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The Zulu battle-axe

by

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ABSTRACT

Little attention has been given previously to the occurrence of battle-axes in precolonial Natal. The accepted view has been that they were a late introduction from neighbouring areas. This paper provides a variety of evidence for greater antiquity in the region and demonstrates that the battle-axe had a cultural status of greater significance than its mere function as a hunting or fighting weapon.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I examine the status and typology of battle-axes in the precolonial culture of the KwaZulu-Natal region. The enquiry is part of a wider research project on the regional metalworking traditions as a whole (Maggs 1991 1992).

Although battle-axes represent a minor part of the production by local smiths (Webb & Wright 1986), this research is justified because there has been no other substantial work on the topic. Indeed, the predominant viewpoint is that the battle-axe was introduced to the Zulu people from their neighbours only late in the nineteenth century. I will examine this contention and review the evidence concerning this weapon, including its local typology.

What evidence is there for the statement by no less an authority than Lugg (1942) that 'the battle axe (*isizenze* or *imbemba*) was not a Zulu weapon, but a late introduction from Swaziland and Basutoland'? He adds that it 'was not used as a weapon of war until after the Zulu War of 1879' and that he saw none among weapons captured during the Bhambatha Uprising of 1906, although by this time they were commonly used in faction fights. Lugg's contention has been given greater currency by Krige (1965) whose standard work on the Zulu maintains that 'there is no record of the Zulus having used an axe in battle since Shaka's day'.

Recent works on the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 tend either to ignore the battle-axe entirely or to reflect the viewpoint of its supposed foreign origin, although some authors do suggest that a few Zulu soldiers carried them in battle. Laband (1992: 61), for example, indicates that '...perhaps a few (Zulu soldiers) might have a battle-axe with a crescent blade (*isizenze*), of Swazi or Pedi origin', while Knight (1987: 42) states that 'A number of axes were used, imported from tribes to the north, like the Pedi, who were highly regarded as manufacturers. They had crescent-shaped blades...'

In complete contrast to the above is McBride's (1976) claim that a variety of small axes was in common use before Shaka's time in the early nineteenth century. However, no sources are given in this popular booklet, so the validity of his claim can not be assessed.

Because of the paucity of written references to Zulu battle-axes it is necessary to consult other sources of evidence. These include early depictions of the weapon as well as examples in museum collections.

THE BATTLE-AXE IN ART

Early illustrations of battle-axes have proved to be a useful source of information since something of their provenance is known or can be inferred.

The earliest depictions of axes from our region come from rock paintings produced by Later Stone Age hunter-gatherers. These people lived in contact with communities

