AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE VALKENBURG CEMETERY AND BURIAL VAULT

Prepared for

University of Cape Town

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Prepared by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An investigation by the Archaeology Contracts Office of the University of Cape Town into the cemetery at Valkenburg has shown that the existing vault post-dates the cemetery walls. The remains of an unidentified earlier structure lie just below ground level in front of the vault. The contents of the vault were disinterred while repairs were made to the interior. The remains of the six coffins and six adult humans contained within were stored then re-interred after the repairs had been completed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Archaeology Contracts Office (ACO) was commissioned by the University of Cape Town to undertake exploratory excavations in the cemetery at Valkenberg in collaboration with Mr T. Thorold (Architect). The area in the vicinity of the cemetery is currently being re-landscaped, while the interior of the cemetery was to be resurfaced and the vault itself made good. Following discussions with the Architect, UCT and the ACO, it was decided that the study should be directed towards:

1. Establishing nature of the gable of the vault which had collapsed forward and fallen. This needed to be archaeologically exposed and recorded with a view to its reconstruction.

2. Testing the area enclosed by the cemetery wall for further burials/features.

3. Inspection of the interior of the vault to establish if further work was necessary.

4. Subsequent to point 3, exhumation of the contents of the vault, an analysis of the remains and photography of caskets and handles.

5. Re-interment of the remains in the vault after its restoration.

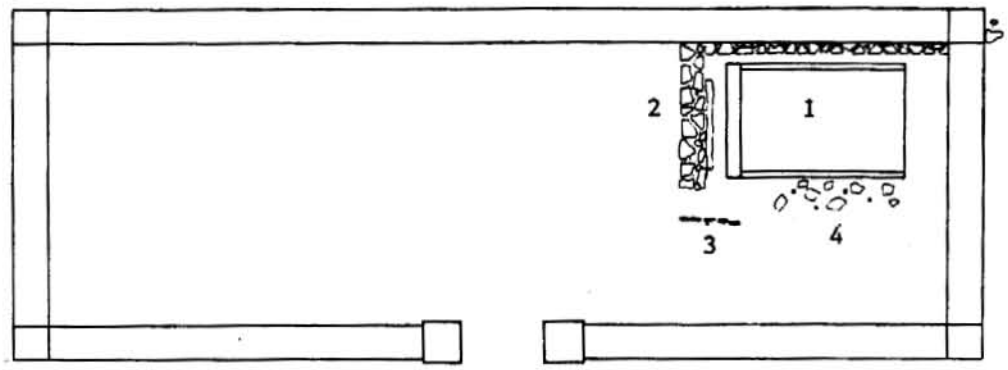
2. THE CEMETERY

The date of the construction of the walls of the cemetery is not known but it is clearly indicated on a plan of circa 1850 (K. Rubin pers comm). The only visible feature within is a vault towards the south end (Figure 1). Test excavations were positioned on the exterior and interior of the wall to search for earlier land surfaces. A single trench was excavated along the entire length of the structure to test for buried features.

The archaeological excavations revealed that an earlier surface existed on the site. The overburden contains plaster fragments and other rubble to a depth of 250mm throughout the walled area. Furthermore the excavations have revealed that early plaster (shell lime) still adheres to the cemetery walls in places below the existing ground surface. This indicates that at some stage in the past, material was imported into the cemetery to raise the surface by 250mm.

The major portion of the area within the cemetery walls to the north of the vault showed no evidence of buried features consistent with graves apart from a shallow depression which contained some modern bricks and the remains of a domestic cat. Artefactual material was a single coffin handle located at a depth of 250mm close to the vault. Basal clays were reached at 350-400mm below surface and these showed no signs of disturbance.

Excavations in the immediate vicinity of the vault showed evidence of a previous structure (Figure 1, Figure 2). This took the form of partial stone foundations directly in front of the vault (Plate 1). This continued along the east side of the structure almost directly under the cemetery wall. The western and southern sides of the foundation are missing. Fragments of lime plaster and loose stone in the surrounding deposit suggest that it had existed here but has been removed. There is a large slate step/slab on the inside of the north side of the foundation indicating that there may have been an entrance/exit to the structure on this side.



