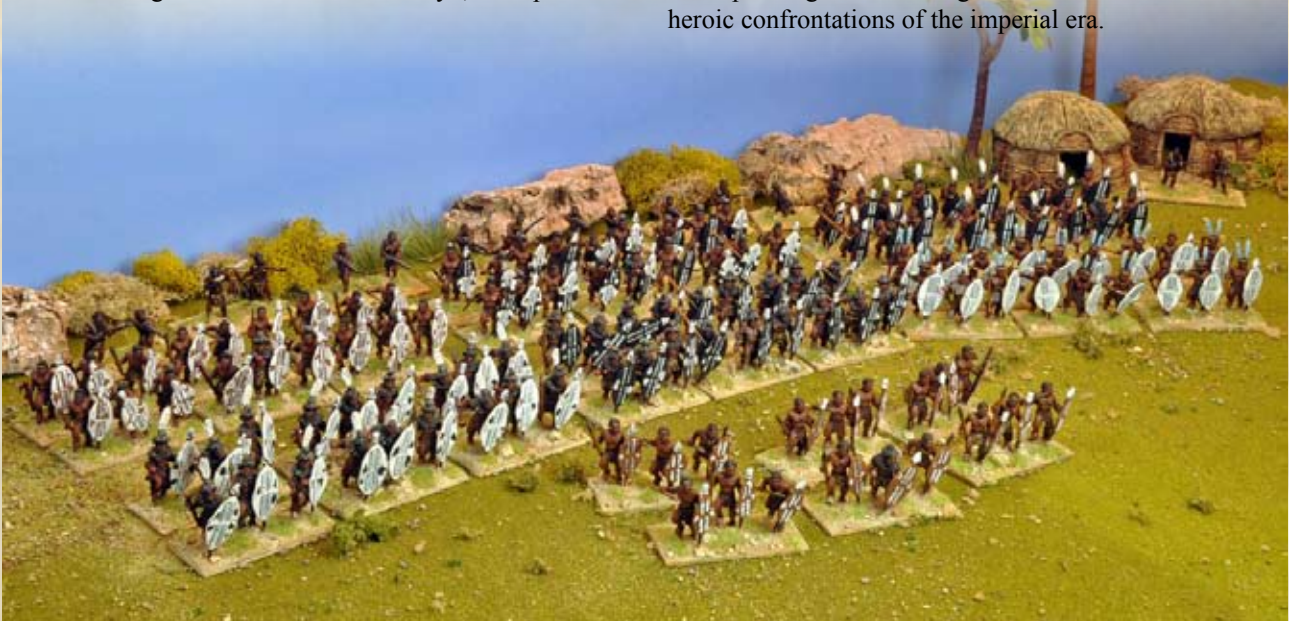


# WARGAMING WITH THE MATABELE

BY CHRIS PEERS

North Star's announcement of their new range of Matabele figures will surely be exciting news to anyone interested in wargaming 19th century Africa. In many ways Matabeleland was the archetypal "savage kingdom" of Victorian imagination. If ever the scenario beloved of fiction writers took place - the white explorer forced to grovel before a mighty African king, master of a huge fortune in gold and ivory, who demonstrated the power of life and death over his fanatically loyal warriors - then it was at the great kraal of kwaBulawayo, "the place of

killing". It was the Matabele who stood guard over the land which gave rise to so many of the legends which haunted the European imagination - Lobengula's gold, King Solomon's mines (in fact it is said to have been the adventures of the hunter F. C. Selous in Matabeleland which inspired Rider Haggard's story). And if they were not quite the equal of the formidable Zulu war machine, they retained their independence for more than a decade longer, surviving long enough in their isolation to match their spears against Maxim guns in one of the last and most heroic confrontations of the imperial era.



