AN ARCHIVIST'S ERROR? NOTES ON THE ORIGIN OF TWO FARM NAMES IN THE WESTERN CAPE

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In discussing the origin of the names Bakkeley Plaats and Vredendal, two adjacent farms in the western Cape Province, a former chief archivist wrote:

"In the 17th century the Dutch had an encounter with an unfriendly tribe of natives who had stolen cattle of another Hottentot tribe and the Europeans. The latter, to commemorate the fight, named this place Bakkeley Plaats ... Shortly after a treaty of peace was made with the natives at a place a little further on. This place they called Vredendal ..."1

Reference to the verbatim copies of the Daghregister for 17 May 1668 (one of the sources cited by Botha) reveals that on that day some Hottentots brought a letter from Saldanha Bay, sent by a corporal Bosman to Commander C. van Quaeldbergen. Bosman reported that a great number of Hottentots, called Namaquas, stole the stock of some other Cape Hottentots as well as ten head of cattle and 30 sheep belonging to the Dutch. In the ensuing fracas two or three "van de onze" ("of our men"), presumably the Company's men at the Saldanha Bay post, were wounded and three Hottentots "onder de voet leyden" (wounded or killed). The following day a letter was sent to corporal Bosman instructing him to send ten men with a wagon and merchandise to the Namaqua in an attempt to continue bartering for stock. They were, however, not to mention the stolen animals and their attitude was to be nothing but defensive, showing no hostility towards the Namaqua.2

On 25 June 1668 Bosman reported to the commander (by then Jacob Borghorst) that the party had been unable to make contact with the Namaqua, even though they had crossed the Olifants River. They had run short of provisions and had to return to Saldanha Bay.3 There is no reference to any battle in the vicinity of the Olifants River, and it seems quite clear that the stock theft and ensuing battle took place at or near Saldanha Bay.

In the second source which Graham Botha cited (the journal of Van der Stel’s Namaqualand expedition), the following excerpts are relevant:

20 September 1685: "... we came once more to the Elephants [sic] River where it flows through high and rocky hills stretching SW. After we had gone over another high sandhill we came to a flat called the Bakkeli Plaets with the river on one side and the mountains on the other, where we camped".

21 September: "After it had been reported to the Hon. Commander that there was a kraal of Hottentots in the vicinity, namely Gregriquas, three men were ordered to go there to visit them and to persuade them to come to us with their huts and cattle. But when the men came there, they had left the previous evening, out of fear that their cattle would be taken from them, because they had risen up against their captain who had been appointed by the Hon. Company ..."

23 September: "... the Hon. Commander tried to solve the dispute concerning the said Gregriquas, part of whom were gathered here, by way of many counsellings by the Hon. Commander to do so, seeing that they were a small tribe and to fight amongst one another was bad, and that other Hottentots could so much more easily rob them of their cattle. Whereupon they promised to return the cattle ... to the aforesaid Captain and furthermore to live in peace with one another".4

It seems quite clear that the Namaqua were involved in the first incident, the "Gregriquas" (formerly known as the Changiriqua) in the second. Even if it is assumed that corporal Bosman mistook the tribal identity of the 1668 raiders, it is unlikely that, seventeen years later, they would still have had the stock they stole; moreover, there is no mention of the stock stolen from the Company. Furthermore, the peace made by Simon van der Stel was among the Gregriqua, not between them and the Dutch.

The fact that the name "Bakkeli Plaets" was used without comment in 1685, suggests that by that time it was in common use. However, it does not appear in the journals of any of the earlier expeditions to the area. As far as can be ascertained, the only reference to any sort of trouble in the western parts of the Cape that could have given rise to the name appears in the journal of Frederik de Smit of the 1662-1663 expedition to the Namaqua under the leadership of Pieter Cruythoff. The party left the Olifants River on 8 December 1662 and on the night of 27 December they were attacked by people they supposed to be "Souquas" (later..."5

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1 C.G. Botha, Place names in the Cape Province ... (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1926), p. 15; the sources cited are "Journal 17.5.1668" and "Journal of Van der Stel's trip to Namaqualand 21.9.1685."

2 Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town (CA), VC 3 Verbatim Copies, Day Book 1667-1670, pp. 246-248.

3 Ibid, p. 268.


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PHOTOGRAPH: DIVISION GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH, ISMC
known as Bushmen), who severely wounded four of their men, one almost mortally. The text, however, makes it quite clear that this incident occurred considerably further north than the Olifants River, which runs through the farm Bakkeley Plaats.

A possible contributory source of the incorrect association of the Vredendal district Bakkeley Plaats with the incident of 1668 is Godée Molsbergen, who mentions it briefly and adds a footnote: “Vandaar die plaatsnaam Bakkeleyplaats.”

The guide-book to Vredendal repeats a version of the Botha story, and a local tradition is that the Hottentots killed in the battle were buried by the Dutch. This gave rise to speculation that graves on a vacant plot of land on the north bank of the Olifants River, at the junction of Vredendal’s Voortrekker Street and the Lutzville road, might be those of the Hottentots killed in the battle of Bakkeley Plaats. The stone-capped graves were oval, suggesting extended burials, and some had simple headstones, both features indicating the adoption of European burial practices. The possibility that these might be the graves of Hottentots killed in some battle was, however, dispelled during a rescue operation in 1983-1984 prior to the levelling of the plot for building purposes. Of the 45 graves excavated—about two-thirds of those that remained after the site had been disturbed by earlier quarrying operations—more than 30 were those of infants of six months or younger, the rest being those of juveniles or the aged; and there was no indication of violent death. The graves were of different types, suggesting that the burials had taken place over an extended period.

Comparison of the plans attached to the title-deeds of the two farms with modern maps tends to confirm that the burial ground was on the original Vredendal farmlands and not on those of Bakkeley Plaats, where there is said to be a similar burial ground which has not yet been investigated. The best information that can be obtained regarding the date of the burials in the Vredendal burial ground is that they took place between the initial granting of the leasehold on 30 November 1837 and, at the latest, about 1920.

There is no actual local knowledge as to who was buried in the graves, but the evidence of the graves, their contents and the physical characteristics of the human remains suggest that it was the burial place of the Vredendal farm labourers and their families.

It is concluded, therefore, that although Botha’s suggestion regarding the origin of the name Vredendal may be based on fact, there is nothing to connect the incident of 1668 with the origin of the name Bakkelke Plaats. The name does, however, indicate that a battle of some sort did take place there; and it is possible that future research might yield the facts.