

Anglo Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi

Trench B: 2002-2003

Paul EVERILL, Tbilisi, 22nd Sept. 2003

2002 Season

Area B was opened on the 21st August 2002. The southwest corner was located 15.6m north and 1.7m west of the ruin known as the triumphal arch, which is itself located to the east of the site of three churches (one of which is still extant and in use). It was decided to open a 7.5m by 7.5m area at this location partly to further expose a north-south wall that extended northwards from the triumphal arch and partly because of the results revealed in an adjacent trench excavated in 1997/8 by Dr. Lomitashvili. This trench was located to the east of the wall and produced from its lower layers examples of double-headed ceramic ritual bull figures dated to the 8th to 7th century B.C. Thus it was hoped that Area B would provide further clarification of the internal structures in the vicinity of the churches complex and also of the deposits associated with the earlier ritual figures.

Excavation began with the stripping of turf and topsoil (context 100) by a team of local workmen under archaeological supervision. It was unclear initially how much material had been deposited through colluvial drift as a result of the area being located on a gentle slope that started at the base of the hill to the north. At first it was thought that a quantity of rubble from a collapsed wall higher up the slope was present beneath the topsoil, however *in situ* mortared blocks of limestone were unearthed after 0.10-0.15m of material had been removed during cleaning. The picture was confusing as it appeared that there were not only remnants of the north-south wall (context 104) but also fragments of an east-west aligned wall (context 105) although no relationship between the two could be initially ascertained. The removal of a light rubble layer with patches of mortar to the southwest of the area (context 101) and a considerably more robust layer of rubble (context 102) to the north of wall (105) revealed that in fact the two walls did join to form a corner. With the removal of a further rubble layer (context 103) in the east of the area the wall structures were clarified and interim dating apportioned to the layers. Layer (101) was a mixed deposit measuring approximately 1.00m thick and it was confined predominantly to the area between the walls and the southern limit of excavation. Considerable quantities of potsherds were recovered dating from the 4th century BC to the 17th century AD with an additional two fragments of transfer printed bone china depicting, quite improbably, a 19th century street scene of Horse Guards in London. Also present within the deposit were animal bones representing the main domesticated species (sheep/goat, pig and cow) and a fragmentary piece of human radius.

Layer (102), north of wall (105), consisted of similar large limestone blocks, averaging 0.25m x 0.15m x 0.1m in size. It measured 0.6m deep but contained a higher density of rubble than either Layers (101) or (103). The soil matrix within this layer was dark and humic and it appeared that the rubble represented the partial collapse of wall (105), but also quite probably the collapse of structure(s) higher up the slope. The subsequent movement downhill of the loose material continued until it was impeded by the wall and accumulated against the northern face of (105). As with Layer (101) there was a large quantity of pottery, animal bone and CBM from many different periods as one would expect to find in layers formed by this process.

Layer (103) on the other hand was the slightest of the three rubble layers. The limestone blocks averaged 0.15m x 0.1m x 0.05m and the rubble was denser towards the south of the trench where the slope began to break onto a more level area. It was situated to the east of the north south wall (104) and colluvial movement combined with partial collapse of this wall would seem to account for this pattern of deposition. Also found within this layer was a substantial fragment of a human femur and distal humerus presumably from a disturbed burial further up the slope.

The construction of walls (104) and (105) was haphazard with unfaced limestone blocks laid in mortar to random courses that included large rounded river pebbles and robbed earlier

masonry. The joining between the two walls was partially accomplished by use of a large faced limestone block measuring 0.65m x 0.8m x 0.5m that had clearly been salvaged from one of the phase three (Byzantine) walls and re-used as a cornerstone. A similar providence was also suspected for some of the larger pieces of limestone rubble within the walls, although the presence of river pebbles suggests that other local materials were being utilised. Construction appears to have been directly onto the contemporary ground surface with little or no foundation. This is a strong factor in explaining the subsequent bowing and lean in wall (105) created by the pressure of colluvial materials on its northern face.

