

PHASE 2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF COLONIAL PERIOD BURIAL PATTERNS ON THE GROOT CONSTANTIA ESTATE, CONSTANTIA.

Prepared for

Groot Constantia Trust

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Prepared by

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Archaeology Contracts Office of the University of Cape Town was commissioned by Trevor Thorold (Architects) on behalf of Groot Constantia to conduct archaeological investigations at two cemeteries (the Cloete Cemetery and the Colijn Vault) on Groot Constantia farm, Constantia, Cape. Both cemeteries were in a neglected state in that tombs had been damaged or had collapsed. For this reason a programme of restoration and conservation was initiated. The archaeological investigations were directed towards identifying lost graves and exposing those that had become degraded. During this process, information about colonial burial practices was revealed. Archival research was not requested as part of this study.

2. THE CLOETE CEMETERY

This burial ground contains the graves of the Cloete's and members of the extended families. According to an information sign posted outside the entrance to the cemetery, about 20 individuals were buried here between the late 18th and 19th centuries.

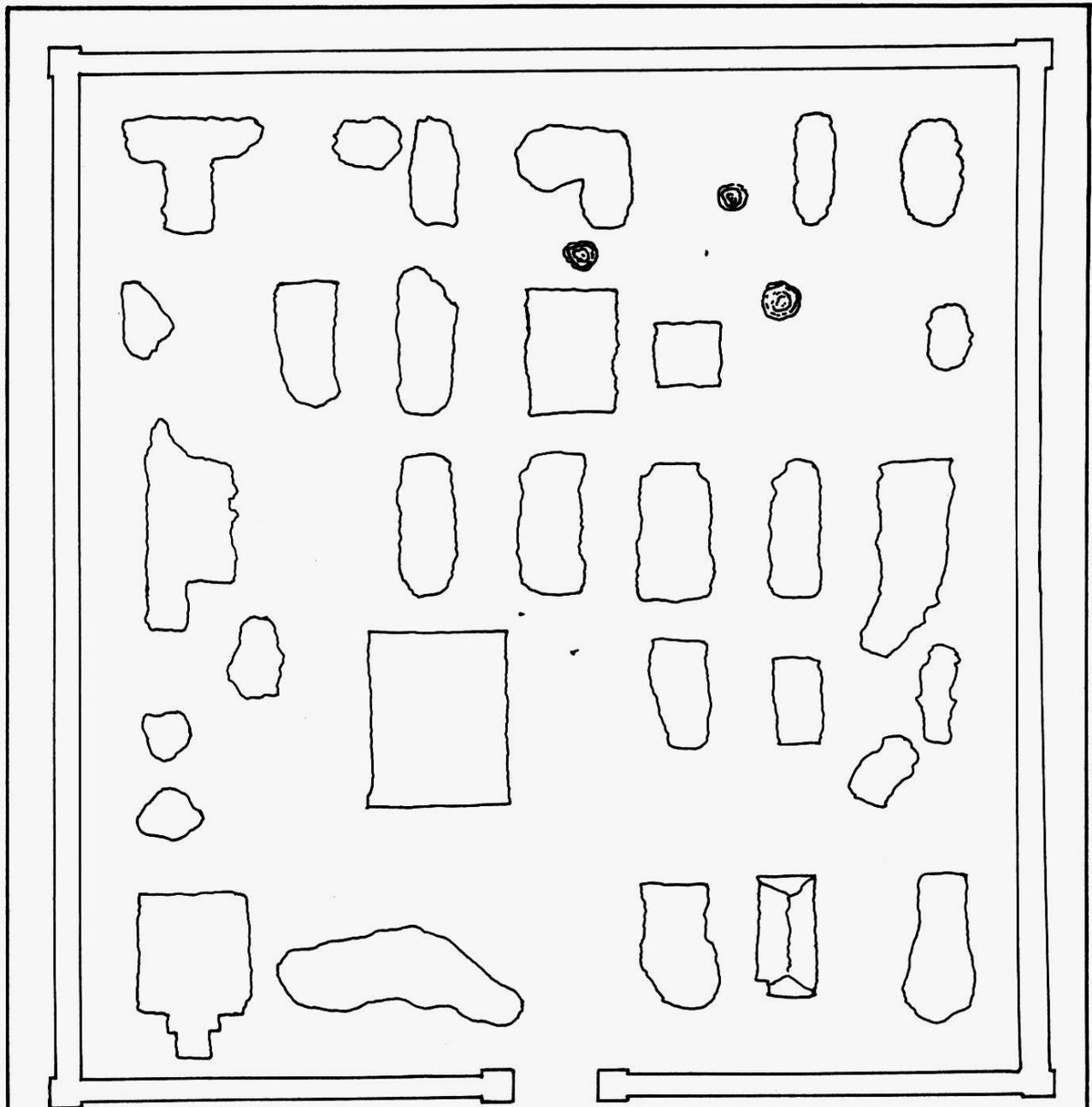
The graveyard itself takes the form of a walled enclosure. The wall had been badly renovated in past. The ensuing rubble had been left within the precinct obscuring the graves. Most of the graves that were visible took the form of low curved brick vaults that had been sunk deeply into the ground. The size and height of these are variable and appear to depend on the stature of the individual buried within. At least 2 of the vaults are only large enough to have contained children (Plate 1 shows the upper parts of a small vault before conservation). It appears that all of these vaults had been designed to contain hollow chambers. In most instances the tops of the chambers had collapsed or been broken into. The interiors had filled with brick rubble and soil. Various attempts had been made to patch and cap these structures but none of these had been particularly successful due to the instability of the aging lower structures.

