



Interim report on excavations at Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis and Khuntsistsikhe in 2015

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SUMMARY

The Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi (AGEN) carried out excavations in the Samegrelo region of western Georgia for the fifteenth consecutive season at the site of Nokalakevi (ancient Archaeopolis). The main field season took place between the 29th June and 24th July 2015 and was carried out by a team of British and Georgian professionals with the assistance of student volunteers from Georgia, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America.

Work in Trench A continued to produce pieces of the double-headed zoomorphic figurines that are unique to Nokalakevi and its sister site of Vani on the other side of the Colchian plain. These figurines are dated relatively to the 8th/7th centuries BC, however OSL dating undertaken by the Oxford University Research Laboratory on behalf of AGEN suggests that the absolute date may be nearer the end of the 7th century BC. The archaeological layers appear to indicate an area of cultivation in the north half of the trench and an area of occupation, characterised by a street/ yard surface and small structures, to the south.

This year saw the completion of all remaining work in Trench C, and the closing of this area after two seasons' investigation that had produced archaeological evidence dating from the prehistoric to the remains of the old dig-house and village hospital. A new area, Trench E, was opened to the east of the main walls and revealed a probable outer defensive ditch.

An archaeological evaluation at a new site, near the village of Khuntsi in Martvili District, was also undertaken by a small team to assess the potential evidence for the location of the 'lost' Byzantine period fortress of Onogurisis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Anglo-Georgian Expedition has received financial, administrative and academic support from a variety of individuals and institutions since 2001, without which it would not have been possible to continue our work. We are particularly grateful to Oxford University's Marjory-Wardrop and Craven funds and to Worcester College; the British Institute at Ankara; University of Winchester; University of Southampton; University of Cambridge; University of Bradford; and FaRiG. Professor David Braund (Exeter University); Professor Michael Vickers (Oxford University); and David Connolly (B.A.J.R.) must also be thanked for their invaluable advice and support.

In relation to the 2015 season we are particularly grateful to the University of Winchester, Department of Archaeology for its ongoing financial support. As always, our greatest debt is to our Georgian colleagues, and the government and residents of Nokalakevi and Senaki, whose friendship and hospitality have been overwhelming.

INTRODUCTION

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 northeast of Senaki (Figure 1). It sits in a loop of the River Tekhuri at the edge of the Colchian plain with hills on its northern and western perimeters. The standing remains at the site consist of a Byzantine period upper citadel atop a high hill, and a lower town on the river terrace below, linked by strongly fortified walls. Recent evidence now indicates that the site was first occupied in the Chalcolithic (c4000BC), with more significant quantities of Bronze Age material culture found and dated by OSL to 2500BC. Archaeological evidence indicates the site was extensively exploited in the 8th/7th centuries BC, in the 6th/5th centuries BC, in the 4th-1st centuries BC, and in the 4th-6th centuries AD. This latter period saw the construction of significant fortifications as the Kingdom of Lazika (of which Nokalakevi, known as Archaeopolis to the Byzantine chroniclers, was capital) became hotly contested between the Persian and Byzantine Empires. After the Arab invasions of the 8th century AD, Nokalakevi was apparently abandoned as a fortified site until it became the seat of the princely Dadiani family in the 16th/17th century AD. Nokalakevi has, perhaps, the longest excavated chronology of any one site in Colchis.

Modern study of Nokalakevi can be traced back to 1833 when the Swiss philologist Frédéric Dubois Du Montpéreux proposed the site as Archaeopolis, the capital of late antique Lazika mentioned in the *Novels* of the Emperor Justinian, and by Byzantine historians and chroniclers. In the winter of 1930-31, a joint German-Georgian expedition led by Dr A.-M. Schneider of the German Archaeological Institute in Istanbul undertook the first archaeological excavations at the site. Schneider’s results were published in the German periodical *Forschungen und Fortschritte* in September 1931 and confirmed the identification of the site with Archaeopolis. 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 large scale works at Nokalakevi temporarily ceased. Three volumes of results were edited by Parmen Zakaraia (1981; 1989; 1993). For a fuller discussion of the history of study at Nokalakevi please see Lomitashvili *et al* (2014a).

The current excavations at the site began in 2001 with the establishment of the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi (AGEN). Comprehensive English language accounts of each seasons’ results were provided in the interim reports (Armour and Colvin 2004; Everill 2003; Everill 2005a; Everill 2005b; Everill 2007; Everill 2015; Everill and Ginns 2005; Everill *et al* 2011a; Everill *et al* 2012; Everill *et al* 2013; Grant and Everill 2009; Grant *et al* 2010; Grant *et al* 2014; Neil 2006). The 2001-10 results were synthesised in a recent monograph (Everill 2014).

This document is an interim report of the results of the excavation undertaken at Nokalakevi in the 2015 season. 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. All aspects of the fieldwork complied with the *Standards and Guidance*, and *Code of Conduct* of the UK ‘Institute for Archaeologists’ (IfA 2008; 2013) and modern methodology is employed on site at all times.

Two separate site archives are maintained (one for each trench) during the course of the excavations.

Since the expedition is an international collaboration the archive is completed on site in both English and Georgian. This means that there are two copies of the site archive for each trench. The Georgian archive is stored at the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi, and the British one in Cambridge, with security copies at the University of Winchester. The site illustrations, such as feature and trench plans, are also copied to ensure that the archive is fully maintained in both the UK and Georgia.