Within the enclosure created by walls (104) and (105) work continued down, beyond the rubble layer (101). In the small area of Trench B outside the walls work was suspended after the removal of layers (102) and (103) had revealed layer (106) – a dark, brown clay-silt with approximately 20% inclusions of fine to moderate limestone fragments. This was, in part, due to safety concerns of over-exposing the wall which had clearly already been weakened in places, but also for the practical reason that it would become increasingly difficult to work in these areas. Now that work was concentrated within the walls the removal of layer (101) revealed what appeared to be a buried topsoil (303) and only a matter of centimeters from that interface were found the first indications of human inhumations in the north-west corner of the enclosed area. There is a specialist osteological report within this monograph, but I wish to briefly discuss the stratigraphy. The first bones (108) were an assortment of long bones arranged roughly east west and were nearly dismissed as a disturbed burial when the articulated skeleton of a child (111) was found close by. Continued careful excavation revealed that there were two articulated adult skeletons underneath, one (114) cutting the other (117). It seems likely, following osteological analysis, that the bones that make up (108) are in fact disturbed elements of (117) which were afterwards reburied on top of (114). All were orientated east west and there were no grave goods by which to date the burials. It seems most likely, stratigraphically, that the burials were not exactly contemporary, but that only a short period of time - perhaps only a few years - elapsed between them. It is also very tempting to view these remains as representing a family group with a male and female in their early twenties joined later by a child, though clearly we cannot currently say decisively that this is the case. The stratigraphy is somewhat complicated by the fact that individual cuts were not apparent during excavation. This is due mainly to the gross similarity between the fills and the layer the graves were dug through (303). It was becoming clear that the “buried topsoil” layer (303) was in fact probably the result of intercutting graves and the mixing of up cast with humic material. It is a dark brownish-grey, sandy clay with approx 20% angular and sub-angular limestone fragments (average 50mm x 50mm) and abraded pieces of CBM. I suspect that it indicates fairly accurately the extent of the burial area. In the last days of the 2002 season these skeletons were recorded and lifted and as work continued in the southern part of the enclosed area a further human skeleton (300) was revealed. It was decided that this skeleton should be covered and protected until we could return in 2003 to excavate it properly.

The dates of the enclosure walls and the burials within them are currently subject to a great deal of debate. Based on the crude form of the walls it is felt that they most likely belong to the Dadiani period in Nokalakevi, C15th – 17th AD. During this period, more noticeably than before, river stone was utilized in wall building alongside old Byzantine blocks salvaged from crumbling walls. It is also believed that the burials are roughly contemporary with the walls as both components seem to be cut from, or built on to, the buried topsoil (303). Under different circumstances removal by excavation of the walls would potentially provide useful dating evidence, but in this instance it was decided to preserve them. It is curious, however, that the burials appear to be fairly shallow and layer (101) above makes one wonder if there were layers which were removed and back-filled with rubble. Accounts of graveyard clearance during the Soviet period in Nokalakevi cannot be discounted as resulting in this curious stratigraphy. Currently it must be admitted that neither the exact relationship between the walls and the burials, nor their respective dates is clear, but this can be resolved in the future.

2003 Season

This season's work began on Monday 25th August after we had removed the plastic sheeting and moderate backfill laid down at the end of the 2002 season. It was decided to extend Trench B so that we could compare the stratigraphy inside and outside the walls and to see if there might be any evidence of terracing or structures further up the slope. An extra 12.5m was measured out northwards making the total area under excavation this season 7.5m x 20m. I felt, in hindsight, that layers (100), (101), (102) and (103) represented reasonably modern (certainly post-Medieval) colluvial movement or deliberate backfill and, as such did not warrant specific archaeological attention although the workmen were supervised at all times. Therefore the work on the northern extension continued through the equivalent deposits. The topsoil/ overburden layer produced a large quantity of pottery and CBM from Hellenistic wares to modern glazed ceramics, as well as a disturbed burial of a large, robust male aged 25-30 found by workmen to the north, represented only by disarticulated leg, foot, pelvis and skull fragments.

