

ANGLO-GEORGIAN EXPEDITION TO NOKALAKEVI:

Interim report on excavations in July 2008



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.0.1 This document is an interim report of the results of the excavation undertaken at Nokalakevi in the 2008 season. A comprehensive report covering all the work undertaken since 2001 will be produced in the near future.
- 1.0.2 The fieldwork was undertaken in accordance with Georgian state legislation regarding excavation within ancient monuments and the relevant permissions were sought from and granted by the Georgian Ministry of Culture.
- 1.0.3 All aspects of the fieldwork complied with the Standards and Guidance, and Codes of Conduct of the UK 'Institute for Archaeologists'.

1.1 Site Background and Location

- 1.1.1 Nokalakevi (which translates roughly as 'ruins where once a town was') is located in the west of Georgia in the province of Samegrelo, 15.5km north of Senaki. It sits in a loop of the River Tekhuri at the edge of the Colchian plain with hills on its northern and western perimeters (Figure 1). The site consists of an upper citadel atop a high hill and a lower town on the river terrace below, linked by strongly fortified walls.
- 1.1.2 Since the turn of the millennium, AGEN has focused on two areas within the walls (Figure 1). Trench A lies adjacent to the eastern fortification wall of the lower town, just north of the east gate. Work has been ongoing in this trench since 2001 and it was expanded to its current size (10m east-west by 13m north-south) in 2004. Work to bring all parts of Trench A back into phase was completed in 2006 and we have now reached some rich cultural layers in which lie the foundations of multi-phased Hellenistic walls. Trench B, located some 60m to the west of Trench A, was opened in 2002 and measures 7.5m east-west by 20m north-south. Excavation in Trench B was suspended following the 2005 field season to allow efforts to be concentrated on Trench A.

1.2 2008 Field Season

- 1.2.1 The staff and volunteers arrived in Nokalakevi on Saturday 7th July 2008. Work began on Monday 9th July with the reopening of Trench A for the season's excavation. Protective layers of plastic and backfill from the end of the 2007 season were removed from the base of the trench. Excavation took place between Monday 9th July and Monday 28th July 2008.
- 1.2.2 The expedition staff, led by Professor Dr David Lomitashvili (head of the expedition) and Ian Colvin, consisted of twelve specialists in total. The Georgian staff was composed of Dr Besik Lortkipanidze (historian), Dr Nino

Kebuladze (finds conservator), Dr Maka Bokeria (palaeobotanist), Niko Murgulia (site supervisor), Natia Dzigua (finds conservator) and Vaniko Kenia (GIS). The British team consisted of Dr Paul Everill and Ben Neil (co-directors of AGEN), Kathryn Grant and Chris Russel (site supervisors), Dr Jane Timby (pottery specialist) and Dr Rebecca Cassidy (ethnographer).

- 1.2.3 Other Georgian participants were: Giorgi Avtandilishvili, Ano Tvaradze, Salome Jamburia, Nino Chkhartishvili, Shorena Khetsuriani, Giorgi Lomitashvili, Misho Darjania, Elene Kenia, Ani Meunargia, Giorgi Meurmashvili, Lali Tsomaia.
- 1.2.4 Our British volunteers were: Holly Brown (Bradford University), Carol Colvin, Lydia Critchley (Bradford University), David Crowther (Bradford University), Joshua Horrocks (Bradford University), Luke Kane (Bradford University), Nicole Leckey (Bradford University), Harry Robson (Bradford University), Nikki Snape (Bradford University), and James Tuohy (Bradford University).
- 1.2.5 International participants were: Tomek Borowski (Durham University), Jonathan Croese (Leiden University), and Belinda van Roeden (Leiden University).
- 1.2.6 Thanks are due to them all for their enthusiasm, dedication and professionalism.



