

Skulls and Scientific Collecting in the Victorian Military: Keeping the Enemy Dead in British Frontier Warfare

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INTRODUCTION

As a result of colonial wars with indigenous peoples, especially in Africa and North America, a distinction seems to have arisen in Western military culture between ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’ enemies. The behavior of civilized enemies in battle appeared rational and constrained by rules. Savage enemies, on the other hand, evinced emotional and unregulated violence. Above all, they were distinguished by an excessive brutality they seemed to display towards their enemies in customs such as cannibalism and the taking of body parts as trophies (see, for example, Marks 1970: 246). In short, the differences between civilized people and savages in warfare were especially evident in their behavior toward enemy dead.

From such dichotomies, an ideology also emerged according to which it was allowable or even necessary, when fighting ‘savage’ enemies, to adopt their methods, to some extent imitating the savagery imputed to them and reciprocating it (Canny 1973; Scheck 2005; Taussig 1987: 122–26). A well-known example of this was the rapid and widespread adoption of the practice of scalping by European colonists in North America (Axtell 1981; Slotkin 1973: 183). Colonial warfare could therefore give rise to strange cultural hybrids, such as a victory march through Boston in 1725, in which British officers paraded in wigs made from human scalps (Axtell 1981: 232). Savage enemies were categorized, on the one hand, as wild, animal-like, and fundamentally unlike civilized opponents. But, for the same reason, they could be exemplars of uninhibited aggression, to be copied and internalized.

Of course, to imitate them was potentially to dissolve the very differences on which the imitation was predicated. If civilized soldiers reciprocated their opponents’ savagery, and so in their own eyes came to resemble them, they

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also needed at times to be able to disown or deny these resemblances (see Harrison 2005).

My question is how nineteenth-century British soldiers serving in Africa, principally southern Africa, negotiated this dilemma. I wish to explain why some of these soldiers, as they encountered enemies they understood to be outside the conventions of civilized war, began to appropriate their remains, in particular their skulls, for use as war mementos or trophies. The collection of enemy skulls can evoke images of primitive ‘headhunting,’ a longstanding icon of savagery in the Western imagination. But I argue that the emergence of such practices among nineteenth-century British soldiers in Africa was connected with developments in Victorian science, in which the collection, measurement, and classification of skulls became central to scientific understandings of human difference, especially moral and intellectual inequality (Bank 1996; van Wyhe 2004). That is, these practices of military trophy taking, primitive and atavistic though they seemed to contemporary observers, actually arose in connection with the growth in authority and prestige of scientific naturalism and rationality. The use specifically of Africans’ skulls as war trophies allowed soldiers who saw the transgression of civilized norms as a defining characteristic of savages, to maintain distinctions between themselves and savages and yet transgress these same norms themselves.

SKULLS AS TROPHIES OF HUNTING AND WAR

Many nineteenth-century British soldiers serving in the colonies were enthusiastic collectors. Sometimes, after successful military actions, they took weapons and other items from the enemy dead as battle trophies, perhaps from people whom they had personally killed. A popular souvenir of this sort among soldiers in the Eighth Frontier War (1851–1853) against the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape were the ivory amulets worn by Xhosa men. When Xhosa were fatally wounded they would smash their ornaments to deny the Whites these highly prized trophies (Mostert 1992: 1251; see also Peires 1989: 50).

The acquisitiveness of soldiers sometimes extended to the taking of enemy body parts. This tended to occur during the looting of possessions from the battlefield dead, as exemplified by the circumstances of the death of Hintsá, a chief of the Xhosa in the Sixth Frontier War (1834–1836). He was shot and killed by a settler militiaman named Southey while escaping from the custody of the British military commander. “Southey was first beside the body and quickly took Hintsá’s brass ornaments for himself. As the others gathered around, they grabbed for what was left of Hintsá’s beads and bracelets. George Southey or his brother William cut off one of Hintsá’s ears and someone else took the other ear. Assistant Surgeon Ford of the 72nd Highlanders was seen trying to extract some of the Chief’s teeth” (Mostert 1992: 725–26). The commander himself took Hintsá’s spear and some of his bracelets and sent them to

his wife as souvenirs. According to some reports, Hints's ears were later offered for sale on the streets of Grahamstown (Lehmann 1977: 178, 196; for similar cases, see Peires 1989: 398; Ritvo 1987: 271).

Other body parts, particularly skulls, were also taken as souvenirs. In 1847 an Ensign serving in the Seventh Frontier War wrote to his parents in England that he had seen "a Kaffir's head" for sale in Cape Town, but had decided not to buy it because he was sure he could get one of his own once he had begun duties on the frontier (Morris 1996: 75).¹

A photograph taken in 1879 shows an officer of the 80th Regiment at the entrance to his tent during the Anglo-Zulu war (Locke and Quantrill 2002: 119). He poses among a collection of personal possessions: rugs, leopard skins, weapons, and an oriental musical instrument, possibly a souvenir of some earlier posting. A British flag is draped over a folding table on which there are framed photographs of women in bustles. Just visible behind these is a human skull, its discreet placement perhaps suggesting some ambivalence about the display of such an object. The previous year the officer's regiment had served in the Ninth Frontier War (1877–1878), and the skull was probably a memento of that campaign (Ron Locke, personal communication 25 Sept. 2004).

