

Comment on graves discovered in a road at Port Nolloth

David Morris, Jani Louw and Abenicia Henderson
14 December 2017

Introduction

McGregor Museum archaeology staff working at Kakamas on 14 December 2017 were contacted by the Port Nolloth Local Municipality concerning the discovery of graves in a roadway outside the town.

Since the team were already half way to Port Nolloth from Kimberley, it was decided to deviate momentarily from work at Kakamas to investigate the find, instead of having to mount a separate investigation from Kimberley a few days later.

Upon arrival at Port Nolloth we were taken to the grave site, situated in a road on the north-east side of the town at $29^{\circ}15'06.6''$ S $16^{\circ}52'26.8''$ E (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Location of a cluster of ten graves exposed in a road north-east of the town centre at Port Nolloth.

Observations

At least ten graves or highly suggestive features were noted along a stretch of approximately 40 m of recently graded road (Figs. 2-6). These are relatively formally laid out (albeit not in perfectly aligned rows), and oriented east-west, as in a cemetery. No other clues to this having been a formal cemetery (headstones/ stone cairns/ burial ground boundary) were noticed, however – although this should not be taken to imply that it was not a recognised burial ground in its day.

It appears that in all cases skeletons remain largely (but not in every instance) intact below the present surface, with just the tops of coffins (where these are in evidence) having been sheared off in the road-grading operation. In one instance the lower end of a coffin had previously been ripped sideways (as in the clawing action of some earth-moving machinery) which had displaced and

snapped a tibia and fibula (exposed) on at least the left side (Fig. 5). Part of a lower mandible with deciduous teeth was exposed in one of the child's graves (Fig. 6).



Figure 2. View northward along the stretch of road where the graves have been exposed.

Those features that were established as definite graves all contain coffins, evident in the form of decomposed wooden coffin side-panels and/or rusted iron staining from metal parts. Coffin shapes vary slightly, from rectangular box forms to the classic shape (narrowing towards head and foot ends from a broadest point at the shoulders). There is evidence of metal coverings on some of the coffins, resulting in the ferrous discolouration and rusted metal fragments noted on some of the graves (most clearly in Fig. 6). Two coffins are those of children/infants (one seeming to be exceptionally narrow – but this impression may result from the road-grader having cut through only the uppermost part of a convex-topped albeit most likely collapsed coffin). A distinctive aspect throughout is that grave infill surrounding and embedding the coffins is of a mottled whitish appearance which contrasts markedly in colour and hardness with the surrounding gray-brown soil matrix. It is surmised that the bottoms of the graves, when dug, had penetrated an underlying calcified (possibly shell-midden?) substrate, with material from that layer becoming mixed into the grave fill to give it its distinctive whitish character (this is most clearly seen in Fig. 5). There was evidence of shell in the infill.



Figure 3. Child's grave at northern end of the visible distribution of graves.



Figure 4. One of the graves at the southern end of the visible distribution of graves.



Figure 5. Outline of coffin within mottled whitish grave infill sediment, showing, near the foot end, mechanical displacement of sediment, coffin wood and limb bones from clawing by earth-moving machinery.



Figure 6. Child's grave. Mandible and deciduous teeth are exposed at the western end (top left).



Figure 7. Plot of 10 graves/features recorded.

Table 1. Tabulated details of ten observations.

Feature No	Latitude	Longitude	Comment
1	29°15'05.5"	16°52'26.8"	Coffin approx. 0.9 m long, metal on lid. Child's grave. Mandible with deciduous teeth exposed .
2	29°15'05.6"	16°52'26.8"	Ferrous stain – possible grave
3	29°15'05.7"	16°52'26.9"	Coffin, classic, approx. 2.1 m long, Adult size. Previous damage to lower end of coffin, tibia, fibula ripped out of orientation and snapped, exposed .
4	29°15'05.8"	16°52'26.9"	Suggestive mottled-white sediment similar to that surrounding nearby coffin burials.
5	29°15'05.9"	16°52'26.9"	Coffin, approx. 1.1 m long. Child's grave.
6	29°15'05.9"	16°52'26.8"	Coffin, approx. 1.8 m long, Adult grave.
7	29°15'06.1"	16°52'26.9"	Coffin fragments.
8	29°15'06.4"	16°52'26.9"	Ferrous staining.
9	29°15'06.4"	16°52'26.8"	Coffin, approx. 1.95 m long, Adult.
10	29°15'06.6"	16°52'26.8"	Coffin, not fully exposed, probably Adult.

Context

Municipal official Ms Alta Kotze and an official named Innocent both mentioned having enquired of older residents concerning the graves: nobody could remember a cemetery here. There had been a suggestion (mentioned by the Municipal Manager, Ms Basson) that these might be 'Bushmen'. Another informant thought that the graves might be connected with a squatter camp that had been situated nearby.

A 1937 aerial photograph of the area (provided to Ms Kotze by Dr Jayson Orton) yielded no indication of a cemetery at this point in the landscape (Fig. 8). Presumably the graves had not had any clear surface traces (mounds, headstones) when the road was created, and hence probably had minimal marking in the first instance: perhaps just a low sand mound, possibly with shells and, conceivably, some ephemeral further memorialisation such as a wooden cross which might soon have disintegrated.



Figure 8. Comparison between 1937 aerial photograph with modern Port Nolloth (comparative view prepared by Dr Jayson Orton and provided by Ms Alta Kotze).

The condition of the decomposed coffin wood is consistent with the graves being easily of the order of many decades to a century old. The colonial era (likely Christian) burial pattern strongly indicates a connection with the Port Nolloth settlement in a general way (more specific association with any subset of the local community is not possible on present evidence). This conclusion is consistent with all the evidence reported above, and it excludes the possibility that the graves could have a precolonial context.

The visible graves were photographed, notes were made, and their GPS locations were plotted.

Process

Municipal officials met with us at the site. It was agreed that it would be preferable not to exhume and relocate the graves, the officials suggesting the possibility of closing and re-routing the road. Already heaps of gravel had been created at either end of the burial ground to stop traffic along the road.

We endorse the idea that the road should be re-routed, as this is clearly part of an old forgotten cemetery.

Exposed graves should be covered over in an appropriate and dignified manner, especially where bone has been exposed and where coffin outlines are visible.

It is suggested further that a buffer of 30 m be provided on all sides of the visible burial distribution, as it is uncertain how far possible further graves may extend.

The existence of the burial ground is to be reported to SAHRA for registration on SAHRIS – which is effected by way of this report. SAHRA may make recommendations on a way forward.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank particularly the Municipal Manager and her staff, especially Ms Alta Kotze, who assisted during our brief visit as reported here.