Five graves (see Figure 2: 5, 9, 7, 16) did not take the low vault form characteristic of this cemetery. Three of these were conventional graves with memorial stones. The fourth (grave 16) took the form of rectangular brick structure with a hollow interior (this had been badly damaged and collapsed) while the other (grave 7) consisted of a large low rectangular structure that had been filled and capped. This may have been a large tomb that had been made good at some stage in the past after its interior had caved in.

2.1 Archaeological investigation

The archaeological investigation involved:

1. Testing the various piles of rubble in the cemetery to determine whether they were collapsed vaults or piles of discarded bricks left behind by the builders who "restored" the wall.
2. Removing piled rubble that obscured the dimensions of a number of graves.
3. Lowering levels in the vicinity of the graves to check for memorial stones and collapsed vaults or graves that had been obscured by overburden that had washed into the cemetery.



(After Thorold 1996)

Cloete Cemetery - distribution of graves and other brick features prior to archaeological investigation.

(not to scale)

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4. At the request of the architect a characteristic vault and a rectangular tomb were excavated to their full depth so as to determine their dimensions and physical characteristics. No human skeletal material was to be removed.

2.2 Findings

Besides features that were clearly graves, 12 piles of broken brick were investigated. Of these, 4 were shown to be collapsed vaults while 8 were piles of miscellaneous builder's rubble. Further remains of 2 vaults were found under soil that had accumulated over the walls after the interiors had collapsed inwards. This brought the total number of graves in the cemetery to 23. A diagram showing plans of the cemetery before and after archaeological excavation is presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

2.2.1 Grave 17

Grave 19 (Plate 2) was selected for detailed study as it appeared to be typical in form to most of the others small vaults in the cemetery. The top of structure had collapsed to the extent that archaeologists could get into it without danger. Rubble was cleared out of the structure and complete bricks were set aside for re-use. The interior of the chamber had filled with a mixture of rubble, lime plaster fragments and soil. It soon became apparent that the west wall of the chamber below surface had burst and tumbled across the coffins in the bottom. This material was removed after which the remains of a coffin was located at a depth of 2000mm below the present soil surface. Careful excavation revealed that this was a collapsed lid of a coffin centrally situated within the vault (Plate 3). A small deep sounding was then opened on the north east side of the chamber in an attempt to reach the "floor" level but parts of a second coffin, cranial fragments and a handle was found here indicating that there was more than one body in the chamber. A further coffin handle of differing size and form on the west side of the chamber indicated that a third body had been placed on this side. Three separate styles of coffin handles (all of fairly simple form) were observed indicating that it is unlikely that all three bodies were buried as a single event. It is more probable that each one was interred at a different time. After we had made these observations, excavations were terminated as it was not possible to reach the floor of the vault without disturbing human material. It is estimated that the bottom of the chamber is at least 2300mm below surface. Figure 3 illustrates the context of the finds. The building contractor responsible for conserving the cemetery was instructed to place a layer of white builder's sand over the material at the bottom of the vault before it was backfilled, compacted and capped.