Figure 1: The location of Nokalakevi indicated by a star (Everill 2012)

FIELD SEASON: 2015

The expedition was directed in Nokalakevi by Dr Nikoloz Murghulia (Georgian National Museum) and Dr Paul Everill (University of Winchester). The Georgian team consisted of Dr Besik Lortkipanidze (Deputy Head of the Nokalakevi Expedition; Head of the Khuntsi Expedition), Dr Nino KEBULADZE (Finds Conservator), Ana Tvaradze (Site Supervisor) and Tamar Niniashvili (Site Assistant). The international staff consisted of Gemma Ward (Site Supervisor) and Sean Doherty (Senior Site Assistant). In addition, the team was joined by Professor Davit Lomitashvili (Deputy Director, National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia) and Ian Colvin (Cambridge University; Director of AGEN). Our Georgian students/ volunteers were: Davit Alania; Giorgi Lomitashvili; Zakro Archuadze; Ketii Arabuli; Nino Khutsishvili; Giorgi Bachoshvili; Teona Uturgashvili; Nino Gabelaia; Oliko Talakhadze; Giorgi Davitaia; Levan Machitadze; Sandro Otkhmezuri; Guka Otkhmezuri. Our international students/ volunteers were: Thea de Armond (Stanford University, California); Zoe Emery (University of Winchester); Jonathan Ouellet (UCL, Qatar); Bryony Lalor; Isabelle Coupal; and Corinna Keefe.

The staff and volunteers arrived in Nokalakevi on Saturday 27th June 2015. Work began for the main

team on Monday 29th June with the reopening of both Trench A and C for the season’s excavation. Protective layers of plastic and backfill from the end of the 2014 season were removed from the base of the trench. The main period of excavation was between Monday 29th June and Friday 24th July 2015. The excavation of Trench E had started with a small team on 16th June; and resumed after the end of the main season from 17th August to the 29th August 2015.

EXCAVATION RESULTS: 2015



Figure 2: Trench locations shown on the 2009 site plan (see Everill et al 2011b)

The context register for this season continues on from previous seasons’ excavations within each trench and therefore begins at **324** for Trench A and **119** for Trench C. The context register for the new Trench E commenced at **100**. The Khuntsi Test Pit contexts began with the number of the pit (Test Pit 1 started at 100; Test Pit 2 started at 200 etc). The total contexts have been tabulated below.

TRENCH	A	C	E	Khuntsi (total)
Number of Contexts	2	12	9	14
Plan and section drawings	5	5	7	3
Samples	2	3	-	2
Small finds	6	7	1	5

Table 1: Quantification of site archives for NOK15

Trench A: Results

The results of this season’s fieldwork in Trench A have been presented below. Only two context numbers were taken out for this trench this year (**324** and **325**) and excavation continued in some contexts assigned in previous years (**313; 319; 321**). Six small finds were identified and recorded during this season’s excavations in Trench A. A list of these artefacts can be seen in Table 6 in the Appendix.

Trench A was reopened on Monday 29th June and the backfill and plastic sheet laid at the end of the 2014 season was removed. The sides and surface of the trench were cleared of silt and vegetation that had accumulated since last year.

The trench was stepped in 1m at the west and north sides and half a metre on the east side. Sadly, once again, progress was hampered by poor weather, with excavation being seriously delayed by two incidents of standing water in the trench - on one occasion a significant quantity of rainfall and run-off required four days of bailing and drying out before the trench was workable again. As a result it was not possible to finally clarify the relationship between the north and south areas of activity outlined above. When it was possible to work in the trench, the different contexts in the southern half of the trench were investigated. While a further five figurine fragments were recovered from the south of the trench this season, the evidence appears to suggest that this phase (8th/7th century BC) of activity has nearly been fully excavated, and layer **319** was seen to extend further east and south. Layer **319** was reduced in spits from the north of the trench southwards revealing a short and fairly crude line of stones (**325**) toward the centre of the trench, orientated east-west. Evidence from recently completed Trenches B and C suggests that while there may be some Bronze Age deposits yet to be excavated, there may not be a huge depth of further archaeology before natural deposits are encountered in Trench A.

Context	Type	Description	Dimensions/ Details	Max. Depth/ Thick.	Max. Height/ Level
324	Unstrat.	Cleaning layer	Trench		-
325	Masonry	Unbonded line of small limestone blocks (avg. 100mm x 70mm) running E-W	1.17m east-west x 0.33m wide		

Table 2: Recorded contexts from NOK 15/A (All levels refer to the zero established in the 1980s)

