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*Assessment of and recommendations on  
human remains discovered during construction  
at Afsaal picnic spot/Traders Rest,  
Kruger National Park*

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This report provides an assessment of, and recommendations for the mitigation of human remains discovered on 2004/04/28 during construction at Afsaal picnic spot/Traders Rest in the Kruger National Park. It is based on observations made during a site visit on 2004/04/30.

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**1. Introduction**

Human remains were discovered during construction activities at Afsaal picnic spot (now known as Traders Rest) in the Kruger National Park on 28 April 2004 (Fig. 1). Anthropology Private Practice, under the auspices of BE AT UP (PTY) LTD was contracted on 29 April 2004 to access the remains and recommend a course of action in mitigating the find. A site visit took place on 30 April 2004, culminating in this report.

Afsaal picnic spot is run as a private concession in Kruger National Park. It burned down on 26 November 2003 and the human remains in question were discovered during the re-building of the facilities. The name has changed from Afsaal to Traders Rest and the facilities are in the process of being upgraded as part of the re-construction programme currently underway.

**2. Events leading to the discovery of the remains**

To manage the re-construction of the facilities a Construction Environmental Plan, complying with minimum environmental regulations, was drawn up by Rhengu Environmental Services and implemented. Re-construction would utilize the existing footprint and therefore only the construction process had to be managed. The Environmental Management Plan consisted of the standard Kruger National Park document adapted to the Afsaal re-construction scenario. The plan required that all construction activities should be stopped if any cultural remains are encountered, and that the find should be reported for mitigation.

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Shortly after the facilities at Afsaal burned down in November 2003, a temporary ablation block was erected to provide toilet facilities to visitors. These ablutions were serviced by a french drain constructed at the time. Part of the upgrading of the facilities in conjunction with the re-construction was the expansion of the toilet facilities, which were insufficient in the past. The existing french drain servicing the temporary ablutions were to be upgraded. The present temporary french drain was, however, found to be too close to the borehole, and to prevent the possible contamination of the water supply the drain was re-located to an environmentally safe location just outside the existing footprint.

Excavations to construct the new french drain uncovered the human remains (Fig. 2). These excavations were on the bank of the Mthoza stream just south of the picnic spot facilities. This location is prone to regular flooding (it recently flooded in 1996 and 2000 (Pers. comm. R Kalwa (Former Game Ranger in the area), 2004/04/30) and is mainly comprised of sandy river borne clay deposits several meters thick.

The remains were found by labourers while they were manually excavating the location to construct the drain. According to them, they first encountered a layer of rocks, which they removed and placed on the side of the hole they were digging. The human remains were found below these rocks. As soon as the nature of the find became evident, all work was stopped and the already disturbed human remains were collected and placed in a plastic bag.

### **3. Assessment of remains**

The remains were found to be well preserved, but badly damaged by the process of discovery. None of the features of the grave structure could be observed and only a few skeletal fragments were still *in situ* (Fig. 3). The remains that were collected and placed in the plastic bag at the time of discovery consisted of

fragmentary bones representing the skull, pelvis, bones from the thorax, as well as both the upper and lower limbs (Fig. 4). They therefore represent most of the skeleton and it can be safely stated that the location and contents of the grave were all but destroyed by the manner in which it was discovered.

#### **4. Possible cultural affinity of remains based on assessment**

No cultural remains were found directly associated with the human remains. A single decorated potsherd was found in the french drain trench, approximately 3m south of the location of the remains (according to the labourers who excavated the site). Several animal bones, probably from the same large (possibly Bovid Class III) animal, were also found while the trench was excavated. Due to the location of the site on the banks of a seasonal stream, it is impossible to access these objects with relation to the human remains, since no direct association can be assumed. These objects could possibly have originated from another locality and was deposited by the stream. No indications of habitational deposits, or any evidence for the presence of any other archaeological remains were observed on the surface surrounding the french drain excavation or in the walls of the trenches connecting it to the ablution block locality. The surface of the area has, most probably, been covered by several depositional events during periodic flooding. This would have obscured any surface indications of the presence of an archaeological site. The walls of the trenches and holes, down to the depth on which the human remains were found, also does not show any indications of an archaeological site.

Based on observations of the surviving evidence an Iron Age cultural affinity for the remains is suggested. Observation of the *in situ* remains indicates that the individual was most probably buried on the side in a tightly flexed, or foetal position (Refer Fig. 3). This mode of burial is usually associated with the African

Iron Age. A layer of rocks covering the remains, as was reportedly found here, is also known from Iron Age contexts.

