

# IN SEARCH OF ENOCH SONTONGA

A Report for the National Monuments Council

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## SYNOPSIS

Documentary evidence placed Enoch Sontonga's grave in one of the Christian black sections of the Braamfontein Cemetery. Excavations revealed the alignment, orientation, spacing and pattern of graves in that section. The unexpected pattern showed that children were also buried there. Further documentary research and new calculations based on the unexpected pattern yielded a new location for Sontonga's grave. The final excavation revealed an adult grave on the calculated spot.

## CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION
2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
3. DOCUMENTATION AND EXCAVATIONS
  - 3.1 Phase 1
    - 3.1.1 Documentation
    - 3.1.2 Excavation
  - 3.2 Phase 2
    - 3.2.1 Documentation
    - 3.2.2 Excavation
  - 3.3 Initial Results
  - 3.4 Phase 3
    - 3.4.1 Documentation
    - 3.4.2 Excavation
  - 3.5 Phase 4
    - 3.5.1 Documentation
    - 3.5.2 Excavation
4. DISCUSSION
5. REFERENCE
6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## IN SEARCH OF ENOCH SONTONGA.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The celebrated hymn, Nkosi Sikeleli' Africa, or 'God Bless Africa', was written and composed in about 1897 by Enoch Sontonga, a teacher at one of the Methodist Mission Schools in Nancefield, Soweto (Shaper 1994). Later more verses were added to this hymn and it became associated with black African aspirations: at one time it was the national anthem of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, as well as South Africa.

Towards the end of 1994, quite by chance, a member of the National Monuments Council (NMC), Dr W. A. Cruywagen, learned that Sontonga was buried in the Braamfontein Cemetery, Johannesburg. At the same time, Mr H. Shaper, author of the Inauguration day brochure on the anthem, was independently searching for the grave. In November, Shaper informed the NMC that he had found the grave number. The Council then decided to recommend the declaration of the grave site as a national monument, if the grave itself could be located.

Mr A. Buff, Regional Manager for the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Parks and Technical Services Department, pursued an archival search for relevant documentation throughout 1995. Once Buff had determined the approximate location of Sontonga's grave, the NMC commissioned Archaeological Resources Management (ARM). It was ARM's task to establish the spacing and alignment of graves in the relevant area to help determine a more precise location.

ARM's relatively simple task soon turned into an extended series of alternating excavations and documentary searches. In this report we first place the search for Sontonga's grave in the context of the Braamfontein Cemetery, and then the series of alternating techniques in chronological sequence.

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Braamfontein Cemetery opened in 1888. The custom at that time was to divide the cemetery into sections according to race and religion. Christian whites, for example, were buried in the southern portion and then segregated further by denomination. Jews lay just north of the white Christians, while non-whites were placed further north and divided into Mahomedans, Cape People, Christian Kaffirs, Coolies and Chinese (Figure 1). Furthermore, children, that is individuals under 12, were separated from adults.

All white and non-white graves were listed in separate registers, but there was a single numbering system. The 410 graves, for example, in the north-eastern black Christian section began with the number 5 and ended with 1398.

Discovering the grave number and location of Enoch Sontonga proved to be a difficult task for Buff and Shaper. First, although there were a few Sontongas in the register, Enoch Sontonga was not there. Interviews with descendants (Figure 2) revealed that Sontonga died at the age of 32. Fortunately, there was an Enoch, aged 32, in a private grave with the number 4885, buried on 19 April 1905. Subsequently, without any leading questions, Sontonga's descendants confirmed the date. A private grave was unusual in the black Christian sections, and presumably the Methodist congregation had joined together to purchase the plot. Whatever the case, it is reasonable to conclude that the number 4885 was assigned to Enoch Sontonga.

