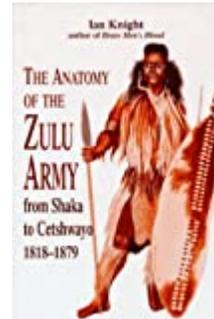




Ian Knight. *The Anatomy of the Zulu Army: From Shaka to Cetshwayo, 1818-1879.* London: Stackpole Books, 1999. 282 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85367-213-2.



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This is a reprint of the first Greenhill cloth edition of 1995 and appears in a series dedicated to military history. The author is not an academic historian but he writes well and has consulted the leading authorities on Zulu history. He has also made good use of the invaluable James Stuart Archive of translated oral traditions published by the University of Natal Press (whose 5th volume will be out soon).

After a brief opening discussion of the emergence of the Zulu kingdom, he tries to set the Zulu army in the wider context of society at large. This is no easy task for a conventional military historian; Knight deserves credit for making sense of a great deal of disparate evidence. The regiments (amabutho) were not a standing army but a citizen force called out when the king required them. Becoming a man involved induction into a regiment. Marriage could not occur until the king permitted the veterans of a particular regiment to put on the head ring (isicoco) and go out to seek wives. In giving a lucid account of these rites of passage, Knight falls into the usual trap of writing in a timeless ethnographical present - as though nothing much changed over the course of the sixty years cited in the title. This does not appear to worry him, because his main concern is the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, a subject on which he has written four previous books. More than half the present volume is dedi-

cated to events of the 1870s.

Explaining what changed and what did not change with the passage of time would be a worthwhile subject for research by some future historian. Ian Knight accepts without much questioning the old proposition that a new model army for a new model kingdom was created by Shaka kaSenzangakhona and remained more or less unchanged in later years. The work of John Wright and David Hedges has rendered this position untenable by pointing to incontrovertible evidence showing:

- 1) Age-set regimental organisations existed in many parts of South Africa in the eighteenth century. They were not an innovation of the Shakan era. The army Shaka commanded was organized on ancient principles.

- 2) Shaka did not invent the short stabbing spear and that weapon did not revolutionize warfare. For a long time - how long, no one can say - it had been the practice for men to carry a kit of spears into battle. The long spears were for throwing, the shorter ones, for fighting at close quarters. This was true even for Xhosa and Sotho soldiers, who would break the shaft of one of their long spears before plunging into hand-to-hand combat. Shaka's innovation was not the short spear itself, but his insistence that his men fight with that spear alone.

3) The bull's-head-and-horns attack formation likewise predated Shaka and was widely used by Southern African chiefs.

4) Shaka's forces won a great victory over Zwide's Ndwandwe coalition, but was by no means invincible in subsequent campaigns. It would be useful for someone to tally the victories and defeats.

Knight passes over Dingane's kingship quickly, too quickly in my opinion. Dingane knew he would need to reorganize his forces to meet the threat of invaders with guns and horses. Eye-witness accounts describe discussions about how best to counter that menace. Realizing that he could not rely on the white mercenary musketeer forces used by Shaka, the king set out to acquire horses and guns. There is good reason to believe, as Julian Cobbing has argued, that some of the guns were acquired through renegade white traders at Port Natal, and others, through slave trading to Delagoa Bay. While Knight acknowledges (p. 167) Dingane's interest in guns, he fails to mention that the Zulu used them against the Voortrekker forces in the celebrated battle of Ncome (Blood River) in 1838. Zulu horsemen also figured in that campaign. The point of this discussion is to emphasize that the Zulu army did not spring into existence fully formed under Shaka in 1818 and remain unchanged in later years, as virtually all conventional military historians assume.

A good example of the perils of assuming an unchanging Shakan model is Knight's map (p. 52) purporting to show 'Sites of Principal Amakhanda in the Zulu

Kingdom c. 1820-1879'. The amakhanda were royal cattle posts maintained and guarded by the king's regiments. The locations Knight shows may fairly represent the configuration of 1879 but give no semblance of an accurate guide to the spatial dispersion of power in earlier years.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, Ian Knight deserves to be congratulated for the work he has done in bringing together between the covers of a reasonably priced paperback the results of a generation of scholarly writing on the Zulu army which went into battle to defend their homeland in 1879. He excels in summing up what it meant to be part of a regiment facing the British invaders. The photographs and illustrations are marvelous. The great question which he (like other historians) leaves unanswered is why the Zulu forces continued to commit themselves to mass attacks on tightly organized infantry for decades after the battle of Ncome had shown what a frightful death toll such encounters exacted. There was no way the Zulu could have prevailed against the might of the British Empire in 1879, but surely they would have done better to avoid pitched battles and to concentrate on harrying the long straggling enemy supply lines. It may be that the answer to this puzzle will eventually be found not by going over battlefield diagrams but through reconsidering Zulu concepts of masculinity and military glory.

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