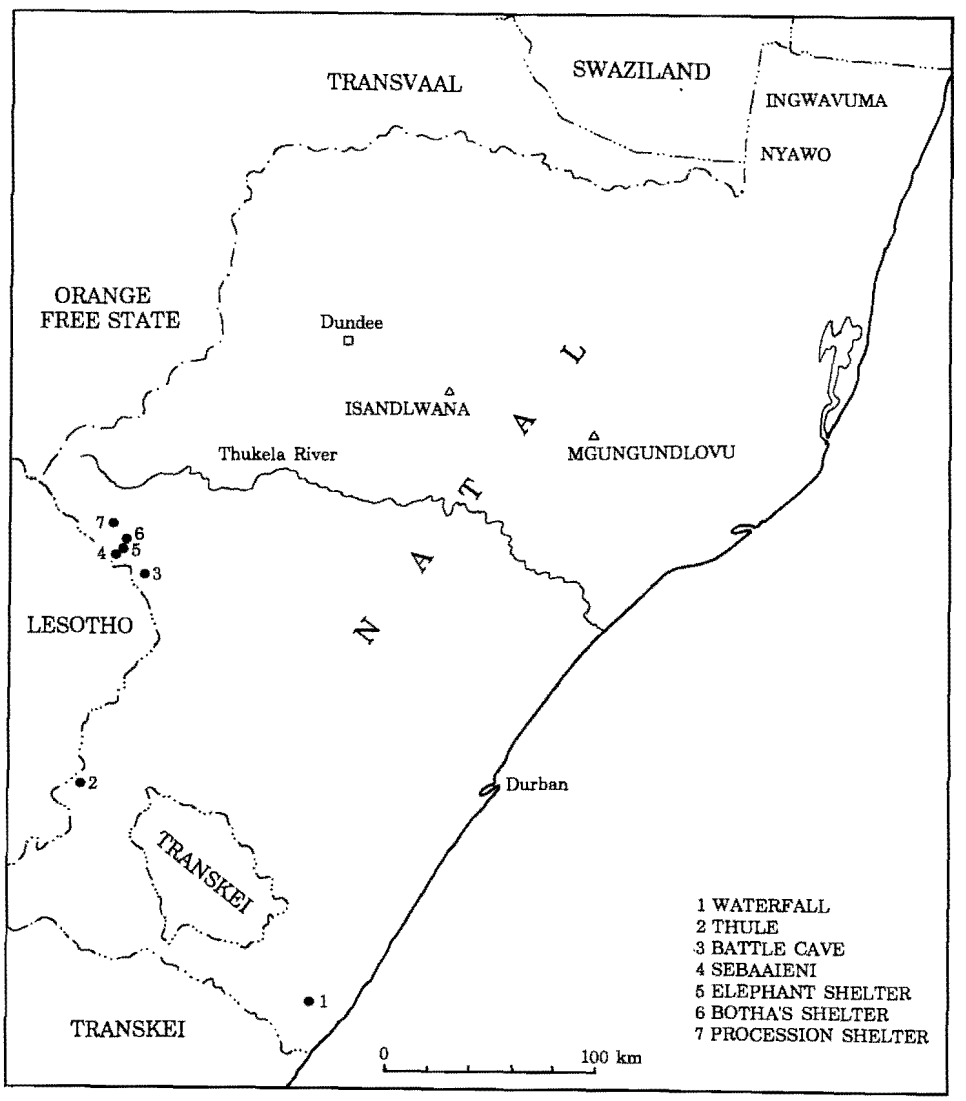


Fig. 1. Sites with rock paintings of battle-axes and places mentioned in the text.

of Black agriculturists for one and a half millennia in Natal before the last individuals were absorbed or annihilated in the mid-nineteenth century with the tightening of European colonial control over the region. The battle-axe was not part of the Later Stone Age culture itself and therefore must have been observed or obtained from agriculturist communities.

While it is just possible that these agriculturists could have been Sotho rather than Zulu, the main cluster of paintings, in particular (Fig. 1,3–7), is cut off from areas of nineteenth century Sotho settlement by a wide belt of the highest mountains in southern Africa. Moreover, these paintings are in close proximity to dense settlements of the later precolonial period, which were occupied by people whose descendants speak Zulu.

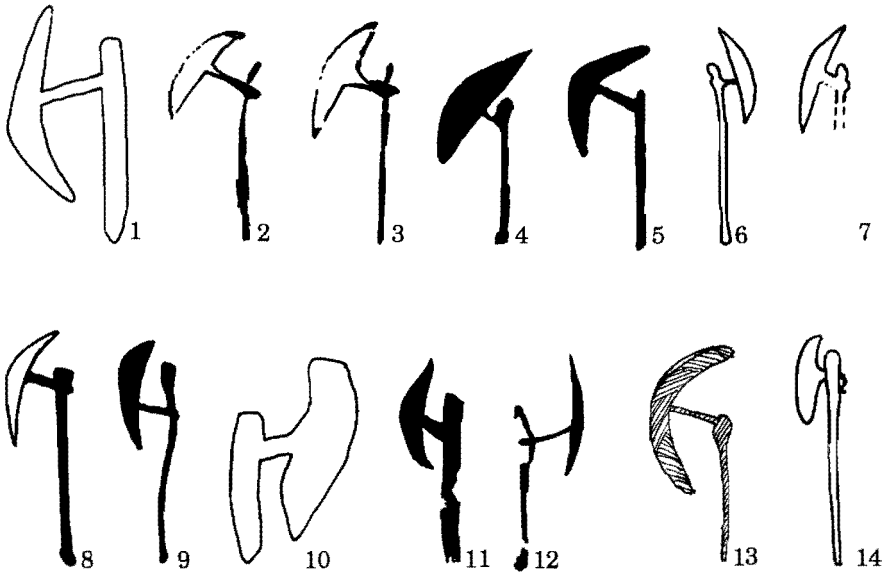
Battle-axes are a rare element in the rock art and yet they are known from seven different rockshelters in Natal. They occur near the coast in the south and along the Drakensberg range from East Griqualand to Cathedral Peak (Fig. 1). In five cases the axes are shown in context, namely two examples of fighting and three of hunting. The hunting scenes depict large animals, but only one animal is identifiable: an elephant. Pager (1971) considers that this scene represents the practice of hamstringing as used by the Zulu in elephant hunting.