At a depth of approximately 1m, in the north of the trench, the rubble came down onto what seems certain to be an interesting layer. (326) is a mid brown, silty clay with a high percentage of degraded daub and charcoal within its matrix, including a large burnt beam measuring approximately 1m x 0.20m. Excavation of this layer was not possible during the 2003 season as it was only in the last few days that the workmen achieved this depth, but I believe that it is a strong indication of the close proximity of timber framed building(s) - which have thus far been missing from Nokalakevi's archaeological record - and will provide much interesting work for the 2004 season and beyond. Approximately 7m from the northern edge of Trench B, (326) appears to be cut by (106) which I believe to be equivalent to (303). If my assessment of (303) is correct (see above) then this would indicate that the burial ground extends approximately 6m north of the walled enclosure. This clearly throws doubt on the theory that burial ground and walls are exactly contemporaneous. It suggests instead that either the wall is substantially later than the earliest burials and perhaps represents a formalising of the cemetery space and continued use, or that the burials continued beyond the enclosed area when space became limited. It will be interesting to see after the 2004 season if there are any apparent differences between the anticipated burials north of the walls and those we have already excavated within the walls.

Archaeological work this year was almost entirely limited to excavation of nine further burials and the gradual excavation of (303). That nine includes (300) which had been left covered since last year and was found to be very badly truncated, presumably by other grave cuts. Also of interest was (316), a male aged 35-40, which was found 0.1m below the grave of burial (117) and may well represent an addition to the hypothetical family group. I refer you to the specialist's report for a detailed analysis of the skeletal remains, but I wish to highlight three very interesting aspects of these burials.

- 1) By the ankle of skeleton (304) was found a small, but very ornate Gold artefact with a blue enamel background and two lines of ancient Greek lettering with white enamel inside. There is some damage to the lettering, but the top line appears to read: missing letter, ligatured omicron, upsilon, chi, two missing letters. Bottom line: mu, alpha, mu, omicron, nu, omicron, nu. "*-oux—mamonon*". It is approximately 40mm x 20mm x 3mm and is semi-circular with a plain reverse side and was perhaps part of a larger object. It is unclear, particularly from its location at the ankle, whether it is deliberate deposition within the grave or an accidental loss and part of the mixed deposits of (303). For caution it was recorded as being from (303) but it is interesting to note that skeleton (304), a male in his fifties with a possible perimortem blade trauma to the maxillo-facial region of the skull, is thus far the only north south burial found in Trench B. It may be that this artefact, provisionally dated to C7th-8th AD, is indeed a deliberate inclusion with the burial.
- 2) Skeletons (322) and (323), a female and male respectively, were buried with the former directly on top of the latter, with the head slightly to one side. They are not the only pair as (319), a young child, was buried with (325), an adult female, but they are interesting for two reasons. Firstly we found associated with (322) a copper alloy buckle, with an iron tang, provisionally dated to the

C6th-10th AD and belonging to a type associated with the *Khasars (?)*. Also (323) appears to have suffered a perimortem blade trauma to the proximal right femur, which could certainly have been the cause of death. It is tempting to infer from this that both (322) and (323) were killed in the same incident during that period.

- 3) Skeleton (307), a female aged 40-50 and possibly suffering with leprosy, was buried in a coffin. Traces of the wood survived in places, including a piece of the lid over the pelvis, and larger sections of the sides and base. This seems at odds with the other dates, which seem to put the burial ground in the mid to late first millennium AD, as one would not expect wood to survive anywhere near as long in the soil conditions of Nokalakevi. There were, however, no nails present and it may be that it is indeed an early example and that the wood was treated or naturally highly resinated. Unfortunately there were no other associated objects by which we could date the skeleton and we did not have the facilities available to conserve the wood for further analysis.

This season's work has been very interesting and provided us with some very special finds, but the chronology of the trench remains a puzzle. The gold ornament and the buckle give us a solid date for the cemetery in the second half of the first millennium AD, but it is not clear how long it was in use for or when the wall was built.