Figure 1: Plan of Nokalakevi showing location of Trench A by the East Gate (drawn by P Everill)

2.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 A Brief History of Excavations at Nokalakevi

2.1.1 For a fuller discussion of the history of Nokalakevi and the study of Nokalakevi please see Armour and Colvin (2004).

2.1.2 Modern study of Nokalakevi can be traced back to 1833 when the Swiss philologist Frédéric Dubois Du Montpéreux proposed the site as Aia, the capital of Homeric Colchis in the Argonautic myths, and Archaeopolis, the capital of late antique Lazika mentioned by the *Novels* of the Emperor Justinian, and by Byzantine historians and chroniclers.

2.1.3 The joint German-Georgian expedition led by Dr Alfons M. Schneider of the German Archaeological Institute in Istanbul attempted the first Archaeological excavations at the site in the winter of 1930-31. Schneider's results were published in the German periodical *Forschungen und Fortschritte* in September 1931 and confirmed the identification of the site with Archaeopolis.

2.1.4 In 1973 the S. Janashia Museum of History established a large and well-equipped expedition to excavate and conserve the historical monument at Nokalakevi. This continued until the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 when political upheavals led to considerable disruption and the end of large scale works at Nokalakevi. Three volumes of results were published, edited by P. Zakaraia (1981, 1989, & 1993).

2.1.5 The current excavations at the site began in 2001 with the establishment of the joint Anglo-Georgian expedition to Nokalakevi.

2.2 Summary of Recent Results for Trench A

2.2.1 A comprehensive account of past seasons excavation results was provided in previous reports (Armour and Colvin 2004, Everill and Ginns 2005, Neil 2006, Everill 2007). The following summarised points are pertinent to this year's results:

- In 2006 a line of stones (context 187) was exposed towards the centre of the trench, which was thought to be part of a building/structure.
- After this area was fully revealed and investigated in 2007, subsequent lines of walls were exposed, confirming that these archaeological remains represented a complex sequence of Hellenistic structures.
- Further excavation of the area in 2007 made it possible to formulate ideas about the types of structure and the building materials used. The walls appear to have been constructed on top of a foundation of large

limestone blocks, which was perhaps laid onto the ground surface as there is no evidence for a foundation cut. These blocks were overlain by a horizontal wooden sill consisting of one or more beams, into which were fixed upright posts measuring c.100mm in diameter. Evidence for these posts was recovered as charcoal both in Trench A and within a comparable structure in nearby Trench B in 2005. Impressions of wattle within pieces of burnt daub in both trenches give further, clear indications that these walls were predominantly of a clay and timber construction.

- No archaeological evidence for roofing material was found in these Hellenistic period contexts, (contrary to the great number of tiles excavated from the later Roman contexts) however buildings of a wattle and daub/ clay and timber construction are likely to have been thatched so this is not surprising.
- First exposed in 2003 and more thoroughly in 2006 and 2007, a line of unbonded limestone boulders (context 187) was uncovered measuring approximately 6m from east to west with a return to the north (at the western end) that extends for 1m. At the northern end of this return a large tapered post-pit [219] was revealed and directly east of this a further post-pit [224] was also uncovered. It seems likely that [219] once held a door post for the entrance to the building. These separate contexts were recorded together as parts of Structure 1.
- Structure 2 was made up of a line of unbonded limestone boulders (context 212) on an east-west alignment (4.5m long) with a return at the western end extending for 1m to the south. The east-west element of this structure is almost parallel to the east-west section of Structure 1.
- The earliest structure thus far (Structure 3) is a roughly square structure consisting of a line of unbonded limestone boulders. It was approximately 2.5m square, with the suggestion that there may have been an entrance at the northwest corner. It lay underneath Structure 2, and about half a metre south of Structure 1 on the same orientation as the other buildings. Structure 3 was sealed by a substantial deposit of burnt material (216) – predominantly daub.
- This burnt deposit (216) was excavated in 2007 and has provided a valuable insight into life during the Hellenistic period at Nokalakevi-Tsikhegoji. The sieving and flotation of soil samples in that year produced a wide range of carbonised seeds, including wild and domesticated grape (*vitis vinifera*, *vitis sylvestris*), wheat (*triticum sp.*), pea (*pisum sativum*), rowan (*sorbus sp.*) and black walnut (*juglans*

regia). Samples of charcoal were also taken from this deposit and submitted for radiocarbon dating at Beijing University.