Lewis-Williams and his students have warned against literal interpretations of scenes, especially those apparently depicting conflict, in the rock art (Campbell 1986, Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989 1992). They point out that even scenes such as those mentioned above, which have been claimed to represent actual events, often contain elements associated with trance-induced hallucination. Such scenes may reflect rather the symbolic strife experienced by shamans while in trance. These authors therefore caution against using the rock art for ethnological purposes. It is, however, my contention that, even though the scenes may well depict symbolic rather than physical confrontation, the artists would nevertheless have painted weapons familiar to them and shown in appropriate contexts. I consider that the artists of these paintings would have regarded the use of battle-axes as appropriate in the contexts of hunting and fighting.

Furthermore, while the artists have clearly taken liberties in terms of distortion and relative scale, for example the axe-heads are sometimes disproportionately larger than the handles (Fig. 2), I consider that the shapes of the blades broadly resemble the actual shapes of axe-heads known to the artists.

The paintings cannot be dated precisely, but as the last record of an independent San band in the Drakensberg is from 1878 (Vinnicombe 1976), they must all date from before this time. Because the paintings are widespread they indicate that the San artists, at least those of the last generations, were familiar with battle-axes and their use. This evidence alone makes it implausible that the weapon was introduced to the region only after the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879.

This war saw a sudden increase in illustrations of the Zulu people, mainly by British artists. The rarity of battle-axes among this material does indeed suggest that the weapon was seldom carried by Zulu soldiers, but that it did at least occur among them. Fripp's well-known painting of the Battle of Isandlwana (1879) shows a Zulu armed with a battle-axe (Fig. 2,14). While the artist was not an eye-witness to the battle, it is clear that he went to considerable lengths to achieve correct detail in such



Figs 2,1–14. Battle-axes as depicted in rock paintings. 1. Waterfall near Paddock, Vinnicombe 1976. 2–5. Thule, Mt Currie District, Vinnicombe 1976. 6–9. Battle Cave, Injasuti, Giants Castle Game Reserve, Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1992. 10. Sebaaieni, Ndedema, Pager 1971. 11. Elephant Shelter, Ndedema, Pager 1971. 12. Procession Shelter, Cathedral Peak, Pager 1971. Engraved cattle horn. 13. Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African Art 83-8-1.1. Painting. 14. C. E. Fripp, The last stand at Isandlwana, National Army Museum 6011-82.

things as weapons, so he may well have used, for a model, an axe taken in the war. Another example from this period was done by an unknown, but almost certainly Zulu, artist who worked in a scrimshaw technique on cattle horn (Maggs 1990). His depiction shows a Zulu soldier, probably of rank as he leads a file of men, holding an axe with crescentic blade (Fig. 2,13 & Fig. 3).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE-AXE

The evidence presented above indicates that the battle-axe was indeed known and used in the KwaZulu-Natal region before 1879, although it may have been something of a rarity. Indeed Lugg (1942) himself admits that there is evidence of its early use among the Zulu 'as a ceremonial weapon because the words for it are to be found in old tribal songs even in Shaka's time'. Lugg may be referring to the following passages in the praises of Shaka (Nyembezi 1932):

'Axe that is sharper (cleverer) than other axes'. And
'Ndaba (ie. Shaka) destroys with a spear
Other lords destroy with axes'.

The actual words used are *ilembe* and *izembe*. The former is archaic while the latter can mean axe or battle-axe, but in this context it is more likely to mean battle-axe.

To better understand the position we need to look at the significance of this

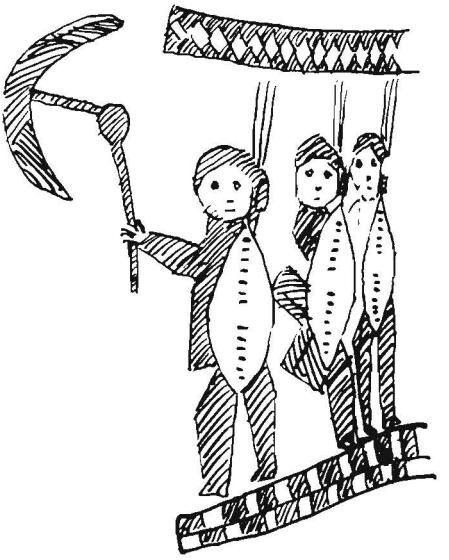


Fig. 3. Section of engraved cattle horn (National Museum of African Art 83-8-1.1) showing soldiers with spears being led by a soldier with a battle-axe.

Fig. 4. Isandlwana celebrations 18 January 1992, Zulu elder with battle-axe.

weapon in Zulu culture of the nineteenth century. This will require a look further afield both in time and space.

