

The Gunfight at Sihayo's Kraal

By

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to correct some accounts of the first engagement in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. At the same time, it also establishes more precisely the locations of the two actions which took place.

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On 11 January, 1879, coinciding exactly with the expiry of the thirty day ultimatum to the Zulu King Cetshwayo, Colonel Glyn's Centre Column crossed the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) River at Rorke's Drift, accompanied by the General Officer Commanding, Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford and his staff.

Chelmsford determined first to attack the homestead¹ of Zulu chief Sihayo kaXonga, located in the Batshe (Bashee) river valley about eight kilometres from the drift. This operation would serve two purposes: it would secure his left flank for the advance towards Ulundi and it would also serve as a lesson to Sihayo himself, two of whose sons were ostensibly one of the justifications for the ultimatum: they had crossed the Buffalo some months earlier, abducted two of Sihayo's wives who had absconded with their lovers and had them killed.

After the crossing, the column made camp on the left or Zulu bank of the Mzinyathi and on the 12th January, Chelmsford ordered a large force forward under Colonel Glyn to assault Sihayo's homestead, which was nearby. This action poses two problems.

The first problem arises from the different modern accounts, at least one of which indicates that the only attack was against Sihayo's homestead,² while others state that this first attack was against a subsidiary homestead in a gorge and his main homestead was attacked some hours later or some combination of the two.³

The official version states:

At 3.30 a.m., a force under Colonel Glyn consisting of four companies of the 1/24th Regiment, the 1/3rd Natal Native Contingent and most of the mounted men left camp to reconnoitre the country to the eastward, where the kraal of the chief Sirayo was known to be situated.

Lord Chelmsford and his Staff accompanied this force, which, after a march of about five miles arrived at a ravine in the valley of the Bashee river.⁴

An engagement took place at this location, and:

Sirayo's kraal, which lay further up the Bashee valley, was burnt later in the day.⁵

A number of the participants left written accounts of these activities. One of these was Henry Harford, Staff Officer to the 3rd Regiment, Natal Native Contingent. He accompanied Captain George Hamilton-Browne with the 1/3rd N.N.C. battalion into the gorge and gives a detailed description the attack. He follows this account with these words:

¹ The alternative word 'kraal' is, like the American 'corral', derived from the Spanish word for farm. In recent times, it has acquired a somewhat pejorative meaning and is here used only for the purpose of the wordplay in the title.

² Donald R. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, London, 1965, re-printed 1988, p. 323.

³ Ian Knight, *The Sun Turned Black*, Rivonia, 1995, pp. 50 and 53. Cf. John Young, *They Fell Like Stones*, London, 1991, p. 25 'Having taken up positions before the main kraal of Sihayo, at about 7.15 a.m., the British were challenged by a Zulu.'; p. 27 'A reserve force comprised of the 2nd Battalion of the 24th (2nd Warwickshires) Regiment of Foot took possession of a secondary kraal, only to find it deserted.'

⁴ War Office, Intelligence Branch (compiled by Capt. J.S. Rothwell), *Narrative of the Field Operations Connected with the Zulu War of 1879*, London, 1881, reprinted 1907 and 1898, p.26.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 27.

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Now that the Cavalry, Mounted Police and 24th regiment had gone on to Sirayo's kraal, one of two companies of the [Natal Native] Contingent were sent off to capture some cattle, and after a short rest and a meal, the whole force returned to camp...⁶

There was also a journalist present, in the person of Charles Norris-Newman. He left a fuller account:

Just as this [first] engagement was finished the second force, consisting of the 2-24th and 2-3rd Natal Native Contingent, under Colonel Degacher, C.B., which had started some [three] hours after us, came up and were taken on farther up the valley to Sirayo's principal kraal, called Loxie [Sokhexe] ...⁷

Norris-Newman was nearly correct, but not quite. Lieutenant Nevill Coghill was serving as *aide-de-camp* to Colonel Glyn. Although Coghill died at Fugitive's Drift on 22nd January, his diary was later found on the battlefield of Isandlwana and several of his letters also survive. Of the 12th January, he wrote:

According to the orders of the previous evening a party of the 1/24th and 2/3 N.N.C. were to start at 5, and the 2/24th and 1/3 N.N.C. to leave at eight by another route and join the first party at a certain point. This arrangement was however changed as in approaching within a mile or so of a kraantz near Sihayo's kraal we heard the lowing of cattle and the Zulu chanting their war song and as it was evident that resistance would be made I was sent back to bring up the 2/24th and the 1/3 N.N.C.⁸

To conclude, there are the words of Chelmsford himself, who observed the first action from the opposite side of the valley with Major Clery:

In passing by the Ngudu Hill we noticed that some herds of cattle had been driven up close under the Kraantz where one of Sirayo's strongholds were said to be – I ordered Colonel Glyn with 4 Companies 1/24th & 1/3d Native Contingent to work up under the Kraantz [and seize the cattle].

Colonel Degacher who had been sent for from the Camp when we found that the Kraantz was occupied by the enemy came up towards the end of the affair with ½ battn. 2/24th and about 400 2/3d Native Contingent. This force went forward to Sirayo's own Kraal which is situated under a very steep Kraantz which is filled with caves. I ordered Sirayo's Kraal to be burnt but none of the other huts were touched.⁹

From the foregoing evidence, it is clear that there were indeed two separate engagements in the Batshe valley on that day. The first was the attack on a large group of Zulu who had taken a herd of cattle into a deep cleft in the steep cliffs of Ngedla Hill, which forms the eastern side of the valley. This was undertaken by the 1/3rd N.N.C. (Commandant Hamilton-Browne), supported by four companies of 1/24th and most of the mounted troops, under the command of Colonel Glynn. The N.N.C. made a frontal assault with elements of the 1/24th in support, while the mounted troops ascended the hill at the southern end to cut off any Zulu who were making their

⁶ Daphne Child (ed.), *The Zulu War Journal of Col. Henry Harford C.B.*, Pietermaritzburg, 1978, p. 21.

⁷ Charles L. Norris-Newman, *In Zululand with the British Throughout the War of 1879*, London, 1880, (re-printed 1988), p. 38.

⁸ Patrick Coghill (compiler), *Whom the Gods Love*, privately published, Halesowen, 1968, re-printed 1969, p. 103. Also quoted in Frank Emery, *The Red Soldier: Letters from the Zulu War, 1879*, p. 73. Coghill also seems to have confused the two battalions of the N.N.C..

⁹ John Laband (ed.), *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, Dover, 1994, p. 60: letter from Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Sir Bartle Frere, 12 January, 1879.

escape over the hill. The 1/24th ascended an adjacent spur with the same object in view.¹⁰

The attack into the cleft is described precisely by one of the combatants, who explains how they turned to their right flank to complete the movement:

We paraded at 4.30 a.m. After going about six miles, we came across the Enemy in a large mountain surrounded by a dense bush. We crossed a river up to our knees in water, then extended in skirmishing order through the bush. We were then ordered to loose our Ammunition but not to fire unless they fired upon us. We hadn't gone very far before they commenced firing at us from the Rocks. We wheeled around to our right and let them have it proper.¹¹

The route of the 1/24th, then, lay on the Rorke's Drift side of the Batshe until they reached their destination, crossing over and deploying ready for the attack. This is the point from which Lord Chelmsford watched the operation. They must have been uncertain as to precisely where their enemy lay because, having advanced towards the cliffs directly ahead, they found that the firing came from their right, causing them to turn in that direction.

