

# Anglo Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi

## Trench B: 2004

PAUL EVERILL, Southampton, March 2005

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### Report on this year's work in Trench B

Arriving in Nokalakevi about 5pm on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> July the commencement of our work on site was delayed by the bad weather that had been a feature of this summer – and which was to prove problematic throughout the 2004 excavation season. The 'advance party' of staff, with the assistance of local workmen, was finally able to remove the backfill and plastic sheeting during Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> July. We prepared the area for the start of archaeological work by straightening the trench edges, removing the weeds, cleaning the walls (104) and (105) and ensuring that the spoil heaps were moved back a safe distance from the trench.

Beginning in earnest on Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> July we trowelled the whole of Trench B a number of times to ensure that we could see some of the subtle differences in the contexts. However, within the southern part of the walled enclosure it was clear that the cemetery soil (303) was still present - and with it the possibility of further burials. Where the Byzantine burials had already been fully excavated in the north of the walled enclosure was a brown layer (340), containing a large quantity of burnt daub and clay. This appears to be very similar to layer (326), north of the walls, which leads me to suspect that this is a late Roman occupation layer which covers the entire trench – and quite possibly contains evidence of timber buildings (see the 2003 report and below).

Layer (326) itself initially appeared to only be present in the far northwest corner of the trench. To the east and south of it was layer (106), which was assumed to represent a continuation of the cemetery soil beyond the walls – thus possibly making walls (104) and (105) later than the Byzantine cemetery. Having trowelled the whole trench it seemed that there was a line of lighter material about 1m wide running directly north of the north-south wall (104). It was hoped initially that this represented a robber trench of part of the first phase of the walls. If this was the case we may have had the opportunity to accurately date the construction of the north-south wall for the first time – not being able to excavate the standing remains – or at least the end of that first phase. Unfortunately it transpired that this apparent feature was actually an artefact of the way that we had stripped the area last year – effectively taking off 'spits' of about 0.2m. Further investigation revealed that the contours of the slope had not been accurately followed and that the lighter area most likely represented a break of slope. This may account for the apparent relationship with the north-south wall (104), which would quite conceivably have been built at the top of a natural or artificial ridge.

Removing layer (106) to the east exposed more of (326) including further, potentially structural, elements within it. In 2003 we had revealed a burnt beam and charcoal in the northwest of the trench. I could now see, about four metres away in the northeast, an area of clean, dark brown clay with large limestone blocks underneath (where the workmen had over excavated it). All this combined indicated to me a well-built timber structure reminiscent of fairly high-quality Roman timber and clay buildings found across the Empire. None of this has as yet been excavated as it would have been out of sequence, but during 2005 it should be possible to properly investigate this structure.

To the south of the exposed occupation layer (326), removal of the colluvial soil (106) revealed a similar layer, (339). This was initially thought to be a further colluvial deposit, but the discovery of two articulated burials within it - (336) and (338) - suggests that it is, in actual fact, a continuation of the cemetery soil found within the walled enclosure – i.e. (303). This supports the original assessment that the walls are late or even post-medieval structures. The removal of layer (339) revealed the brown occupation layer (326) underneath it. Layer (326) sloped much more steeply than had previously been thought – to a considerable depth beneath the base of the east-west wall (105). This also supports a late date for the walls.

A large proportion of this year was spent excavating down to the occupation layer (326) north of the walls and a number of our volunteers worked very hard indeed to achieve this – much to their credit. Within the walled enclosure, however, the delicate work of excavating human burials was still the priority. As well as the two beyond the walls there were nine in this area during the 2004 season. Many were truncated, demonstrating that the cemetery had been in use for an extended period – at least beyond a short-term response to an epidemic or conflict. For example, during this year and previous years we have found what appears to be a truncated burial with the disturbed elements reburied, disarticulated but orientated east west, on top of the most recent burial. Clearly, had these elements still been fleshed their treatment would have been different and this indicates a more prolonged usage of the cemetery.

Two burials in particular provided special interest. Skeleton (328) was a partially articulated juvenile (see the Osteological report for the specialist assessment) with a crude copper ring (Small



*The ring finger from Skeleton (328)*

Find NOK04/B #3) consisting of one piece of copper alloy overlapping itself. The ring was still *in situ* on a finger of what was thought to be the right hand (post depositional movement of the skeleton made an exact determination of the ring finger impossible during excavation). It seems possible to me that this was an adult sized ring that was modified to fit a smaller, adolescent finger, but it could equally be crude workmanship. Further

specialist work at the museum in Tbilisi is required on the ring to draw more detailed conclusions.