## 3. DOCUMENTATION AND EXCAVATIONS

### 3.1 Phase 1

#### 3.1.1 Documentation

The second problem was the location of plot 4885 in the cemetery. The north-eastern black Christian section ended with grave 1398, dated to 1901. The next section allocated to black Christian interment was in the north-west

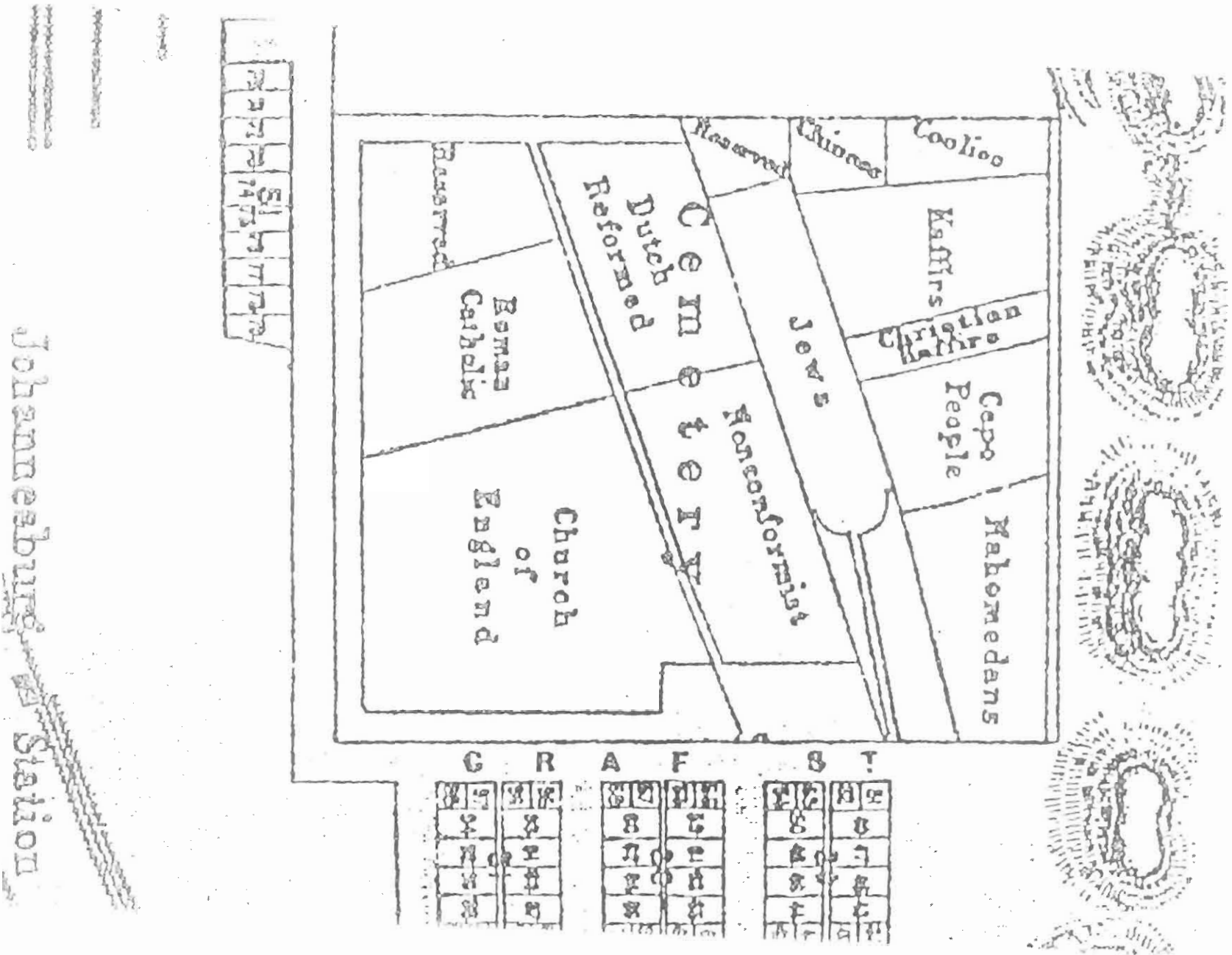


Figure 1. A portion of Jeppe's map of the Transvaal, 1899.



Figure 2. Descendants of Enoch Sontonga at the Braamfontein Cemetery, accompanied by Dr W.A.Cruywagen on the left, Prof. J.Khumalo in the middle back, and Mr H.Shaper on right.

quadrant. This area, however, had been scraped by a bulldozer in the 1960s, landscaped and made into a Memorial Park Cemetery. What is more, the official grave-plot map for this section disappeared over 40 years ago, well before levelling activities.