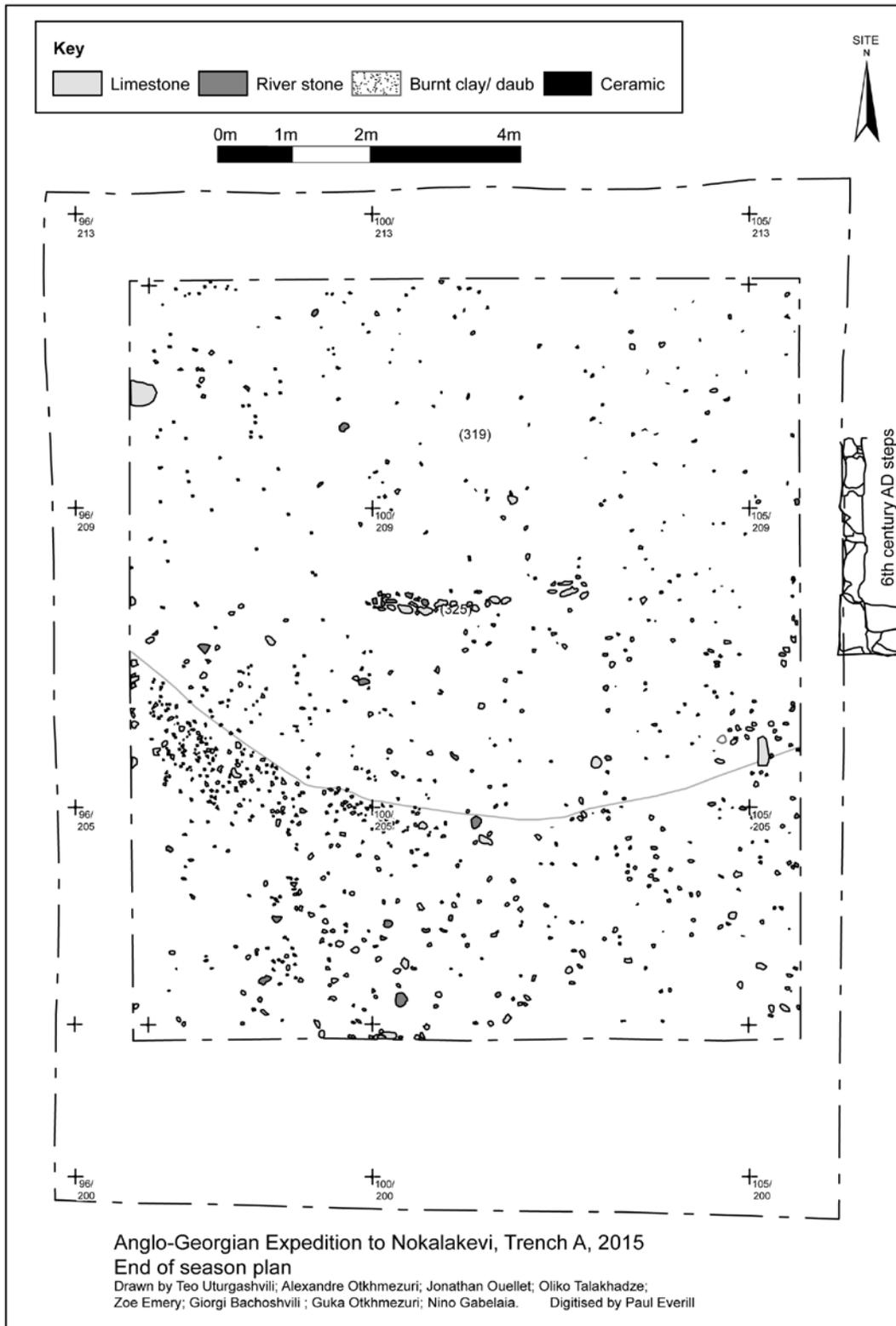


Figure 3: Trench A, end of season plan

Trench C: Results

Excavation began on the 29th June and following the initial cleaning the remainder of **113** was removed. This fully revealed layer **114**, which was another colluvial deposit consisting of a significant quantity of finer limestone rubble within a matrix of dark greyish brown silty clay. The removal of **114** revealed the full extent of **115**, which had been partially exposed in 2014. This confirmed the initial interpretation of **115** as a surface, being far more compact and level than the overlying colluvial deposits. The removal of **114** in the south of the trench exposed a line of limestone blocks (**120**), reminiscent of the Hellenistic buildings in Trenches A and B (Figure 4). To the north of **120**, directly overlying **115**, an assemblage of ceramics was found that appeared to represent three of four near complete vessels dumped outside the building onto the external surface and subsequently sealed by post-abandonment colluvial material (**114**). The wall line (**120**) of c.4m consisted of nine undressed limestone blocks measuring, on average, 0.15m x 0.3m x 0.15m. The line was orientated approximately east-west and terminated, or was interrupted by spaces, e.g. for doors, at both the west and the east side of the trench. Adjacent to each 'terminus', and slightly to the south, were two or more ceramic tiles. The only intact one was at the western end and measured 210 x 260 x 40mm (4.595kg). Slightly north of the wall a shallow oval pit (fill **124**; cut **125**), measuring 0.58m x 0.8m x 0.2m deep, contained domestic rubbish.

Following the removal of the wall line (**120**) and yard surface (**115**), the sequence of colluvial deposits continued. Initially two numbers (**121**; **122**) were assigned to an otherwise homogenous rubbly deposit north and south of the wall, as a precautionary measure in case further structural elements became evident. This layer (**121/122**) may have been a make-up layer for the structure and surface as its removal revealed three sloping colluvial layers evidently lying one on top of the next and apparently truncated by the act of terracing, similar to what had been observed under the hospital in this trench in 2014. However, the interpretation of **121/122** as a make-up layer makes little sense when one considers its similarity to the layers removed. Layer **121/122** may instead represent a continuation of colluvial movement following another terracing episode.

Layers **123**; **126**; and **127** were, in turn, a denser rubbly colluvial deposit; a finer, more soily colluvium; and another dense rubbly colluvial deposit. They were excavated in that order, revealing the natural slope. The removal of **127** revealed a further, more substantial colluvial deposit (**128**) which extended across the trench and contained - towards its base - some substantial limestone boulders (avg. 0.3m x 0.3m x 0.2m).

Underlying **128** was a thin deposit (**129**), approximately 0.1m thick, which was a mid-brown silty clay with inclusions of fine sub-angular limestone fragments and occasional fine river pebbles. Also found within this layer were charcoal, a few pieces of ceramic, and flint debitage, similar in character to that revealed in the lowest archaeological deposits in Trench B. Directly underneath this was the reddish brown clay (**130**), also revealed in Trench B, which was entirely bereft of archaeological finds, very compact and clean. This was considered, as in Trench B, to represent the natural soil and subsequent excavation in Trench C, in the remaining few days of the 2015 season, was spent revealing as much of this deposit as possible to shed light on the natural relief.