The second assault was by four companies of the 2/24th and part of the 2/3rd N.N.C. (Commandant Cooper) under Colonel Degacher, which was brought up earlier than originally planned and which went further up the valley to attack and burn Sihayo's homestead itself.¹² This cautious action, it seems, was watched with some amusement by spectators of the 1/24th from the top of the cliff overlooking the homestead, because it was found to be deserted.¹³

The second problem is the location of these two engagements. Most of the eye-witnesses are silent on their precise whereabouts but there are descriptions which might help us. The first is from Commandant Hamilton-Browne, whose battalion attacked the first objective. He describes it thus:

The Krantz was a precipitous mountain about 500 feet high, and where the enemy and the cattle were located was in a deep cleft running in a V shape, the foot of the hill being covered with boulders and rushes.¹⁴

He emphasises the V shape several times in his description of the engagement, in one of which he says: "As we neared the place, I observed that I could send a party to the right and left of the V-shaped entrance."¹⁵ From this, it is clear that the V-shaped defile was at the rear of a wider mouth.

Harford had this to say about the location:

Eventually, on reaching the foot of a ledge of rocks, where they curved in a horse-shoe bend overhanging a steep valley, a somewhat grim sight presented itself.¹⁶

¹⁰ Norris-Newman, p. 40f.

¹¹ Letter from Colour Sergeant William Edwards, 1/24th Regiment, to his wife. South Wales Borderers Regimental Museum, Brecon, Accession No. 2002-25.

¹² Norris Newman, p. 41.

¹³ Col. G. Paton, Col. F. Glennie, and Col. W. Penn Symons, *Historical Records of the 24th Regiment, from its Formation in 1689*, London, 1892, p. 228.

¹⁴ G. Hamilton-Browne, *A Lost Legionary in South Africa*, London, c. 1912, p. 105.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Child: Harford, p. 19.

From these descriptions, it seems that we must look for a wide-mouthed cleft in the hill which slopes upwards to a cliff surrounding the cleft, but in which there is a narrower defile, into which the cattle were taken.

The first task in locating the site is to examine a large-scale topographical map.¹⁷ From this, it is quite easy to determine that there is but one very deep defile in the western flank of Ngedla Hill, overlooking the Batshe River. This however, is too narrow to fit the description because it would be impossible for it to hold the number of troops which were engaged, in extended skirmishing formation.

There are also two other indentations in the hillside, one large re-entrant almost at the centre of the valley and a much slighter one about 1,500 metres to the south. The most southerly of these is again too narrow to fit the descriptions given but that further north, which is also to the south of the narrow defile previously discussed, is a much better fit, having all of the required features: it has a wide mouth, extends to a depth of some 500 metres, after which there is a narrower defile about 250 metres wide and extending a further 150 metres into the hillside. Here there is a craggy cliff some 100 metres in height, accessible to the fleet-footed Zulu who tried to hold the British force off. Furthermore, the left flank of the re-entrant has a sufficiently easy gradient as would allow much easier access to the top of the hill, and is the most likely point at which some of the 1/24th made their ascent. The site is quite heavily covered with scrub and small trees and there are still many Zulu homes to be found on the lower level near the present road.

Whilst there is no tangible evidence that this is the site of the first engagement, it really is the only one of three possible sites which fits the descriptions given. It should also be mentioned that this indentation lies opposite an open area on the other side of the Batshe river, at a distance of about 1,500 metres, from where Chelmsford and his staff viewed the skirmish.¹⁸ There is no other such convenient vantage point along the whole western side of the valley.

The site of the second engagement is drawn from an unusual source. In 1882, Bertram Mitford visited every battlefield in Zululand as a tourist and wrote an engaging account of his travels. His description of the location of Sihayo's homestead itself is as follows:

About an hour's ride [from St Augustine's Mission] brought us through the green valley of the Bashi and after several tedious detours ... we entered the steep stony defile leading to the truculent old chieftain's former abode.... The site of the kraal, which was easily found, is on a ridge, or rather spur, overlooking the approaches from the valley on either side; the cattle enclosure still stands, and is girt by a solid stone wall, around which, and thickly overgrown with tangles of weeds, are the clay floors of the huts, being all that remains of the same. On the other side of the ravine, in the rear, rises a huge wall of frowning cliff ... and here, amid the stones and clefts, Sirayo's followers made a futile stand against the hated invader.¹⁹

¹⁷ Map 2830BC *Rorke's Drift* in the topographic 1:50,000 series published by Chief Directorate: Surveys and Mapping, Mowbray, South Africa, 1981.