Although serious, these hurdles were not insurmountable. Fortunately, the size of the section and number of graves (1697) were known. Furthermore, the grave register was complete, and it was possible to compile an inventory for the north-western area. If cemetery officials followed the British burial standards, the standard procedure of the day, they would have started in the first row in the south-east corner of this section and moved north to the end; then the next row would have proceeded from north to south and then south to north again. By following this standard procedure, Buff, with the assistance of the Management Information Systems division of the Municipality, was able to reconstruct a grave-plot map and locate the probable position of Sontonga's grave.

The exact spacing and alignment in this section, however, could not be determined without excavation. Furthermore, since Sontonga was buried in a private grave, there may have been a headstone. Following standard procedures, cemetery officials should have buried the headstone in the grave before the area was levelled. It was therefore hypothetically possible for excavations to determine Sontonga's exact location.

### 3.1.2 Excavation

The first excavations began on December 7th and continued on the 8th and 11th. Initially, we excavated a 2 x 4m trench in the presumed area of Sontonga's grave, removing the fill by pick and shovel until the horizon scraped flat by the bulldozer in the 1960s appeared.

The scraped horizon marked an abrupt transition between the fill and the reddish-brown shaley substratum. Shallow grooves from the teeth of the bulldozer were signs of the actual scraping.

The fill itself consisted of various deposits of different coloured soils containing bricks, bits of asphalt, glass, plastic, tin cans and other modern debris (Figure 3). A 10cm lens of dark greyish-brown soil lay directly on top of the scraped horizon. This dark soil contained similar recent artefacts with the addition of a metal casket handle that was probably contemporaneous with the graveyard.

A concentration of quartz pebbles and slightly pink soil marked the graves. A few centimetres of the stony concentration was removed from one to make sure it was grave fill. The remaining graves were isolated by removing 2 to 6cm of sterile shale around each one.

A small (5,5 x 5,5cm) cast-iron plate was found 45cm deep at the contact between the dark zone and shaley substratum. It lay on the edge of a grave at the western end of the trench (Figure 4). The plate had the indistinct and crude number 4(?)17 chiselled into it. A stain in the soil suggested that the plate could have been *in situ*.

## 3.2 Phase 2

### 3.2.1 Documentation

Significantly, according to the reconstructed burial plan, a grave with a number ending in 417 was located near Sontonga. If the number on the plate was 417 and if the number plate was *in situ*, then Sontonga should have been buried in the fourth grave to the south in the same row.

### 3.2.2 Excavation

To expose this grave, excavations were extended south on the 19th, 20th and 21st December, by another 3 x 4m (Figure 5). Here the dark zone yielded a strip of iron ribbon that probably had held another number plate (Figure 6).

Unfortunately, the first cast-iron plate proved to be out of context, and it was now clear that the bulldozer had removed much of the original surface of the graves. There was thus no evidence to place Sontonga's grave in the west row.

Because the grave originally attributed to Sontonga appeared too small for an



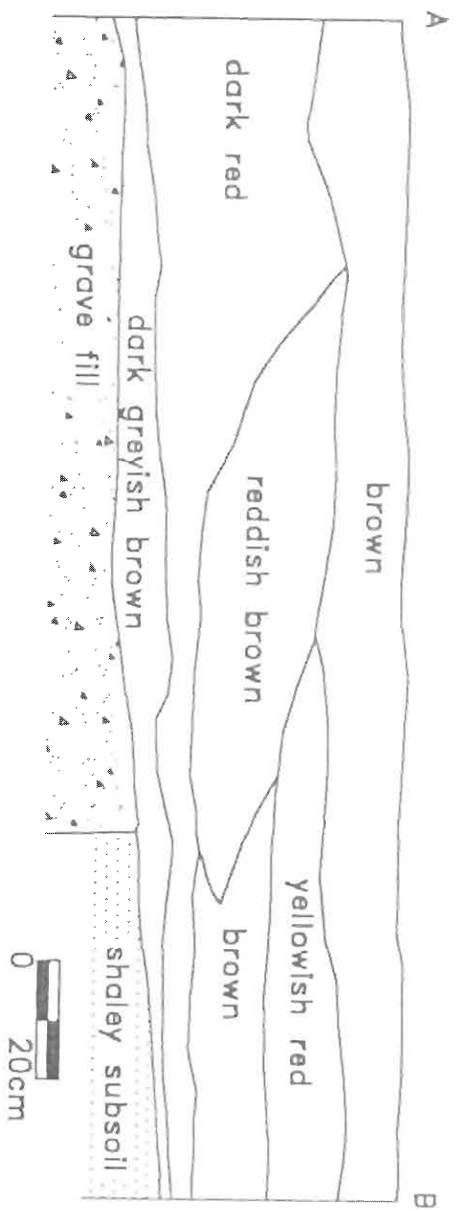


Figure 3. North section showing layers of fill above grave.