The current working hypothesis for the stratigraphic sequence in Trench B is that the burial ground was first used at some time around the 6th Century AD at a time when non-Christians and Christians might be buried together and before the formalised rigidity of later practices. It has been noted that although the walls do not run exactly north-south, east-west, that a number of the burials seem to respect their alignment, including (322) which was associated with the copper buckle (see above). This may suggest a contemporaneity with the earlier burials. Stratigraphically, however, it seems most likely that the burial ground was in use for some time before the construction of the wall in the post-medieval period, which was preceded by the removal of a large quantity of the cemetery soil (303) within the walled area - almost down to the depth of burials - creating a level area within the enclosure and effectively revetting the slope to the north. The rubble layers that now lie on top of context (303) appear to be only 100 to 200 years old suggesting that the enclosed area ceased to be maintained following the Dadiani period - during which the walls had been constructed. There is also the unknown element of Soviet period cemetery clearance. According to Schneider's plan of Nokalakevi in 1930-1 the corner of the enclosure wall, as excavated during the 2002 season, was still visible above ground (this was unknown to us last year). It does seem likely, therefore, that the upper element of the rubble layer in Trench B is a disturbed deposit - an upcast, or spoil deposit following the clearance of the cemetery further south.

The story of the Cemetery appears to be one of early Byzantine foundation, continued use and later formalisation - through construction of the walls - and then abandonment, disuse and finally destruction in the Soviet period. Further excavation in 2004 promises to be another fascinating season's work and will further illuminate these theories.

Contexts

NOK02/B

100	Layer	Dark, humic topsoil Depth between 10-20cm. Very mixed. Hellenistic to Modern pottery.
101	Layer	Rubble Layer c. 0.9m deep Large, rough, limestone blocks (Avg. 0.25m x 0.15m x 0.1m) within dark brown, humic soil. Also consists of occasional spreads of degraded mortar and modern material in upper part of layer. First human bone fragments in this layer. Buries topsoil (122/ 303) within walls (104) and (105) (May actually consist of 2 or 3 separate depositional events. See section #309 :- Larger stones in upper part of layer 0.2m deep; Mortar spread 0.05m deep; Denser rubble layer (but with smaller stones) 0.65m deep) Interpretation: Rubble from collapse of East-West wall (105) and North-South wall (104) and other structure(s) further up the slope. Post-Medieval.
102	Layer	Rubble Layer c. 0.6m deep Large, rough, limestone blocks (Avg. 0.25m x 0.15m x 0.1m) within dark brown, humic soil. Also consists of post-med material. Buries layer (106) north of wall (105). SMALL FIND # 2: Cu Alloy – Rim of Cauldron? Interpretation: Rubble from collapse of wall(s) further up the slope seems to have collected on the northern face of the East-West wall (105) to create this layer. Post-Medieval
103	Layer	Rubble Layer Medium to large, rough, limestone blocks (Avg. 0.15m x 0.10m x 0.05m) within dark brown, humic soil. Also consists of post-med material. Buries layer (106) east of wall (104). Human bone fragments in this layer. Interpretation: Rubble from collapse of North-South wall (104) and possibly from structure(s) further up the slope. Post-Medieval.
104	Masonry	North-South Wall Limestone/ Ragstone blocks, some Riverstone (c. 10%) and v. occasional CBM. Bonded with mortar. Core is very well mortared. Average size of face = 0.2m x 0.25m x 0.15m. Average size of core = 0.2m x 0.15m x 0.1m Mostly undressed. Cornerstone is a large dressed block (? re-used Byzantine) 0.65m x 0.8m x 0.5m. 0.92m wide x max. surviving height 0.95m Crude construction with core and face. Interpretation:

Initially thought to date to the Dadiani period of Nokalakevi, C15th – 17th AD, because of the crude form of the wall, and to be contemporary with the late burials within the enclosure it forms with (105). It now seems likely that the burials are much earlier- possibly C7th-10th AD – and, although it is quite possible that the walls were built by the inhabitants of Nokalakevi immediately following the collapse of Byzantine influence in the area c. C8th AD, the stratigraphic evidence suggests that they may not actually be contemporary with the burials, but actually post-date them. It is possible that they represent a later formalisation of an extant early Christian cemetery during the Dadiani period.
There is no associated cut or foundation for these walls and they are apparently built directly onto buried topsoil (122/ 303).

