

KING DINGANE

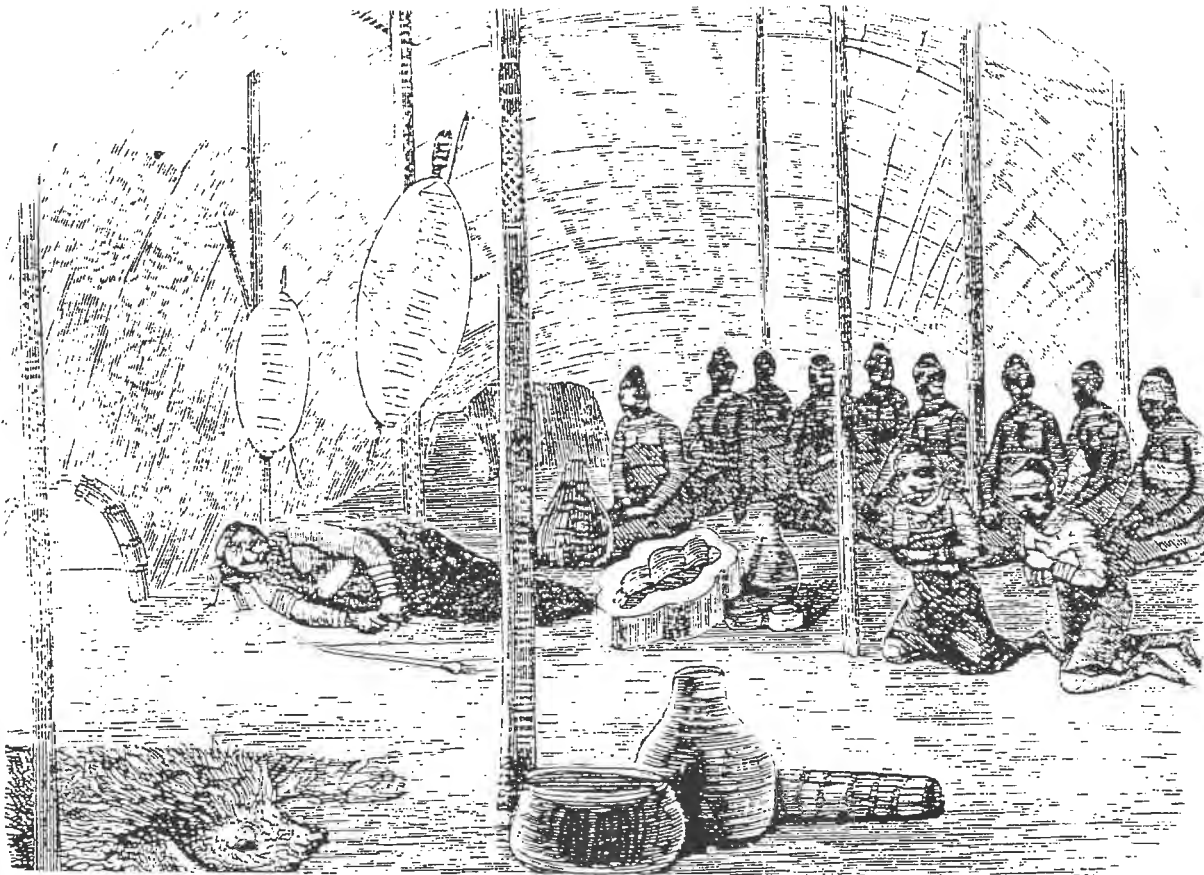
Dingane, the second Zulu king, is undoubtedly the least popular of the entire line of monarchs because, as the Zulu say, 'he killed all the children of his father, Senzangakhona'. Only Mpande was spared. Dingane was the archetypal regicide, an assassin and a murderer. His eleven-year reign was violent, bloody and, finally, disastrous for his people. With few exceptions, most historians and writers assail King Dingane's 'treachery' and ruthlessness when he gave the order to kill the defenceless and unsuspecting Piet Retief and his party in 1838. Dingane has been more vilified by critics than even King Shaka, for he was equal to, or surpassed Shaka for acts of 'savagery' and 'cruelty'. Yet he possessed none of his brother's genius, sagacity or vision. Dingane has thus emerged in the popular mind as the number one 'ogre' in the Zulu dynasty. But history's judgement may have been a touch harsh.

