

Anglo Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi

Trench B: 2005

Paul EVERILL, Southampton, 27th November 2005

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Trench B Report



Figure 1: The Trench at the start of the season

The 2005 season began on the 1st August when the student volunteers arrived in Nokalakevi from Britain. Most of the staff and the Georgian volunteers had already been on site for a few days, including an overland team who had transported equipment all the way from Britain. We had already removed last years backfill and plastic sheeting from Trench B and following an initial trowelling clean I identified two key areas for our work to focus on. Last year I was convinced that there were structural elements of a clay and timber building starting to appear at the north of the trench. This did seem clearer right

from the start this year and I wanted to focus on this to establish just exactly what it represented. Along with the continued excavation of any further human remains from inside the Byzantine cemetery at the south of the trench, this was my main aim for our work in Trench B this season. In terms of supervision I decided that Niko Murgulia, a Georgian Masters student who has worked with us for three seasons now, should assist me by supervising work in the cemetery while I concentrated on investigating the potential structure.

Work in the initial stages of the season revealed a number of important pieces of information which have changed the perception we had of the archaeology at the end of the 2004 season and our plans for this season. Firstly, it soon became clear that a layer of burnt daub and clay (326), north of the cemetery, had not yet been fully exposed. Instead there remained a layer of quite fine limestone rubble, possibly colluvial material, over most

of that area. This rubble was assigned the number (379). Last year, in some areas, we had removed colluvial soils (106) and (339) down onto (326). I now strongly suspect that these soils are the same and I believe that (379) almost certainly represents the denser elements within this broader colluvial deposit which sits on top of the demolition layer (326)

At the far north of the trench it became clear very early on that the two or three large limestone blocks that had been exposed last year were actually merely part of a line of stones that ran the complete width of the trench. This line linked the burnt beam at the west of the trench (which had first been exposed in 2003) with an area of dark reddish brown clay at the north-east (see the 'Beginning of Season Trench Plan').

Finally we discovered that somebody had removed three human burials that had been identified last year, but left unexcavated – presumably for some kind of memento or in an act of wanton vandalism. These burials had been truncated by Skeleton (362) and its related grave cut [363] and elements of them were therefore exposed. They had remained covered and protected all year and it was only when we re-opened the trench that they had been removed. A bag of human bone was later recovered from elsewhere, but it was mixed up and we have had to void the context numbers assigned to these remains - (364) to [372] - and any information that could have been obtained from these bones *in situ* was lost.

The Hellenistic Building (see the relevant plan)

The nature of our work this year could hardly have been much more different to last year. The hard work of removing the colluvial deposits in the north of the trench last year meant that we were able to work on some very interesting archaeology. Much less soil was shifted this year, but instead this part of the trench became a focal point of the season's work. By the end of the 2004 season I was of the opinion that we were beginning to expose a clay and timber building, that would probably turn out to be Roman or Byzantine, situated immediately under the colluvial deposits in the first occupation layers in Trench B. Removing (379), a layer of rubbly colluvium, we began to expose the full extent of a layer of burnt clay and daub (326) that covered much of the north of the trench. It became clear that this represented the final collapse of our building, with sections of wall still fairly coherent and containing the charcoal remains of wooden posts. This was the case particularly toward the west of the trench and signs of heat-scorching on some of the stones that form the 'foundation' for this building suggest that the destructive fire was at its fiercest in this area. This was also near to two pieces of charcoal beam that were still lying *in situ* on top of the stone foundation (381).

The method of construction appears, from the small area of the building that we have thus far exposed, to have involved the levelling of an area and the laying of an unbonded line of large limestone blocks as a surface foundation – there is no indication of a cut for it – onto which was placed a wooden beam(s). It seems likely that upright posts measuring approximately 0.1m in diameter, such as the ones we found evidence for either as charcoal, or as impressions in pieces of daub, were fixed to this horizontal beam. Around this frame wattle would have been woven, before daub was applied in quite a substantial quantity to make a strong wall. There was no archaeological evidence for the roofing material, which would probably rule out tile given that it normally survives very well in the archaeological record when present. The areas of very compact red clay (380) north of the foundation (381) are almost certainly surviving elements of a 'beaten earth' floor common in this kind of structure. To the south of the building we exposed a large area of cobbling



Figure 2: The Hellenistic Foundation (381) and related cobble surface (397)

(397) which is clearly some kind of surface. It is not metalled enough to be a road, nor is it confined in any way, but merely peters out away from the building. It appears instead to be more like a yard surface and there is an indication of a step up to the wall, where we also found a dump of domestic rubbish – predominantly pottery - (388). I believe that these both suggest the presence of a doorway close by, though there is nothing in the structural remains to support this.