The excavation of Trench C allowed for the first investigation of the western end of the 'lower town' with modern methodologies. The results were not dissimilar to those observed in Trench B and are revealing as much for what is absent as what is present. Aside for the fascinating opportunity to excavate the material remains of the expedition's precursor, the upper layers were colluvial sediments, containing mixed material culture, including OSL dated ceramics from the Hellenistic to perhaps as late as the 12th century AD. As was the case in the north part of Trench B, the first in situ

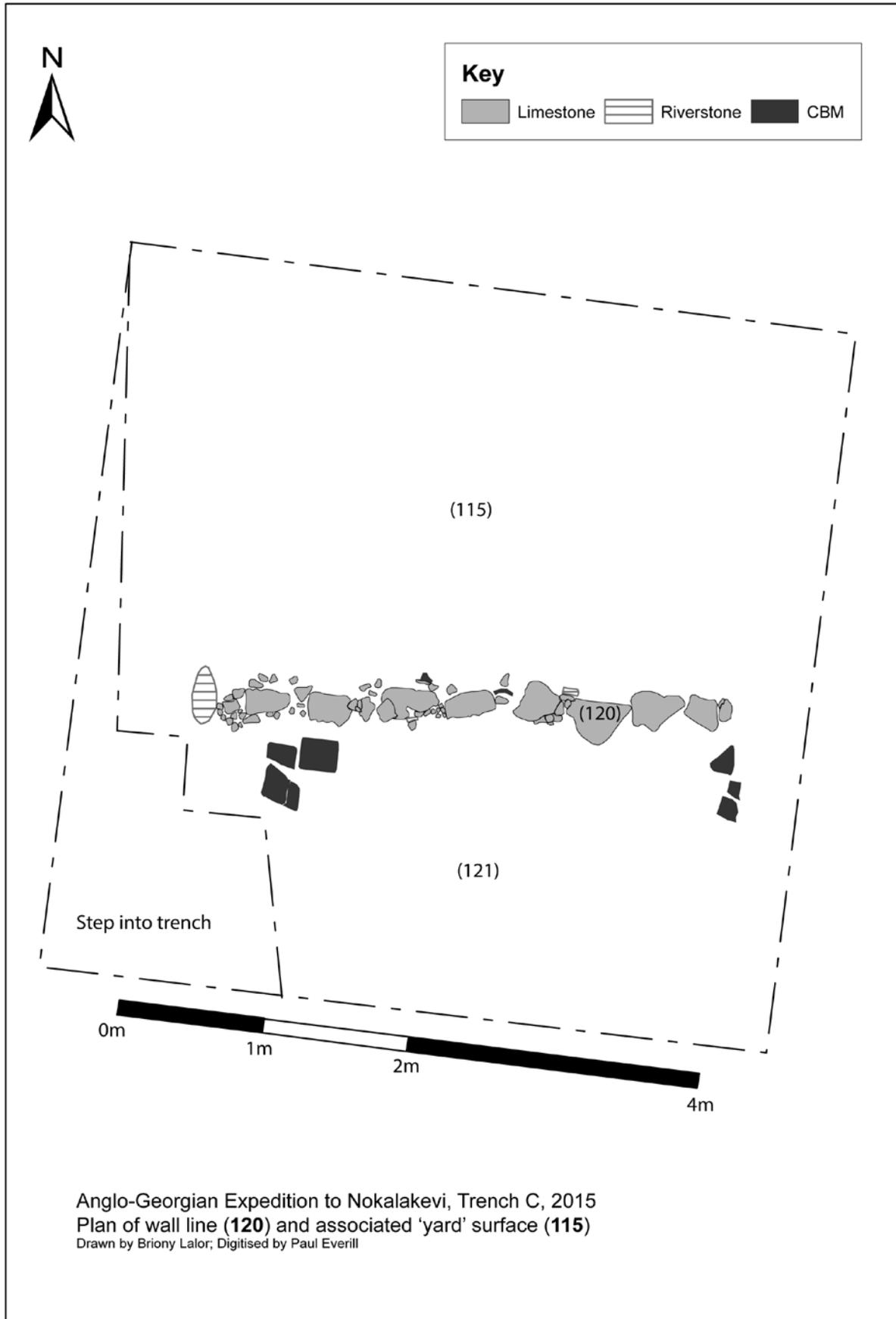


Figure 4: Probable Hellenistic period structure in Trench C

archaeological remains observed were a wall sill/ base formed of unbonded limestone blocks. Underlying this, with further parallels to Trench B, was a minimum of one metre of colluvial sediments overlying a primary archaeological layer containing ceramic dating to the Bronze Age, but without structural evidence.

Context	Type	Description	Dimensions/ Details	Max. Depth/ Thick.	Max. Height/ Level
119	Unstrat	Cleaning layer	Trench		-
120	Structure	Line of nine unbounded limestone blocks (avg. 0.15m x 0.3m x 0.15m)	c4.5m E-W	300mm	
121	Layer	Probable colluvial deposit south of 120	1.5m N-S x >5m	100mm	
122	Layer	Probable colluvial deposit north of 120	3m N-S x >5m	100mm	
123	Layer	Dense rubble layer south of 120	0.8m x 5m	c0.2m	
124	Fill	Fill of 125	0.58m x 0.8m	0.2m	
125	Cut	Cut of domestic rubbish pit north of wall 120	0.58m x 0.8m	0.2m	
126	Layer	Less rubbly colluvial deposit under 123	1.8m x 5m	0.12m	
127	Layer	Denser rubbly colluvial deposit under 126	Across trench	0.15m	
128	Layer	Less rubbly colluvial deposit under 127	Across trench	0.2m	
129	Layer	Fine rubbly colluvium	Across trench	0.1m	
130	Layer	Natural			

Table 3: Recorded contexts from NOK 15/C (All levels are in metres above sea level)

Trench E: Introduction

Trench E was first opened on the 16th June 2015 and measured 10m north-south x 9m east-west. The trench was orientated parallel to, and 30m from, the eastern fortifications and was therefore not on a true north-south alignment.