If King Shaka's personality stands accused of being 'flawed', then Dingane's 'acute paranoia' can be more legitimately substantiated. And with good reason. After all, he had ascended the throne over his dead brother's body, leaving the assassin fearful that he, too, might one day have an assegai thrust into his vitals by an assailant. Dingane was therefore a most insecure monarch who felt constantly compelled to assert his legitimacy in the eyes of his subjects — by reward, if possible, and by force, if necessary. He relied increasingly on the latter and had scores of opponents, real or imagined, executed along with their families and retainers. There were many in the kingdom who had been devoted to Shaka and looked for opportunities to overthrow or weaken an evil usurper. As if internal dissension was not enough, Dingane was the first Zulu king to collide violently with a genuine white menace to Zulu sovereignty when the Boers invaded the Natal

region in 1838. Dingane's panicked response was one of blind fury and brute force — devoid of any diplomacy or political skill.

Dingane was born around 1788 or 1789. His mother was Mpikase, a younger and more junior wife of Chief Senzangakhona.² Dingane was three years younger than his half-brother Shaka, and during their childhood they lived at separate homesteads with their mothers. When Senzangakhona died in 1816 Dingane entertained ambitions of becoming chief of the Zulu. He accordingly returned to Senzangakhona's *umuzi* from a stay with the neighbouring Qwabe, shocked to find that Shaka had turned up and assumed the chieftainship. Dingane quickly abandoned any idea of disputing the matter with Shaka and promptly pledged his allegiance. Shaka received Dingane magnanimously and later made him a district chief north of the White Umfolozi River.³

Dingane's motives for plotting Shaka's assassination are not entirely clear, although he had revealed his ambitions for power upon his father's death in 1816. He may have resented his brother's fame and military prowess, or perhaps he felt that he would never be secure as long as his half-brother had the power to execute or punish him at will. Thus, in July or August 1828, Dingane conspired with another half-brother, Mhlangana, and Shaka's chief servant, Mbopa, to kill the king while he was alone at Dukuza. As one story has it, Mbopa had heard an *isigodlo* girl tell of a dream Shaka had had in which Shaka claimed that he was dead and Mbopa was serving a new king. The conspirators decided to kill him that day — 28 September 1828. Dingane was the first to attack and sink his assegai into the king's side, followed by Mhlangana and later Mbopa. (For details of Shaka's assassination,



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The interior of King Dingane's royal hut. The king is lying down while the *izigodlo* kneel in obedience

see chapter on Shaka.) Dingane moved swiftly to eradicate his immediate opposition. He conspired with Mbopa to murder Mhlangana early one morning in October.⁴

Dingane and his conspirators had chosen a propitious moment to kill Shaka, who was alone and relatively unguarded, having sent the bulk of the Zulu army against Soshangane.⁵ Two weeks after Shaka's assassination a half-starved Zulu army stumbled into Dukuza from their unsuccessful Balule expedition, having been repelled by the military genius of Soshangane. The army was so weary and demoralised by Shaka's constant military campaigns, that they acquiesced to Dingane's rule and acknowledged him as king.⁶ Dingane further curried their favour by promising the nation that the 'assegai would be replaced by the dancing stick'. He allowed the warriors to return to their homes to rest and shortly afterwards released several long-serving regiments from military duty and allowed them to don the headring and take wives.⁷

King Dingane did not wish to live at Shaka's royal *umuzi* at Dukuza so he established his own further north at Umgungundhlovu in 1828. Umgungundhlovu, 'the enclosure of the elephant (the king)' was to remain the capital of the Zulu Kingdom for ten years and comprised some 800 huts housing three to four thousand inhabitants.⁸ The king lived in the largest hut — a spacious woven beehive structure, the roof of which was supported by six large poles. Initially Dingane saw no need to have an extensive *isigodlo* of women. However, his *izinkulu* advised him to establish an *isigodlo* as a symbol of royal tradition and status. Dingane acted accordingly and gathered some 400 women into his harem. He often danced and was in turn entertained by his women but, like King Shaka, he seems to have remained largely inactive sexually, expressing the view that he wanted to sire no male children who might one day plot to take the throne from him.