British soldiers in the Cape Frontier Wars often equated fighting the Xhosa with killing animals and, in particular, with hunting (Peires 1989: 50, 306). One of Victorian Britain's central rituals of imperial conquest, in Africa, India, and other colonial possessions, was the recreational hunting of indigenous game animals, and the preservation and display of their remains: heads, skulls, horns, skins, and so forth (MacKenzie 1988; Ritvo 1987). Hunting was therefore an important leisure pursuit in the Victorian military, and many colonial officers were keen sportsmen, who hunted the local wildlife, accumulated animal trophies, and brought them home at the end of their service. These demonstrations of violent power and mastery over the local wildlife symbolized mastery over land and people. To take human trophies as if their colonial subjects were native fauna was an extreme, but logical, extension of this metaphor.

In 1891 the Belgians sent an expedition to take control of the Katanga region of Congo for King Leopold, under the leadership of a Canadian explorer and soldier, Captain Stairs. One of Stairs' officers killed the local king, Msiri, took his head back to camp and announced: "I have killed a tiger! Vive le roi!" The expedition returned to the coast the following year, bringing the king's skull with them in a kerosene tin, as if it was the trophy of a hunting expedition (Crawford 1912: 308–10; Gordon 2001: 320; Stairs and MacLaren 1997: 386).

¹ See Skotnes (1996: 18) for a photograph of a probable example of such a preserved head from nineteenth-century southern Africa.

The appropriation and display of such human trophies are illustrated by the treatment of the body of Luka Jantje, a Tswana chief killed in battle against the British in 1896. Shortly after the chief's burial, one of the officers present declared that he would "like that fellow's skull" (Chilvers 1933: 132) and bribed one of his men £5 to exhume the body, take the head, and boil it to remove the flesh. When reports of this event appeared in the press, an acrimonious dispute ensued among the Cape's political elite, amidst which the officer was forced to resign his commission. But he kept the skull; later in life, working as a shift foreman on an East Rand mine, he still had it on display on the wall of his room, in much the same way that a sports hunter would display the trophy head of an animal (Chilvers 1933: 133; Shillington 1985: 239–40).

Another African leader whose remains met with such treatment was Bambata, a chief killed leading the last Zulu revolt against the British in 1906 (Marks 1970, 1986). He was killed at the bottom of a steep ravine, and a decision was made that it was too difficult to retrieve his body and that his head should be removed. The head was placed in a tent under armed guard, and his followers were brought into the tent to view the head and persuade them to surrender. The official reports state that the head was treated with dignity and that afterwards the head and body were given burial together. However, it appears that somebody obtained Bambata's skull and kept it. For in 1925, a photograph appeared in *The Nongqai*, the monthly magazine of the South African Armed Forces, showing a human skull mounted on a plaque, exactly as the trophy skull or horns of a game animal might be. The following text accompanied the photograph (see Gillings 1989; 2002): "The bottom photograph shows the actual skull of the rebel leader, Chief Bambata, who was slain at the Mome Gorge, and decapitated for identification purposes. His skull is the only relic of a Rebellion which cost the Government 740,000 pounds to suppress."

Some colonial officers brought relics of this sort home to Britain after the end of their period of service. While serving in the Ninth Frontier War, Lieutenant (later Major-General Sir) Frederick Carrington obtained a skull he believed to be that of the Xhosa leader Sandile, who was killed in 1878 in that war (Hummel 1989: 163–67; Gon 1984: 122–23). Carrington had not taken part in the fighting in which Sandile died, and how he obtained the skull is not known. But he returned to England with it, and for many years kept it on the mantelpiece in his Gloucestershire country estate. When he married, late in life, his wife announced that she would not stay in the house "if that thing stayed in the dining room" and demanded that it be given burial (Hummel 1989: 164). Carrington interred it on his estate in 1905, under a headstone which read: "Here lies the head of Sandilli [sic] chief of the Gaika nation killed in action in the Peri bush King William's Town 1878." All the available evidence, carefully reviewed by Hummel, is that Sandile's body was not decapitated, and the skull was probably a fraud sold to Carrington by

some “peddler of war relics” (Hummel 1989: 164). If this was the case, it suggests that the commoditization of such trophies was not uncommon at the time.²