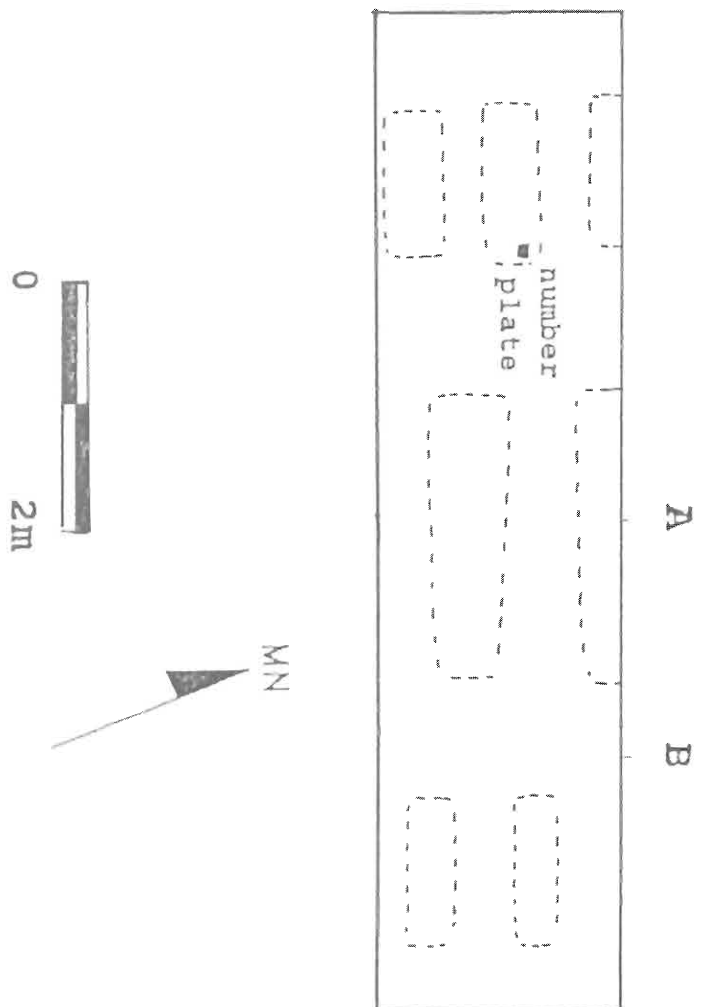


Figure 4. Plan of excavated grave area, Phase 1.



Figure 5. Phase 2 excavation in progress, from south-east.