King Dingane was extremely sensitive to the fact that he had succeeded the founder of the Zulu Kingdom and, in a sense, lived in the shadow of his late brother's illustrious reputation. He appeared to have had an inferiority complex about his brother. He lacked Shaka's noble bearing and tall, well-proportioned physique, being instead shorter, stockier and darker in complexion. Dingane was most self-conscious of his short teeth and, when amused, would only grunt in mirth rather than laugh aloud for fear of embarrassment. But he had little enough time to dwell on his imperfections as he had to turn his attention to the brewing crises facing him. In the tradition of so many authoritarian rulers with shaky claims to legitimate power, King Dingane embarked upon his own version of the 'big lie' to discredit and tarnish the legacy and memory of a fallen rival. His propaganda hatchet job yielded fruit, for Dingane's derogatory version of King Shaka's personality and childhood was reproduced by Fynn and Isaacs in their sensationalised diaries and travelogues containing some fictitious and distorted accounts of Shaka's supposed illegitimate birth, wanton savagery and tyrannical rule — much to the lasting and wrongful defamation of King Shaka's character and place in history.

King Dingane faced many challenges to his authority during his turbulent reign — none more perplexing than the handful of British traders clustered around Port Natal. He was suspicious of their motives, yet he was intent on acquiring their trade goods, especially guns. So he tolerated the English presence until they began to provide refuge for the many Zulu fleeing from his rule.

When the traders first settled at Port Natal in 1824, the entire region was temporarily depopulated, except for 300 odd destitute members of the Amatuli chiefdom who lived on the Bluff. By 1831 the African population had reached a figure estimated at between two and three thousand. During Shaka's rule the vast majority of refugees comprised elements not incorporated within the Zulu Kingdom.¹⁰ After Shaka's assassination, Dingane's efforts to legitimise his rule met with resistance which the Zulu king attempted to eradicate through execution and confiscation of property. This internal dissension within the Zulu Kingdom forced opponents of Dingane to flee for refuge to Port Natal, which by this time was recognised as a sanctuary.

Dingane meted out severe punishment to those seeking to challenge him. Remnants of these rebellious chiefdoms, namely the Qwabe, Cele and Qadi, sought refuge with the traders. The rise of a potentially subversive Zulu community under protection of the white traders presented Dingane with a growing threat to the authority of the Zulu state.¹¹



Courtesy of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Captain Allen Francis Gardiner (RN), the first missionary at Port Natal and author of *Narrative of A Journey to the Zoolo Country in South Africa*

The first rift in relations developed in 1831 as a result of John Cane's unsuccessful diplomatic mission to the Cape Colony on behalf of Dingane, who wished to open friendly communications with the British government. Cane's efforts were sabotaged by two factors: first, British officials rebuffed Dingane's sincere overtures; second, Dingane confiscated Cane's cattle as punishment on the advice of his Khoi interpreter, Jacob, who spread unsubstantiated rumours about Cane's support of a British plan for the invasion of Zululand. Fed by rumours from the refugees that all the whites were to be liquidated, Fynn fled southwards to the Illovu River, while the remaining whites hid in the surrounding bush for safety. The traders returned to Port Natal several months later on King Dingane's assurance that no harm would come to them.¹²