Some relics of Bambata appear also to have found their way to England, as was discovered in 2002 by historical researchers examining the personal effects of a Colonel Alexander, an army engineer who served in South Africa at the time of the Bambata Rebellion (Gillings 2002). His army records state that he was born in Dublin, was fluent in French and Zulu, and married an American. He was decorated twice in the First World War and, in 1919, was Deputy Controller of the Baghdad railway system. In the Second World War, he and his wife managed Ashorne Hill, the residence of staff of the British Iron and Steel Confederation after their evacuation from London. It was here, among the animal trophy heads, spears and other Africana that appear to date from Alexander’s period at the house, that an envelope was discovered among his effects. It carried the name “Bambata” spelt backwards, and contained a typed report of Bambata’s death and a clipping of African hair. The likeliest explanation of this discovery is that military personnel took cuttings of Bambata’s hair from his body as souvenirs. If so, it was not the first time this had happened to the body of an African leader killed in action against the British. Thirty years earlier, it had been done to the body of Sandile (Gon 1984: 122; Mostert 1992: 1252).

There seems to be little evidence of British military personnel in the Victorian era, or later, taking body parts as trophies from enemies who were white or European, or trafficking in their remains as war memorabilia. So, for example, we do not seem to find accounts of nineteenth-century servicemen perpetrating such acts in the Napoleonic wars, or the Crimean War, or against Dutch settlers in the Boer Wars. The looting of personal effects from the dead was certainly common, but soldiers seem to have drawn a moral boundary preventing them from using as souvenirs the body parts of opponents with whom they understood themselves as sharing racial identity or kinship (Harrison 2006). That is, they seem to have drawn a distinction between two categories of enemy, one closely related and the other distant, codifying this dichotomy in the permissibility or impermissibility of taking body parts as trophies. In effect, they acknowledged close enemies as human, while equating distant ones with game animals or quarry. There are many ethnographic examples of the use of such classifications in warfare, always accompanied by the use of the remains of enemies of the ‘distant’ category as war trophies and mementos. This pattern occurs in a wide range of societies, from small-scale indigenous communities to some of the nation states involved in the major wars of the twentieth century. Wherever it occurs, it seems to do so specifically among

² Recent archaeological excavation of Sandile’s grave has confirmed that his body was not decapitated (Feni 2005).

combatants from social milieus in which the hunting of animals is conceptualized as an act of violent power and forms an important dimension of male identity (see Harrison 2006).

OUT-SAVAGING THE SAVAGES

Some African societies also seem to have been of this type, and had ritual practices involving the taking and use of enemy body parts. British soldiers were sometimes victims of such acts. So, for example, in the First Ashanti War in 1824, the head of the British Governor Sir Charles McCarthy was taken and his skull made into a ceremonial drinking bowl for the Ashanti king (McCaskie 2003: 424). In southern Africa, the Xhosa and Zulu sometimes mutilated the bodies of British soldiers, taking heads, skulls, or other body parts, in most cases for use in war magic. British civilians and soldiers expressed horror at such acts (see, for instance, Locke and Quantrill 2002: 84, 228; Peires 1989: 48–49, 52, 105; Marks 1970: 245–46).

It is possible that some soldiers who took enemy skulls were attempting to copy and reciprocate their enemies' behavior. The British and Xhosa certainly reciprocated other sorts of brutality, such as the torture of prisoners, as they came increasingly to dehumanize each other during the course of the Frontier Wars (Peires 1989: 48–49, 52; Mostert 1992: 1117).

A probable example of this sort of reactive or retaliatory trophy taking is the treatment of the remains of the Mahdi, the religious leader who led an insurrection in the Sudan in the 1880s. In 1885, his forces destroyed the British-led garrison at Khartoum, killed the commander, General Gordon, decapitated his body, and put the head on display. When the Anglo-Egyptian army defeated the Mahdists at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, its general, Kitchener, who had idolized Gordon, ordered the Mahdi's tomb to be blown up. "[T]he body of the Mahdi himself was dug up and flung into the Nile—not, however, until the head was severed, and this was purloined by Kitchener as a trophy of war. He appears to have had a notion that he might have used the skull for an inkstand or a drinking cup, or alternatively that it might have been forwarded as a curiosity to the Royal College of Surgeons in London" (Moorehead 1971: 335).

The skull was placed in an empty kerosene drum "for future disposal," an official expression meaning, according to Churchill, that it would be "passed from hand to hand till it reached Cairo, where it would be treated as 'an interesting trophy'" (1899: 212; see also Manchester 1983: 281). Churchill's comment suggests that he was quite familiar with such behavior.³ It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Kitchener's treatment of the Mahdi's remains was a post-mortem settling of scores over the death of Gordon, and the mutilation of his body, thirteen years earlier.

³ Compare the similar disinterment and appropriation of the remains of the Zulu king Mpande by the British after their victory over the Zulu at the battle of Ulundi in 1879 (Vijn 1988 [1880]: 86–88).