There is also Skeleton (362) which was found to the southern edge of the walled area. This was particularly interesting, not least because it was clearly one of the earlier burials and as such the fill was noticeably different from the ubiquitous cemetery soil (303), which had until now made positive identification of the grave cuts impossible. Not only was this a nearly complete, articulated adult burial with a clearly defined grave cut, but it also had complete, lugged Byzantine pot (about 0.2m max diameter its shoulder) beyond the skull in the western edge of the grave. This is something that we had not found until now and represents an interesting depositional practice with an apparently early Christian burial in this area. Accurate dating of this vessel may prove particularly useful in understanding the period over which this cemetery was used.



*The Byzantine pot associated with skeleton (362)*

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### Thoughts on the Colluvial material

In Trench B there is a very thick layer of material - (101);(102);(106) and (103) – which contains a very mixed assortment of finds – plastic and metalwork that dates from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; 19<sup>th</sup> Century pottery and metalwork; Byzantine pottery and glass and Hellenistic pottery. In 2002 we dug this in layers south of the wall, but in 2003 I decided it was

colluvium, and therefore 'non-archaeological', and so we removed it all together when the workmen extended Trench B to the north.

There are photographs in existence that show the site from the 1960s/ 1970s. These also show the hillside to the north under low shrub, rather than trees like today. We know that Schneider excavated one of the towers on the slope in 1930-1 and his other plans of this time show the walls (104) and (105) still clearly above ground.

Putting these facts together might suggest that the hill was cleared – possibly in Schneider's time following his discovery of an extraordinary gold coin hoard – and this resulted in a metre or so of material from the hill being deposited around the wall in the last 70 years – deforestation being the major contributing factor to land-slides/ movement of soil, rocks etc.

If the tree-felling was for the benefit of, or resulting from the work of, the first archaeologist to excavate in Nokalakevi, Schneider, it is quite ironic that these actions appear to have ultimately led to the burial of the walls and the creation of a new archaeological record.

## Context Register

### NOK04/B

327	Fill	<b>Grave Fill</b> Dark grey Clayey Silt; Frequent Inclusions of fine angular and sub-angular limestone fragments; Very mixed – contains Byzantine and Hellenistic pottery. Essentially the same as (303) which is the cemetery soil.
328	Skeleton	<b>Partially articulated juvenile – east-west burial</b> For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report  <u>Small find NOK04/B #3 – crude Copper Alloy ring in situ on finger of ?right? hand</u>
329	Cut	<b>Grave Cut- filled with (327) and (328)</b> Unclear
330	Fill	<b>Fill of pit [331]</b> Dark grey Clayey Silt; Frequent Inclusions of fine angular and sub-angular limestone fragments; Large sherds of pottery, including a substantial percentage of a broken jug with handle, which was photographed in situ.
331	Cut	<b>Pit</b> Unclear because fill (330) essentially the same as buried topsoil/cemetery soil (339).  <u>Interpretation</u> Assumed to be a cut feature, despite the edges being unclear, because colluvial movement would have resulted in a scatter and disintegration of the large jug. Edge of cut unclear, but pottery and associated animal bone only within a 0.5m diameter. Possible small refuse pit.
332	Fill	<b>Grave Fill</b> See description of (327)
333	Skeleton	<b>Partially articulated adult – east-west burial</b> For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report
334	Cut	<b>Grave Cut – filled with (332) and (333)</b> Unclear
335	Fill	<b>Grave Fill</b> Dark grey-brown silty clay; Frequent Inclusions of fine angular and sub-angular limestone fragments; Very mixed – contains Byzantine and Hellenistic pottery.

Essentially the same as (339) which is the cemetery soil/ buried topsoil north of the walls.

336	Skeleton	<b>Articulated adult – east-west burial</b> For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report
337	Cut	<b>Grave Cut</b> Unclear
338	Skeleton	<b>Articulated adult legs into western trench edge</b> For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report
339	Layer	<b>Cemetery soil/ Buried topsoil – north of walls</b> Dark grey-brown silty clay; Frequent Inclusions of fine angular and sub-angular limestone fragments; Very mixed – contains Byzantine and Hellenistic pottery.
<p><b><u>Interpretation</u></b> Initially thought to be a cemetery soil extending north of the walls (104) + (105) due to its similarity to (303). Despite having two burials (338) and (336) and the ‘amphora pit’ [331], it now seems most likely that this is a buried topsoil.</p>		
340	Layer	<b>Brown layer – inside walls</b> Appears to contain large quantities of burnt daub and/ or clay. Not excavated during the 2004 season.
341	Fill	<b>Grave Fill</b> See description of (327)
342	Skeleton	<b>Articulated but truncated juvenile – east-west burial</b> For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report
343	Cut	<b>Grave Cut- filled with (341) and (342)</b> Unclear
344	Fill	<b>Grave Fill</b> See description of (327)
345	Skeleton	<b>Disarticulated – reburial?</b> For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report
346	Cut	<b>Grave Cut- filled with (344) and (345)</b> Unclear
347	Fill	<b>Grave Fill</b> See description of (327)
348	Skeleton	<b>Partially articulated adult – truncated below chest – east-west</b> For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report
349	Cut	<b>Grave Cut- filled with (347) and (348)</b> Unclear
350	Fill	<b>Grave Fill</b> See description of (327)
351	Skeleton	<b>Articulated adult legs – truncated above thigh – east-west</b> For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report
352	Cut	<b>Grave Cut- filled with (350) and (351)</b> Unclear
353	Fill	<b>Grave Fill</b> See description of (327)