1. Vault
2. Stone foundation in front of vault
3. Alignment of shell lime plaster
4. Stone and plaster indicating demolished wall
5. Cemetry wall

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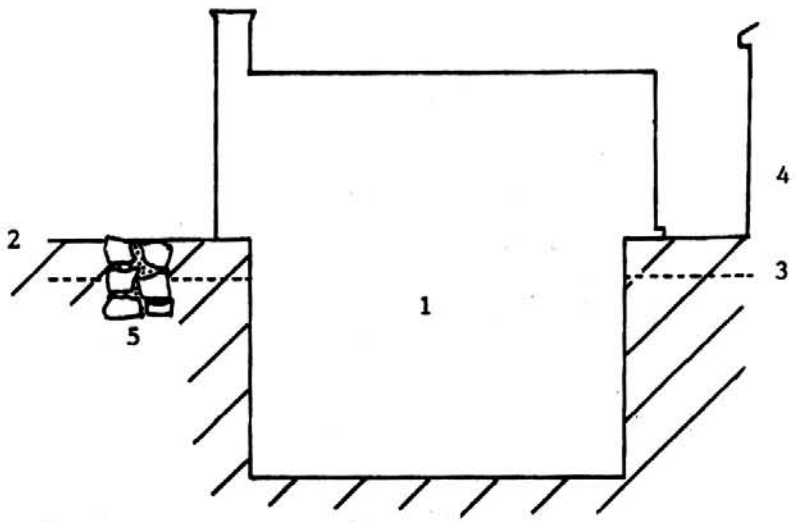
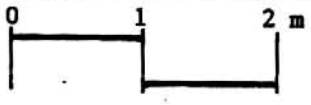


1. Vault interior
2. Present land surface
3. Earlier land surface
4. Cemetry wall
5. Earlier foundation

2



The base of the foundations clearly relates to an earlier lower land surface and predates the cemetery wall.

3. VAULT

The existing vault is built from standard bricks (with frogs). The excavations clearly showed that the upper portion of the vault was built up from the existing surface and is the most modern feature of the cemetery complex.

Gable: The vault was originally gabled but this had collapsed in the past, after which fairly crude repairs had been carried out in recent years. The fragments of the original gable were found lying in front of the structure. The Archaeology Contracts Office and Trevor Thorold (Architect) systematically exposed the fragments of the gable. In this way the dimensions of the structure could be measured and details of the plasterwork recorded for restoration purposes. The remains of the gable which was lying on its face were carefully turned over to establish whether an inscription was present. There was no evidence of this on any of the plasterwork.

3.1 Vault interior

The door of the vault was opened to inspect the condition of the interior and its contents. At time of opening two coffins rested on steel supports which spanned the breadth of the vault at ground surface level. Both of these coffins had been broken open. One had lost its bottom and therefore the contents, the other contained human remains but the cranium and some of the larger post-cranial bones had been removed. The interior of the vault which extended 1800mm (Figure 2) below ground level had been subject to regular flooding. A large pile of disarticulated coffin fragments and bone lay in the bottom. At this point it became apparent that the vault required repairs to its interior which meant that the contents had to be exhumed and stored while this was being done, then re-interred.

3.2 Exhumation

Since legislation is in place to ensure the proper treatment of human remains, it was agreed that the process of exhumation should be conducted with the approval of the relevant authorities. Permission was obtained from the Administrator of Cemeteries (Cape Town City Council) and a site meeting was arranged with a member of the City Health Department who wished to inspect the vault before exhumation could take place. The exhumation process was approved on condition that the excavators wore masks and gloves and the remains were treated with calcium chloride. The exhumation was conducted with the assistance of two staff trained in human anatomy.

The two semi-complete coffins (Plate 2) were removed from the vault. The excavators were then able to climb into the vault and remove the fragments of coffins in the bottom. These were then re-articulated as far as possible for photographic recording and to determine the minimum number of coffins. The periodic flooding of the interior had resulted in the coffins floating and eventually coming apart. The human remains then settled in an untidy pile in the bottom of the vault along with other organic particles, nails, metal items (handles) and saturated sawdust. The resulting wet organic sludge had to be excavated by hand, then sieved so that smaller items and bones could be retrieved. All skeletal and artefactual material was stored on the premises in the unoccupied "Edwardian House" nearby.

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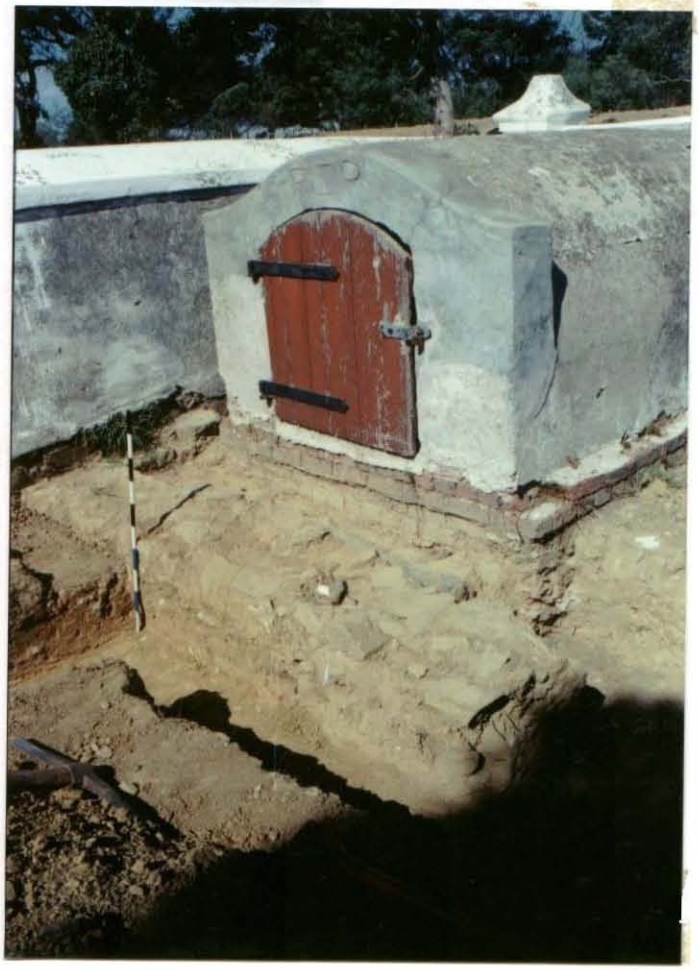