On the rare occasions when these colonial practices came to public attention in metropolitan Britain, they caused public scandal and considerable official embarrassment.⁴ There was, for instance, an outcry over the treatment of the remains of the Mahdi, “when it became known to the public, and not even the General’s popularity in England (where he was idolized after Omdurman) was able to protect him from it. Queen Victoria was deeply shocked—she thought the whole affair ‘savoured too much of the Middle Ages’—and Kitchener was obliged to write her a mollifying letter. [The British Consul-General] in Cairo meanwhile quietly possessed himself of the skull, and sent it up to the Moslem cemetery at Wadi Halfa, where it was secretly buried by night” (Moorehead 1971: 335–36).

Victorian civilians and soldiers alike agreed that such behavior had no place in civilized war. But their conceptions of civilized war seem sometimes to have been subtly at variance. Civilians tended to assume that civilized soldiers fight civilized wars by definition, no matter whom they are fighting. For such soldiers to mutilate enemy dead or take body parts as trophies was absolutely anomalous, even inconceivable.

But some members of the military appear to have had a more complex and nuanced view, in which civilized warfare was one of two varieties of warfare in which a civilized soldier might engage, depending on whom he was fighting. From this perspective, civilized soldiers fight civilized wars when they fight other civilized soldiers. But against savages they may fight savage wars. The difference, accordingly, between a civilized and savage combatant is that a savage is only able to fight savage wars, while a civilized soldier can choose to wage either type of war. To put this differently, the civilized soldier imagined that within himself a second, savage, soldier was encompassed and subsumed. This encapsulated savage could be released in appropriate contexts, above all when fighting other savages. A sergeant in a Highland Scots regiment recalls going into battle against the Xhosa: “Nervousness gives place to excitement, excitement to anger; and anger may be supplanted by barbarism as an infuriated soldiery rush on, heedless of their doom. Their only thought is of victory; and when victory is gained, it requires a masterly general to restrain the men from deeds which cannot be named” (in Peires 1989: 49).

Victorian soldiers and civilians took for granted a fundamental divide between savage and civilized people, with the former distinguished from the latter by primitive customs such as headhunting. They also agreed that the dead bodies of civilized enemies were owed respectful treatment, and that savages do not understand such rules.

But some colonial soldiers went further, considering it acceptable to treat the remains of savage enemies in the same way that such peoples themselves

⁴ For the public reaction in Britain and elsewhere to the killing and mutilation of Hintsa, see Lehmann (1977: 196–202) and Mostert (1992: 759ff).

treated (or were assumed or expected to treat) their own enemies' remains. These soldiers thereby expressed a sense of possessing natural and self-evident rights over the bodies of lesser races, including the right to appropriate the brutal practices of such races and retaliate in kind against those who desecrated British dead.

They seem, in other words, implicitly to have conceived of war as an inherently relational or reciprocal activity, in which enemies negotiate the kind of war they are waging, communicating with one another, in particular, through their behavior towards each other's dead. That is, engaging or not engaging in acts such as trophy taking represents part of a dialogue in which the two sides are trying to construct a relationship and rules of conduct towards each other. From this point of view, 'savage' and 'civilized' denote, not so much contrasting categories of enemies, as contrasting modes of interaction to which encounters between enemies can give rise.

In some situations, colonial officers might therefore treat enemy remains in a manner suggestive of primitive trophy hunting. But they did not consider themselves to have thereby become savages because, crucially, they refrained from using the remains of civilized enemies in this way and, in their own view, thereby showed that they respected higher values and were fully capable of moral discrimination.

Of course, from another point of view, their appropriations of African people's skulls and other body parts could appear to realize some dark fantasies of human nature. Such behavior could be interpreted, for instance, as a perverse victory for the colonized who, by allowing or encouraging brutality towards themselves, had managed to tempt into savagery those who had come to rule and civilize them, as Conrad imagined with the figure of Kurtz.

Thus while trophy taking in the Victorian military originated in ideologies of racial superiority, it could be valorized either negatively or positively within these same ideologies' terms. Those who carried such acts, and those who deplored them, both tended to do so in the name of a moral distinction between 'savage' and 'civilized' whose truth they jointly upheld.

SKULLS OF CHIEFS AND KINGS

Alfred Grenfell, later Field Marshall Lord Grenfell, fought in the battle of Ulundi, at which the Zulu state was finally defeated. In his memoirs, he recalls a revisit to the old battlefield in 1881, two years after the Zulu defeat:

I made a long ride with Buller and Donald Browne into Zululand to see our old fighting ground at Ulundi. When we arrived, we found the old track across the Umfolozi River where our square had stood. I stood at the place, which was still marked by cartridges, at the corner of the square where the Zulus had made their last attack. I told Buller that I had seen a Zulu Induna shot in the head by Owen's machine-guns, of which there were two at this corner. He was leading his men on and got as close as eighteen

yards from the square, for I had measured it after the action. I again paced the eighteen yards and came to my old friend, a splendid skeleton, his bones perfectly white, his flesh eaten off by the white ants. I felt I could not part with him, so I put his skull into my forage bag, and brought it home with me. It now adorns a case in my collection of curiosities (Grenfell 1925: 65–66).