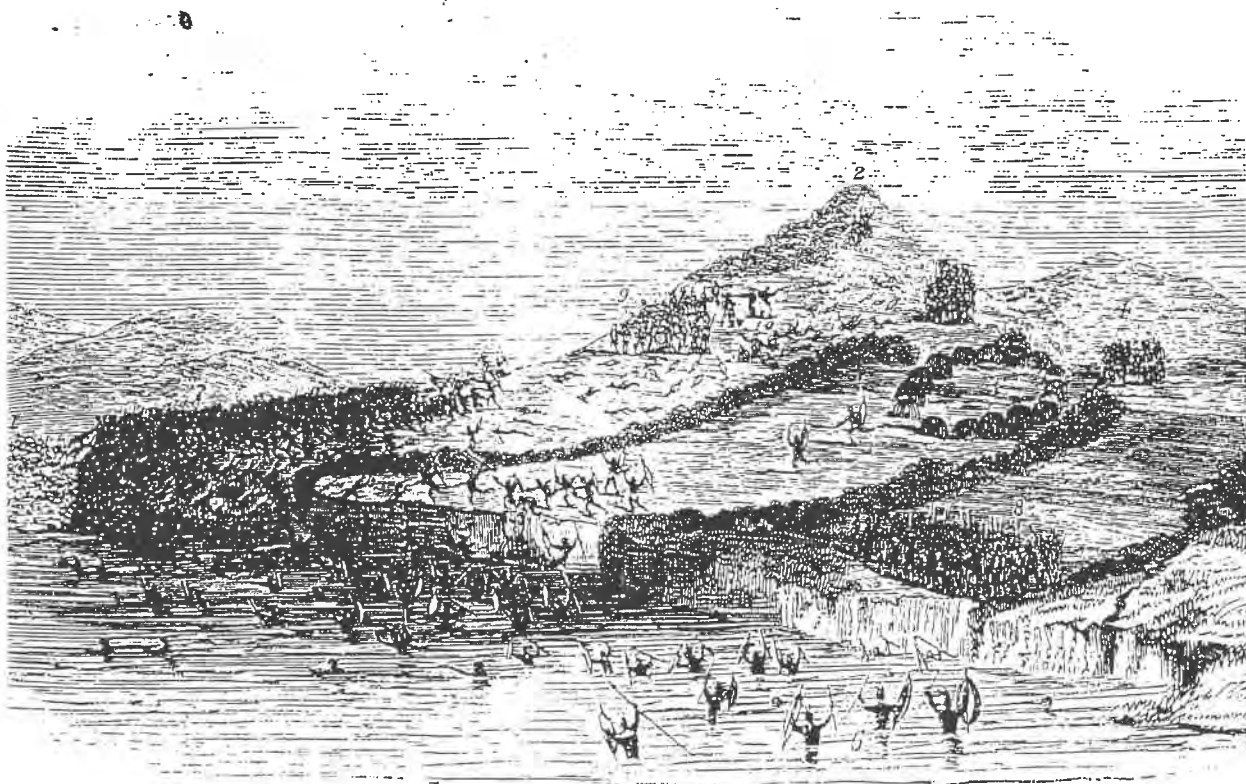
In 1833 a second and more serious incident occurred when a Zulu expedition, returning via Port Natal from an unsuccessful raid to recover stolen cattle, came to blows with the traders and their wards. Once again the refugees had circulated an unsubstantiated rumour that several departing traders had been killed by the Zulu *impi*. John Cane's clients reacted to the news by attacking and killing 200 unresisting members of the

Zulu army. 'Convinced that Dingane would seek revenge by an attack on the settlement, the British traders quickly abandoned the port and fled to Pondoland. Another trader, Henry Ogle, eventually returned to Natal whereupon he visited Dingane's headquarters and received assurances that the traders were free to return.'¹³

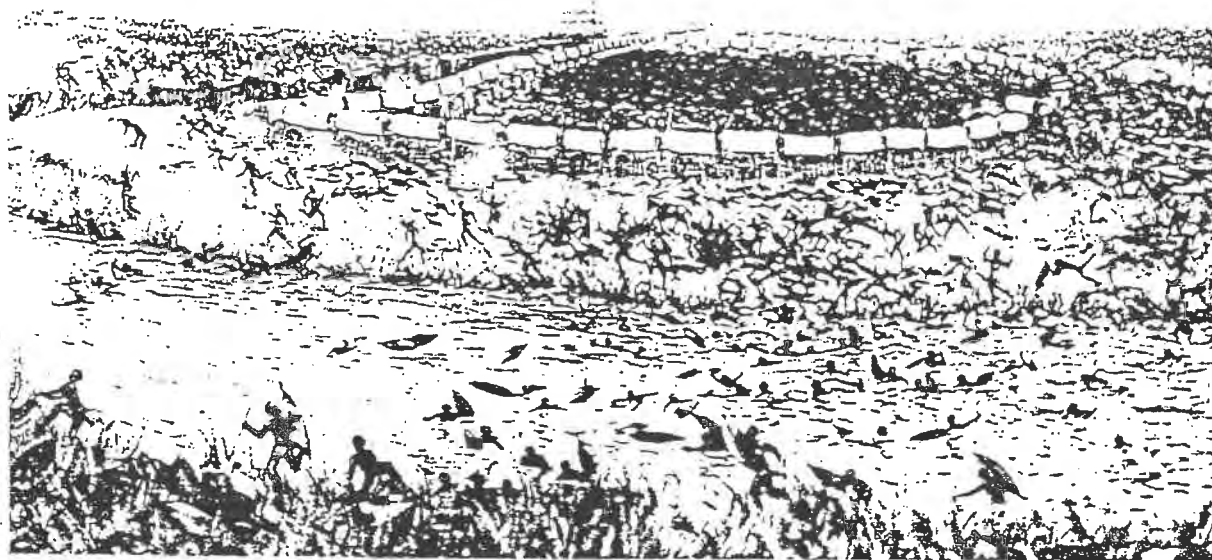
King Dingane was clearly in a dilemma as to what course to adopt towards the traders and their black wards. Like Shaka before him he coveted the trade goods brought into Zululand, but the Zulu exiles at the port, while not a direct threat to the king's exercise of power, nevertheless undermined his position at court by their very existence. As early as 1833 Dingane's chiefs had begun to resent the sanctuary given to the Zulu refugees by the British traders and had, in fact, begun to urge the king to send an army into Natal to exterminate all the Zulu exiles there.¹⁴ For the first eight years of his reign, Dingane tolerated the exiles at Port Natal, but by 1835 he had decided that more persuasive methods must be applied to the British traders to halt the increasing flow of Zulu deserters.