¹⁸ Child: Harford, p. 21.

¹⁹ Bertram Mitford, *Through the Zulu Country, Its Battlefields and People*, London, 1883 (re-printed 1992) p. 48f.

Lieutenant Coghill also made a contribution here:

While this [the fight in the defile] was going on the 2/24th and 1/3 N.N.C. were being moved round to attack the kraal itself wh[ich] was reported to be strongly fortified and loopholed. ... Its strength and the metal[sic] of its defenders were not to be tested for on arriving at the kraal it was found to be deserted.... The kraal was burnt and we returned home with the cattle we had captured²⁰

The key word here is "round". Round what were the 2/24th and N.N.C. moved? The answer is: the northern shoulder of Ngedla.

Then last, and perhaps the most important, clue is provided by Captain William Penn Symons:

It [Sihayo's homestead] was picturesquely situated in an angle of the hills 200 feet above the level of the valley, and well watered.²¹

Sokhexe is therefore not located within the western Batshe valley at all, but rather, it occupies a high shelf on the northern flank of the hill, which itself is surrounded by a vertical cliff some twenty five metres high, those same cliffs from which the 1/24th gazed down on their advancing colleagues. As Mitford describes, it is approached from the northern valley by a steep, stony defile, now traced by a rather poor track, which winds its way almost to the summit of Ngedla. Also as Mitford describes, it looks almost due north across the Batshe river as it turns east to follow the northern face of Ngedla.

The first engagement lasted about one and a half hours and the force was back in its camp on the Mzinyathi by four in the afternoon. Interestingly, this small fight resulted in the capture of some cattle, which was highly regarded. Private Edwards again:

If I get through this all right I shall have plenty of Prize money to draw as all that is captured is to be divided among the troops.²²

With regard to the cattle captured in this engagement, Lord Chelmsford was as pleased as was Edwards:

The cattle captured by this force up to date is 413 cattle, 235 sheep, 332 goats, and several horses.

The division of such booty will be made agreeably to the regulations sanctioned by His Excellency the High Commissioner, and reported by him for the sanction of Her Majesty.²³

I have been able to visit the site of Sokhexe and was privileged to be shown round by Dlokodloko kaNgobese, a great-grand-son of Mehlokazulu kaSihayo himself.²⁴ The foundations of the stone cattle enclosure, indicating walls of almost a metre in thickness, are still visible in the grass, showing it to be some seventy or eighty metres in diameter. When it was at its full height, with embrasures for firearms, it might have

²⁰ Coghill *op. cit.*, p. 104 and Emery, *loc.cit.*

²¹ Penn Symons MS, South Wales Borderers Museum, Brecon.

²² Letter of Colour-Sergeant Edwards.

²³ The National Archives (Public Records Office) WO 33/34, No. 55: Report from Lord Chelmsford to the Secretary of State for War, 14th January, 1879.

²⁴ I am indebted to Petros Sibisi, from the Rorke's Drift Museum, for his valuable assistance in locating these two sites, without whom I would not have been able to find them.