An open area trench was opened at this location to investigate properly the results of a small test trench that had been excavated outside the walls by a short-lived Georgian-Swiss collaboration in 2006. This original trench had revealed archaeological layers indicating the presence of a significant defensive ditch, but the size of the trench itself made it impossible to draw conclusions. The original trench area was revealed in the northwest corner of Trench E.

Trench E: Results

On removal of the top soil (**100**), a layer of limestone rubble and riverstone (**101**) was revealed across the entire area of the trench. This layer included a large quantity of mortar, and the remains of metal objects such as a mattock and scythe. During excavation it became clear that this deposit represented the remnants of large restoration projects undertaken in the 1970s and 80s. Once recorded the removal of **101** revealed the underlying deposit **102**, which once again covered the entire trench area. Layer **102** consisted of small limestone fragments, and mixed material culture from a variety of periods. The clear implication is that, as has been seen in all previous excavations across the lower town, this is colluvial sediment from the steep slope to the north. The bulk of the archaeological material retrieved from this layer represented ceramic building material, such as brick and tile.

The removal of layer **102** revealed, in the west half of the trench, the remains of a substantial wall (**104**), which was orientated north-south. It extended for the whole length of the trench and continued to the north. The wall was built as a dry-stone, unbonded structure using medium-sized riverstones and limestone. To the east edge of it was found layer **105**, which included a quantity of fine limestone fragments. Layer **105** contained a limited amount of material culture, the majority of which was building material and pottery of the 17th-18th centuries AD. Initially it was thought that this layer represented the collapse of wall **104**, however an alternative interpretation following cleaning was that it might instead have been the remains of an architectural feature, such as a buttress, added to the wall to strengthen or support it. Wall **104**, and possible buttress **105**, were considered to be constructions of the 17th-18th centuries AD, during the Mingrelian Principality when a branch of the Dadiani family ruled Nokalakevi. As such, the wall may simply represent a demarcation of private territory, or perhaps a modest refortification of the area at a time when the original three walls of Tsikhegoji-Archaeopolis were in a state of disrepair.

After structures **104** and **105** were recorded and removed, it revealed a brownish deposit (**106**) in the western half of the trench, which was evidently a fill of a significant cut feature [**107**]. Fill **106** consisted of a moderately compact sandy-clay with a large quantity of fine riverstone (average size 40-60mm³). An identical deposit was revealed during the excavation of the first trench in 2006, and this had been interpreted as the fill of a ditch or a very large pit. Its size, approximately 5-6m wide, and the continuation of it discovered in 2015, confirmed the interpretation of it as a linear feature – either a channel that had been filled by natural processes or human action or, most likely, a large defensive ditch. No such ditches have been discovered at Nokalakevi before, though they are known at other fortresses within the Kingdom of Egrisi (e.g. Tolebi; Eki; Khomakirde and etc.) and the presence of a possible stone-built bank (**108**) to the west of cut **107** certainly supports this

interpretation. Further work in 2016 will allow for the full excavation and interpretation of **106/107** and **108**.

Context	Type	Description	Dimensions/ Details	Max. Depth/ Thick.	Max. Height/ Level
100	Layer	Topsoil	Across trench		
101	Layer	Deposit of materials used in 1970s/80s conservation projects	Across trench		
102	Layer	Backfill of 2006 trench	2m x 3.5m		-2.10
103	Layer	Colluvial deposit	Across trench	0.15m	-2.04
104	Masonry	North-south orientated wall, constructed in unbounded limestone and riverstone.	1.1-1.4m wide; 9.3m long		-2.39
105	Structure?	Possible buttress, or structural support to wall 104	1.65m x 9.3m	0.3-0.4m	-2.44
106	Fill	Fill of ditch 107 – not fully excavated			
107	Cut	Cut of ditch – not excavated			
108	Masonry	Possible stone-built bank to west of ditch 107 – not excavated	1.85m x 0.5m		
109	Layer	Not excavated			

Table 4: Recorded contexts from NOK 15/E (All levels refer to the zero established in the 1980s)

Archaeological evaluation at Khuntsistsikhe: Introduction

The village of Khuntsi is located in the Martvili municipality, on the north bank of the Tskhenistskali river. In the northern part of the village, on Kukiti hill, is located the Khuntsi fortress (known locally as “Najikhu”). Kukiti hill is part of the Unagira ridge and has a total area of approximately 6000 square kilometres. The walls of the fortress are, aside from several sections in the north part, not visible above ground level. The site is owned by the government, however a mobile phone mast and associated infrastructure was constructed at the top of the hill three years ago. During construction

the ruins of the fortress, notably the remains of the top tower, were revealed and damaged without consultation with archaeological agencies. Also found were animal bones and fragments of pottery. Currently all these materials are stored in the public school in Khuntsi.