As Widstrand (1958) has shown in his major study, the axe in many parts of Black Africa was important for its ceremonial and symbolic functions. Indeed, in many cases it was more significant as symbol than as functional tool or weapon. The symbolic importance was not only widespread, but it extended far back in time: for instance, battle-axes were found among hoards of high-status items at Great Zimbabwe (*ca.* 1250–1450) and Khami (*ca.* 1450–1640); the latter examples, being highly decorated, were clearly intended for symbolic not practical use (Robinson 1959).

The symbolic significance is not merely secular, but extends into the spiritual realm. For example, among contemporary Shona, who are in part the descendants of the Great Zimbabwe and Khami communities, battle-axes play a role in religion. According to Dewey (1986) they are ritual items used 'primarily in spirit possession ceremonies (*bira*)'. They are 'passed down from generation to generation and universally associated with the ancestors'. Dewey's (1985) study shows that the battle-axe among the Shona has essentially a religious function today. However, in the past it was used as a weapon against enemies and wild animals, including elephants, as well as serving as a symbol of political authority and even resistance to colonial rule.

In nineteenth century Zulu society the king or an independent chief was the focus of national ceremonies such as those associated with sowing and harvest. The first fruits ceremony was particularly important; not only did it assure a rich and sanctified harvest, but it strengthened both the king and the national army (Lugg 1929, Raum 1973). For these ceremonies various sacred substances and artefacts were required, among them the ancestral axe, spear and hoe. When not in use these items were secreted in the back section (*msamo*) of the Great Hut. This is the most sacred place in a Zulu homestead, for it is here that the ancestral spirits are most powerfully present. Another source (Mqaikana in Webb & Wright 1986) lists the axe among the 'articles of chiefship' of the Chunu clan who lived in the middle Thukela valley. This particular axe therefore seems to carry a dual symbolic message – a link with the nation's ancestors as well as a demonstration of aristocratic authority when it is brought out for ceremonies.

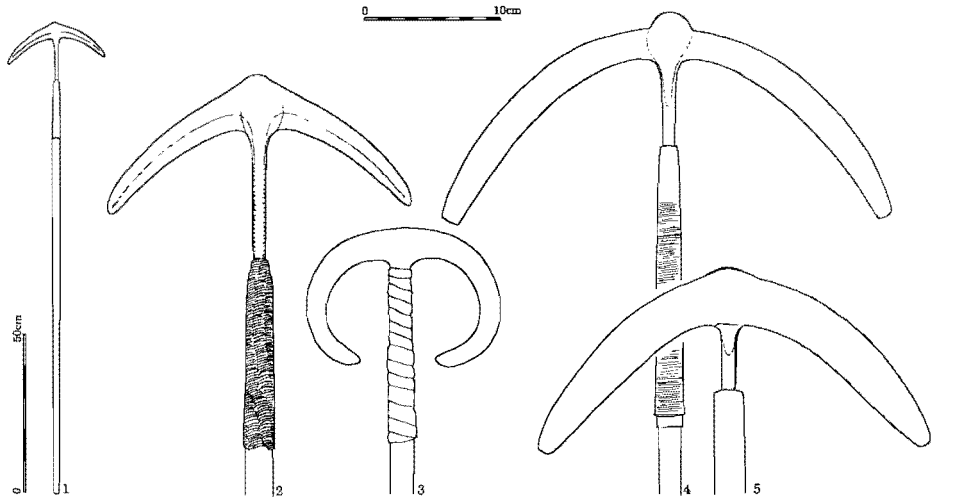
Today the battle-axe is still used as a highly visible symbol by the Zulu royal house. King Goodwill Zwelithini regularly carries one on ceremonial occasions when traditional regalia are used. Among the Swazi, who are closely related both in language and culture to the Zulu, the battle-axe plays a similar role. It was used as a highly visible symbol during the coronation of King Mswati in 1986.

It was not only the kings who carried battle-axes, but apparently certain other men of importance. Nyembezi & Nxumalo (1966) include 'heads of households and councillors' in this category, although it is not clear whether ordinary homestead heads would have been included in the nineteenth century. The early literature is of little help here, although, there are some pointers. The officer corps of the Zulu army was essentially aristocratically based, as was the case with European armies of the era. A non-academic source (Reyburn 1940) states that in the Zulu army of the 1830s 'the trusted men, those who had shown exceptional valour' carried battle-axes in addition to their normal weapons. As mentioned above, the Zulu engraving of a soldier with battle-axe shows him leading a file of soldiers armed only with spears, which suggests that he is of higher rank (Fig. 3).