During removal of the demolition/collapse layer (326) we began to recover a large quantity of pottery. Initially we suspected that Prof. Lomitashvili's assessment of them as Hellenistic period sherds indicated more colluvial drift from the known Hellenistic sites at the top of the hill. However, we were soon recovering such a quantity of Hellenistic ceramic material, including several large and unabraded sherds, that we had to reassess the likely dating of the structure. Although the method of construction for small vernacular buildings was much the same for a long period, our assumption that this was probably Byzantine was based more on the relatively high level of it in an archaeological sequence predicted from Prof. Lomitashvili's previous work in a nearby trench. By the end of the season no doubt remained that we were excavating a building from around the 4th or 3rd Century BC and that we were contributing to a little known period in the history of Nokalakevi. Future seasons will hopefully provide an opportunity to extend the trench so that we can excavate far more of this and other buildings.

During removal of the demolition/collapse layer (326) we began to

The Byzantine Cemetery

(see the plan of all the burials from this area excavated from 2002-2005)

This year we excavated a further four human burials from within the cemetery, and exposed one more (395) which was covered over again and will be excavated in 2006. This will be the 26th burial recovered from the cemetery since work began here in 2002. For a detailed assessment see the Osteological Report (some notes are also included in the Context Register below). In this report, however, I would like to discuss the main issues raised by this year's work in this area.

Half way through this season, following the excavation of two further Christian burials (383) and (386) at the south of the area, workmen started taking the cemetery soil (303) down again and it wasn't long, predictably, before they found another skeleton (395). This was over in the east of the cemetery and its feet looked as if they would be right up against the north-south wall (104) so yet again we had to go into the baulk which we had left in place to support it. Niko started taking the baulk back to expose this east-west burial and came down on the legs of a north-south burial (392) right up against the wall and 30-40cm directly above (395). (395) was immediately covered and our attention turned to (392). The latter was very well preserved, but there were no finds associated with it that might provide a date for it or a clue to its religion or ethnic origin.

We have now excavated three north-south burials from the north-east corner of the cemetery. All three are in close proximity and include an older male (304) and a neonate

(377). The latter had been badly exposed and disturbed by soil erosion over the last year and had to be lifted rapidly in the first few days of this season. This group is something of a puzzle in an ostensibly Christian cemetery. It is also worth noting that (392) had two large stones on top of it. It seems quite likely that these stones have fallen from the bottom of the wall which suggests to me that the grave was dug down the side of the wall and then slightly underneath – this was also my interpretation of the grave of the neonate (377). This undermined the bottom course and caused the stones to fall onto the grave soon after. This would of course mean that the burial post-dates the wall construction. Given that the form of the wall suggests a late date (no earlier than the 11th Century AD) and that the pottery finds and occasional 'Small Finds' from the cemetery soil (303) and the grave fills suggest an early Byzantine date (6th – 8th Century AD) it now seems quite likely that this cemetery was in use for a prolonged period. If this is the case then perhaps an earlier wall was replaced much later, or maybe the cemetery wasn't formalised until that point.



Figure 3: Skeleton (392) - a north-south burial

Another puzzle is the religion of the north-south burials. One possibility we have considered is that they are Muslim, because Mecca is more or less due south, but Prof. Lomitashvili doesn't think that this is historically likely and it would be surprising in an apparently Christian cemetery, so we are still uncertain. It seems plausible that these three north-south burials represent a family group that had settled in Nokalakevi and that the compassion of the community had allowed them to be buried in the cemetery against the normal practice of segregation. Ben Neil, the Expedition Osteologist, notes

that (392) – a probable female – would have been in the later years of child-bearing age and the proximity of the neonate (377) might indicate a tragic end for both. We hope, in the future, to apply isotope analysis techniques in order to ascertain the geographical origin of these people, but it seems likely that even with that information we will not be able to state conclusively how they came to be buried in an otherwise Christian cemetery.

Contexts

NOK05/B

326	Layer	Demolition Layer – outside the building
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This context description supercedes the previous description in the NOK03/B report at which time (326) had not been excavated

Mid brown clayey silt. Very compact. Contains occasional large pieces of burnt daub, with the impression of round wooden posts evident on them – estimated diameter of these posts from the daub is 0.1m – and pieces of limestone block, average size 0.2m³, some of which appear squared off. This context extends across the entire width of the trench (7.5m) and for 6m south of the Hellenistic building. The depth varies from 0.05m towards the south, to 0.2m nearer the building. Large quantities of Hellenistic pottery were recovered from this layer, particularly towards the base of it where it interfaced with (397).

Interpretation:

By the end of the 2005 season it was clear that this deposit represented the terminal collapse of the predominantly clay and timber Hellenistic building at the north of Trench B, with evidence of a destructive fire particularly obvious in the heavily fired nature of the daub and timber fragments towards the west of the trench. Sections of the wall appear to have fallen southwards (down the slope of the hill) and the consistency of burnt of daub – particularly towards the west of the trench – suggest some sections of the fallen wall were more or less *in situ*. The frequency of large pieces of daub became markedly reduced with increased distance from the building.