In its use of approbatory terms such as “splendid” in reference to the remains of a dead enemy, this passage resonates with some enduring themes in Western ideologies of hunting.⁵ One is that a ‘true’ hunter feels affection and respect towards the animals he kills and pays homage or tribute to them by keeping parts of them as trophies. Another, related theme, rooted in the aristocratic hunting traditions of medieval Europe, is that hunters and their quarry alike are ranked by degrees of inherent quality or nobility, with the noblest game reserved for a hunting elite (Cartmill 1993; Herman 2001). When Grenfell took the *induna*’s skull from the battlefield at Ulundi, he could justifiably have considered himself similar in rank in the British army to an *induna* in the Zulu army. In the *induna*’s impressive remains (the “old friend” he “could not part with”) he acknowledged the presence of someone with whom he shared relative equality (within, of course, their quite separate social worlds), much like a medieval king acknowledged in the nobility of the stag he hunted the equivalent, in the animal realm, of his own royal status in the human realm.

Similarly, it would have been egregious for someone of the rank of Kitchener to have valued the skull of an anonymous Mahdist foot soldier as a war memento, and it would have been equally inappropriate for the skull of the Mahdi to have ended up as a souvenir in the hands of an ordinary British trooper. On this both Kitchener and the Mahdi would probably have agreed. Between the hunter and prey, the soldier and the skull, the collector and the collected, propriety required a parity of status.

The Ashanti king acknowledged this when he kept Sir Charles McCarthy’s skull as a ceremonial drinking-bowl. So did Sir Frederick Carrington in keeping the skull of someone he referred to as “Sandilli, chief of the Gaika nation” on the mantelpiece in his dining room. In nineteenth-century British military culture, and in some African societies with which the British fought, the taking of enemy remains in war was structured by principles of rank and hierarchy, and by a mutual recognition of the existence of these principles in one another.

For this reason, the taking of African heads and skulls by the British military seems to have been carried out predominantly, though not exclusively,

⁵ See also the passage from the amateur phrenologist in the Eighth Frontier War, quoted below. On the history of collections (or “cabinets”) of curiosities, see Impey and MacGregor (1985). It was not uncommon at the time for these private museums of exotica and rarities to include human body parts: for an example, see British Library (2006).

by members the officer class, and their victims tended to be similarly high ranking Africans. But the perception that their own commitment to principles of rank and hierarchy was often mirrored by the African peoples whom they fought, could at times make it seem that they and their opponents were uncomfortably alike: not so much colonizers and colonized, rulers and ruled, but partners joined together in violent exchanges of killings, of body parts for body parts, mutilations for mutilations, moderated only by a shared commitment to distinctions of rank and status.

These similarities between some African peoples' practices and their own, or those of their own society's recent past, were not lost on contemporary European observers. At the time of the Anglo-Zulu War, for example, only a century had passed since the judicial practice of displaying human heads in public had come to an end in England (McLynn 1989: 274). Hence when the explorer Burton, traveling through an African chiefdom in 1859, saw skulls of the chief's enemies displayed on stakes, the spectacle reminded him of the Temple Bar, the London city gate on which heads of traitors were displayed until the previous century (Franey 2001: 225–26).

When a high-ranking colonial officer such as Kitchener took the head or skull of an enemy leader, his actions, too, must have evoked these sorts of historical resonances, perhaps echoing the events of 1746, when the leaders of the Jacobite rebellion were executed and their heads displayed on the Temple Bar, where they remained until 1778. Kitchener's revenge on the Mahdi's remains has even closer parallels with the post-mortem punishment meted out on the exhumed corpse of Oliver Cromwell under Charles II after the Restoration.

A Victorian military officer fighting 'savages' in the colonies could do something impermissible when fighting civilized enemies: namely, indulge in a form of cultural nostalgia, resurrecting some of the more grisly military and judicial practices of his own society's recent history, and performing these as exemplary political symbolism. In doing so, he was reaching back into a less civilized past to retrieve for himself some of the former functions of a king. In this retrospective appropriation of royal power by the individual colonial officer, the anatomical or ethnological museum, or the private connoisseur's cabinet of curiosities, replaced the Temple Bar as a site for the exemplary display of body parts of enemies of the state.