105	Masonry	East-West return of Wall (104) Limestone/ Ragstone blocks, some Riverstone (c. 10%) and v. occasional CBM. Bonded with mortar. Core is very well mortared. Average size of face = 0.2m x 0.25m x 0.15m. Average size of core = 0.2m x 0.15m x 0.1m Mostly undressed. 0.8m wide x max. surviving height 1m Crude construction with core and face. <u>Interpretation:</u> See (104)
106	Layer	Dark Brown Clay-Silt outside walls (104) + (105) Excavation suspended outside walls at this layer for safety reasons in 2002. To be continued at 1m distance from walls in 2004. Contains Frequent small to medium limestone fragments. Possibly equivalent to 'buried topsoil' (303), i.e. a cemetery soil
107	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)
108	Skeleton	Disarticulated Human long bones orientated East West. On top of SK (114). Apparently represents disarticulated parts of (117) Male. 22-24yrs old. Height approx 170cm. No pathologies or trauma.
109	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (107) and (108) Unclear
110	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)
111	Skeleton	Articulated Child. East West On top of SK (114) Unclassified Juvenile.
112	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (110) and (111) Unclear
113	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)
114	Skeleton	Articulated Adult. East West Cuts SK (117) Female. 20-21years old. Height approx 172.3cm. No pathologies or trauma. Congenital fusing of two cervical vertebrae.
115	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (113) and (114) Unclear

116	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)	
117	Skeleton	Articulated Adult. East West Truncated by SK (114) and poss reburied as SK (108) Male. 22-24yrs old. Height approx 170cm. No pathologies or trauma.	
118	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (116) and (117) Unclear	
119	Fill	Grave Fill	Recorded as NOK03/B 301
120	Skeleton	Child	Recorded as NOK03/B 300
121	Cut	Grave Cut	Recorded as NOK03/B 302
122	Layer	Layer into which graves cut	Recorded as NOK03/B 303

NOK03/B

Topsoil/ Modern Overburden

Trench B was extended 12.5m to the north to make it 7.5m x 20m. This was in order to compare the stratigraphy inside and outside the enclosure walls. I felt, in hindsight, that NOK02/ B (100),(101),(102) and (103) represented reasonably modern colluvial movement or deliberate backfill and, as such did not warrant archaeological attention. Therefore the work on the northern extension continued down until we reached (326) and we then had reason to expect archaeological deposits.

Disturbed burial of large, robust male aged 25-30 found by workmen to the north. Represented by leg, feet, pelvis and skull fragments.

See NOK02/B (100) and (101) for equivalent description.

300	Skeleton	Articulated but Truncated Child. East West. Sex unknown. <17years old	
301	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)	
302	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (300) and (301) Unclear	
303	Layer	Buried Topsoil (cemetery soil) Dark Brown Grey sandy clay with approx 20% angular and sub-angular Limestone fragments (average 50mm x 50mm) and abraded pieces of CBM.	

Interpretation:

Graves apparently cut into this layer. It seems likely that this is not so much a buried topsoil as the result of the continuous process of digging graves into the subsoil creating a very mixed, humic layer – a cemetery soil. All the graves appear to be backfilled with this material making it virtually impossible to recognise the cuts.

“SMALL FIND” NUMBER ASSIGNED

Gold, Byzantine C7th-8th AD artefact with blue and white enamel and Greek lettering found near to the ankle of SK (304). It is unclear whether it is deliberate deposition within (305) or part of the mixed deposits of (303). For caution it was recorded as being from (303). (See Plan # 301)