Summary of observations: The interior of the vault was lined with brick throughout. In turn this had been plastered and white-washed. It clear that in late 18th century colonial period burials at Groot Constantia involved elaborate preparation - namely the excavation of grave to a depth of 2 m or more (possibly penetrating B horizon or bedrock), the lining of the excavation with bricks, plastering and white-washing. It would appear the body was interred before the roof or a side of the vault was completed. There is no evidence of any doors being built to give easy access to its interior which meant that every time a body was interred the vault had to be broken open. The structure was then sealed until it was presumably broken open for the interment of further bodies. One of the most important implications of these observations is that if vault 19 is typical of the others in the cemetery, there are certainly more than 20 people buried here. A more realistic figure would be between 40 and 60 individuals.

2.2.2 Grave 16

This grave (Plate 4) was selected for further investigation because it was atypical of others in the cemetery. It took the form of a rectangular structure with straight sides which, like other vaults was built into the ground. The roof and upper portions of the walls had collapsed into the interior making it impossible to make any direct observations about the form of the upper portions. Initially the building contractors removed some of the loose rubble from the interior of the structure. ACO staff then commenced controlled excavations in the interior. Half the extent of the grave was taken down to floor level which was reached at a depth of 1200 mm below the ground surface. No intact fragments of coffin were visible. These had decomposed into dark soft humus that lay across the extent of the floor as far as we had been able to expose it. The floor itself consisted of stone cobbles. Human remains including a humerus and 2 femurs were found lying in a disarticulated state. Figure 4 illustrates the context of the finds. Two different forms of coffin handle (Plate 5) were found indicating that 2 bodies may have been interred here. Also significant was a pintel (hinge) typical of that which may be found on a vault door.

Summary of observations: Grave 16 appears to have been a vault. The subterranean portion was built of stone to a depth of 1.20 m below surface level and plastered on the interior (Figure 4). The upper structure was built of frog bricks typical of the 19th century. A lintel-like feature lay where it had collapsed on the south side of the grave indicating the probable location of the vault door. A large portion of the structure must have projected above ground as it would have to have been high enough to accommodate a standing person (i.e. the Undertaker). As yet there is very little to indicate how the upper portions of the structure may have appeared. There is some evidence in the brickwork to suggest that the tops of the side walls may have been curved upwards along their length. It is known that this particular structure had a door and possibly a gable.