- A total of eight burials were excavated in 2007, of which two infants and one neonate were placed within amphorae . A fourth such burial – an individual in early childhood within a *dergi* – was found and excavated in 2006. In 2007 a flexed female adult was among the eight inhumations excavated. It had been placed in an east-west grave cut and was adorned with an array of jewellery items (two copper bracelets, at least one and possibly two earrings two bead necklaces, a pin, a coin and a folded lead seal). Two pottery vessels had also been placed as grave goods next to the skull. It was very similar to a flexed burial excavated in Trench A in 2003. These well-furnished burials, plus those within the amphorae and the cremated remains excavated, appear to be part of the Hellenistic period necropolis identified by earlier excavations that extends east of the late Roman fortifications.

2.3 Aims and Objectives for NOK 08

2.3.1 The broad aims and objectives for the 2008 field season, based on previous work in Trench A, were outlined as follows:

- To further expose the walls through systematic application of single context recording and excavation of deposits in order to ascertain the relative phasing and layout of the structures uncovered in previous seasons.
- To determine the existence and type of any further burials belonging to the Hellenistic period.
- To characterise the relationship between the structures and the burials, i.e. do the buildings relate to a phase of occupation immediately preceding the Hellenistic necropolis, or vice versa? If they are broadly contemporary, do the buildings represent funerary monuments and buildings?

3.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

3.1 Excavation Methodology

- 3.1.1 During this season excavation continued in Trench A. Hand-excavation was carried out using picks, shovels and trowels in order to reduce the level of the trench, define new layers and uncover archaeological features. All removed soil was scanned for the presence of any stray, unstratified artefacts which were recovered and bagged for dating and analysis.
- 3.1.2 Workmen were employed by the expedition to carry out maintenance and conservation work in Trench B.
- 3.1.3 A digital photographic record was maintained throughout the excavation of the trench, features and finds.
- 3.1.4 Levels of deposits, layers, features and small finds were taken throughout the excavation. In addition, levels were taken across the trench for contour information at the end of the season.
- 3.1.5 Individual features and graves were planned at 1:10 and the trench itself was planned at 1:20.
- 3.1.6 Since thorough drawings of the trench sections were produced in the 2007 season for Trench A, it was not deemed necessary to re-draw these again this season. It will be useful to make amendments and to add on any newly defined layers to these illustrations next season to ensure stratigraphic continuity.
- 3.1.7 The buildings uncovered in 2007 were given Structure numbers so that the various elements of each building could be grouped within our recording system. See section 2.0 for a breakdown of these structures.
- 3.1.8 At the end of the season the trench was re-covered using plastic sheeting as a protective measure between excavation seasons.

3.1.9

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Number of Contexts | 24 (including three un-excavated contexts) |
| Plan and section drawings | 9 |
| Bulk Soil Samples | 12 |
| Digital Photographs | 1266 |
| Small finds | 11 |

Table 1: Quantification of site archive for NOK 08/A

3.2 Training

3.2.1 A formal proactive training programme was conceived and implemented in 2007. Details can be found in the relevant interim report (Everill 2007).