On ceremonial occasions today leaders of detachments of men performing traditional Zulu military movements frequently carry battle-axes (Fig. 4). When asked about this, Prince Gideon Zulu, an authority on the traditions, stated that some people today carry a battle-axe although they are not really entitled to do so. The right to carry one derives from the individual's descent; in other words it is a sign of aristocracy. The implication is that men at a certain level of social/military rank were entitled to carry battle-axes.

THE NHLENDLA

We now need to consider another item of Zulu metalwork because it has analogies, both in form and function, with the battle-axe. The *nhlendla* is really a type of staff, but it has a steel blade, essentially that of a battle-axe, hafted not at right angles to the handle, but with the tang inserted into the end of the staff, as in the case of a spear (Fig. 5). This peculiarly Zulu implement is therefore superficially like a spear, but it has the head of a battle-axe and its function is solely symbolic. The *nhlendla* as a symbolic staff should not be confused with a functional type of Zulu spear which has



Figs 5,1–5. The *nhlendla*. 1–2. Owned by Dabulamanzi, brother of King Cetshwayo. Attached to shaft by wire binding, length 1,50 m. Natal Museum 5786. 3. From Msinga, Natal, collected before 1903. Attached to shaft by raw hide binding, length 1,64 m. Natal Museum 183. 4. Unknown provenance. Attached to shaft by skin of cow tail, length 1,56 m. Durban Local History Museum NN89.180. 5. From Msinga, Natal, collected before 1903. No binding on shaft, length 1,64 m. Natal Museum 184.

a winged spearhead and which some authors have also called *nhlendla* (Bryant 1949, Nyembezi & Nxumalo 1966).

The head of the *nhlendla,* as with that of the battle-axe itself, is a relatively complex piece of metalwork by regional standards, because the tang is set at right angles to the blade. This form must have been difficult to make out of a single piece of metal, indeed several examples retain signs that welding was used (Figs 5,2 & 5,5). It is presumably because of this difficulty that most of the more recent battle-axes were made of industrial sheet steel, or have their tangs rivetted to the blades. The battle-axe head must therefore have been one of the most complex items produced in the regional smithing tradition.

Sticks of one sort or another were widely used in nineteenth century Zulu society. It was normal for men and older women to carry some form of walking stick; however the staff, finely carved from wood and around 1,5 metres in length, was carried only by older men of higher status. Some staves had their upper portions carved in a variety of shapes resembling winged and barbed spearheads (Fig. 6). That these carved forms themselves carried symbolic meanings is evident from a description of one where the barbed shapes are linked to cattle horns and thus to cattle. Lugg (1942) calls this type *intinga yobukhosi*, which was carried by 'chiefs of standing' only. 'At the head are three crescent shaped horns the top one representing the bull, and the lower one his opponents ...' (op. cit.).

The *nhlendla* needs to be placed in similar context. Today it is carried by the Zulu king on ceremonial occasions. A picture from the War of 1879 shows one member of a Zulu delegation to the British carrying such a staff. It was apparently associated only with chiefs and senior members of the Zulu royal family (see caption to Fig. 5).

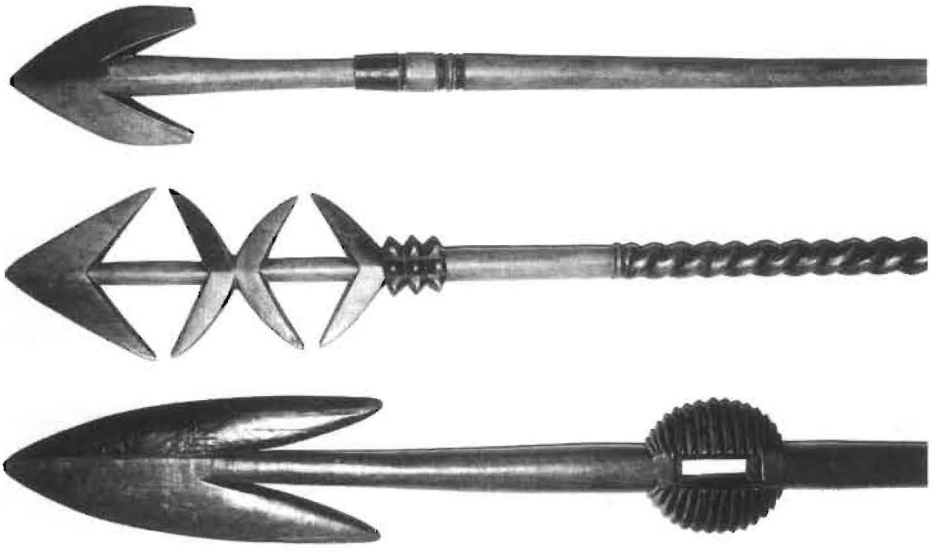


Fig. 6. Zulu staves of wood carved to resemble winged and barbed spears. British Museum 1936A.1015.1, 186?C1.674, 1895A.0806.3

Bryant (1949) calls it 'a "royal weapon", carried only by the chief and other such great men as he permitted'.