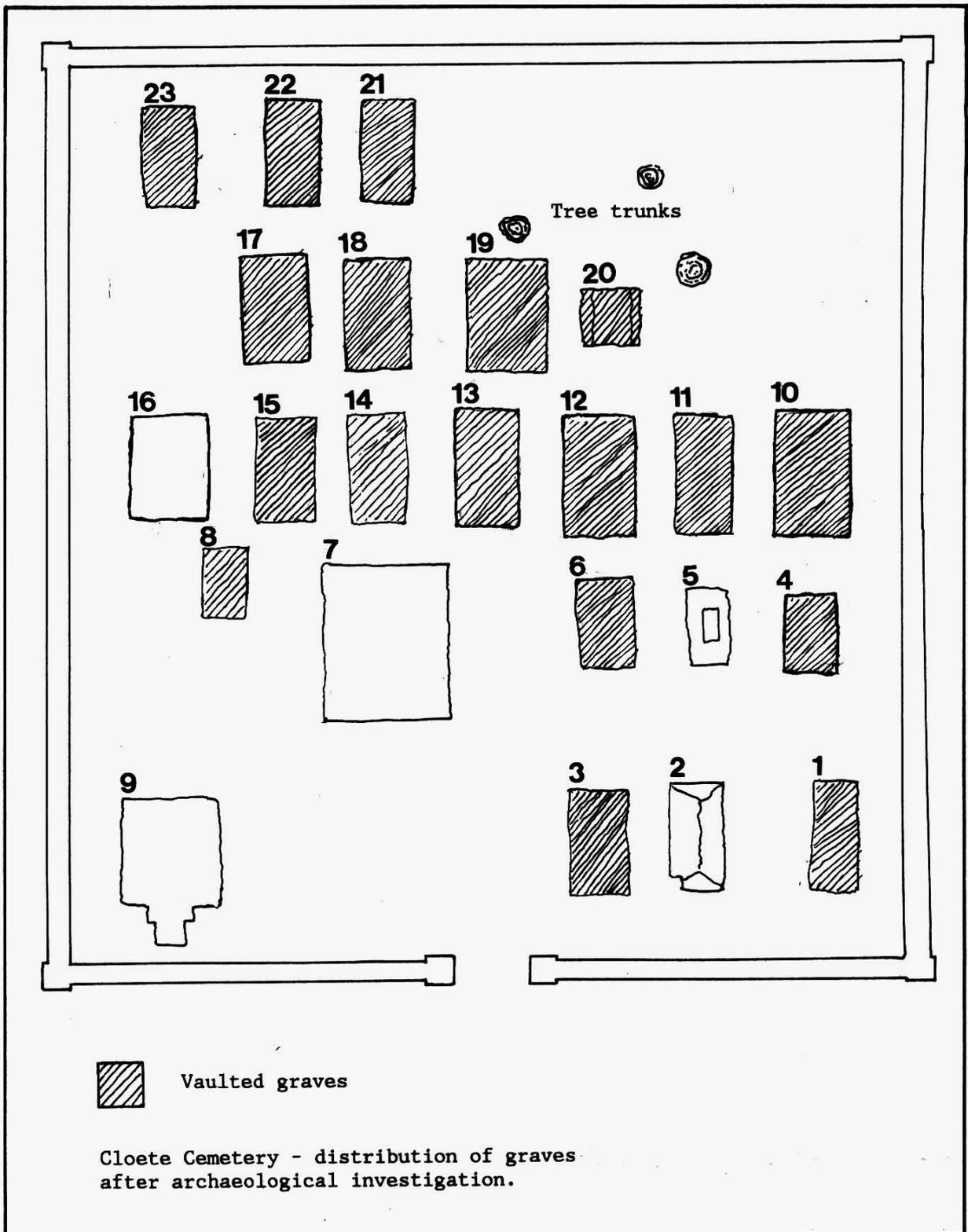
3. THE COLIJN CEMETERY

This is a single burial vault (Plate 6 and 7) located in the vineyards on the hillsides to the south east of Groot Constantia. The structure is slightly set into the hillside and enjoys a spectacular outlook over Constantia and the Cape Flats. At the time of the investigation the vault was in a decrepit state in that much of the plasterwork had fallen away. The gable was unstable and the door had long since been removed. A large hole had been broken into the left hand side of the structure.

3.1 Archaeological investigation

The Archaeology Contracts Office undertook to:

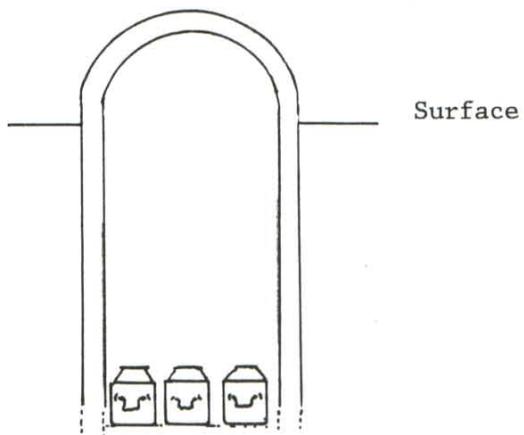
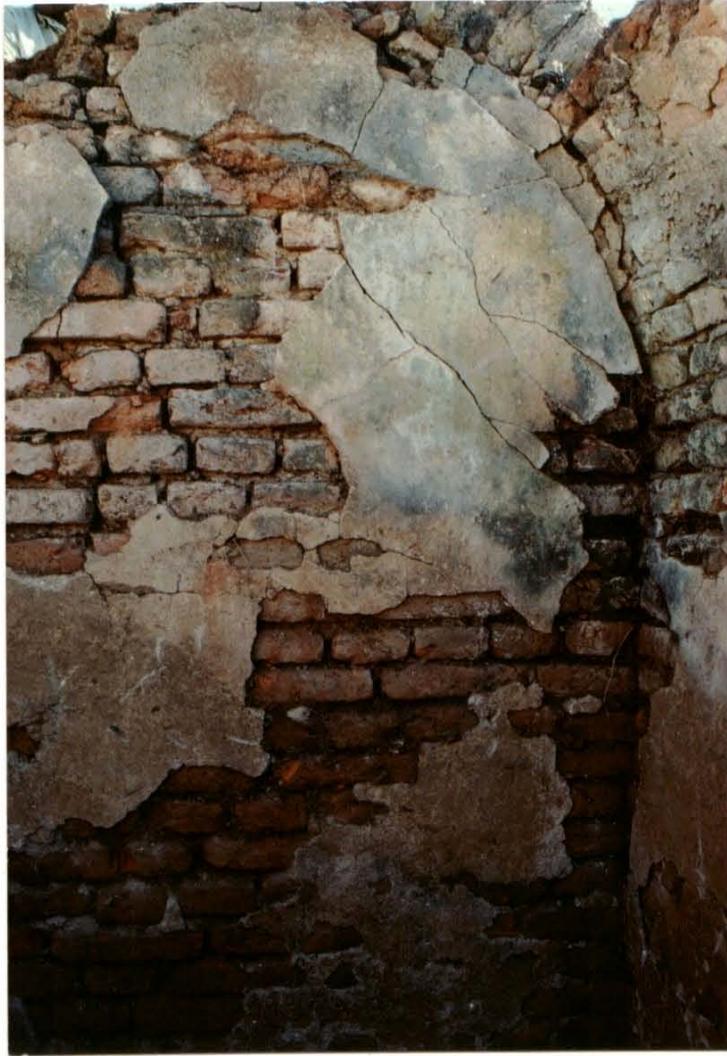
1. Lower levels around the exterior of the vault in an attempt to locate previous land surfaces and expose some of the lower fabric.
2. Temporarily exhume any remains in the interior while the building contractors worked within the structure (vault A). The remains were later returned and the vault was sealed.