Iron Age human settlement in the Kruger National Park is relatively well known. According to Meyer (1986) habitation in the area peaked during two periods namely between 700AD – 900AD (Early Iron Age) and between 1700AD and 1900AD (latter part of the Late Iron Age). The most important economic activity of these peoples settling in and utilizing the area were hunting and gathering. In addition, some grain was produced and small livestock kept. Trade also occurred with foreign traders in some areas. Unlike, and probably because of, Phalaborwa, metal production was only for household purposes and surpluses for trade were not produced. The area was not ideally suited to Iron Age settlement. Farming and habitation were prone to fluctuations in rainfall and the spread of endemic diseases. The area was, however, ideal for hunting purposes.

Although archaeological remains dating to the Middle Iron Age (900AD – 1500AD) occur in the Kruger National Park, it seems as if the area was sparsely populated at this time. Studies of these sites indicate a near total dependence on hunting and it is speculated that the archaeological remains from this time might be those of hunting camps (Meyer, 1986).

This tendency of short habitation periods and non-intensive activity in the pre-historic Kruger National Park area provides a very low archaeological visibility of sites. Hunting activities leave very little evidence on the landscape. The area has also been used as a passage between the coast and the fertile lowlands – which were intensively settled. Groups of moving people, again leave very little archaeological evidence of their passing. It is therefore often very difficult to identify archaeological sites in the area.

A single grave on the bank of a stream, along one of the well-known routes through the area, fits with what is known of the archaeology of the area. This context will explain the absence of a formal settlement associated with the grave locality.

#### **5. Recommendations**

The location and contents of the grave were damaged severely in the process of discovery. Very little in tact skeletal elements or *in situ* archaeological remains survived. The existing remains are not suitable to be studied due to their fragmentary nature. No other archaeological remains were observed in the vicinity of the grave.

It is recommended that the remains be re-interred at the location where it was found and that the rocks, which were kept separately and could be retrieved, be replaced. By extending the french drain trench to the south it will provide sufficient space for the construction, while leaving the location of the grave with the remaining *in situ* as well as the re-buried remains undisturbed by further construction activities. The area to the south of the grave location is already disturbed by the present construction activities, partially by the french drain excavation already existing, as well as by the already excavated overflow trench for the drain. No evidence indicating the presence of archaeological remains were observed in this area. The pipe leading to the drain will also pass by well to the west of the grave location (Fig. 5).

As an interim measure, and to solve the problem of temporarily storing the remains (which could not be removed from the site since no permit has been granted), this recommendation was implemented. The removed remains were replaced on top of the few remaining *in situ* skeletal elements and covered with soil and the rocks that were removed. The temporarily re-buried remains and

rocks were covered with soil to preserve the dignity of the deceased individual. The location was demarcated with construction danger tape and the labourers and contractor was advised to treat the locality as a gravesite and to show the same respect as if it was a modern grave in a cemetery (Fig. 6).

Should this recommendation be ratified the temporary measures will be sufficient to implement them fully and no further action will be necessary.

#### **6. Limitations**

These recommendations are only applicable to the mitigation of the human remains observed during the site visit of 2004/04/30. If any other cultural remains are impacted in the process of implementing these recommendations further mitigation will be required.