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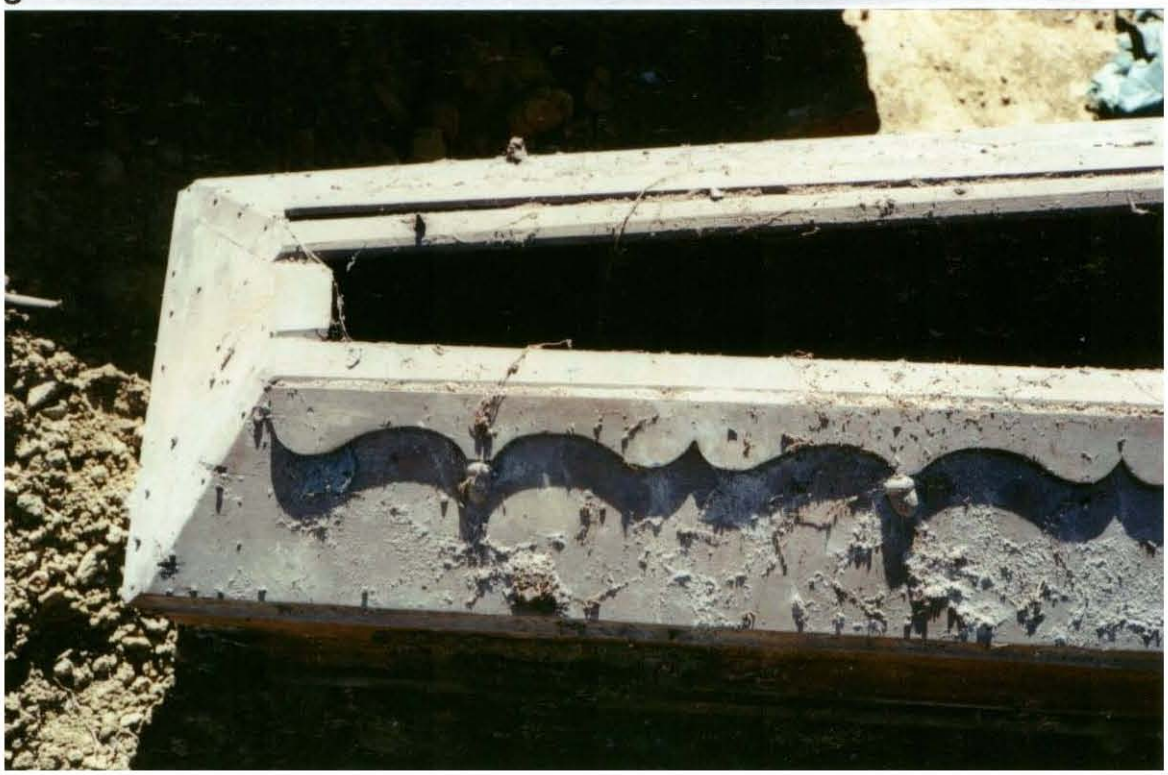

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In all, the remains of six coffins and six adult individuals were removed. One coffin containing the remains of individual "C" is complete but missing a lid. It is trapezium-shaped, with elaborate wood and metal decoration. Both sides of the lid were decorated with a line of wooden acorns linked to ornamental panelling (Plate 3). The presence of many of these items in the deposit in the vault suggests that this was a fairly standard decoration. The areas around the handles (3 on each side and 1 on each end) had been decorated with thin metal plate (foil) which may have been gilded (Plate 4). Very little of this was still adhering to the coffin. The body had been placed in the coffin on a layer of sawdust (4 buckets full) - the purpose of this is unknown but probably to absorb body fluids. The sawdust had become compacted and matted which meant that it had to be scraped out and broken up to locate the smaller bones. There was no evidence of any grave goods apart from some fragments of shroud, brass pins and two silk bows. Some of the bones had fragments of desiccated tissue adhering. The identifiable remains of the other coffins are similar in form apart from one extraordinary large oak coffin that probably had to be custom made for an extremely obese individual (Plate 5).