The word *nhlendla* refers also to the crescent moon and therefore presumably came to be applied to the staff because of the shape of its blade. I have not found any reference to symbolic meaning attached to the blade shape, but no doubt symbolic associations did exist. The link between the barbed spear-shapes of the wooden staffs, the bull's horns, and thus the authority of senior males was noted above. The crescent of the *nhlendla* blade would similarly echo the crescent shape of cattle horns. The *nhlendla*, therefore, apparently combines the symbolic significations of both battle-axe and staff-of-state in heightened form with regard to the status of the dominant male authority.

BATTLE-AXES IN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

From the preceding discussion it is clear that the battle-axe and its relative the *nhlendla* played significant roles in nineteenth century Zulu culture. To find out more about the typology of the battle-axes older examples were examined in various collections.

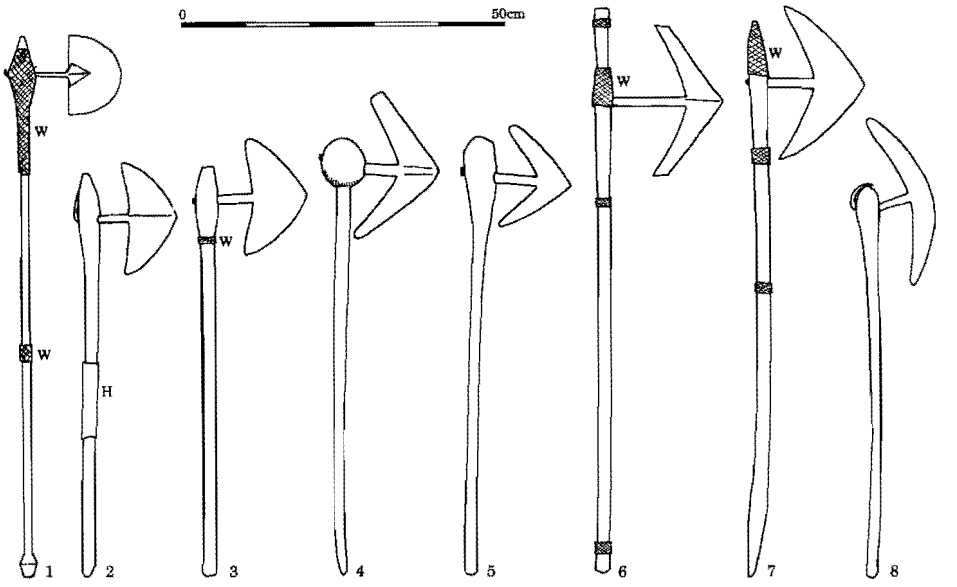
For the metalworking research project, of which this paper forms a part, information was obtained from a wide variety of sources including visits to museum collections. My visits covered a number of museums in South Africa, Britain and Germany which have significant holdings of nineteenth century Zulu material. In Britain a valuable source proved to be military museums, including those of several regiments that saw early service in Natal. Of great help has been the extensive and detailed documentation on the material culture of southern African people compiled over several decades at the South African Museum, Cape Town, by Margaret Shaw

and her colleagues. This amounts to an archive of information derived from museum collections and culled from a wide range of published material and field work.

The sources show that large quantities of Zulu items were collected by nineteenth century European visitors and settlers in Natal, especially from 1879 onwards. Much of the material found its way to museums, especially in Britain. Stereotypical Zulu items – spears, shields, clubs – predominate, but there is also a range of other artefacts among which are occasional battle-axes. Several museums in South Africa also hold early examples of this weapon, although most are from this century.

There are several difficulties facing the apparently simple task of placing these battle-axes in some sort of typological order. Relatively few axes are attributed to the Zulu before 1879. Most museum documentation of nineteenth century items is poor and therefore provenance information is often unreliable. Some apparently correct attributions are from areas neighbouring on other ethnic groups who may have been the origin of these axes or at least influenced their design. A further problem is that even as early as the 1880s some axes began to be made with industrial components including sheet steel and rivets (Fig. 7,1), both of which were unknown to the traditional smiths of southern Africa. Such axes were evidently obtained through labour migrancy to the developing mining and urban areas. Despite these problems there is sufficient evidence to propose a typology for the battle-axes of the region.