## THE FOUNDING OF THE KINGDOM

The Matabele saga began in 1822, when Mzilikazi of the Kumalo, a Ndwandwe clan which had been incorporated into Shaka's new Zulu kingdom, was sent to attack the Swazis. Mzilikazi succeeded in capturing a large number of Swazi cattle, but rashly decided to keep some of them instead of sending them all to Shaka. Aware that the Zulu king was not likely to look kindly on this sort of thing, he went into hiding in the hills of the Kumalo country. Eventually the Zulus found him, took him by surprise and scattered his followers, but Mzilikazi and a few hundred others escaped across the Drakensberg Mountains and onto the High Veldt of what was to become the Transvaal. Here they encountered scattered groups of Sotho, Tswana and other peoples, many of whom had already been impoverished by Nguni or Afrikaner encroachment, and whose traditional fighting methods were no match for the Zulu-style tactics introduced by the newcomers. There Mzilikazi's people continued to pursue their new vocation

of cattle rustling. They soon made themselves rich at the expense of the local Sotho and Tswana tribes, many of whose survivors were incorporated more or less willingly into their ranks in the same way as the Zulus had done to the Ndwandwe. This was the beginning of the class system which characterised their society in the second half of the century. The "amaZansi" or "those from the south", in other words the original Ndwandwe families, constituted the aristocracy. Below them came the "abeNhla" or "those from the road", who were absorbed during their time on the High Veldt. Later, when they moved north of the Limpopo River, the local Shona and Kalanga tribes were brought in under the name of "Holi". It was about this time that the name Matabele (or Ndebele) first came into use. Among the various theories about its origin, the most appealing is that it meant something like "They Disappear From Sight", referring to the way in which the warriors took cover behind their great Zulu-style shields.





## MZILIKAZI

Mzilikazi seems to have been popular with his subjects, and he ruled successfully until his death in 1868, in contrast to the fate of his contemporary Shaka. White missionaries, impatient at his refusal to let his people go to work for them, often portrayed him as a savage tyrant who ruled solely by terror, but others - like the Scottish missionary Robert Moffat, got on well with him and regarded him as intelligent and statesmanlike. Matabele tradition suggests that he was genuinely mourned as the "founder of the nation". Of course nineteenth century African ideas of government will not always appeal to modern tastes, and people were executed for witchcraft, impaled, mutilated or fed to crocodiles. And ruthless aggression against neighbouring peoples weak enough to be exploited was par for the course. Even Moffat admitted that Mzilikazi was responsible for "the desolation of many of the towns around us - the sweeping away the cattle and valuables - the butchering of the inhabitants". One of his native informants recalled "the great chief of multitudes... the chief of the blue-coloured cattle", who was so confident of his strength that he had refused to flee when the invaders approached, heralded by "the smoke of burning towns". "The onset was as the voice of lightning, and their spears as the shaking of a forest in the autumn storm. The Matabele lions raised the shout of death, and flew upon their victims... Their hissing and hollow groans told their progress among the dead... Stooping to the ground on which we stood, he took up a little dust in his hand; blowing it off, and holding out his naked palm, he added, 'That is all that remains of the great chief of the blue-coloured cattle!'" Something of this reputation remains to this day in southern Africa, where the fearsome army ants, famous for their aggressive wars against the local termites, are still known as "Matabele ants".

## AGGRESSORS

But the Matabele were not always the aggressors. The Griquas and Koranas from the south had horses and guns, and were said to be the worst cattle thieves in southern Africa (quite an achievement!) In 1831 they descended on the Matabele settlements and drove off a huge herd. They might have been surprised to encounter no resistance, but after three days riding they decided that they had got away with it. After all, the Matabele were entirely on foot and could hardly have followed them undetected across the open veldt. So on the third night the thieves had a feast and went to sleep. During the night a Matabele "impi" - which had indeed kept up with them by marching at night - surrounded them at a place now known as Moordkop, or Murder Hill. Mzilikazi got his cows back, and only three Griquas escaped with their lives.