In some cases, his African colonial subjects too may have viewed him as behaving like a chief or king. In fact, if he took the skull of a chief or king, they could have understood him as making a claim to the succession. One apparent case of this sort concerns the death of Mkwawa, chief of the Wahehe people in German East Africa (Baer and Schröter 2001; Winans 1994). In 1891, his army defeated a German expeditionary force sent into his territory and killed its commanding officer. Mkwawa was then hunted relentlessly for a number of years by a German force under a British-born officer called Tom Prince (later, von Prince). Finally cornered in 1898, Mkwawa

killed himself. His head was removed and brought to Prince's headquarters, where it was boiled to remove the flesh. Prince and his wife kept the skull in their house, treating it as what one visitor to the household described as a "family trophy" (Baer and Schröter 2001: 187–88). Eventually, Prince may have had the skull sent to a museum in Germany.

After Mkwawa's death, the German authorities rewarded Prince for his services, awarding him the hereditary title 'von' among other honors. But they also required him to move to a distant part of their East African colonial territory, concerned that his personal influence over the Wahehe was becoming too great (Winans 1994: 232–33). It appears that some of the Wahehe people had begun to regard him as their new leader, transferring their loyalties to von Prince in person, instead of to the German state. Given the assumption in some societies in Africa, and elsewhere, that the body of the king or chief represents the chiefdom or state (Huntington and Metcalf 1979), it is possible that some among the Wahehe understood that by having Mkwawa killed and taking his skull, von Prince had also acquired something of Mkwawa's identity, and had been transformed from Mkwawa's adversary into his replacement or successor, a new incarnation of the dead chief. Von Prince's superiors were particularly concerned that he had started to behave in ways that suggested that he may have begun to view himself in this light (Winans 1994: 232–33). An officer who came into possession of the skull of a king or chief might discover that this powerful relic had—in the eyes of his colonial subjects at least—come into possession of him.⁶

SKULLS AND THE RISE OF SCIENTIFIC NATURALISM

There seems to be no evidence of British soldiers in Africa souvenirizing skulls on a significant scale before the 1820s. In fact, one must probably go back to the thirteenth century to find, in the Western European military tradition, norms making it acceptable for combatants to treat enemy heads or skulls as personal war souvenirs.⁷ An important question is why such practices of individualized trophy hunting emerged, or rather re-emerged after an apparent gap of some six hundred years, in the context of nineteenth-century colonial warfare. So far, I have suggested that they emerged in the context of the encounter with non-European peoples who themselves had cultural practices capable of

⁶ For the subsequent complex history of Mkwawa's skull, see Baer and Schröter (2001) and Winans (1994). The Treaty of Versailles included a demand that Germany return the skull to the Wahehe. In 1954, a skull believed to be that of Mkwawa was found in a German museum and finally repatriated.

⁷ For example, after the death of Simon de Montfort at the battle of Evesham in 1265, his head, hands, and genitals were presented to the wife of his chief enemy, Roger Mortimer (Prestwich 1988: 51; Strickland 1996: 5). But for a much later example, see the treatment of the skull of the Native American chief "King Phillip" by the seventeenth-century English Puritan Cotton Mather (Lepore 1998: 174–75).

being interpreted—through the lens of Victorian historical consciousness—as primitive customs of trophy taking.⁸ It is unlikely that the sense of civilizational superiority many soldiers shared would have allowed them simply to copy their enemies' practices. Rather, they needed to be able to copy them, at least as they imagined them, in such a way as to allow themselves also to disclaim the imitation. As I will try to show, the key factor that enabled them to do so was a set of important developments in Victorian science.

In 1879, during the Anglo-Zulu war, the Zulu king detained at his homestead a Dutch trader named Cornelius Vijn. After the battle of Kambula, the Zulu army's first defeat by the British, the survivors came to Vijn and asked him the meaning of some puzzling behavior they had observed among the enemy. One of the questions they put to Vijn was: "Why did the Whites cut off the heads of those who had fallen, and put them in their wagons? What did they do with these heads? Or was it to let the Queen see how they had fought?" (Vijn 1988 [1880]: 38).

Bishop Colenso, who translated and edited Vijn's memoirs, suggests in a footnote that the "heads" the Zulu referred to may have been skulls, "which (it is well known) were carried off by some Whites from the battle-field" (Vijn 1988 [1880]: 38). Such souvenir hunting took place after other similar defeats of indigenous armies in nineteenth-century southern Africa, as we have seen. However, it always occurred after battles when all that remained of the African dead were bones. The Zulu, on the other hand, appear to have witnessed decapitations of bodies immediately following the fighting.

One possibility is that these acts were carried out by army physicians or medical officers, or at their behest. African battlefield dead had sometimes been treated in this way earlier during the Eighth Frontier War. One English settler, who led a militia in which a local apothecary served as surgeon, recalled one night during the war when, "we were surprised by a dreadful stench. I sent men round the camp to find out the cause of it. They went on the scent and found Taylor the apothecary, who had volunteered to join me had brought one of the Caffers heads we had shot the first day, and had taken another man's pot. [Taylor] was boiling it to get the meat off. The old fellow had the skull in his shop until he died" (Stubbs 1978: 176; footnote omitted, original brackets).