scale)

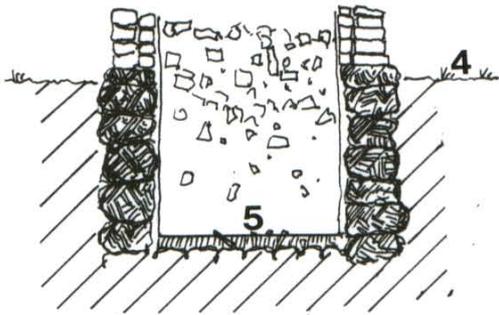
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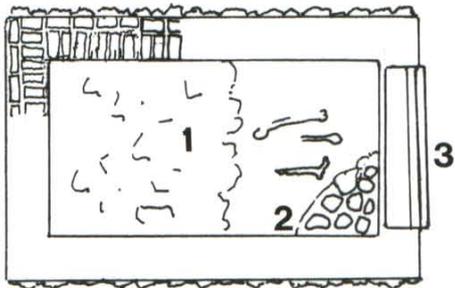


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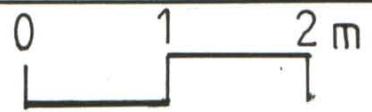




1. Rubble fill
2. Cobble base
3. Entrance feature
4. Existing surface
5. Human remains, coffin frags



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3.1.1 Findings - exterior

Test excavations were conducted along the sides and the rear of the structure. It was found that vault A had been designed in such a way as to rest with its rear portion slightly set into the slope of the hillside. Some 120 mm of top soil had accumulated against the rear of the vault thus raising the soil surface at this end (Figure 6). Levels in the vicinity of the entrance had not changed very much. This slight change in the gradient of the slope can probably be attributed to the fact that the land had been cleared and plowed for planting vines.

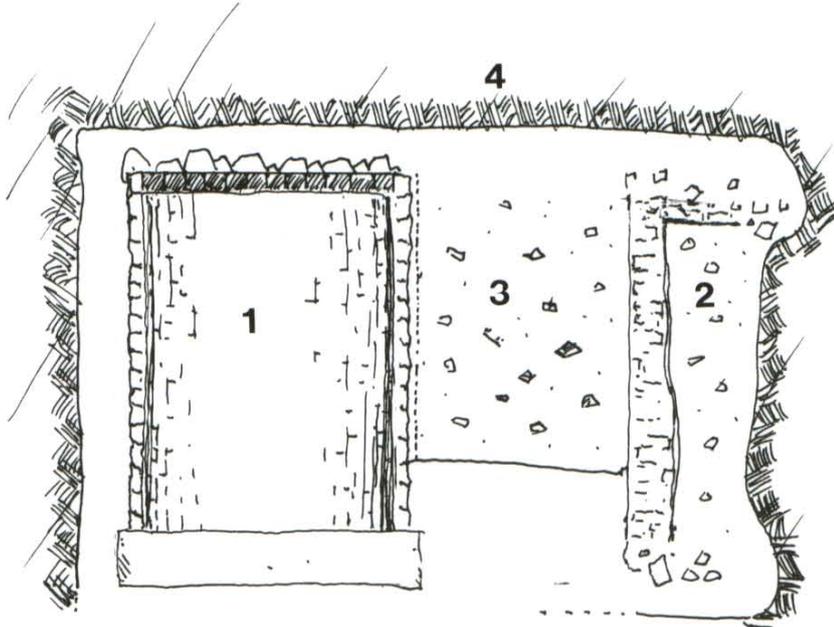
It was of interest to note that the soil on the exterior of the vault A contained fragments of lime plaster and brick rubble that did not have its origin in the standing structure. The foundation trench for vault A had clearly penetrated this soil rubble layer indicating that the vault post-dated this. Broadening of the excavation clarified the situation by revealing the remains of a second structure (termed vault B) 1500 mm off to the right hand side of vault A (Figure 5). The second structure was evidently older judging by its soft red brick and lime plaster construction. Vault A, in contrast is built of hard yellow frog bricks.