The human skeletal material was subjected to a brief analysis by the ACO under the direction of Professor Susan Pfeiffer of the School of Human Biology, Guelph University, Ontario, Canada. A report on the analysis follows.

3.3 Human material

The six individuals were arbitrarily named A-f. Only individual "C" could be securely related to a coffin. All the others had lost their context. Only 2 crania were found and it was not possible to relate these to any individual post-cranial skeletons. The analysis is therefore based on examination of the post-cranial bones.

"A". This is a male individual (based on pelvis and overall size). The auricular surface suggests a person of older age but this may be influenced by trauma to the sacroiliac. The pubic symphysis and the synovial joints suggest an age in the 30's. There is evidence of periosteitis to the tibiae indicating that the individual suffered from a systemic infectious illness.

"B". This is a male individual (based on hips and overall size). Both the auricular surface and pubic symphysis suggest an age between 35 and 45 at time of death. The individual suffered from traumatic osteoarthritis to the right elbow - possibly started by an arm injury.

"C" This is a female individual (based on hips, ribs and overall size). Although the auricular surface seems overly young, the sternal rib ends, extensive osteoarthritis and osteoporosis suggest an age in the 60s. There is evidence of a healed colles fracture (wrists). This kind of injury happens when an osteoporotic woman falls and attempts to stop herself with her hands. Individual "C" is the only material that can be associated with a coffin.

"D" This is a female (based on pubis). The auricular surfaces and pubic symphysis suggest an age in the early 30s.

"E" This is a male (based on hips and overall size). The pubic symphysis and auricular surface both suggest an age in the 30s. This individual is very similar to "B" in morphology.

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"F" This was a small but robust person. The sex is difficult to determine but indicators such as the mandible suggest male. The epiphyses and sternal rib ends indicate that the individual died at an age of between 22 and 28. The individual had suffered a traumatic injury to a lower leg (tibia) and had lost a number of teeth before death.

Other observations on skeletal material

1. Male mandible with advanced osteoarthritis
2. Female non-geriatric mandible
3. Male mandible with extensive pre-mortem tooth loss.
4. Male mandible with grooved anterior teeth. Matches male cranium with filed teeth, suture obliteration; age: 30-50 years.
5. Male mandible matches large round male cranium.
6. Male Mandible.

The skeletal material, where possible has been sorted into individuals and bagged. It is not possible to sort smaller bones such as phalanges, tarsals, ribs and vertebrae without an extensive study. These body parts have been bagged together.

4. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. An earlier land surface existed at a level 250mm lower than that of today.

2. The buried partial foundations of a stone structure close to the existing vault are contemporary with this land surface, but predate the wall of the cemetery (which in part is built over this). This may have been an earlier vault. The presence of a coffin handle on the earlier land surface may indicate an early exhumation phase.

3. The cemetery wall is associated with the earlier land surface. Part of the cemetery wall has been built over the foundations of the early structure.

4. The existing vault is associated with the present land surface and is therefore more recent. It is likely to date to the 19th century but may contain bodies exhumed from a previous structure. The very large oak coffin is to big to be lowered into the vault in a complete state.

5. The vault contained the remains of six coffins and six human remains. All are the remains of adults - 2 males, 1 suspected male and 2 female. All but one of the females, died at an early age. The identity of the individuals is not known.

6. At the time of completion of this report, the gable of the vault has been rebuilt, the door made good and the interior filled to ground level with builders sand to reduce the flooding problem. The excavation trenches and foundations in the cemetery have been backfilled and re-surfaced. The two partially competed coffins have been made good in preparation for the re-interment.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following decision has been reached after discussions with the Architect, U.C.T. Planners Department and the ACO.

1. The two partially complete coffins should be made good.

2. The skeletal material, bagged and labelled according to individual (where possible), is to be housed in the two repaired coffins.

3. The repaired coffins with skeletal material, other coffin fragments are to be housed in the vault. The vault is to be kept locked and the key should be retained by the University and/or the National Monuments Council. Access to the vault should be granted to researchers on application.

4. It is desirable that archival research is undertaken to establish the association of the remains. As yet no complete archival history of Valkenburg has been completed to date.

6. INVESTIGATION TEAM

Excavations	Mzwondile Sasa Mzumzima Mjikelizo
Exhumation	Tim Hart Dave Halkett Jeanette Smith Caroline Veling
Analysis	Susan Pfeiffer Jeanette Smith Tim Hart
Report Preparation	Tim Hart

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