#### **Literature cited:**

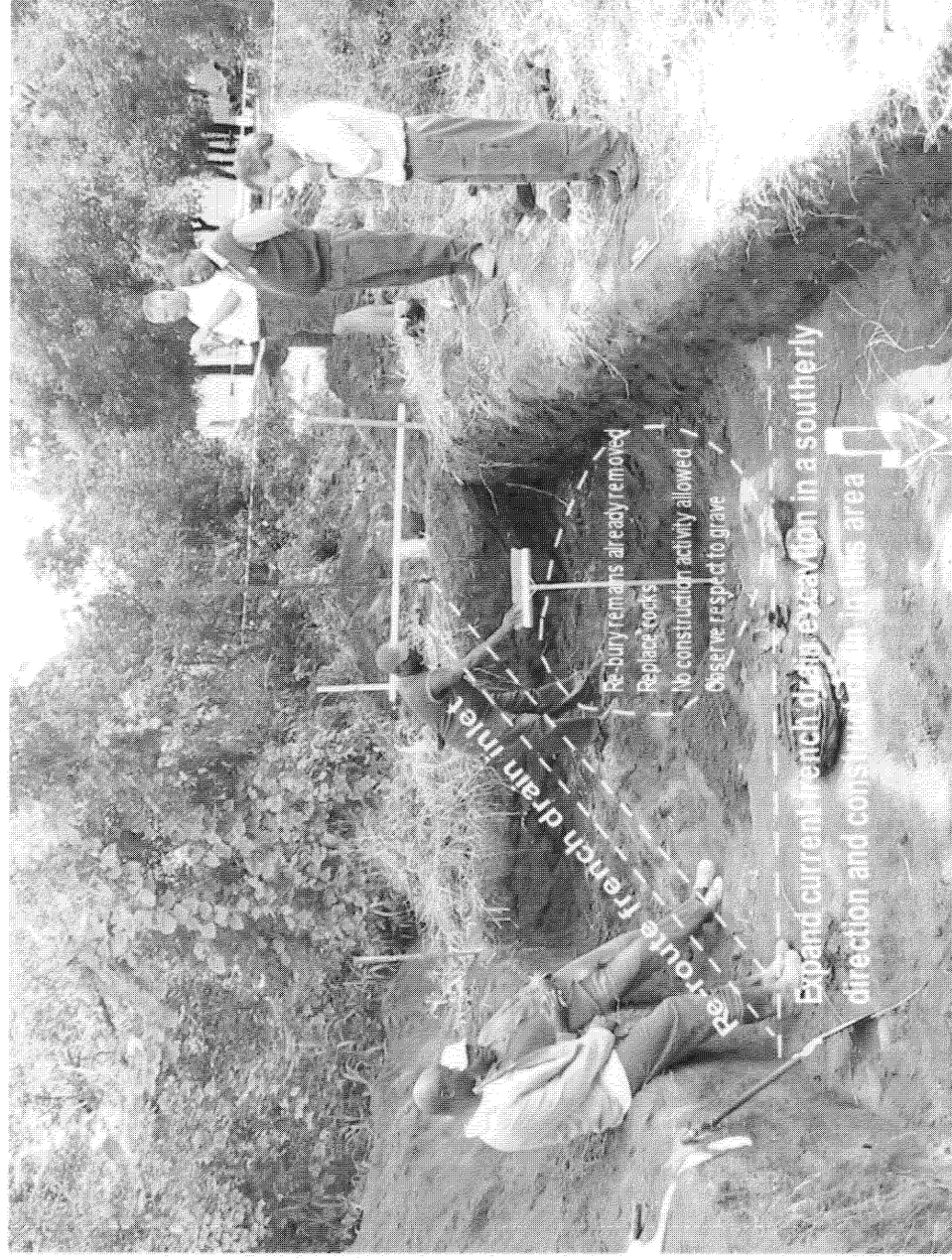
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**Figure 4.** Skeletal elements collected by the labourers at the time of the discovery.