Only a side wall and a portion of the rear wall of vault B has survived. The rest appears to have been destroyed. The dimensions of the structure are similar to that of vault A and the interior has been plastered. For this reason it is suggested that vault B is an older burial structure that has collapsed and subsided. It is possible that it may have been similar to other graves present in the Cloete cemetery. Thorold (pers. comm) has obtained reliable oral evidence that in the past other graves were visible in the area but these were destroyed when the land was cleared for vineyards. There are quantities of brick rubble in the vineyard surrounding the vault indicating that it is quite likely that there are other graves beneath the top soil.

3.1.2 Findings - interior

On first inspection of the interior of vault A human remains in the form of pelvis fragments were identifiable among rubble and debris that had accumulated. Debris in the interior were carefully removed and human remains and coffin materials were separated. Bones of wild animals including shrews, lizards, frogs, rodents, birds and a small mammal (feline) were also removed. Underneath the layer of debris was a dark humic material that consisted of decomposed wood, metal studs (coffin decoration) as well as many fragments of human bone that was largely in a disarticulated state. Identifiable fragments of coffin, handles and bone were removed from the deposit and bagged.

Some 60 mm thickness of humic material was excavated to reveal the floor of the vault which consisted of well fired grey tiles which had been plastered into position. Several of these were missing but the floor was largely intact. Two brick coffin rests spanned the width of the vault. The interior of the structure was high enough for a person to stand comfortably although the floor was only 1200 mm below the entrance (Figure 6). The condition of the contents of the vault indicated that the interior was subject to damp and almost certainly periodic flooding. It is likely that vandals had helped themselves to many of the larger of the human bones.



- 1. Vault A
- 2. Vault B
- 3. Rubble
- 4. Soils



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3.1.3 Human remains

The human remains were transported to the University of Cape Town for examination and temporary storage in the Archaeology Department. The bones were not subject to detailed analysis beyond that which was necessary to determine the number of individuals present. The examination was made difficult by the number of major bones that were missing from the sample. Cranial fragments included a portion of a facial-maxillary region showing signs of severe tooth decay and advanced periodontal disease, part of a mandible of a child, various cranial fragments. Most of the bones consisted of vertebrae and ribs (some of which were severely diseased) and smaller body parts. Parts of 4 adults were identified, one of which was represented by a single tibia. The bones of at least one pre-adolescent child were identified.

3.1.4 Grave goods

Only fragments of coffins and handles were found. The identifiable fragments of coffin wood had been treated with a thick layer of pitch on the interior - probably in an attempt to keep the coffins watertight. Quantities of metal studs and foil indicate that some of the coffins may have been extensively decorated. Four sets of coffin handles were identified (Plate 8). Three of these were very ornate and made of cast iron. They are very similar to other examples found in the 19th century Anglican cemetery off Somerset Road in Cape Town (Halkett, in prep). No plaques or tablets were located during the course of these excavations but three were retrieved from the vicinity of the vault by local residents some years ago (Thorold, pers comm). Unfortunately the provenance of these finds is unknown so they cannot be confidently attributed to Vault A.

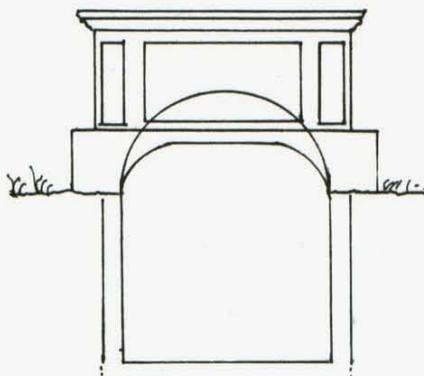
Summary of observations: The existing vault which is presently the under restoration was probably one of several in the area. Parts of another structure have been located nearby. The vault was left open for many years during which time the much of the human skeletal material has been stolen. The structure differs to the majority of tombs at the nearby Cloete cemetery which take the form of low sealed vaulted chambers set deeply into the ground. In contrast the Colijn vault has an ornamental gable with intricate plasterwork and a doorway. It was designed to be visible in that much of the structure projects above the ground. The interior was carefully prepared with a tiled floor and brick coffin rests. No coffins had survived intact but four separate sets of handles were found. Bones of 3-4 adults and a child were found. These have been re-interred along with the coffin handles. The archaeological investigation has shown that there were other structures in the area that have been demolished. This vault was probably one of several.

