found dating to two periods, namely the early 20th century and the 1920s–1930s (Fig. 3). Decorated potsherds were identified as relating to the Shilowa industry (dated to circa 900 A.D.), whilst undecorated potsherds could be of a much later age (A.Meyer *pers. comm.*).

Glass:— Glass artifacts such as containers for liquor, non-alcoholic beverages and food were found (Fig. 4) (Van Vollenhoven *et.al.* 1998).

Metal:— Metal artifacts formed the largest part of the archaeological assemblage. It included material of distinct military origin such as belt buckles, cutlery with makers' marks of companies known to have supplied the British army, uniform buttons and cartridges (Army & Navy Stores catalogue 1907). Other artifacts included fishing hooks, parts of cooking pots, axe heads, nails,

food tins (Fig. 5) and lead seals of bottles dating from the turn of the century.

Faunal material:— These included parts of wild and domesticated animals, such as guinea fowl, francolin, steenbok, zebra, impala, small rodents, tortoise, cane rat, serval, fish, scrub hare, sheep and cattle (Van Vollenhoven *et.al.* 1998). Worked bone, which was part of a necklace, was of particular interest (I. Plug *pers. comm.*).

Discussion

As no specific historical information on this particular outpost was found, the archaeological evidence comprises the only information currently available on the site. The general information on the Steinaecker's Horse unit, could be useful to explain some of the archaeological finds.

The openness of the site, as well as the large number and distribution of cultural material found on the site, indicate that the site has been disturbed at some time. Most of the material dates to historical times, proving that the site was used extensively for a short period of time in recent times. Little evidence of any permanent settlement (e.g. hut floors) were found, which supports this argument. Historical information on the site indicates that it was used by the military unit of Steinaecker's Horse as an outpost during the Anglo-Boer War (Pienaar 1990).

The largest features on the site are the refuse middens, indicating that a fairly large number of people were stationed here. The cultural material indicates two periods of occupation or utilization, namely the late 19th to early 20th century and the period approximately 1920–1940. The first period coincides with the Anglo-Boer War and as large numbers of the artifacts, such as uniform buttons and spent cartridges were identified as of a military origin, this proves the presence of a military unit at the site. The later date is speculative. As it is known that former members of Steinaecker's Horse, such as Harry Wolhuter, later on became game

rangers (Wolhuter 1973; Pienaar 1990), it is possible that they temporarily used the site because they knew of its existence.

A small number of potsherds dated to 900 A.D. and Middle Stone Age lithic artifacts were also found at the site, indicating that it was inhabited in prehistoric times. Potsherds similar to Late Iron Age ceramics, were also found. These were probably brought to the site by the African servants and the Native Police, a black unit commissioned by the British Army. It is known that this unit was deployed with Steinaecker's Horse (Wolhuter 1973). Other artifacts of non-western origin found at the site, included glass beads and pieces of a necklace of worked bone, intended to represent the dew-claws of a lion. These artifacts were found in different locations as those with a western origin, suggesting some kind of social differentiation between soldiers of Steinaecker's Horse and those of the Native Police. However, conclusive evidence for this assumption was not found and there is a need for further research.

The large number of tins found on the site, reflect the diet of the garrison. It included the usual military rations of bully beef, sardines and ham, confirmed by historical sources (Wolhuter 1973). Faunal remains revealed by the excavation, also indicate that the unit supplemented their diet. Remains of domesticated animals, such as goat and sheep were found in the refuse middens. Fishing and hunting contributed to the diet as bones of fish, guinea fowl, cane rat, scrub hare, zebra, steenbok, impala and tortoise were found. Fishing hooks and spent cartridges found at the site support this. The cartridges may also be evidence of target shooting as the garrison was not at any stage involved in battle. Historical sources confirm that both game and domesticated animals were utilized in the diet of Steinaecker's Horse (Stevenson-Hamilton 1952; Pienaar 1990).

Conclusion

It is concluded that the site was occupied by a voluntary military unit known as Steinaecker's Horse during the Anglo-Boer War. The site was used again at a later stage (1920s-1940s), although it is uncertain by whom and why.

On the evidence that the site was not only occupied by the white members of Steinaecker's Horse, but also by African servants and Native Police troops, a kind of social (racial) differentiation is suggested. This is inferred by artifacts associated with different groups at different locations on the site. For instance, more Iron Age type ceramics were found in association with glass beads at excavation 5, as were late 19th and early 20th century ceramics. The latter were however mostly found at excavation 1 and 2 and were associated with more European type metal artifacts such as food tins. However this is not conclusive and needs further research. It is recommended that the archaeological research be extended to supplement the existing material data base, in order to verify and increase the historical information.

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