Historical background

Agathia Scholasticus, a 6th century Byzantine historian, is among those who described military operations in west Georgia in AD542 between Byzantium and the Sasanian Empire. It was part of a confrontation that lasted for more than 20 years and was contemporary accounts describe it as a “Great War of Egrisi”. During the war Agathia talks several times about the fortress of Onogurisi, which was strategically important for both the Byzantines and the Iranians. While translating Agathia’s work Kauhchishvili (1936) tried to identify the location of this fortress (Georgica, III, 1936, pp. 59-62, Note 1). He linked its name with the Unagira Mountain that is situated on the border of Martvili and Khoni districts. He also noted Agathia’s account of how, in AD554, Persian forces occupied the Kingdom of Lazika up to the river Tskhenistskali, with Byzantine forces maintaining fortified positions to the west of the river (Georgica, III, pp. 38-41, Note 2). Based on this account, Kauhchishvili felt that the fortress should be on the eastern border of Lazika, approximately halfway between Archaeopolis in the west and Kutaisi in the east, protecting the capital - Tsikhegoji-Archaeopolis. Kauhchishvili also identified Onogurisi with the fortress of Ukimerioni, and subsequently several suggestions have been made for the location of Onogurisi. Berdzenishvili (1975) also connected its name with the Unagira Mountain, and searched for it in the vicinity of Bandza and Nokalakevi. He described a temptation to link the village of Onogia situated near Bandza with Onogurisi (N. Berdzenishvili, issues of history, VIII, 1975, pp. 463-465), however Onogia is located on the plain with no suitable location for a fortress of such importance. In the 1980s, the Nokalakevi expedition undertook archaeological excavations at Abedati fortress, in Martvili district, and publications (Zakaria and Kapanadze 1991; Lekvinadze 1993) linked the site with Onogurisi (P. Zakaria, T. Kapanadze, Tsikhegoji-Archaeopolis-Nokalakevi. Architecture, 1991, pp. 127-137; V. Lekvinadze, Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis, III, 1993, pp. 209-222). This issue was discussed most recently by Pailodze (2003) (A. Pailodze; Chronicle of Khoni, part II; 2003 pp. 27-32). Studying the work of Agathias, and the geographical descriptions, Pailodze stated that it was impossible to identify Abedati with Onogurisi because of the distance from Kutaisi. He also noted that the mountain ridge of Unagira begins at the border with Imereti, near the village of Matkhoji on the opposite bank of the river Tskhenistskali from the hill of upper Khuntsi. This hill is known locally as “Najikhu”, meaning “place of fortress”. Pailodze reported some above-ground ruins on the hill at Khuntsi which he suggested were the remains of Onogurisi. During the 2014 Nokalakevi field season the authors visited the hill of upper Khuntsi and observed for themselves the remains of various structures. In addition to the etymological discussion described above, it was also noted that the nearby river Nogela might be connected with Onogurisi. The date and function of the structural remains, however, were unclear and plans were made for an archaeological evaluation of the site in 2015, the results of which are reported here.

Khuntsistsikhe Test Pits: Results

An archaeological evaluation, through the excavation of four test pits within the Khuntsi fortress (Figure 5), was undertaken by a small team from the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi in 2015. The initial aim was to examine archaeological layers inside the fortress, to study the stratigraphy and retrieve finds to determine the chronology. A temporary bench mark for spot heights was established at the base of the north wall of a probable tower, and was assigned an arbitrary value. Alongside the excavation, a limited GPS survey was undertaken using a Leica Zeno 10 of the University of Winchester’s Department of Archaeology. With this equipment it is possible to