The immediate cause of King Dingane's aggressive posture is not certain, but the defection of an entire

The battle of the Thukela at which eighteen Port Natal hunters and mercenaries and around 1 500 of their African followers were defeated by a Zulu army of 12 000 in April 1838



Courtesy S b Baurquin, Durban



Courtesy Kille Campbell Museum, Durban

The Zulu army assaulting the impregnable Boer laager during the Battle of Blood River on 16 December 1838

Zulu regiment to Natal in the latter part of 1834 may have provided the impetus.¹⁵ By April 1835 Dingane's threats against the port had reached such alarming proportions that 'self-interest compelled the traders to come to grips with the problem of Zulu escapees'. The arrival of the missionary, Allen Gardiner, in February 1835 provided a temporary solution to the political impasse. A threatened Zulu invasion of the port prompted the traders to induce Gardiner to go to Zululand and negotiate terms with Dingane. This the missionary succeeded in doing, and in June 1835 the king agreed to respect the lives and property of those residing at the port, provided all Zulu escapees were returned to Zululand in future.¹⁶

For a brief three-month period both parties honoured the treaty. Anxious to ingratiate himself with Dingane so that he could begin mission work in Zululand, Gardiner took an active role in returning fugitives with the aid of the traders — notably James Collis. Dingane made no further threats against Port Natal for he was obviously pleased with Gardiner's efforts in solving the problem of escapees.¹⁷ However, at the end of June 1835, two white traders violated the treaty by encouraging Zulu, especially young women, to renounce their allegiance and move to the port.

King Dingane retaliated against the traders' viola-

tions by prohibiting all trade between Zululand and Port Natal and, with the exception of Gardiner, refused to permit any European from crossing the Thukela River boundary. That the Zulu king did not attack the port is attributable to the fact that all the traders and many of their clients possessed firearms.¹⁸

Relations between the traders and King Dingane were not entirely beyond reconciliation after the breakdown of the treaty. Tension eased somewhat when the traders agreed to assist Dingane's army in recovering cattle from the Swazi king, Sobhuza. Commercial relations were re-established as a result of the traders' invaluable assistance in this campaign. The upshot was that Dingane now demanded muskets and powder in exchange for ivory, hides and cattle. For a short time the traders willingly supplied him with firearms because of the outrageous profits to be made. Dingane's insatiable desire for guns arose out of the fear of a rumoured white invasion advancing from the Cape Colony. However, a permanent breakdown in trader/Zulu relations came about in 1837 when asylum was once again offered to escapees; shortly thereafter, sales of firearms were discontinued out of fear that Dingane would use them against the traders.¹⁹