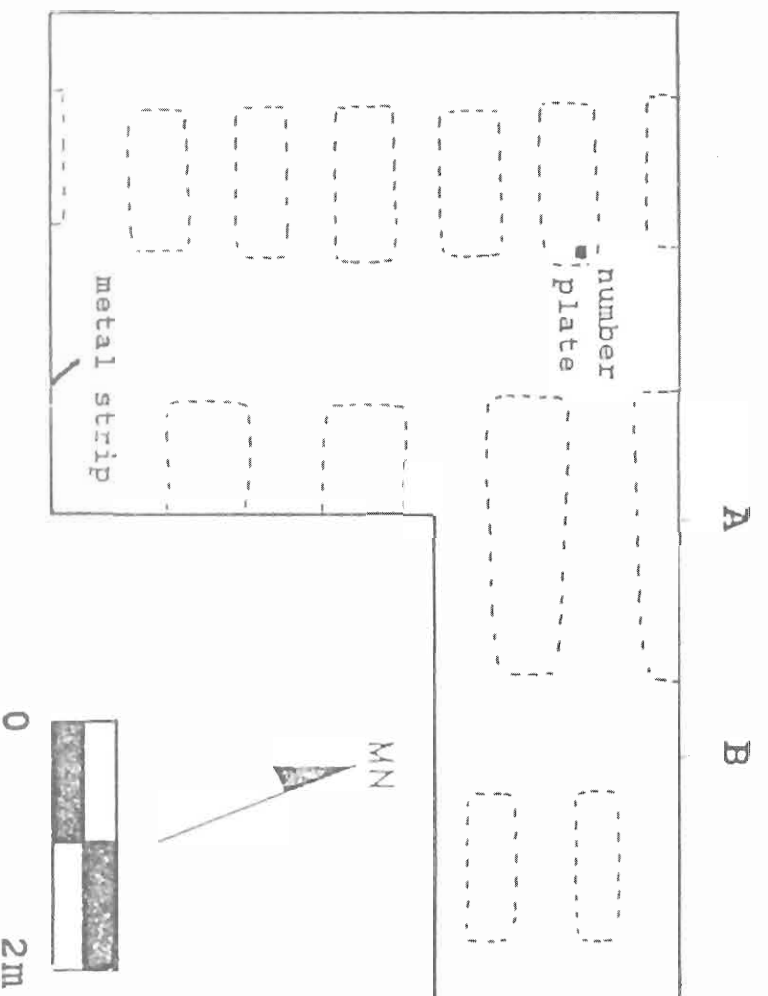


Figure 6. Plan of excavated grave area, Phase 2.

adult of 32, we removed about 20cm of the stony fill to determine the exact dimensions. We repeated this exercise for the next grave to the north (Figure 7). Both graves were about 1,2m long, the same size as the others in this row but only one half the size of those in the middle row. Clearly, Sontonga could not have been buried in the west row.

### 3.3 Initial Results

The excavations were successful in that they revealed the pattern of burial (Figure 8). A row of adult-sized graves (about 2,25 x 0,6m ) alternated with rows of half graves for children, all oriented east/west. The wedge shape of the adult graves in the middle showed that the head was at the west end. The east/west alignment and orientation was typical of Christian cemeteries. The pattern of large and small graves, however, was not expected.

The black Christian section in which Sontonga was interred was designated for adults. Children were supposed to be buried in another section further north. Black children and adults were normally separated for at least two reasons. It was not the custom of black people to place more than one body in a grave, and even so, few families could afford to purchase a plot - a pre-requisite of re-use. The mixture of large and small graves should therefore not have occurred.

## 3.4 Phase 3

### 3.4.1 Documentation

Although this unexpected pattern was a setback, it stimulated further documentary research. First, by comparing the register with the grave-lot map for the eastern half of the cemetery, Buff discovered that the same pattern of adults and children had occurred in the 'Coolie' area. It was then necessary to establish whether the pattern of alternating rows of adults and children was typical for the whole of the north-west section.

### 3.4.2 Excavation

To confirm the pattern in the north-west section, we extended a 2,5 X 6m trench east of the first excavation. The new phase of excavations began on