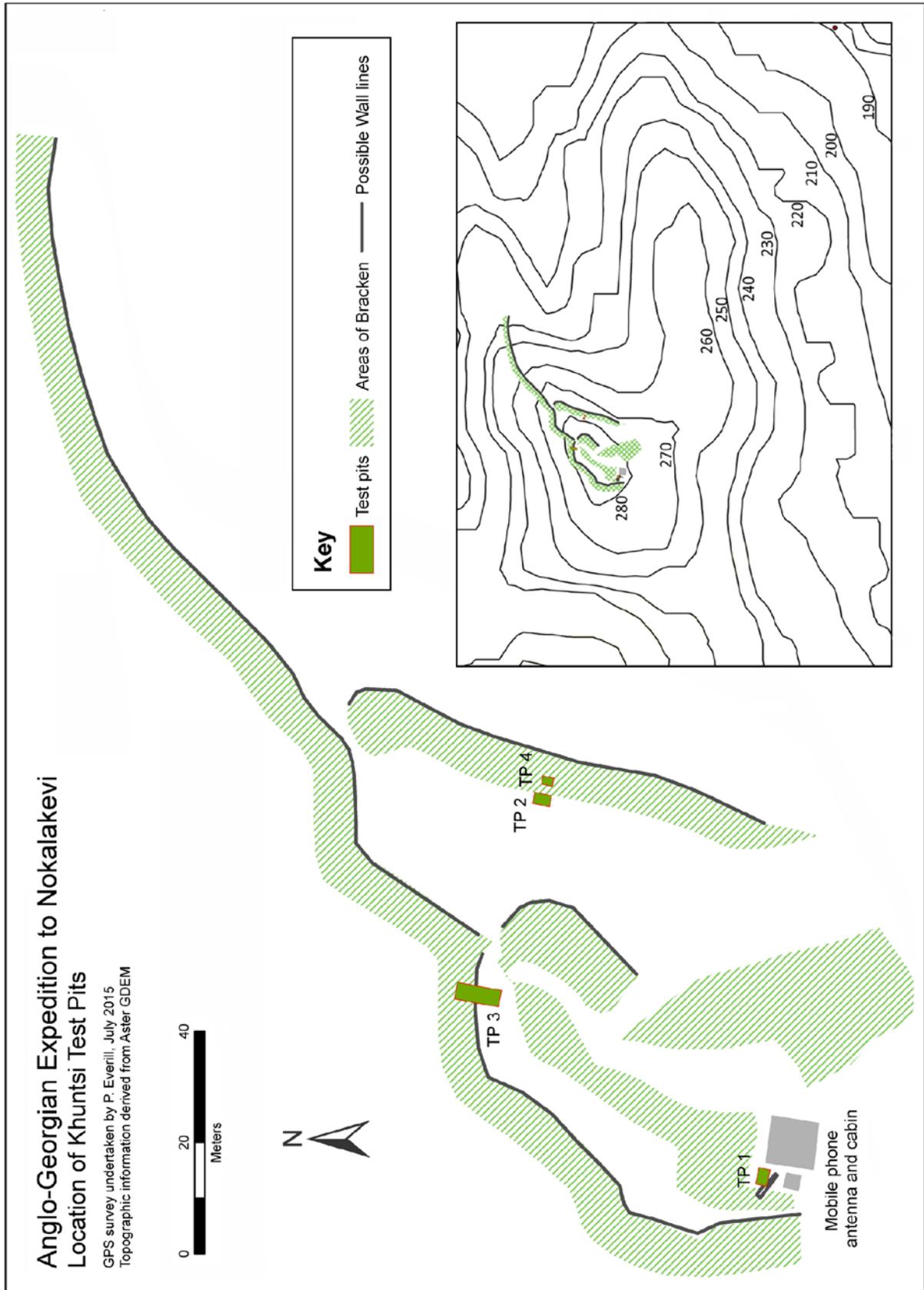


Figure 5: Location of Test Pits during the Khuntsistsikhe evaluation

locate points within 150mm of their precise global position, however the height readings tend to be less accurate so it was not used to establish the benchmark. During the survey it was observed that large areas of bracken appeared to be growing over areas with a higher density of stone rubble and, in places, short sections of surviving wall face could be observed along the edge of the bracken. These observations were used to produce conjectural wall lines in the mapped data, and the hypothesis appears to have been supported by evidence from Test Pit 3 (see below).

Test Pit 1

The first test pit was located immediately north of a surviving wall at the top of hill, within a probable tower and close to the mobile phone mast. It measured 3m east-west x 2m north-south, and was intended to reveal the extent and form of the wall(s) and to investigate the survival of internal/ external surfaces.

Following the removal of the topsoil (**100**), to a depth of 0.15m, it was seen to overlie a heavily compacted clay floor surface, **101**. This had the appearance of having been baked, even burnt in places where it had a reddish orange colour. This would be in keeping with the burning of the structure (possibly a tower) within which it was contained.

Finds retrieved from the topsoil included ceramic building material and sherds of pottery that were indicative of locally produced, Byzantine period vessels..

The clay floor was cleaned and recorded before being covered with breathable plastic sheeting and the trench backfilled. It will be properly investigated in 2016 when a bigger area can be opened.

Test Pit 2

The second test pit was located towards the east of the hilltop, adjacent to an area of bracken thought to indicate underlying wall/ rubble deposits. It measured 3m north-south by 2m east-west, and was intended to expose the west face of a wall, or the western edge of rubble that might indicate collapsed stone structures.

The topsoil at this location (**200**) was 0.26m deep and overlay layer **201**, which was a mid-brown clay. It was interpreted as a colluvial deposit incorporating elements of wall collapse (large rubble) with CBM and pottery, and charcoal towards the base. This layer was 0.74m thick and overlay a possible occupation layer (**202**) which was a 0.35m thick, mid-greyish brown silty clay, containing a significant quantity of pottery, daub and CBM. The pottery appeared unabraded and was therefore thought more likely to be *in situ*. The charcoal present immediately above - at the base of **201** - may actually represent the destruction phase, but a bigger area needs to be studied. Layer **202** overlay a possible natural deposit (**203**), which was excavated to a depth of 0.1m. It was a light yellowish brown clay with occasional small pebbles, and contained no archaeological material. Further work in 2016 will determine conclusively whether this is natural or archaeological. By the end of the evaluation in 2015 Test Pit 2 had been excavated to a depth of 1.5m.

Test Pit 3

Initially located adjacent to a further area of bracken, Test Pit 3 was intended to expose the south

face of an underlying wall/ rubble deposit that was suspected at the north of the hilltop. It initially measured 3m east-west x 2m north-south. Failing to observe archaeological deposits within TP3, it was extended to 3m east-west x 3.2m north-south, and then again to its final size of 3m east-west x 8m north-south. Initially (at 3x2m) the topsoil (layer **300**, 0.2m thick) directly overlay a natural soil (**301**), a light yellowish brown clay. Extending the trench revealed an east-west orientated line of limestone rubble (**303**), consisting of a dozen or more large limestone blocks of about 0.25-0.4m³. Having no obvious form, and with no mortar present, the trench was extended a second time to enable a satisfactory interpretation of this feature. Within the newly extended area of the test-pit the topsoil was seen to overlay an occupation layer (**302**) - thought to be equivalent to **202** in Test Pit 2. Layer **302** was a dark, greyish brown silty clay. It was not fully excavated but still produced 26.3kg of pottery, including a number of large, diagnostic pieces, plus 6.9kg of ceramic building material. Layer **302** first appeared at the line of rubble (**303**) and extended northwards. The cleaning of **302** revealed the south face of a wall (**304**). This wall was ultimately seen to be very substantial (1.5m thick), built of limestone blocks and bonded with mortar. It was orientated approximately east-west and situated on a natural break of slope, which marked the northern edge of the hilltop. Being constructed on a natural slope the north face was visible at the bottom. The wall apparently consisted of large blocks throughout, rather than a finer rubble core.