In 1832 a Zulu "impi" or army attacked Mzilikazi's headquarters while his warriors were away on a raid. The subsequent battle was a draw, but the Matabele suffered serious losses. Knowing that the Zulus were the one people he could not intimidate, the king decided to take his people out of their reach once. First he moved them a hundred miles to the west into the Marico Valley, but in 1836 the vanguard of the Boers "Vortrekkers" began to arrive there. Like his contemporary the Zulu king Dingaan, Mzilikazi decided to strike first, but also like Dingaan he failed to finish the job. At first the Boers were taken by surprise and several of their camps were wiped out, but most of the men escaped. A Matabele "impi" of around 3,000 men attacked the now concentrated Boers at the Battle of Vegkop, but were unable to storm their wagon laager and were driven off with heavy losses. Then the Zulus and Griquas returned to the attack, and Mzilikazi realised that he could not hope to survive on the High Veldt against such a combination



of enemies. He led his people north once again, this time across the Limpopo River into the country which became known as Matabeleland, in the west of modern Zimbabwe. This was a well watered country with plenty of grazing, and had the further advantage that it was easily defensible. To the north an almost impassable forest stretched away to the Zambezi, while the south and west were protected by the rugged Matopo Hills. The main road from the south entered the country via the precipitous Mangwe Pass, which was easily defended by a regiment stationed at a nearby kraal. The only vulnerable frontier was on the east, where it bordered on the territory of the local Shona tribes. But Mzilikazi defeated the Shona, reduced them to vassalage, and enjoyed a period of relative peace until his death in 1868 (though his last fight with the Boers was as late as 1847, when he sent an "impi" back south across the Limpopo in search of more cattle). Lobengula and the Defeat of the Matabele.

Mzilikazi's favourite son Lobengula succeeded to the throne in 1870, after a brief civil war, and soon resumed his father's career of conquest. His armies campaigned in all directions, consolidating his power over the neighbouring tribes and in some areas even extending it. Among their opponents and victims in this period were the Tswana in the west, and the Barotse, Tonga and Ila beyond the Zambezi. In about 1887 the Tonga, fed up with the depredations of local Chikunda slave raiders, rashly invited Lobengula to come and help sort them out. An "impi" duly arrived and wiped out the slavers, but the Tonga had not taken the precaution of hiding their cattle, and of course the Matabele found the temptation irresistible. They went home with all the beasts they could round up in payment for their services, then over the next few years came back twice more for the rest of what they described as "our cattle which we have left among the Tonga", inflicting immense damage in the process.

But Lobengula was careful to avoid trouble with white men, and he encouraged hunters and traders (including the famous elephant hunter F. C. Selous) to visit his country. A British Resident named Captain Patterson was sent to Bulawayo in 1878. Patterson was an arrogant character who insisted on travelling wherever he liked against the king's orders; one day he and his whole party

disappeared, and it was rumoured that Lobengula had had them murdered, but nothing was ever proved, and the British, preoccupied by then with events in Zululand, took no action. Lobengula raised no objection when in 1885 Britain established a Protectorate over Bechuanaland to the west (now Botswana), which had once been a favourite Matabele raiding ground. This conciliatory attitude, as well as the remoteness of the country, enabled the Matabele to retain their independence long after the defeat of their Zulu cousins in the south. But by the late 1880s the impetus of the European "Scramble for Africa" was unstoppable.

## CECIL RHODES

In October 1888 Cecil Rhodes sent agents of his British South Africa Company to trick Lobengula into signing away the mineral rights in his kingdom. The king soon saw through this con trick, but was persuaded to allow prospectors to enter the country anyway. Then in May 1890 Rhodes revealed his true intentions, despatching a heavily armed "Pioneer Column" from Bechuanaland, consisting of about two hundred civilians with an escort of four hundred British South Africa Company and Bechuanaland Police. Avoiding a direct confrontation with Lobengula, the invaders skirted around Matabeleland proper and marched into Shona territory further north, where they built a fortified post at Fort Salisbury.

Lobengula protested, but held back from giving his "impis" the order to attack. In doing so he missed what may have been his only chance to keep his kingdom. Soon the white colonists were building more forts, establishing farms and mines, and luring young Shona and Matabele men to desert Lobengula and work for them. In 1891 Mashonaland became a British Protectorate, situated at the very point where the borders of Matabeleland were most exposed to attack. Many of the Shona welcomed the whites as protectors against their Matabele masters, and took the opportunity to thumb their noses at them from the imagined security of the new settlements. But the king was not prepared to put up with disrespect from his own "dogs", as he called the Shona. In June 1893 a rebel chief stole some Matabele cattle, an "impi" was sent across the border in pursuit. The warriors had instructions not to molest the whites, but they slaughtered many of their

NSA1010 - Chief and Izinduna







NSA1009 - Matabele Amadoda Warriors

Shona employees, burnt their kraals and took all the cattle they could find. One white settler at Fort Victoria recalled how "insolent Matabele swaggered through the streets of the town with their bloody spears and rattling shields". Just like the Matabele, the subjects of Queen Victoria were not prepared to put up with this sort of insult from what they saw as "lesser breeds". Soon the colonists were advancing into Matabeleland in force from two directions.