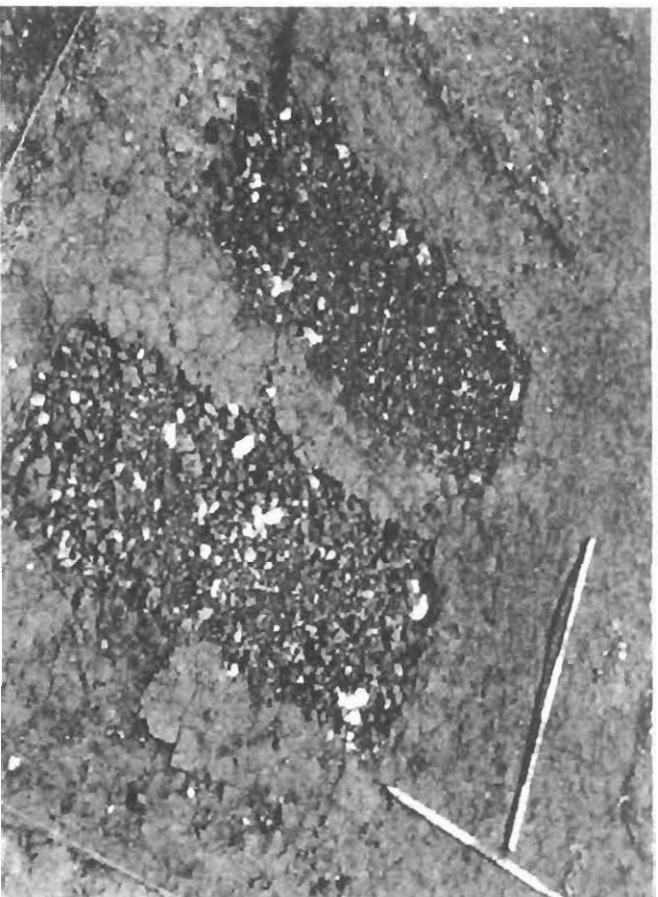


Figure 7. Partially excavated half graves in the west row.



Figure 8. General view from west of Phase 1 and Phase 2 excavations. Red and white ribbon on left marks location of number plate.

February 2 and continued on the 6th, 8th, and 9th.

The stratigraphy here was the same as previously encountered: various lenses of fill overlay a dark zone on top of shaley subsoil. The grave pattern was essentially the same: from west to east there was a row of children, walkway, row of adults, and then row of children (Figure 9). Clearly, then, this must have been the pattern throughout this section of the cemetery.

### 3.5 Phase 4

#### 3.5.1 Documentation

The next step was to recalculate the exact location of Sontonga's grave using the new excavation data. Later in February, however, Buff quite unexpectedly found some other plans. The first was a larger site map, dating to 1909, from which more accurate measurements were possible. The second was a burial concept plan, dating to 1898, showing that burial had started from the south-west corner, rather than the south-east as previously supposed. This second plan also showed the east/west burial format uncovered by the excavations.

Thirdly, a new burial number plan showed another burial area (the 4th) for black Christians.

Combining the new excavation data with the register, Buff determined that there were a total of 1973 people, 822 adults and 1151 children, buried in the section that included Sontonga, and not 1693 as shown on the site plan. Sixty-six adults who died after 1909 were buried in the 4th area.

Now that the precise number of graves had been determined, as well as the starting point, spacing and order, Buff could recalculate the location of Sontonga's grave. During this process, Buff realised that the area shown on the 1909 site-plan was too large for the number of confirmed graves; and so the cemetery roads must have been included. With the roads included, Sontonga's grave should be in the next row of adults east of the row of children exposed in the third excavation. In between the two rows there should be a road traversing the centre of the cemetery.