**Figure 5.** The grave location showing recommendations.



**Figure 6.** The grave location indicating temporary measures implemented.

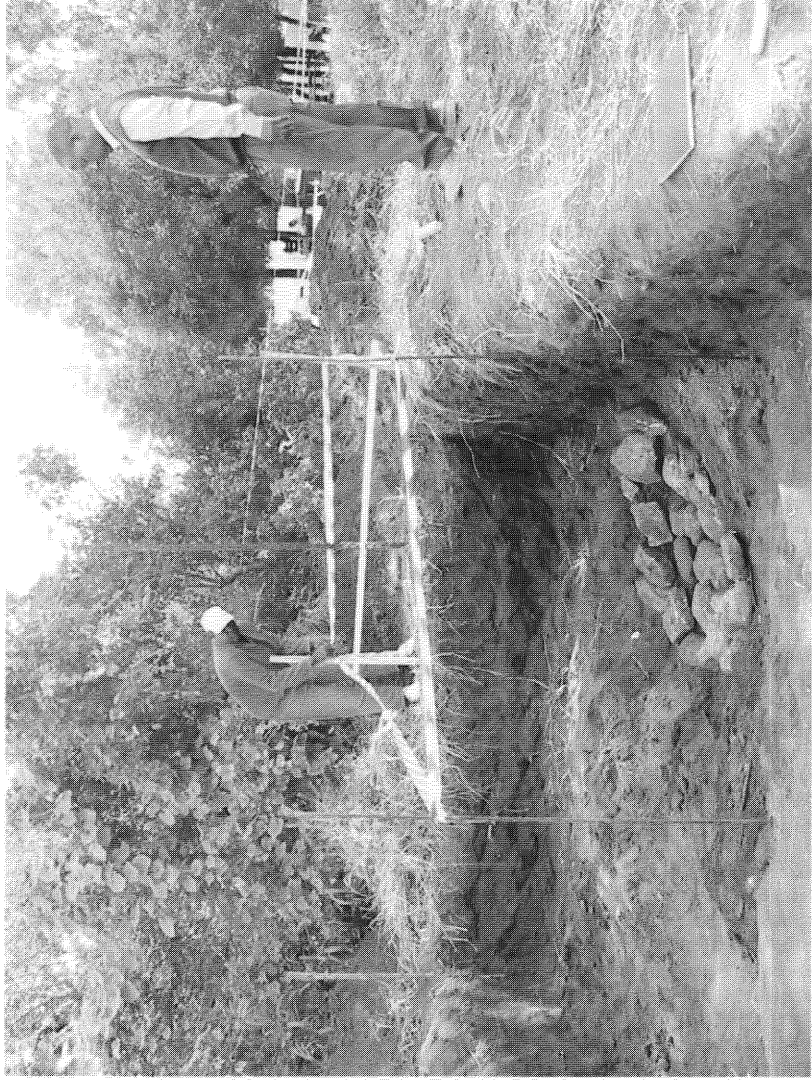
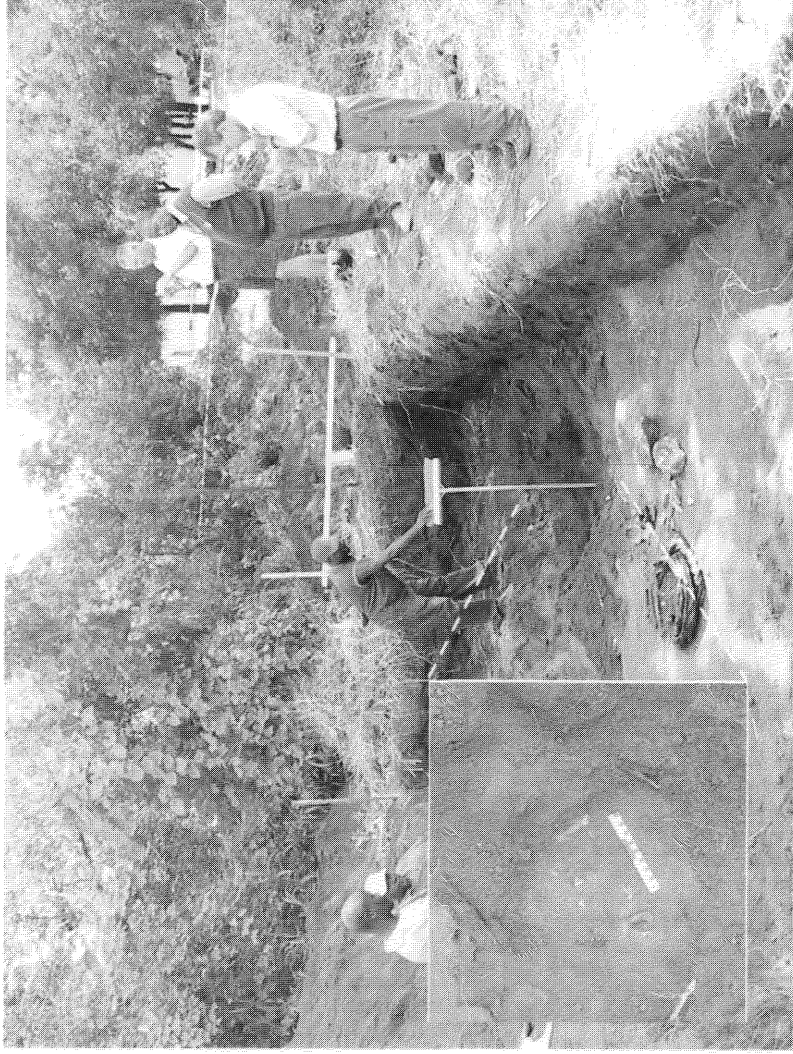




Figure 1. Southern Kruger National Park showing the location of Afsaal picnic spot.



**Figure 2.** Excavations to construct the french drain at Afsaal picnic spot showing the human remains as found during construction.



**Figure 3.** Remaining *in situ* human remains at Afsaal picnic spot.