4. CONCLUSION

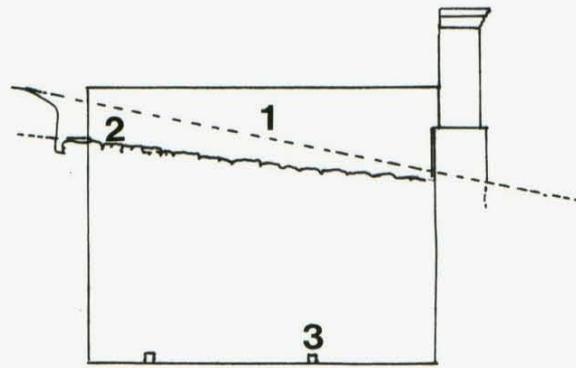
The study of burial patterns of the colonial period has never been subject to formal study by archaeologists. So far the archaeology Contracts Office has worked on five cemeteries dating from the mid-18th to the 19th centuries. It is become apparent that styles of burial show variability over time in terms of the burial method used, coffin hardware, tombstone styles and grave goods. There is without doubt interesting chronological information represented that reflects changing religious and social attitudes as well as differing cultural values.



Front aspect



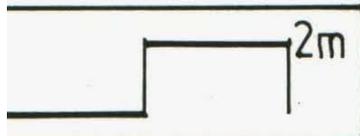
Side aspect



- 1. Present surface
- 2. Original surface

- 2. Original surface
- 3. Brick coffin res

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5. PROFESSIONAL TEAM

Principal investigator

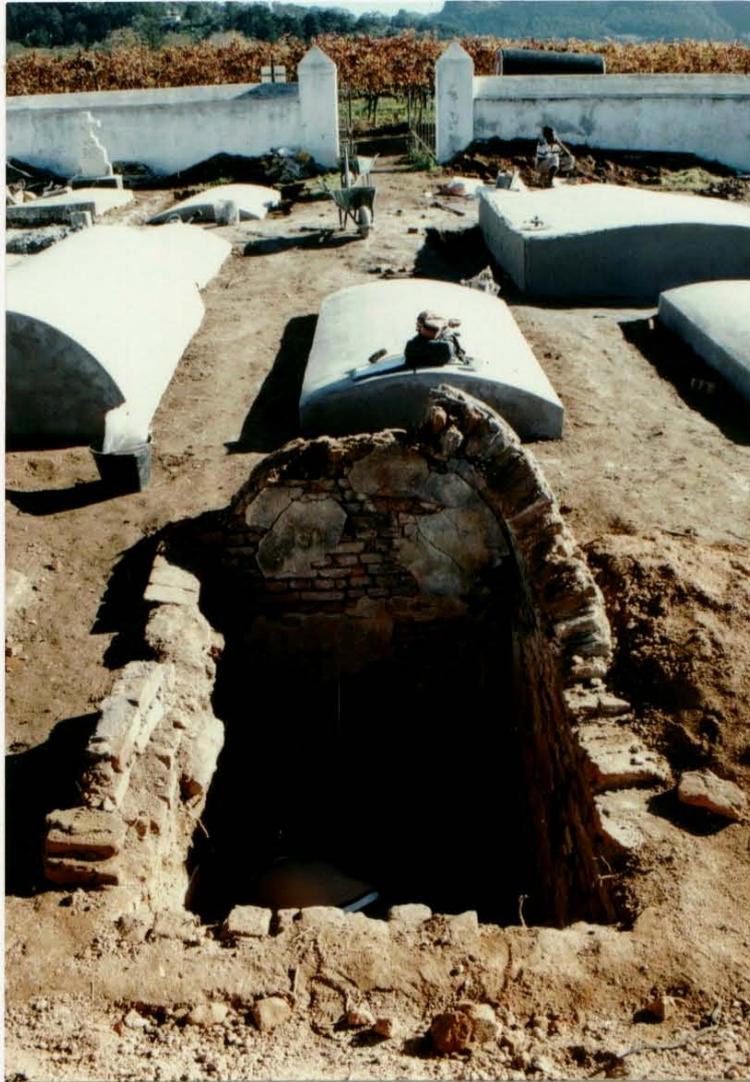
Tim Hart

Excavation

Tim Hart
Dennis Neville
Harriet Clift
Dave Halkett
Mzumzima Mjikelizo
Mzwandile Sasa