4.0 EXCAVATION RESULTS

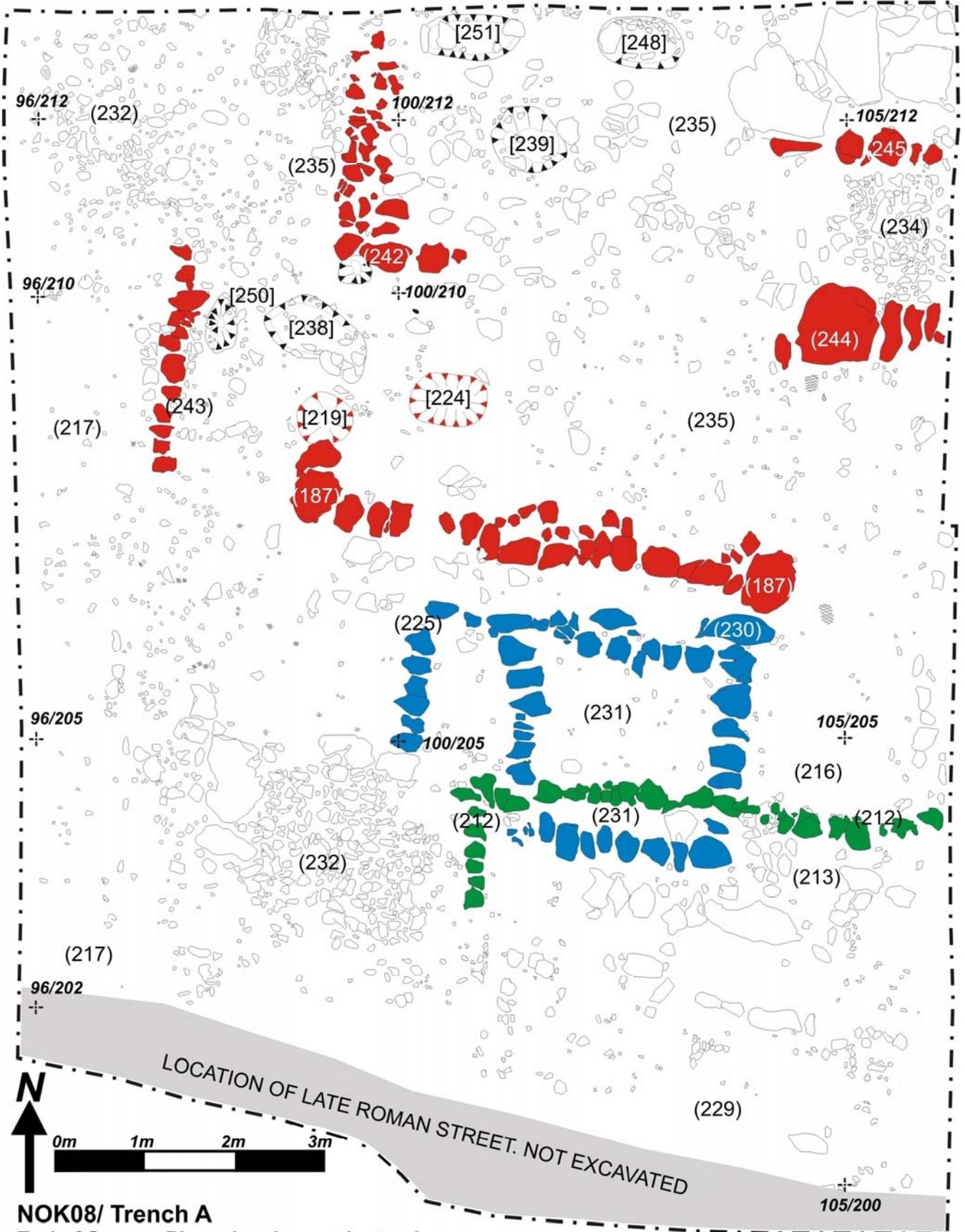
4.1 Summary

4.1.1 The results of this season's fieldwork have been presented below. Twenty-four context numbers were taken out this year, although the last three (254-256) represent contexts for a grave which was revealed at the end of this season, but has not yet been excavated (this will be excavated in the 2009 season). The table below presents a summary of these contexts which have been described in more detail in 4.2.