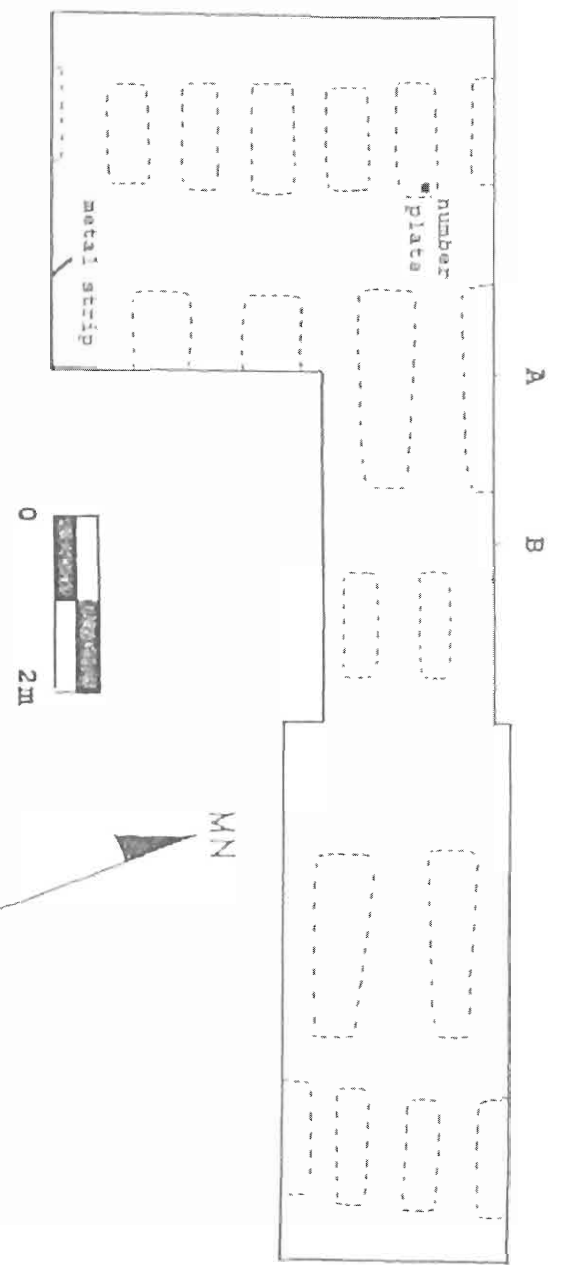


Figure 9. Plan of excavated grave area, Phase 3.

### 3.5.2 Excavation

We then placed a 3 X 3m trench directly over the calculated spot. This fourth phase took place on March 5th, 6th and 7th. The overall stratigraphy was the same with a dark zone separating fill from the scraped horizon. Most significantly, the excavations uncovered an adult grave on the precise spot calculated by Buff (Figure 10). Unfortunately, there was no sign of a headstone.

The wide space between this adult grave and the row of children to the west was the road. The arrangement revealed in the fourth excavation then, from west to east, was a row of children, walkway, row of adults, row of children, roadway and then a row of adults that probably included Sontonga (Figure 11).

## 4. DISCUSSION

It was not possible to find headstones or number plates *in situ* because landscaping had removed all surface features in the 1960s. Nevertheless, the combined data from the excavations and cemetery documents led to an identification of Sontonga's grave that is highly probable.

First, there was the identification of grave plot 4885 with Enoch Sontonga, followed by the location of 4885 in the section reserved for black Christians in the north-west area of the cemetery. Then, the pattern of graves revealed in the excavations along with the plans of 1898 and 1909 forced a recalculation of the precise location within the Christian section. This recalculation led to the discovery of an adult grave on the exact spot next to the central road.

Furthermore, the number plate adds strong support to the identification. In this black Christian cemetery, six graves ended with the number 17. The plate was found near a group of three, while the other three were some distance away (Figure 12). The probability is higher than that the plate came from one of the graves in the closest group. Significantly for the identification, the near group of numbers ending in 17 also surrounded number 4885, Sontonga's grave.

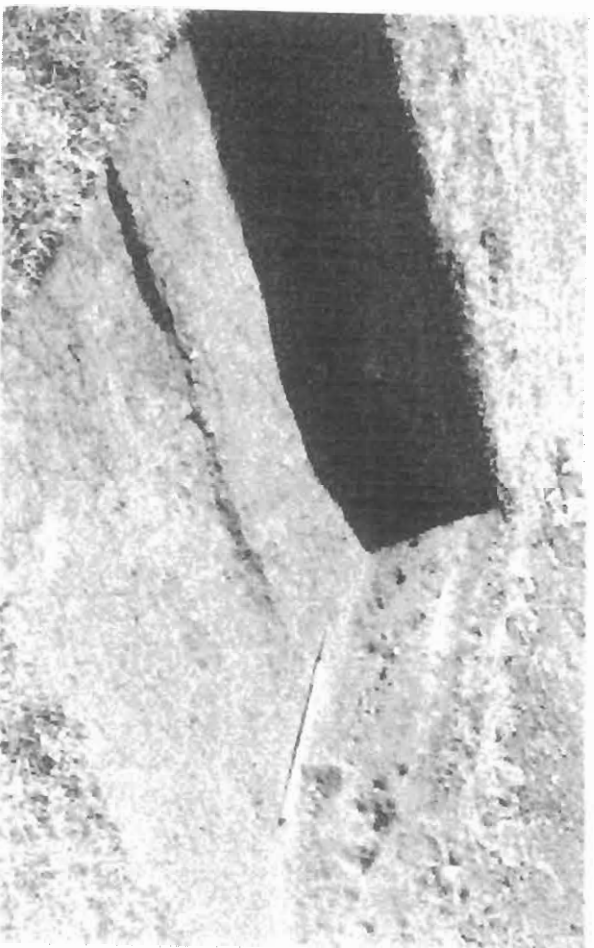


Figure 10. General view from west of Phase 4 excavation, Sontonga's grave in the middle.