Widstrand (1958) has argued, for Africa in general, that the axe is essentially a



Figs 7,1–8. Battle-axes. 1. Blade of industrial sheet steel attached to tang by three rivets, Eshowe 1884/5, South African Museum 9453. 2. Zululand, Natal Museum 3179. 3. Zulu, Zambaans Territory (Chief Sambana of the Nyawo) 1897, Natal Museum 76A. 4. Brought from Zululand by Rev. F. Owen when he left after death of Retief, Durban Local History Museum AC 4392. 5. Wahlberg ethnographic collection from Natal, National Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm (not to scale). 6. Zulu, National Cultural Museum, Pretoria, 1989/99. 7. Swazi, Natal Museum 6744. 8. Natal, British Museum 198A.1012.4. H = hide, W = wire binding.

woodworking tool and that specialised axes for fighting exist in few cases. He argues further against using the term battle-axe because the implement often serves as an indication of status and has ceremonial uses. In our region, however, there is a clear difference in design between, on the one hand, the woodworking axe and adze where the blade takes the form of an elongated triangle, with narrow cutting edge in relation to the total length and, on the other hand, the battle-axe which is hafted by means of a tang set at right angles to the blade itself. Since these two classes of implement differ in both form and function, I have retained the term battle-axe even though, as has already been suggested, fighting may not be the primary function of such implements.

Widstrand's (1958) classification is based on the method of hafting blade to handle. All of the examples included in this paper fall into his first category – slot-shafted axes with straight shafts. The typology used below is based on shape of blade.

Shapes of battle-axe blades

Triangular blades: These have a cutting edge formed by two sides of a triangle, the third side forming the back edge from which the tang extends. The two illustrated examples (Figs 7,2 & 7,3) are heavy, robust examples which would undoubtedly have been effective weapons. The example illustrated in Fig. 7,3 was collected in 1897 from the Nyawo whose territory borders Swaziland (Fig. 1). Similar examples are recorded from the Swazi and Tsonga.

Winged blades: This group differs from the above in having broader blades with concave back edges. Again similar examples can be found among neighbouring peoples. It includes the two earliest axes traced, both from the first half of the nineteenth century. One of these is said to have been taken by the Rev. F. Owen when he left the Zulu capital, Mgungundlovu, in 1838 (Fig. 7,4). The other was collected by the naturalist J. G. Wahlberg, who was in the region in the 1840s and 1850s (Fig. 7,5). Both of these are relatively robust and would have been effective weapons. They have the stouter handles with pronounced thickening at the hafting point which characterise most of the apparently functional battle-axes. A third example is said to have belonged to a man who had served King Cetshwayo as a cook (Fig. 8).

There is a subgroup where, by contrast, the wings are more slender and elongated, and the handles are relatively long and thin, usually with bands of decorative wire-work binding (Figs 7,6–7,7 Figs 9–10). They are relatively fragile and play essentially a symbolic, ceremonial role. Commonly associated with the Swazi, this style may well be Swazi in origin. It is regularly associated with aristocratic status. It is this type that is carried by the Zulu and Swazi monarchs on ceremonial occasions today.

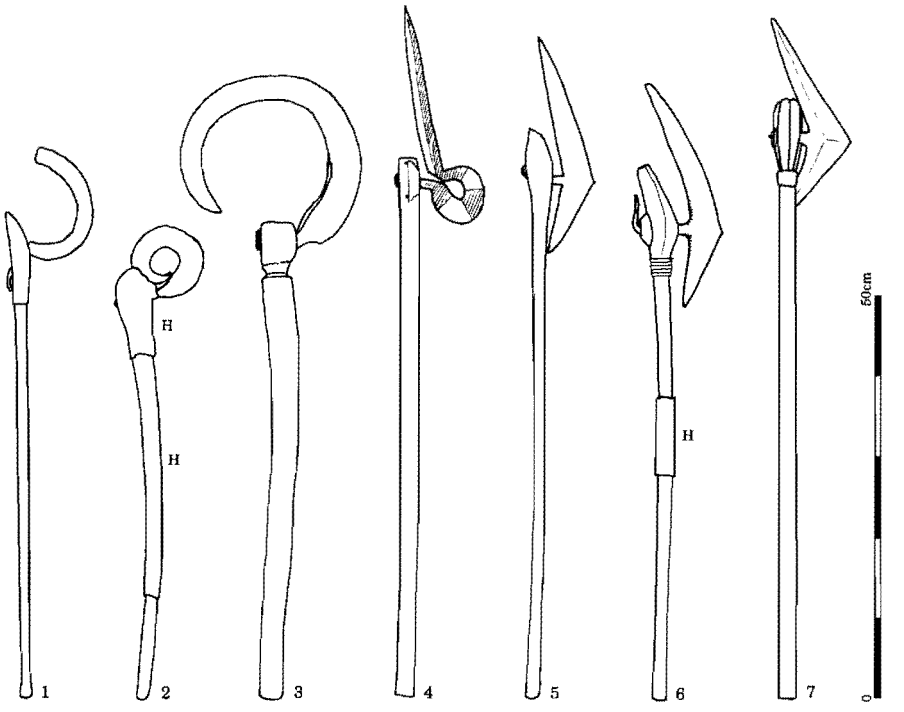
Crescentic blades: This shape is similar to the previous group, but the blade has both edges curved, the back being concave (Fig. 7,8). This shape predominates in the early illustrations (Fig. 2), but is rare in museum collections.