4.1.2

| Context | Type | Description | Dimensions | Max. Depth/ Thick. | Max. Height/ Level |
|---------|----------|--|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 233 | - | Cleaning Layer for unstratified finds | - | - | |
| 234 | Layer | Stony/rubble layer in NE corner | - | - | -3.47 |
| 235 | Layer | Grey-brown clay silt N of Structure 1 | - | - | |
| 236 | Fill | Inhumation fill within [238] | 1.2m x 0.7m | 300mm | -3.48 |
| 237 | Skeleton | Skeleton in [238] | - | - | -3.57 |
| 238 | Cut | Grave cut | 1.2m x 0.7m | 300mm | -3.48 |
| 239 | Cut | Cremation burial cut | 0.2m x 0.1m | | -3.21 |
| 240 | Fill | Cremation fill within [239] | | | |
| 241 | Skeleton | Skeleton in [239] | - | - | |
| 242 | Masonry | L-shaped section of wall – N of [219] – Structure 1? | 1.5m x 0.75m (N-S) 1.0m x 0.4m (E-W) | - | |
| 243 | Masonry | N-S line of stones – W of (187) – Structure 1? | 2.0m x 0.4m | - | |
| 244 | Masonry | E-W line of large stones – S of (234) – Structure 1? | 2.0m x 0.5m | - | |
| 245 | Masonry | E-W line of large stones – N of (234) | 1.9m x 0.35m | - | |
| 246 | Fill | Cremation fill within [248] | 0.7m x 0.4m | 150mm | -3.29 |
| 247 | Skeleton | Skeleton in [248] | - | - | -3.31 |
| 248 | Cut | Cremation burial cut | 0.7m x 0.4m | 150mm | -3.29 |
| 249 | Fill | Single fill of [250] | 0.55m x 0.4m | 200mm | -3.59 |
| 250 | Cut | Cut for small pit | 0.55m x 0.4m | 200mm | -3.59 |
| 251 | Cut | Grave Cut | 1.0m x 0.14m | 150mm | -3.34 |
| 252 | Fill | Inhumation fill within [251] | 1.0m x 0.14m | 150mm | -3.34 |
| 253 | Skeleton | Skeleton in [251] | - | - | - |
| 254 | Fill | Grave fill within [256] | As yet unexcavated | - | - |
| 255 | Skeleton | Skeleton in [256] | As yet unexcavated | - | - |
| 256 | Cut | Grave cut | As yet unexcavated | - | - |

Table 2: Recorded contexts from NOK 08/A



NOK08/ Trench A

End of Season Plan, showing conjectural

Hellenistic Structures in red (Structure 1), green (Structure 2) and blue (Structure 3).

Drawn by Dr P Everill, from site plans. Feb 09. *Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi*

Figure 2: Trench plan showing contexts and structures referred to in the text

4.2 The Cultural Layers and Deposits (see Figure 2 for locations)

- 4.2.1 (233) was a context taken at the beginning of the season for the purpose of unstratified finds from initial cleaning of the trench. It was necessary to use this number to identify the finds uncovered during the cleaning process in case of any residual/intrusive finds within the trench since it had been open for a year and partially backfilled to secure the plastic.
- 4.2.2 (234) was a rubbly layer located north of Structure 1 and between walls (244) and (245) comprising very frequent angular and sub-angular limestone with mid-dark grey-brown fine clay-silt within the voids. This context seemed discreet and may represent the foundation layer for a path, yard or floor surface. A few animal bones as well as a large piece of pot with rim and handle were uncovered within this deposit. No daub is present within this context which clearly distinguishes it from the overlying layer (235).
- 4.2.3 (235) consisted of mid-dark grey-brown fine, but firmly compacted clay-silt containing occasional small angular limestone inclusions, rare river stone fragments, occasional charcoal (flecks and patchy areas), frequent fired clay/daub, abundant potsherds, occasional animal bone fragments, very rare flint and rare pieces of slag. This deposit forms a layer located north of Structure 1. Two samples (<1> and <2>) were taken from this layer to assess its environmental potential. Finds (as listed above) were collected for analysis and dating. It is worth bearing in mind that this deposit may be equivalent to context (211) taken out in 2007.