There were cases of soldiers killing Africans specifically to obtain medical specimens in this way. A wealthy adventurer who raised a private corps of volunteers in the same war, remembers one of his men who kept a broken sickle

⁸ For instance, educated Victorians would have been familiar with classical descriptions of the headhunting practices of the ancient Gauls (Diodorus of Sicily 1939: 173–75), and with Gibbon's account of the Lombard king Alboin, who wore an enemy king's skull on his belt and compelled his wife (the enemy's daughter) to drink from it (Gibbon 1910: 449–50, 454–55).

under his coat, for cutting the throats of Xhosa women and children they took prisoner (Peires 1989: 51; Mostert 1992: 1153). When a surgeon of the 60th Regiment requested some scientific specimens, his men were all too ready to comply.

Doctor A—of the 60th had asked my men to procure for him a few native skulls of both sexes. This was a task easily accomplished. One morning they brought back to camp about two dozen heads of various ages. As these were not supposed to be in a presentable state for the doctor's acceptance, the next night they turned my vat into a caldron for the removal of superfluous flesh. And there these men sat, gravely smoking their pipes during the live-long night, and stirring round and round the heads in that seething boiler, as though they were cooking black-apple dumplings (in Peires 1989: 49; see also Morris 1996: 75; Mostert 1992: 1153).

The military procurement of heads or skulls in this way in southern Africa for medical or scientific study seems to date back at least to the 1820s, in warfare against the Khoisan or 'Bushman' peoples (Morris 1996: 73–75). The background to this was the emergence of phrenology and craniology into public consciousness early in the nineteenth century. These were sciences or quasi-sciences in which the shape and proportions of the human skull were understood to be the key to explaining variations of race, intelligence, temperament, moral character, and so forth (Bank 1996). Throughout the century, the skull was attributed with profound scientific significance, particularly with the development of Darwinism and racial theories based on it. It became an iconic signifier of human difference, a "scientific fetish object" (Franey 2001: 223; see also Griffiths 1996: 39). The belief that variations in skull form could be used to establish races led to a demand, on the part of metropolitan science, for large samples of non-European skulls for quantitative measurement, statistical analysis, and classification.

The colonies were therefore a vital source of specimens for anthropologists, anatomists, and other interested scientists. In southern Africa early in the nineteenth century, the naturalist Ludwig Krebs sent to German museums consignments including items he described as a "Hottentot in brine," a "Kaffer's skull in spirits," and a "complete Bushman in brine in a barrel" (ffolliot and Liversidge 1971: 70, 172, 230). As late as the 1890s, the naturalist Jameson brought a preserved African head to London (Franey 2001: 230). Travelers to the colonies—explorers, naturalists, physicians, anthropologists, missionaries, and so forth—were urged to collect skulls. They obtained them from graves, hospitals, execution sites, and battlefields (Franey 2001: 222; Luyendijk-Elshout 1997; Stern 1971: 59).

The colonial military, and military physicians in particular, became important sources of skulls and other human remains for scientific study. When Kitchener considered sending the Mahdi's skull to the Royal College of Surgeons, he was following a well established practice: army surgeons had sent skulls of African dead to the College from the siege of Shiloh and other military

actions in 1851 (Bank 1996: 402; Griffiths 1996: 44; Morris 1996: 73; Skotnes 1996: 18–20).⁹

It was not only in Britain that science and the colonial military were closely linked in this way. The notorious study of “Indian crania,” ordered by the chief medical officer of the United States Army in the 1860s, involved military personnel in the systematic harvesting of Native American skulls and other remains for the newly established Army Medical Museum (Riding In 1992: 19; Thomas 2000). And during the Herero uprising, which began in 1904 in German South West Africa, the military authorities there ran internment camps which seem to have functioned as skull production centers for the German scientific establishment. When inmates died, or were executed, women were made to de-flesh the heads with broken glass, the skulls then being packed into crates and shipped to the Berlin Pathological Institute (Madley 2005: 437, 454, 456).¹⁰

As Franey (2001: 220) points out, many Victorians were ambivalent towards these collecting practices, viewing them on the one hand as legitimate contributions to knowledge, and on the other as unpleasantly similar to ‘primitive’ headhunting customs. The similarities were by no means illusory: “Fundamentally speaking, then, the specimens so critical to physical anthropology are no different from trophies collected in primitive warfare: both specimen and trophy operate as legible signs of the power possessed by the man who displays them” (Franey 2001: 225–26).

Indeed, it was probably for precisely this reason that soldiers were often more than willing to assist with the collection and preparation of specimens. The emergence of a scientific fascination with skulls in Europe and North America seems to have provided an alibi for the sorts of trophy hunting some soldiers had their own reasons for wanting to carry out. So, for example, during the official enquiry into the mutilation of the body of Luka Jantje, the officer who had had the chief’s skull exhumed and boiled gave the excuse that he had intended to offer the skull to a museum “for the benefit of students of Physiology” (Shillington 1985: 240), as if his actions had been meant as a disinterested contribution to science.