Sickle-shaped blades: In this group the blade resembles the shape of a sickle, but it is sharpened on the outer, not the inner edge. One such example (Fig. 11,1) has a museum accession date of 1881, while another is said to have belonged to Langalibalele of the Hlubi royal lineage who was deposed and banished by the Natal colonial authorities in 1873 (Fig. 11,2).

Sickle-shaped axes are also recorded from the southern Sotho people; for example,

Figs 8–10. Battle-axes as depicted in photographs. 8. Battle-axe held by a man (name not recorded) said to have served as cook to King Cetshwayo (Bowden coll., Natal Museum). 9. 'Tonga warrior, Tongaland' (presumably Ingwavuma District) 1927, A. M. Duggan-Cronin photograph, McGregor Museum. 10. Battle-axe of Chief Umbalelwa Mngomezulu, who identified himself as Swazi, Ingwavuma District, 1970. A. Byron photograph, South African Museum.

Thompson (1967) describes them as having been used at the Battle of Dithakong 1823 (Fig. 11,3). Examples from Lesotho include one where the sickle is combined with the bayonet shape described below (Fig. 11,4). It therefore seems probable that the sickle shape developed among the Sotho and that examples were traded to the Zulu or perhaps copied by Zulu smiths. This is likely in the case of the Hlubi battle-axe (Fig. 11,2) since this people lived as neighbours of Sotho for a considerable time. The shape itself may have been inspired by the imported European sickle, which was adopted by the Sotho during the nineteenth century. On the other hand Thompson's reference of 1823 would seem to be too early to allow for this derivation.



Figs 11,1–7. Battle-axes. 1. Zulu 1881, Museum fur Völkerkunde, Berlin, 111D 664. 2. Hlubi, belonged to Langalibalele, South African Museum 6690. 3. Southern Sotho 1823, from illustration in Thompson (1967). 4. Lesotho 1910, blade has pattern of polished and black sectors, Natal Museum 1689D. 5. Ngobevu Natal 1936, Natal Museum 5781. 6. Zulu, Anglo-Zulu War, compare notches on blade with Fig. 5,2, British Museum 1934 07.12.5. 7. Thukela Valley near Kranskop Natal 1951, private coll. H = hide.

Bayonet-shaped blades: In this group, although there is considerable variation, the common factor is that the distal wing of the blade is elongated to protrude well beyond the end of the handle so that the axe can be used in a stabbing as well as chopping action (Fig. 11,5). This shape may have been inspired by the bayonets fixed to the firearms of colonial military forces. One example (Fig. 11,6) is said to have been collected during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. Several Zulu examples are, however, more recent and include industrial components (Fig. 11,7). The bayonet shape is frequent among axes from the Tsonga of southern Mozambique (Junod 1927, Muller & Snelleman n.d., Widstrand 1958) and it may therefore have reached our area from this source.

CONCLUSIONS

Battle-axes were known and used in the Natal-KwaZulu region prior to the Anglo-Zulu War. Their use as weapons both in hunting and fighting is implied in the rock art, and they evidently did play a part, albeit minor, in the Zulu army of that period. Their symbolic significance in relation to aristocratic power and associated ceremonies, such as the first fruits ceremony, suggests an origin long before the

nineteenth century. Some forms of the blade, such as the sickle and bayonet shapes, may well be derived from neighbouring people, as has been claimed by previous authors. But the available evidence for the battle-axe, both as an implement and as a symbolic concept embedded in the culture, indicates that it was not a late introduction to the region.

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