354	Skeleton	Disarticulated and disturbed – elements orientated east-west For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report
355	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (353) and (354) Unclear
356	Fill	Fill of Pit Dark brown, silty clay. Frequent inclusions of angular and sub-angular limestone fragments (avg. 50mm x 111m x 70mm)
357	Cut	Cut of sub-circular pit 1.2m North-South x 1.0m East-West x 0.15m deep

**Interpretation**

Probably base of truncated pit. Possibly cut from top of colluvial material (106) but missed during excavation because (356) is so similar to (106)

\* 358, 359, 360 voided

361	Fill	Grave Fill Dark Brown, loose clayey silt. Moderate mortar flecks, frequent disarticulated human bone. Moderate angular 80-100mm limestone fragments.  West end of grave contained a <b>complete, lugged, Byzantine pot</b> It had been placed upright, immediately to the west of the skull.
362	Skeleton	Articulated adult - east-west burial For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report  Excavator notes that: The fill was full of disarticulated human bone including two femurs and skull carefully re-laid into the grave (which could show some relationship or reverence?). The body has probably been wrapped in a shroud, which had been sown (as no pins present) and carefully lowered into the grave with two stones placed on either side of the arms to wedge the upper body in place.
363	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (361) and (362) Sub rectangular cut with rounded corners. 1.89m East-West x 0.55m North-South. Steep sided edges with rounded base.

**Further Discussion**

This cut is one of a series of intercutting graves including [366]; [369] and [372] and seems to be the last in the sequence.

364	Fill	FOUND BUT NOT EXCAVATED DURING 2004
365	Skeleton	
366	Cut	
367	Fill	FOUND BUT NOT EXCAVATED DURING 2004
368	Skeleton	
369	Cut	
370	Fill	FOUND BUT NOT EXCAVATED DURING 2004
371	Skeleton	
372	Cut	
373	Fill	Grave Fill See description of (327)

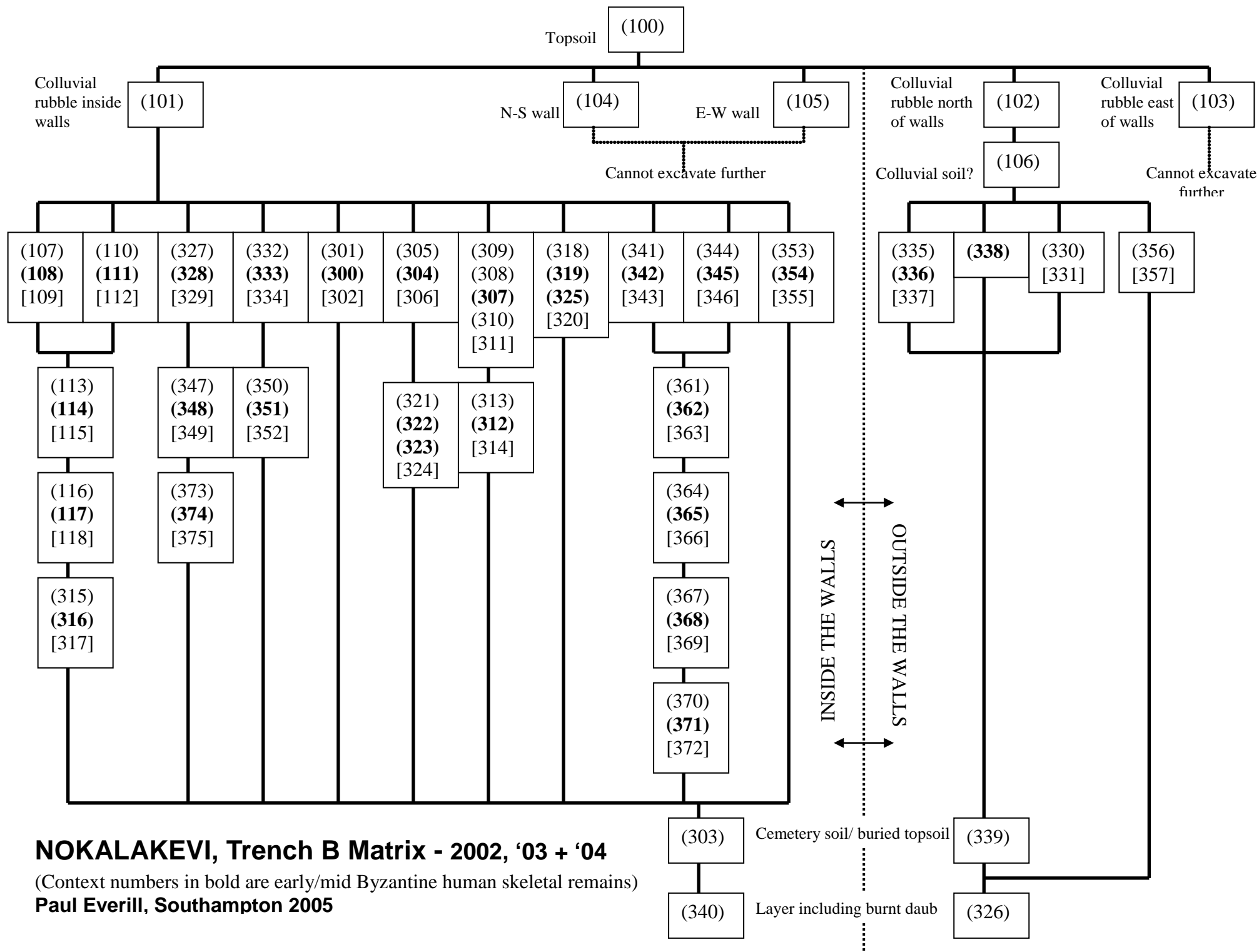
374	Skeleton	Articulated adult legs – truncated above knee – east-west For detailed discussion see specialist Osteological report
375	Cut	Grave Cut- filled with (373) and (374) Unclear