4.3 Walls and Structures (see Figure 2 for locations)

- 4.3.1 (242) comprises a new section of wall which was revealed for the first time this year. This wall consists of sub-angular limestone boulders (averaging 160x200x50mm) arranged in an L-shape with the longer arm on an east-west alignment and the shorter arm on a north-south alignment. The stones were unbonded and were naturally weathered with no obvious tool marks or signs of dressing. The wall segment is located north of 187.
- 4.3.2 (243) was a small linear wall orientated north-south consisting of unbonded, angular limestone blocks (averaging 190x250x70mm). One larger block was present at the northern end (230x470x50mm). This wall segment has no returning arms and may therefore constitute a screen. Further excavation of the area directly north of (243) has the potential to reveal a continuation of the wall.
- 4.3.3 (244) is a probable east-west wall comprising of seven unbonded limestone blocks (averaging 400x100x70mm) which extended for approximately 1.5m. The stones were natural and undressed. It was located to the south of (234). One very large limestone block (560x750x330mm) was located at the western

end of this wall. At present, there is no clear sign of this wall continuing in a westerly direction, but further excavation may provide evidence of this. The eastern extent of this wall disappears under the baulk/steps.

- 4.3.4 (245) also consisted of seven unbonded limestone blocks, extending for 1.5m on an east-west alignment. As is the case with (244) the eastern end of this wall runs into the eastern baulk/steps and the western extent is untraceable beyond 2m. It was located immediately to the north of (234) and may have formed a pair with wall (244).

4.4 The Burials (see Figure 2 for locations)

- 4.4.1 What follows is a summary. For full details of the burials including figures please see Benjamin Neil's separate 2008 Osteological Assessment for trench A.

- 4.4.2 Cut [238] (containing skeleton (237)) was aligned east-west just north of posthole [219]. It had an elongated oval shape with moderately sloping sides, an irregularly flat base and a fairly shallow profile. Skeleton (237) was in early childhood, (around 4 years old +/- 12 months) positioned with the head at the west end and the feet in the east. The skeletal elements were highly fragmented, friable and rearranged from their natural anatomical position with no obvious indication for the disturbance. Fragmentation of the bone is likely due to the impact pressure from activity and wall collapse events over the area. The majority of the skeleton was represented apart from the hands and feet, which were completely missing. The bones were collected for more detailed osteological assessment that can be read in the 2008 osteology report.

(236) was the grave fill surrounding the skeleton. This deposit comprised mid-dark grey-brown fine, but lightly compacted clay-silt with occasional small rounded and angular stones (20-40mm), occasional charcoal flecks, small rounded flecks of daub, frequent potsherds, occasional animal bone and two large pieces of metamorphic rock/quartz (50mm). Indications of a funerary structure closely surround the inhumation especially to the south-east, comprising a single course of un-mortared, unshaped river-stone and angular limestone blocks of around 15-30cm diameter. A sample of this deposit (<5>) was taken from underneath the skeleton to assess any environmental potential and to look for any small finds (e.g. beads).

- 4.4.3 Cut [239] was an oval shaped, east-west orientated pit, located centrally within the northern part of the trench. The cremation of an adult male (241) occurred throughout the fill (241), which consisted of blackish crumbly silt-clay with rare stones (50-100mm) and occasional potsherds, The fill was collected as a 100% sample (<3> and <4>) in order to recover all the bone and any

associated artefacts. Fragments of a possible copper bracelet were also recovered from within this burial.