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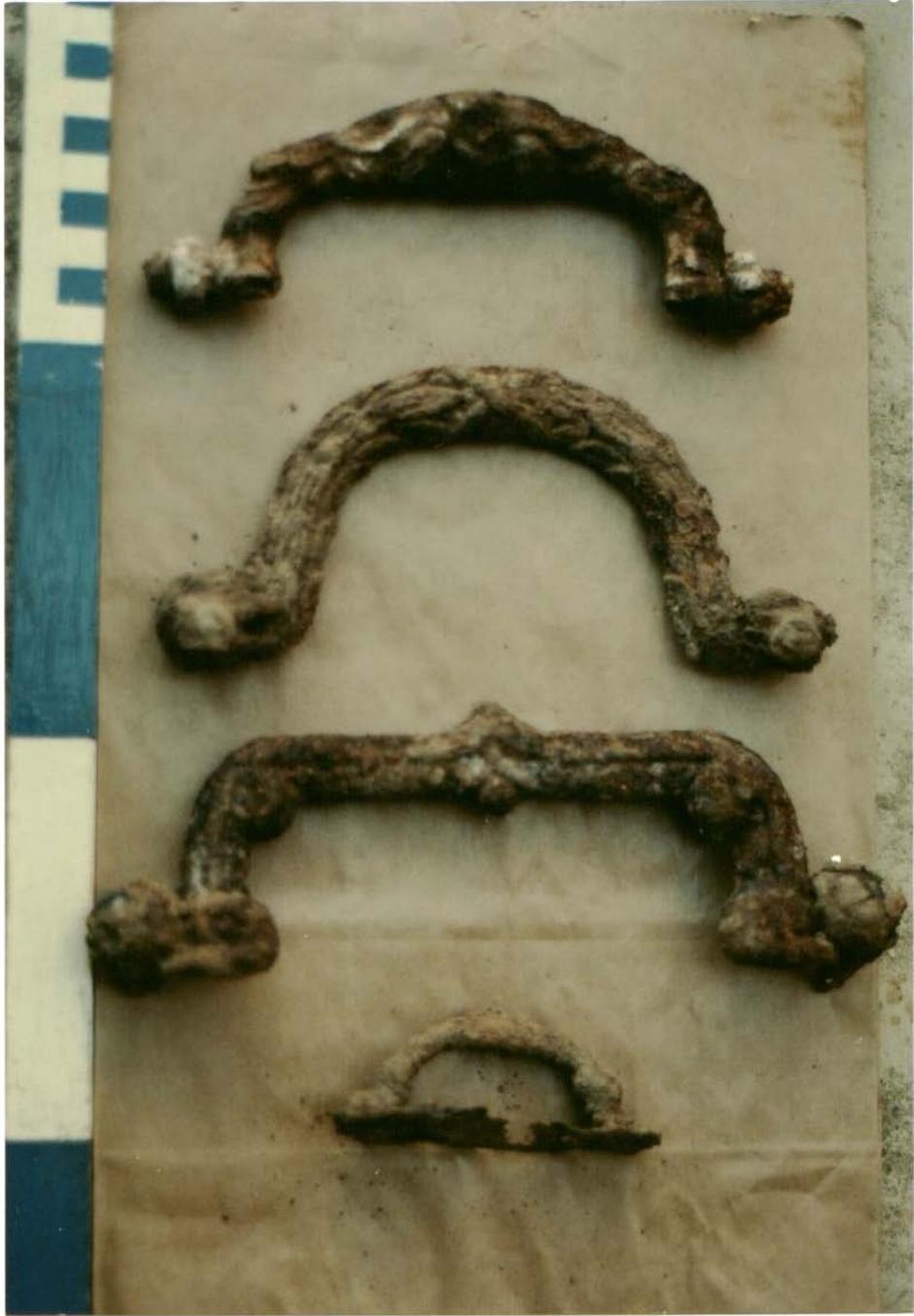
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