The southern column was mainly a diversion, and played a minor part in the fighting. The main threat came from the north-east, where two more columns, from Forts Salisbury and Victoria, rendezvoused at Iron Mine Hill and marched on Lobengula's kraal at Bulawayo. Together they numbered six hundred and ninety mounted white men with Martini Henry rifles, about four hundred Shona tribesmen on foot, two seven-pounder field guns, and eight machine guns, of which five were Maxims. There was also a steam-powered searchlight for protection against night attacks. The transport wagons were designed to be formed in Boer style into a defensive laager. To face this powerful force, Lobengula had about 12,500 warriors altogether, not counting a large force which he had sent off to the Zambezi before the crisis erupted. On 25th October 1893, at Bonko on the Shangani River, 3,500 Matabele attacked the two laagers of the north-eastern column in the early hours of the morning. Despite the demoralising effects of the searchlight and the unexpected rapid fire from the Maxims, the warriors attacked with great determination, but they were beaten off without ever reaching the wagons, with the loss of about five hundred men.

Lobengula forbade any more attacks to be made on laagered wagons, but instead ordered his "impis" to wait until the marching columns were crossing the only useable ford across the Umguza River on their way to Bulawayo. Then they should attack while the wagons were half way across, so that the whites would have no time to form them into a laager. (Is it coincidence that the Zulus had beaten the British in similar circumstances at Intombe Drift in 1879, when a column had been split by a flooded river and defeated in detail? It is interesting to speculate that some of the "indunas" with Zulu names in Lobengula's army might have been advisors employed to pass on the lessons of the Anglo-Zulu War.)

## ORDERS WERE DISOBEYED

But unfortunately for Lobengula, his orders were disobeyed. Just before noon on 1st November the eastern column stopped for lunch on top of a low hill in open country not far from the Bembesi River. The colonists seem to have thought that they were safe as long as they stayed away from the dense bush which lay a few hundred yards away, and although they formed two wagon laagers, one on either side of a small deserted kraal, they rashly sent their livestock to graze on lower ground about a mile away. Some of the men put their rifles aside and began to mend their torn clothes. But what they did not know was that 6,000 Matabele were marching parallel to them under the cover of the bush. The "impi" included two elite regiments, "Ingubo" and "Imbizo", and was well supplied with guns, including many modern breech-loading rifles. Perhaps the "indunas" in command felt that as their force was overwhelmingly superior, they were justified in disobeying orders and launching an immediate attack while the whites were vulnerable. Suddenly the young Zansi warriors of "Ingubo" and "Imbizo" burst out of cover and charged the nearest laager, five hundred yards away across open ground. They fired their guns on the move, but their shooting was inaccurate and caused few casualties, while the startled colonists raced to get their Maxims into action. This may have been the first time in history that regular soldiers charged against massed machine guns, in the open and in broad daylight. The outcome may have surprised the Matabele, but to us, with hindsight, it was inevitable. A survivor from "Imbizo" recalled that when the "sigwagwa", as they called the Maxims, opened fire "they killed such a lot of us that we were taken by surprise. The wounded and the dead lay in heaps." Nevertheless the warriors rallied and returned to the charge at least three times, advancing to within a hundred and ten yards of the laager. Sir John Willoughby, who was with the column, later said that "I cannot speak too highly of the pluck of these two regiments. I believe that no civilised army could have withstood the terrific fire they did for at most half as long." But the only result of their incredible courage and discipline was the loss of more than half their number before they finally retired.