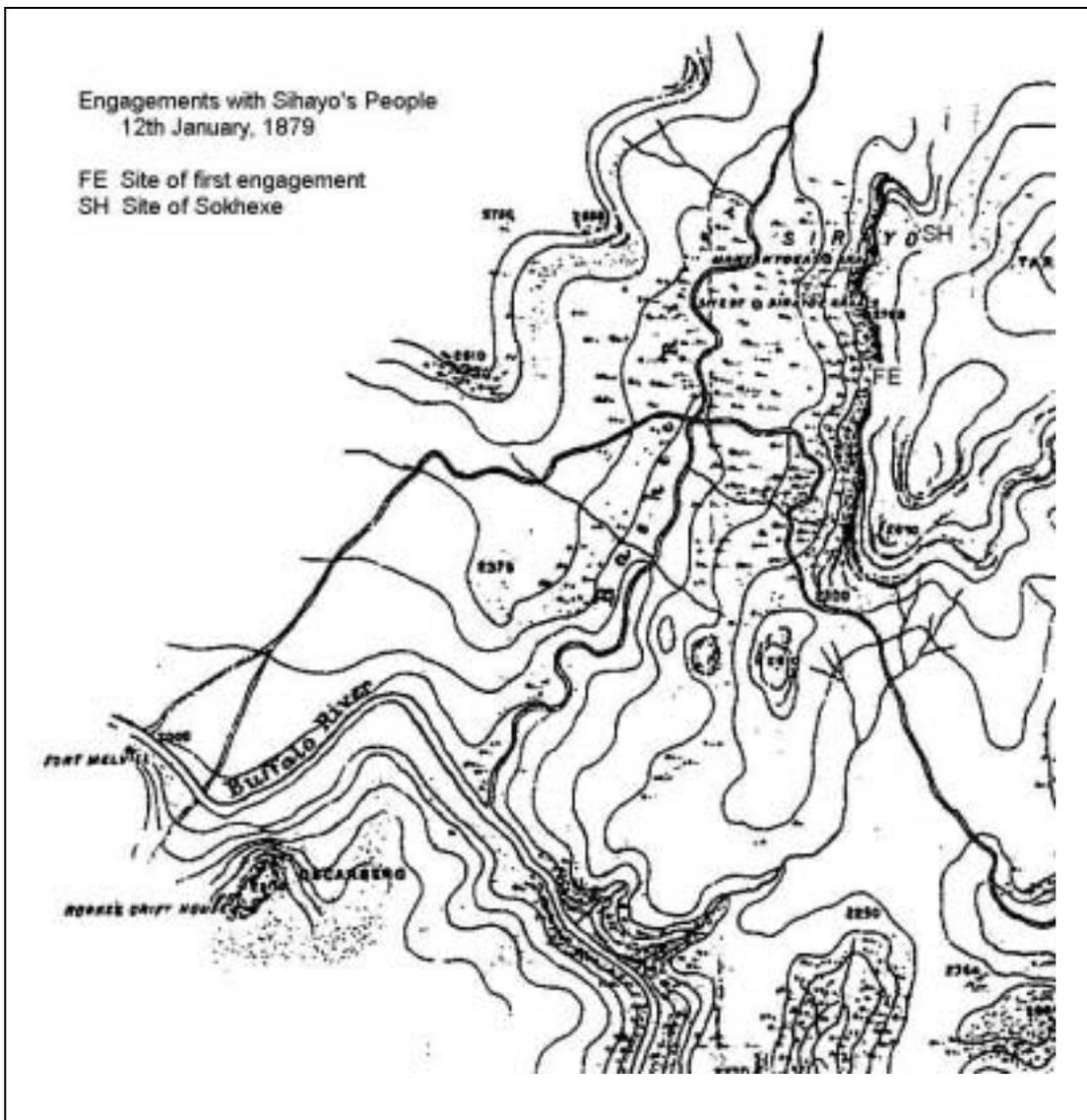
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seemed a formidable obstacle indeed; however, it is completely overlooked by the surrounding cliff and would thus have had little defensive merit for western arms:

The position was strong had it not been that it was completely commanded from a cliff above, under whose shelter Sihayo had in the innocence of his heart erected an impregnable fortress.²⁵

The site around the perimeter of the homestead foundations is still occupied by the traditional Zulu round huts, now rather more spread out than they would have been in 1879, and inhabited now, as then, by the descendants of Sihayo's people.

The map below shows the area of operations of this engagement, and is based on a map prepared in November, 1879 by Captain T.H. Anstey, R.E., entitled "Military Survey of the Country Around Isandhlwana". The page following shows recent photographs of the two areas.



²⁵ Coghill *op. cit.*, p. 104.

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Figure 1 Site of the First Engagement



Figure 2 Site of Sokhexe showing the foundations of the cattle kraal