- 4.4.4 Cut [248], was an oval cut lying close to the northern bulk of the trench; this feature was not clear and was mostly defined by a series of stones (limestone) surrounding the burial and a capping roof tile on the eastern side of the grave. A mid to dark loose brown-grey silty-clay grave fill (246) was uncovered from around the skeleton. A glass bead (small find 6) was found within the fill. A 100% bulk sample <7> was taken of the fill, which awaits processing. As a result, no osteological data is available for this individual.
- 4.4.5 Cut [251] was an inhumation grave located along the northern baulk (west of [248]) with a river stone capping the grave and a stone at the western end of the grave (by the feet). Skeleton (253) was in early childhood (around 5 years old +/- 16 months) and buried in a flexed position with the head at the east and the feet at the west. A copper bracelet (small find 10) was found around the left ankle, two copper earrings (small find 11) and a turquoise and blue beaded necklace (small find 9) were collected from around the skull. Four bags were taken as a sample <11> of the grave fill. A broken pot vessel was found at the foot of the grave.

4.5 Other Features

- 4.5.1 A small pit with a shallow, oval cut [250] was revealed directly adjacent to wall (243) (to the south). This pit contained a loose, mid to dark grey-brown clayey-silt fill (249) with potsherds and fragments of animal bone.

5.0 DISCUSSION

5.1 General Discussion of Results

- 5.1.1 Excavation in Trench A over the last few years has made it possible to formulate ideas as to the nature of the Hellenistic period structures and their building materials. As there is still no evidence of tile of this date within Trench A, with the exception of a single whole roof tile, which appeared to cover cremation burial [248], it is unlikely that this was utilised as a roofing material. This supports the theory that the Hellenistic buildings in this area were of a clay and timber construction and probably had a more lightweight roof, perhaps of thatch.
- 5.1.2 Further excavation is required to better understand the function of the structures. The segments of wall uncovered for the first time in 2008 are interesting as they raise new, unanswered questions. It is worth considering the possibility that walls (244) and (245) form one large east-west wall/structure with two faces (244 as the south-facing and 245 as the north-facing), and a rubble core (234). It is more likely, however, that context 234 represents a surface between the two walls, perhaps even part of the eastern entrance to the building referred to as Structure One.
- 5.1.3 The 2008 training programme was successful in that it met the aims and objectives set out in the 2007 Interim Excavation Report (Everill 2007). Assigning individual students to mentoring staff members was particularly beneficial to both the staff and students, because it provided a more personal approach to training and meant that the needs of each student were discussed on a one-to-one level.

5.2 Proposed Aims and Objectives for 2009

- 5.2.1 Having exposed and recorded the structures in 2007 and 2008, the 2009 season will be largely concerned with removing the remains of those foundations to expose earlier cultural layers. Section drawings of the Trench edges, last drawn in 2007 will be updated.
- 5.2.2 The small area of Byzantine/ Medieval cemetery at the south of Trench B will be fully excavated so that it can be backfilled in order to conserve the wall there. This will also provide an opportunity to examine some of the earliest surviving deposits from Nokalakevi, and provide a direct comparison with deposits from a nearby trench excavated in the late 1990s by Professor Lomitashvili.
- 5.2.3 A Differential GPS survey of the lower town, the citadel, the fortifications and their immediate vicinity will be undertaken where conditions allow. This will compliment the Total Station Survey of the lower town undertaken in 2005.

- 5.2.4 AGEN will assist Professor Lomitashvili wherever possible in the development of a Mingrelian regional archaeological strategy, and particularly in the development of a regional 'Sites and Monuments Record' (SMR) or 'Historic Environment Record' (HER).
- 5.2.5 As was identified in 2005 (Everill 2005) there is scope for recording isolated finds of archaeological material produced through local agricultural and other activity in an SMR/ HER.
- 5.2.6 AGEN will continue to support ethnographic study in the region.
- 5.2.7 AGEN will continue its engagement with the local community, through language teaching and communicating the results of our work to the local community.

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