What was worse, the rest of the Matabele army failed to support them, but fell back and allowed the column to cross the Bembesi and Umguza Rivers unopposed. Lobengula fled northwards, trying to find refuge among the Ngoni across the Zambezi, but either died on the way, probably from smallpox. Only one more battle remained to be fought - the "last stand" of the Shangani Patrol, so stirringly related recently in these pages by W. P. Bollands. But this was actually a mistake, as by now both sides were seeking to end the war. The British South Africa Company appropriated most of the best land for sale to white farmers, and confiscated most of the Matabele cattle. In 1896 the people launched a desperate rebellion in which twice as many whites were killed as in 1893. This time the Matabele abandoned their traditional tactics, and fought mainly as skirmishers with rifles. Some of them had been employed by the British as policemen, and had obviously learned to shoot. As Summers and Pagden remark in their book (see the source list at the end of this article), observing that the whites suffered eleven percent battle casualties in this campaign, twice the rate of the 1893 war, "the Matabele had become a fair marksman". But numbers eventually told against them, and after six months of fighting they were beaten, more by starvation than by military force. Matabele Warfare.

## REGIMENT

The basic military unit among the Matabele, just as in Zululand, was the "regiment" or "ibutho", commanded by an officer known as an "induna". Regiments were formed in Zulu style, by calling up all the boys in the kingdom who had reached military age since the last unit was formed, though unlike in the Zulu system Matabele regiments might occasionally be reinforced by drafts formed from the sons of the original members. The Zansi regiments were always regarded as the elite of the army, with the Enhla next in the scale and the Holi generally despised, but this social snobbery did not necessarily reflect their actual military effectiveness, and there were some very good Holi units which fought loyally even in the crisis of 1893. Rather regrettably the Matabele did not seem to go in for the splendid names sported by many of the Zulu regiments; there are no "Raisers of Dust" or "Overthrowers of Kings". But among the distinguished regiments of Lobengula's reign were:

*Ingubo, "The Blanket": Formed by Lobengula as his bodyguard, hence the name, implying that it accompanied him everywhere.*

*Imbizo, "Drafted": Also created by Lobengula, by drafting aristocratic Zansi boys from smaller regiments formed by Mzilikazi. Regarded as elite.*

*Insuga, "Stand Up": A young regiment with a very distinguished record in the war of 1893.*

*Inzimnyama, "The Black Ones": An elite Holi regiment, formed in Mzilikazi's reign. Guarded the main entry point to Matabeleland at Mangwe Pass. The name may imply that they carried black shields.*

*Inyati, "Buffalo": A favourite of Mzilikazi's, probably founded before 1840 but reinforced with younger drafts since. Inyati veterans were still guarding his grave in 1893.*

*Amahlogohlogo, "Golden Weaver Birds": Lobengula and his cousin Mtshane Kumalo both served in this unit in their youth, and the latter was commanding it in 1893. The name refers to the source of the feathers in the warriors' headdresses.*

*Zwangendaba, "Here is the News": An elite unit which rebelled against Lobengula in 1870 and was consequently destroyed. The survivors were incorporated into the evocatively named Amabugdwana, "Swimmers in Blood".*

## COLOUR OF THEIR SHIELDS

Were Matabele regiments distinguished from each other by the colour of their shields like the Zulus? Surprisingly, this is not an easy question to answer. Summers and Pagden quote David Carnegie, who was in Matabeleland in the 1880s, as saying that "The different regiments are known by the colours of the shields they carry", and observe that several white veterans of the 1893 war confirm this. "However" they continue, "the Matabele themselves do not seem to agree". According to one informant each regiment "had shields of the same shape", but not necessarily of the same colour. (Illustrations and surviving examples do show minor variations on the standard shape of the war shield, with some photographed in the 1890s being so broad in relation to their length as to be almost circular. There were also much smaller versions carried

NSA1008 - Matabele Warriors in full Regalia





by herdsmen and messengers, but these were not normally used in battle.) Instead, this informant stated, the "induna" or regimental commander distributed the hides from which the shields were made, allowing the bravest warriors first choice, "until the cowards had to take what was left". As among the Zulus, the "most honourable" colour was white, usually with a few dark markings, so presumably the favoured men took these, leaving the predominantly black or brown hides for the others. According to the same informant units in training had black shields, replaced by coloured ones when their education was completed. If this was the case each regiment would present a mixture of different colours, perhaps with the palest shields in the front rank.