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## Graphics Register

### NOK04/B

312	Plan	Human Skeleton (328)	1:10	Jeff
313	Plan	Partial Amphora (330)	1:10	Chris O
314	Plan	Human Skeleton (333)	1:10	Ben N
315	Plan	Human Skeleton (336)	1:10	Jamie E
316	Plan	Human Skeleton (342)	1:10	Richard B
317	Plan	Human Skeleton (345)	1:10	Meg S
318	Plan	North Part of the trench (326);(339)	1:50	Paul E
319	Plan	Human Skeleton (348)	1:10	Jess W
320	Plan	Human Skeleton (351)	1:10	Jeff
321	Plan	Human Skeleton (354)	1:10	Jess W
322	Section	W-Facing Section of Pit [357]	1:10	Jamie E
323	Plan	Plan of Pit [357]	1:20	Jamie E
324	Plan	Human Skeleton (374)	1:10	Alex H-S
325	Plan	Human Skeleton (362)	1:10	Rat



**NOKALAKEVI, Trench B Matrix - 2002, '03 + '04**  
 (Context numbers in bold are early/mid Byzantine human skeletal remains)  
 Paul Everill, Southampton 2005

**NOK02 /3  
Trench B  
Drawing # 311  
Plan of burials**

25-09-2003 P.E.

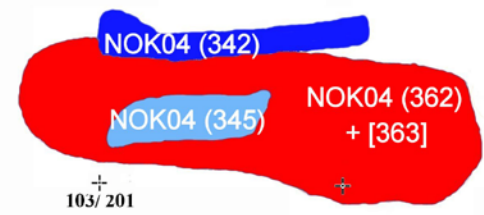
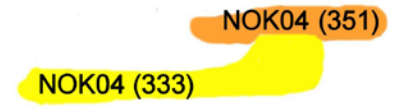
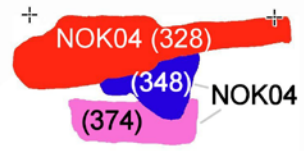
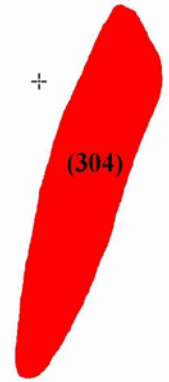
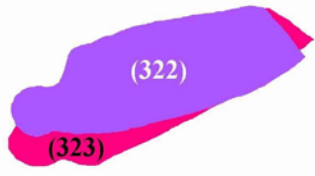
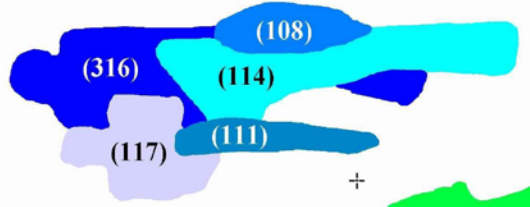
(Added to after NOK04)



(105)

101/205

103/205



101/201

103/201



(104)

See Plan Nok02/B # 8