The arrival in Natal of the first contingent of Boer

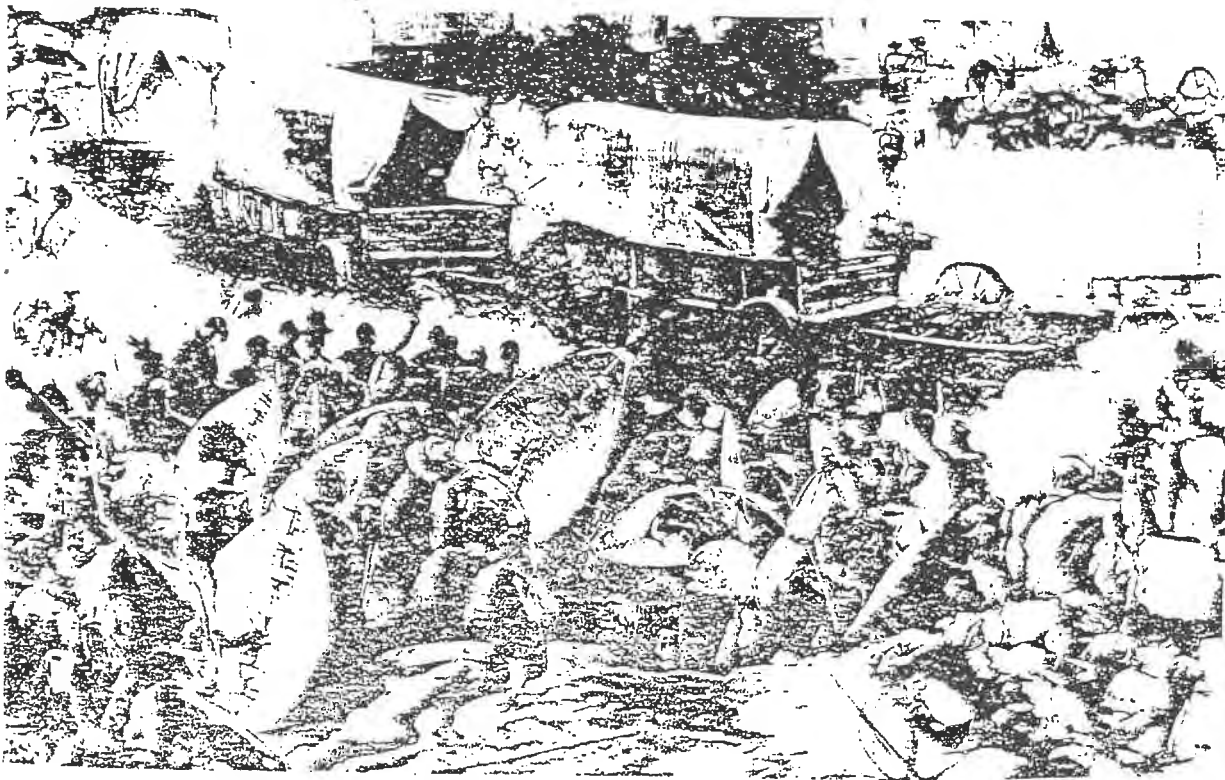
settlers in 1838 under the leadership of Piet Retief and Gerrit Maritz inspired the English traders to adopt measures that would release them from the economic and political stranglehold of King Dingane. In June 1837 news of the impending Boer move to Natal prompted the English traders to consider aligning themselves with Retief. Not expecting any immediate establishment of British rule, the traders announced, "When the Boers arrive we intend to form an internal government of our own ... and we have no doubt that everything will then go smoothly."²⁰ How mistaken they were!

However perturbed Dingane had grown with the traders over the issue of Zulu refugees, he had tolerated their presence out of a fear of firearms and in the forlorn hope of obtaining guns to bolster his military power. The trekkers constituted a much more serious threat to continued Zulu hegemony over Natal. The thirty odd traders and their retainers could be effectively restricted to the port vicinity, whereas the numerous Boer pastoralists demanded large tracts of land clearly regarded by the Zulu as their territory. Dingane's reaction to the Boer invasion was to kill

their leadership and launch a swift surprise attack on the trekker encampments: the king's strategy was to inflict such a severe defeat as to force their withdrawal from Natal.²¹

Accordingly, Dingane met Retief and six Boer representatives at the royal *umuzi* at Umgungundhlovu on 6 November 1837. After five days of ceremonies and discussions the Zulu king promised Retief the so-called 'vacant' lands of Natal if the Boers would recover 300 head of cattle stolen by the brigand Blatokla chief, Sikonyela. Retief secured the cattle and rode triumphantly into Umgungundhlovu early in February 1838. King Dingane accepted the cattle and, on 4 February, affixed his mark to a document that reputedly ceded the territory known as Natal — from the Drakensberg to the ocean as well as all the land between the Thukela and Umzimvubu Rivers in the north and south respectively.

Dingane was fearful of Retief's commando of sixty-nine mounted riflemen who put on a dazzling display of mobility and marksmanship for the Zulu court. The king was further frightened when his bodyguards observed several Boers prowling around his hut in the



Courtesy of the British Library, London