A quick survey of contemporary pictures produces contradictory evidence. A watercolour by Charles Bell, dated 1835, shows a group of warriors wearing similar headdresses, which suggests that they belonged to the same regiment, but of the two shields seen face-on, one is white and the other a solid dark colour. In 1877 A. A. Anderson painted what he called "a rough but a correct sketch" of the annual "Inxwala" dance at Bulawayo, at which Lobengula inspected his troops. The warriors drawn up for review form three distinct units distinguished by the colour of the shields visible in the front rank. Of the one on the right Anderson wrote, "The black shields form one regiment and is his (ie. Lobengula's) bodyguard". This is the opposite of what we would expect, but this role was often entrusted to a young regiment in training. An oil painting, "The Battle of Mbembesi" by J. P. Macdougall, shows what is probably the "Imbizo" or "Ingubo" regiment engaging in a firefight with a South Africa Company laager; Macdougall was at the battle, so this is presumably a fairly accurate representation. Most of the Matabele are firing rifles and so have discarded their shields, but two shields are visible in close-up in the foreground. One is white with dark blotches, and the other is black. White with black spots is thought to have been the colour associated with the "Imbizo" regiment, but other elite units like Insuga seem to have carried mainly black shields.

## SHIELD PATTERNS

As any fan of the Zulus knows, the subject of shield patterns is a complicated and fascinating one; their famous Nguni cattle come in a staggering variety of colour schemes, each

with its own name - although it is unlikely that even the Zulus ever had so many beasts that they could provide the whole of every regiment with matching hides of a distinctive type from which to make their shields. The Matabele north of the Limpopo certainly did not, especially as many of their animals had been stolen from northerners like the Barotse and were more likely to be of a single fairly uniform colour - generally reddish brown. Having said all that, I prefer my units to have distinctive and fairly uniform shields. Even if this is not strictly accurate for the 1890s, they are intended to represent an army of any date from about 1870 onwards, which is a good enough excuse. The best source for Nguni cattle colours is the book by Poland & Co. cited in the source list below, but admittedly you have to be a bit sad to go as far as that. A quick and cheap substitute is the photo gallery on the website of the Nguni Cattle Breeders' Society of South Africa, at [www.ngunicattle.info](http://www.ngunicattle.info).

It is more likely that it was their distinctive headgear that was used to distinguish the regiments, but unfortunately we do not have much more data on this subject than we do on shields. The standard type was what Summers and Pagden describe as "an odd headdress like a pom-pom made from a mass of feathers stitched to a string net". The feathers were usually trimmed short, and the effect at a distance would be something like a small fur busby. Black ostrich or crow plumage was most popular, but some units wore guineafowl feathers, which are grey or black, speckled with white. Additional coloured feather decorations could be added; among those mentioned are white plumes from the wings or tail of the ostrich (as worn by the "Imbizo" regiment), the long, narrow blue-grey feathers of the crane, or the slightly shorter, dark blue or purple ones from the tail of the roller. (One such bird is still known as "Mzilikazi's roller" because of the king's liking for these feathers.) The golden weaver associated with the Amahloghlogo regiment mentioned above is quite a small bird with short feathers, so presumably its plumage formed a pompom rather than being added as extra adornments. In that case this unit's headgear would have been a striking yellow or yellowish green colour, or perhaps these feathers would just have been scattered among the usual black ones. Bell's painting mentioned above shows an elaborate arrangement of plumes and pom-poms, but he does not identify the regiment, and in any case it is unlikely that anything so

*NSA1005 - Matabele Warriors in full Regalia*







NSA1006 - Matabele Warriors in full Regalia

fragile was still being worn on campaign in Lobengula's day.