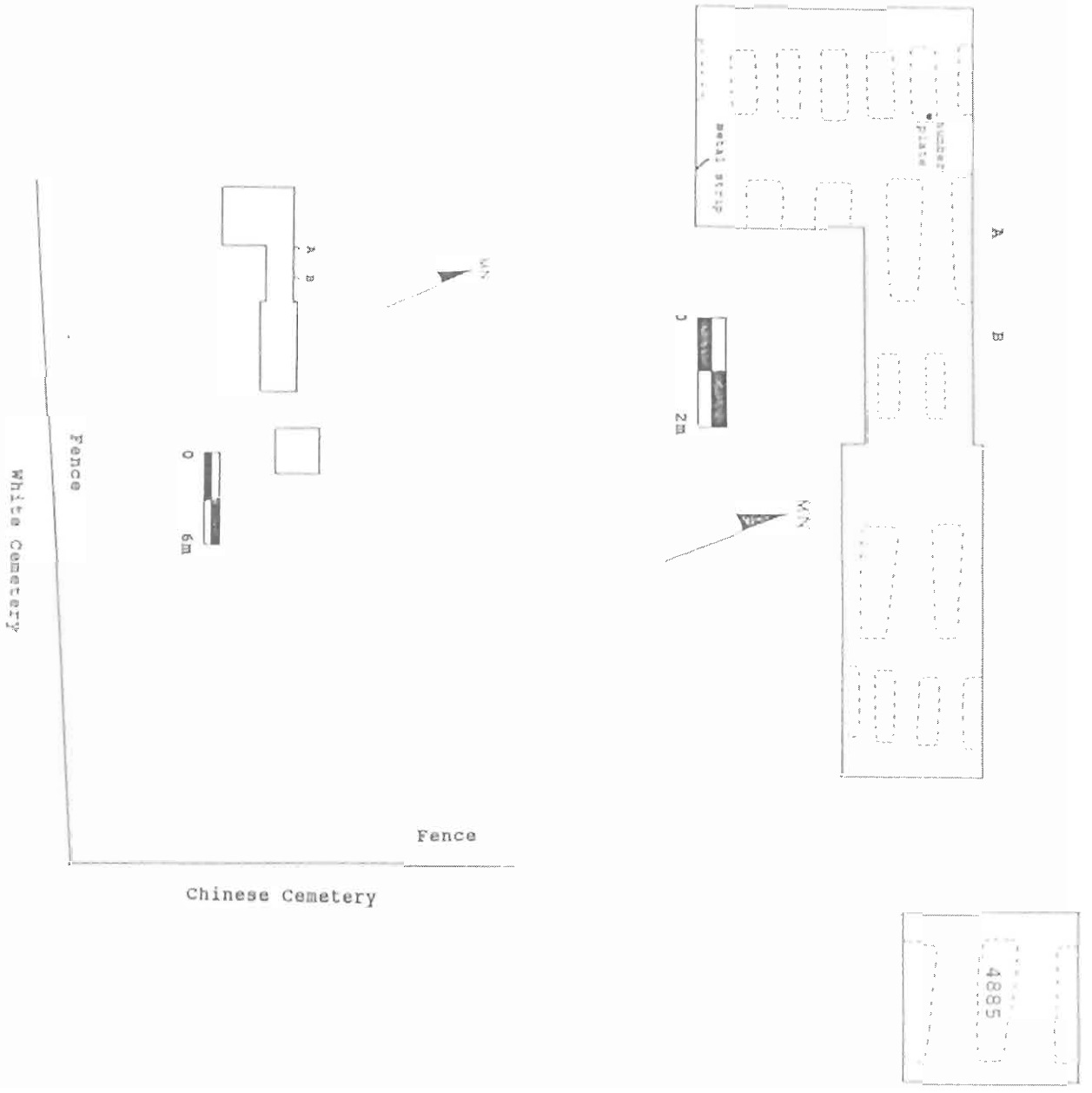


Figure 11. Plan of complete excavations.

The close proximity of the number plate, three graves ending with the number 17 and grave 4885 are most probably not a coincidence. Although full proof is not possible without an *in situ* number plate or headstone, or a grave-plot map for this area, the location of Sontonga's grave is almost certain.

## 5. REFERENCE

Shaper, H. 1994. Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika. Cape Town: Tusk Publishing Company.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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