Layer **302** contained a significant quantity of pottery and animal bones, with some large pieces of locally-produced Byzantine period vessels, including rims of a pithos, (Pic. 9.2); lutherium (Pic. 9.3); dergi (Pic.9.4); 4. frying-pan (Pic. 9.5); and censer (Pic. 9.6). The last was of a type also found in Nokalakevi, and two stamped amphorae handles recovered from layer **302** displayed a plant/ vine motif with clear parallels with one found in Nokalakevi in 198?. (Pic. 10-11);

Test Pit 4

Test Pit 4 was located just east of TP2 in order to reveal a wall, of which the face was visible under the east side of the bracken. It measured 1.5m x 2m. Perhaps reflecting its position further down the slope there was colluvial material, primarily limestone rubble, directly on the surface. Layer **400** was therefore a very thin topsoil with a very colluvial character and a depth of 0.2m. Layer **400** sealed layer **401**, which was interpreted as an occupation layer similar to **202** and **302**. Layer **401** was a mid-brown silty clay with a thickness of 0.4m. It contained a significant quantity of archaeological material. The underlying layer, **402**, contained moderate, angular limestone blocks and was a light greyish brown clay. Excavating this layer to a depth of 0.3m, a total depth of 0.9m for the test pit, it was felt that it was an interface onto natural deposits. This hypothesis can be tested in future seasons.

Khuntsistsikhe Test Pits: Conclusions

It is clear that the archaeological evaluation of remains at Khuntsi have identified a fortified site, dating to the Late Antique period. It cannot yet be stated that these are definitely the remains of the Onogurisi of Agathias' contemporary accounts, but the evidence is beginning to look compelling.

- The geographical position of the Najikhu hill at Khuntsi: it is approximately halfway between Archaeopolis and Kutaisi; it overlooks the Tskhenistskali river; and is the perfect location from which to guard/ watch the approaches to the Lazikan capital, Tsikhegoji-Archaeopolis, from the east.
- The evidence of fortifications: The scant remains visible above ground only hint at the scale of the fortified works. While much further work is required, the size of the fortress is

suggested by the lines of bracken growing over walls and associated rubble – as demonstrated in TP3 – and remains of a tower in TP1.

- The date: While there is some mixing of material, the majority of the material culture found during the evaluation dates to the Byzantine/ Late Antique period, i.e. contemporary with the Lazikan wars. This includes the stamped amphorae handles, bearing a rare motif of this period only previously observed in Nokalakevi itself.

‘Open Area’ excavations planned for 2016 will greatly increase our understanding of this site, but this is undoubtedly a significant discovery. If it can be confirmed as the location of the ancient fortress of Onogurisi, then it perhaps represents the greatest breakthrough in Lazikan studies in a generation.

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APPENDIX

Small Find No.	Context No.	Description	Trench Coordinates	Level
1	313	Fragment of leg and torso from double-headed zoomorphic figurine	102.03/204.35	-4.36
2	313	Partial head, neck, torso and leg from double-headed zoomorphic figurine	103.73/203.21	-4.34
3	313	Bronze find – poss. Brooch pin fragment	101.43/ 204.43	-4.38
4	321	Complete head, partial body fragments of double-headed zoomorphic figurine	99.82/ 202.34	-4.44
5	321	Bronze object	104.10/ 202.63	-4.36
6	313	Bronze object – possible hair pin	103.23/ 204.87	-4.36

Table 5: Trench A 2015 Small Finds Register (All levels refer to the zero established in the 1980s)

Small Find No.	Context No.	Description	Trench Coordinates	Level
1	121	Small copper alloy fragment	103.36/ 202	125
2	121	Copper alloy cylinder?	103.9/ 201	124.06
3	122	Copper alloy sheet	101.06/ 202.49	125
4	121	Fe object	101.15/ 201.53	125.17
5	126	Copper alloy object	104.10/ 202.62	123.79
6	128	Copper alloy object	104.53/ 202.34	124.33
7	128	Copper alloy object (pin?)	103.00/ 203.10	124.40

Table 6: Trench C 2015 Small Finds Register (All levels are in metres above sea level)

Small Find No.	Context No.	Description	Trench Coordinates	Level
1	103	Head of animal; ceramic figurine	106.75/207.7	2.79

Table 7: Trench E 2015 Small Finds Register (All levels refer to the zero established in the 1980s)

Small Find No.	Context No.	Description	Trench Coordinates	Level
TP2 1	200	Partial iron knife blade	100.80/ 202.30	
TP3 1	302	Stamped Amphora	102.2/ 205.6	-2.25
TP3 2	302	Conical shaped ceramic	102.45/ 204.6	-2.04
TP3 3	302	Two Torus shaped sandstone, one whole one half	102.3/ 205.2	-2.03
TP3 4	302	Torus shaped ceramic	102.9/ 205.9	-2.03

Table 8: Khuntsistsikhe 2015 Small Finds Register

Sample No.	Context No.	Description	Sample Size
1	319	Ceramic vessel rim with handle, plus 20g soil, taken for OSL dating	20g
2	319	Organic rich sample – taken for bulk enviro sampling	3 large bags

Table 9: Trench A 2015 Sample Register

Sample No.	Context No.	Description	Sample Size
1	114	Pottery for OSL dating – sherds of single vessel (?Hellenistic jug?)	Sherds + 20g soil
2	122	Pottery for OSL dating – sherds of single vessel	Sherds + 20g soil
3	129	Pottery for OSL dating – directly above natural	1 sherd and 20g soil

Table 10: Trench C 2015 Sample Register

Sample No.	Context No.	Description	Sample Size
TP2 1	202	Pot sherd rim for OSL dating plus 20g soil 1.04m below topsoil (100.80/ 201.90)	20g
TP3 1	302	Base of pot, soil for environmental sample	600g

Table 11: Khuntsistsikhe 2015 Sample Register