## DRESS

As far as the rest of their dress was concerned, the Matabele superficially resembled Zulus but differed in a number of respects. At least some married men retained the head rings (though they were smaller than the Zulu style and worn more towards the front of the head) and otter skin headbands, though the latter became less common as time went on. Ox-tail fringes on the arms and legs, however, remained popular. The Samango or white-throated monkey whose skin was widely used in Zulu regalia was not found in Matabeleland, though of course some warriors might still wear items which they or their fathers had brought from the south. Apparently the local vervet monkey was not much favoured, perhaps because it is a rather nondescript grey colour, and by Lobengula's time kilts were more likely to be made from spotted cat skin or jackal tails (perhaps mixed together in the same garment), or replaced in action with loincloths made of jackal or other fur. The rather scruffy looking "Matabele kilt" seen in photos from the 1890s looks as if it is made up of any old strips of fur or skin, and should probably be painted in various shades of light grey and brown. A cape made of ostrich feathers or jackal fur might be worn around the shoulders, but this item was probably reserved mainly for ceremonial occasions. Lobengula himself and his senior "indunas" were sometimes depicted wearing leopard skin cloaks. Holi regiments would perhaps be more likely to take the field in basic outfits consisting just of loincloths and headdresses and I have a couple of such units made up of Mark Copplestone's Watuta figures, just for variety. Based on a similar survey of sketches made between the 1830s and the 1870s, Summers and Pagden argue that when the Matabele began their migration to the north in the 1820s they were equipped like Shaka's "impis" with a single stabbing assegai (known to the Matabele as "isika"), and that the "isijula" or throwing spear was probably reinstated after Mzilikazi's death in 1868 by his successor Lobengula. However Afrikaner accounts of the Battle of Vegkop in 1836 describe spears being thrown into the laager, so missile weapons may actually have reappeared at about the same time as Dingaan reintroduced

them in the Zulu army. Alongside them, late 19th century Matabele warriors carried an odd assortment of spears of various origins, including hunting and fishing weapons taken from enemy tribes. Zulu-style knobkerries were also in use, and a few illustrations from the 1890s show Sotho or Shona type battle-axes. Matabele veterans denied that the latter were used in battle, but it is possible that some of the Holi may have carried them unofficially. Interestingly, the "isika", in contrast to Zulu practice, were the property of the king rather than of the individual warriors. The aim of Matabele tactics, like those of the Zulus, was always ultimately to get to close quarters and stab the enemy, and once this happened few opponents could resist for long. Moffat's informant quoted above refers to the "clash of shields", and the "hissing and hollow groans" which served the Matabele for a war cry as they carved their way through the enemy ranks.







## GUNS

They did not despise guns, though, and the new weapons became increasingly common in the second half of the nineteenth century. At first they were the usual African trade muskets, cheap muzzle-loaders and worn out elephant guns, but by the 1890s modern rifles were being imported in large quantities. In 1889 the infamous "Rudd Concession", one of several attempts by the white men to con Lobengula out of his kingdom, promised him 1,000 Martini Henrys and 100,000 rounds of ammunition, and most of this seems to have been delivered. In fact in the war of 1893 the Matabele possessed more breechloaders than their white opponents. But firearms never displaced spears as the main fighting arm, and were seldom employed very effectively. F. C. Selous visited Lobengula not long after the battle which brought him to power in 1870, and was told by a hunter named Philips, who had treated the wounded after the battle, that although both sides possessed large numbers of muskets nearly all the wounds were caused by spears, mostly at very close quarters: "In many instances he found two men lying dead together, each with the other's assegai through his heart." In 1893 the war correspondent C. L. Norris- Newman concluded that the Matabele were still poor shots, but were "much more dangerous" with the assegai.

## DECLINE

It is often argued that the Matabele had declined in various ways from the high standards which existed in Zululand. Their dress uniforms were less elaborate, their shields less carefully made, and their stabbing assegais had smaller blades (in fact these were often old Zulu ones which had been repeatedly resharpened). Norris-Newman, who had been in the Zulu War of 1879 as well as the Matabele campaign of 1893, thought that overall they were "not as brave" as the Zulus. Nevertheless their neighbours