304	Skeleton	Articulated Adult. North South Male. 50- 55yrs. Osteoporosis or TB? Periodontitis. Sword blow to face? Height approx.165.07cm
305	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)
306	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (304) and (305) Unclear, but cuts (321) and truncates Skeletons (322) and (323)
307	Skeleton	Articulated Adult in Coffin. East West Female. 40-50yrs. Fused vertebrae (not congenital). Avicular healing. Poss. Leprosy. Height approx.154.87cm
308	Timber	Partial Coffin Lid Black, degraded wood surviving only as a small area 0.35m x 0.3m above pelvis of Skeleton (307)
309	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)
310	Timber	Coffin Base and Sides Black, degraded wood surviving only in places. Length 1.66m x width c.0.3m x depth (from lid) c.0.28m
311	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (307),(308),(309) and (310) Unclear
312	Skeleton	Articulated Adult. East West. Female. 20 years. Height approx.155.86cm
313	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)
314	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (312) and (313) Unclear
315	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)
316	Skeleton	Articulated Adult. East West 0.1m underneath SK (117) Male. 35-40. Congenital fusion of 2 thoracic vertebrae. Abscess formed around impacted molar. Height approx.172.24cm
317	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (315) and (316) Unclear
318	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)
319	Skeleton	Articulated Child buried on top of (325). East West Sex unknown. Approximately 6-8yrs old.
320	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (318), (319) and (325) Unclear
321	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (303)
322	Skeleton	Articulated Adult Skeleton. East West Female. 33-45. No pathologies other than caries. Height approx.158.77cm. Truncated by [306] Associated with C6th-10th AD Cu Alloy buckle. (See Plan # 304)
323	Skeleton	Articulated Adult Skeleton buried with (322). East West Male. >22years old. Mineralised plaque.

Poss. perimortem blade trauma to upper right femur (and pelvis?)
Truncated by [306]

324	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (321), (322) and (323)
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Unclear
Truncated by [306]

325	Skeleton	Articulated Adult buried with (319). East West
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Female. Thread-notch on left maxillary incisor. Height approx. 161.5cm

326	Layer	Mid Brown Silty Clay with Daub and Charcoal (incl. poss. beam slot)
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To the north of the extension to Trench B.
See Plan # 310. Appears to be the ground surface into which the burial ground was dug and therefore it should be expected that the Dark Grey Brown Sandy Clay (106) north of the walls will also contain burials. (326) is as yet unexcavated so it is unclear to what period this layer dates but may provide further stratigraphical assistance in dating the cemetery.

Graphics

NOK02/B

1	Plan	Pre-Ex (101)(102)(103)(104)(105)	1:20	Paul E et al
2	Elev.	W-Facing Elev. of Wall (104) (2/2)	1:10	Mary S
3	Elev.	E-Facing Elev. of Wall (104)	1:10	Jane M
4	Plan	Human Skeleton (108)	1:10	Liz
5	Plan	Human Skeleton (111)	1:10	Mary S
6	Plan	Human Skeleton (114)	1:10	Jane M
7	Plan	Human Skeleton (117)	1:10	Jo W
8	Plan	Bottom Plan (104)(105)(120)(122) (109)(112)(115)(118)	1:20	Paul E

NOK03/B

300	Plan	Human Skeleton (300)	1:10	Steve K
301	Plan	Human Skeleton (304)	1:10	Ross L
302	Plan	Human Skeleton (307)	1:10	Jessica W
303	Plan	Human Skeleton (312)	1:10	Tom B
304	Plan	Human Skeleton (322)	1:10	Steve K
305	Plan	Human Skeleton (319)	1:10	Tom B
306	Plan	Human Skeleton (316)	1:10	Niko
307	Plan	Human Skeleton (323)	1:10	Alex H-S
308	Plan	Human Skeleton (325)	1:10	Jessica W
309	Sect.	Rough E-Facing section either side of wall (105) showing differences within rubble layer (101) and (102)	1:20	Paul E
310	Plan	Bottom Plan (104)(105)(326)(303)	1:50	Alex H-S + Steve K
311	Plan	Plan showing distribution of skeletons from Nok02/B and Nok03/B (104),(105),(108),(111),(114),(117),(300), (304),(307),(312),(316),(319),(322),(323), (325)	1:20	Paul E

Trench B: Matrix