Furthermore, some nineteenth-century British soldiers actually were also themselves amateur naturalists, anthropologists, or psychologists, and collected

⁹ In Australia, skulls or preserved heads of Aborigines killed in action by British forces were also sent to this museum, or to its predecessor the Hunterian Museum. See, for instance, Connor (2003: 39, 134).

¹⁰ In Europe and America, these close connections between science on the one hand and the military and judicial arms of the state on the other were well established by the nineteenth century. Anatomization (the use of bodies of executed criminals for dissection by the medical schools) was abolished as part of capital punishment in Britain only in 1832, in some of the United States much later. The skulls and other remains of those executed were often then acquired and displayed by medical museums such as that of the Royal College of Surgeons (Richardson 1987; Sappol 2002).

human remains in the name of such disciplines. One participant in the final fighting of the Eighth Frontier War, when phrenology was at the height of its popularity, recalls: “As we ascended the evidences of the fight became more frequent; rolling skulls, dislodged by those in front, came bounding down between our legs; the bones lay thick among the loose stones in the sluits and gulleys, and the bush on either side showed many a bleaching skeleton. A fine specimen of a [Xhosa] head I took the liberty of putting into my saddle-bag, and afterwards brought it home with me to Scotland, where it has been much admired by phrenologists for its fine development” (in Peires 1989: 52). Grenfell, who took the *induna*'s skull from the battlefield at Ulundi, was another such professional soldier and recreational craniologist. He was a keen amateur antiquarian, a collector and connoisseur of ancient Egyptian and other artifacts, equipped by his class background with the cultivation, refinement, and knowledge properly to appreciate such objects (Weaver 1937: 362–64).

Griffiths (1996: 12, 19, 21) has revealed the extent to which the world of nineteenth-century museum collecting was pervaded by metaphors of “prey,” “quarry,” “trophies,” and “prizes”: in other words, by the language of the hunt or chase. Hunting, evocative of vigorous masculinity to the Victorians, was an arch-metaphor for their scientific, as well as military, encounters with the non-European world (Ritvo 1987). I would suggest therefore that Victorian colonial soldiers could readily adopt the museological collecting practices of the time and transmute these into the appropriation of body parts as war trophies, because of the powerful pre-existing affinity between scientific collecting in the colonies, and colonial warfare, both of which tended to be conceptualized as varieties of an archetypally male pursuit of hunting. In both of these activities, Europeans equated African people with their continent's often-dangerous fauna, specimens of which were difficult and challenging to obtain, testing the manhood of those who sought to collect them.

Thus the question whether the skulls of African battlefield dead were collected and displayed as scientific specimens, as hunting trophies, or as war mementos may be somewhat moot, given that these distinctions may not always have been meaningful to the Victorians, for whom the similarities between these modalities of appropriating bodies seem often to have been deeper than the differences. The important point is that these remains were appropriated as a demonstration of power and conquest, the quality, value, or significance attributed to them reflecting on the prowess of their collectors and possessors, whether these individuals had acquired them as soldiers, natural scientists, or game hunters.

CONCLUSION

The use of skulls as war mementos appears to have been a recurring pattern in the British military in southern Africa throughout much of the nineteenth

century, and to have continued into the early twentieth century.¹¹ My argument is that these practices were local manifestations of certain transnational advances in science. British soldiers collected the skulls of Africans, or became involved in their collection, as part of a much wider range of educated and often cosmopolitan Europeans and North Americans with amateur or professional scientific interests in collecting the skulls of colonized peoples.

These developments in Western science had a special significance for soldiers in the colonies, offering them a means of resolving a fundamental dilemma of colonial warfare: namely, how to be both like and unlike their indigenous opponents at the same time. Though they were far from being the only Victorians to appropriate African skulls, they had distinctive reasons for doing so: these practices enabled them to reciprocate the perceived savagery of their opponents, and simultaneously maintain a distinction between themselves and savages. They could imitate their adversaries and claim at the same time that they were not doing so.

On the one hand, they could appear to support the cause of universal scientific progress and, in the same breath, show they could out-savage the particular and very tangible savages whom they were fighting on the frontiers, outdoing them at their own primitive customs and beating them on their own terms. The skull in the retired officer's cabinet of curiosities thereby attested to a truly comprehensive defeat of the chief whose skull it once was. It confirmed its collector's superiority in intellect and culture, while proving him to have been, in his time, the more successful savage as well.

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¹¹ The last case known to me in which a European colonial officer engaged in such behavior occurred in 1961 in the Congo following the murder of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. The Belgian police chief who disposed of the body showed journalists, during an interview in 1999, what he claimed were two of Lumumba's teeth and suggested that he had also kept a finger-bone (De Witte 2001: xviii, 140–43, 201).

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