continued to regard them with a mixture of awe and terror, and under Lobengula the warriors' training regime could still be extremely tough. In the 1870s the explorer Emil Holub collected accounts of the training regime of the Matabele armies, and claimed that although high class "Zansi" boys were raised in rather leisurely fashion in their fathers' kraals, perhaps relying on their natural sense of social superiority to motivate them in battle, the training of prisoners of war and other non-Matabele recruits was far more rigorous. On one occasion only one hundred and seventeen out of a hundred and sixty recruits survived the training period. This is not surprising if some of the more lurid stories are true. Holub says that, apart from fatigues, route marches and mock fights with clubs, one task involved killing a wild hyaena with a stick. A former Shona captive quoted by Summers and Pagden adds that groups of young warriors would be sent to kill buffalos with clubs, and even to tackle lions bare-handed. Selous remarked that the man-eating lions which plagued other parts of the continent were almost unknown in Matabeleland, where the lions were scared of the people rather the other way around! In this context the story told by the elephant hunter William Finaughty, of Mzilikazi ordering one of his regiments to haul a man-eating crocodile out of a river and bring it to him alive, can be seen not as the whim of a capricious tyrant, but as part of a consistent policy of accustoming young warriors to hardship and bloodshed. The deliberate brutalisation of young captives and conscripts has chilling parallels to the use of child soldiers in Africa today. The Legend.

## FALL OF THE KINGDOM

After the fall of the Matabele kingdom all sorts of romantic legends circulated about the whereabouts of Lobengula's supposed hoard of gold and diamonds. According to the best known tale, the king had ordered every man who went to work in the South African mines to steal a diamond or



a nugget of gold and bring it home with him as tribute. The treasure was locked away in two steel safes purchased from the white men. In 1893, when he realised that defeat was imminent, Lobengula ordered the safes to be taken from Bulawayo by ox cart and hidden in a secret cave in the hills. Apart from the king himself, the only people who knew exactly where it was were the men who had hidden it, and they were all killed on Lobengula's orders by an "impi" stationed at the bottom of the hill. Then, because these men still had at least a vague idea of the location, they too were massacred on their return to the capital. Many years later a white treasure-hunter located a survivor, a very old "induna" who had somehow escaped the slaughter, but, the story goes, he was by then too senile to remember where he had been! Of course the whole tale is full of holes. How easy was it to steal from the mines in the first place, and how many Matabele would not have simply stayed where they were with their loot? And could Lobengula really afford to murder his own soldiers wholesale while he was facing a life and death struggle for his country? In reality he had once had a fair bit of cash, but had spent the bulk of it on guns, some was lost when the whites burnt his kraal at Bulawayo, and most of the rest was offered as a bribe to stop the whites pursuing him after the Battle of Bembesi, and promptly stolen by a couple of BSAC troopers. So by the time he would have been thinking about hiding his safes they were probably already empty. All the same, as wargamers we need not let the facts spoil a good story, and the search for this treasure would be an ideal scenario for a roleplaying or skirmish game.



## NORTH STARS MATABELE

Just as exciting as the arrival of North Star's Matabele figures is the announcement that they are beginning to release a range of British South Africa Police (eventually, I understand, to include mounted versions, plus wagons for the inevitable "attack on a laager" scenarios). But of course the Matabele spent most of their time fighting against various fellow Africans, of whom the Tswana, Ila, Ngoni, Chikunda and Barotse are all covered in the "Death in the Dark Continent" army lists. For the Tsonga, and the Shona who remained outside Matabele control, use the Generic Villager list. The Tswana were equipped rather like the Sotho (or Basutos) further south, many of them armed with muskets and riding horses; naturally they had the advantage over the Matabele in open country, but suffered some severe defeats when they allowed themselves to be caught in the bush or trapped against a lake or other obstacle. The Ngoni fought in a similar style to the Matabele, but were generally less well disciplined and never got the hang of guns. The Barotse had once been ruled by the Kololo, another group of warlike refugees from the Zulus, and still fought with Zulu-style shields and throwing assegais, though they seem to have preferred knobkerries to the stabbing version. Their warriors were usually outclassed by the Matabele, but they had acquired plenty of guns, which helped to even the odds. They sometimes joined with the Tswana in a formidable "trans-Zambezi alliance". The Ila were cattle herders who specialised in skirmishing on foot with spears; they were no match for the Matabele in a stand-up fight, but excelled at ambushes and destroyed several exploring expeditions over the years.

Altogether, then, a Matabele army provides countless opportunities for colonial and intertribal battles. Far more than just a poor man's Zulu, its combination of warrior ferocity with Zulu-style discipline and reasonable firepower should make it a deadly opponent as well as a distinctive looking army on the wargames table.

## SOME USEFUL SOURCES

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