A substantial piece of charcoal still lies on top of the limestone blocks (which are themselves heat-scorched) to the west of the stone foundations (381). This is in close proximity to a large section of collapsed clay wall suggesting that this may have been near the seat of a fire that precipitated the collapse of the building. The burnt beam measured 0.5m x 0.1m next to a smaller, separate piece measuring 0.2m x 0.15m.

376	Fill	Grave Fill
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Dark Grey Clayey Silt; Frequent Inclusions of fine angular and sub-angular limestone fragments; Very mixed – contains fragments of Byzantine and Hellenistic pottery. Essentially the same as (303) which is the cemetery soil into which the grave was dug.

377	Skeleton	North South, Articulated Human Neonate
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0.5m long in situ. Associated with nearby north-south aligned burials (304) and (392). Supine, with head at north.

378	Cut	Grave Cut
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Appears to be dug down the side of the wall and then slightly undercuts the bottom course of stone. Exact form was unclear but appears to be sub-rectangular, 0.2m x 0.5m

379	Layer	Rubble Layer overlying building at north of trench B Dark grey brown, moderately compact silty clay; 75% small limestone fragments. Average depth 0.1m. Probably represents a small colluvial deposit following the collapse of the building
380	Layer	Possible Floor Surface inside the building Very compact, Reddish Brown clay layer within the stone foundation. I believe that this may well represent a beaten clay floor surface inside the Hellenistic building. EXPOSED BUT NOT EXCAVATED IN 2005.
381	Masonry	Foundation for building Single course of large unmortared limestone blocks (average size of each block is 0.3m ³) orientated east northeast- west southwest. EXPOSED BUT NOT EXCAVATED IN 2005. <u>Interpretation:</u> A substantial piece of burnt beam lies in situ on top of one of these stones (see 326) and it seems reasonable to draw the conclusion that these stones represent a foundation which supported a Hellenistic clay and timber wall which seems to have been destroyed by fire (326). Some of these stones are also heat scorched.
382	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (376)
383	Skeleton	East West, Articulated Adult On top of SK (386). Supine, with head at west.

Osteologist's Notes:

Aged 40-50 years old, Female, height: 171.731cm +/- 4.24cm

Pathology and trauma:

- Considerable taphonomic degradation resulting in soft and friable bone.
- Post-mortem, in-situ pressure displacement of skull resulting in a squashed deformation along a long axis from the right zygomatic process of the frontal bone to the left asterion.
- Alveolar resorption of RM_{1/2/3} LPM₂ and LM_{1/2} partial resorption of LC¹. LPM¹ suffers heavy attrition, small caries on lateral borders of LPM² and LM¹. Caries on lateral border of LM₃ and RPM₁. Heavy 'cupped' attrition of RPM₂. Deep caries on RM¹.
- Right clavicle: broad, flattened lateral aspect with macroporosity. Possible abscess around the costoclavicular ligament attachment site.
- Possible 'point' trauma to the left inferior of the right ulna – bony callus surrounds a slight oval depression with sharp borders.
- Foramen (pathological?) in radial tuberosity of right radius.
- 1 (surviving) thoracic body shows marginal lipping,
- A severe case of periostitis of the right femur with billowed reactive bone overlying the cortex.
- Spur formation on the posterior surface of the calcaneus (arthritis).

384	Cut	Grave Cut Unclear
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385	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (376). Cut by (384)
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386	Skeleton	East West, Articulated Adult. Supine, with head at west.
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Osteologist's Notes:

Aged 50-60 years old, Female, height: 162.226 cm +/- 3.72cm

Pathology and trauma:

- Slight dental calculus on all mandibular teeth; slight caries on RM₁.
- Billowed rugosity to the mastoid processes.
- Clavicles: marked hypertrophy of the conoid tubercles; hypertrophy and lipping of the medial anterior border, hypertrophy of the costoclavicular ligament attachment site.
- Lipping and bony spur growths on the thoracic vertebral bodies.

387	Cut	Grave Cut Unclear
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388	Layer	Rubbish Dump Mid brown clayey silt. Moderately compact. Frequent fine and medium sized angular limestone fragments (10%). 1.4m N-S x 1m E-W x c.0.15m deep.
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Interpretation:

Originally thought to be the fill of a cut feature, but I now think it represents a dump directly onto the cobbled surface outside a speculative doorway into the building. Contained a large quantity of Hellenistic pottery

389	VOID	
390	VOID	

391	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (376)
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392	Skeleton	North South, Articulated Adult Human burial in an excellent state of preservation. Associated with nearby north-south aligned burials (304) and (377). Supine, with head at north.
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Osteologist's Notes:

Aged 35-44 years old, probable female, ht: 160.36 cm +/- 3.27cm

Pathology and trauma:

- Macro/microporosity over the supra-orbital ridge and margin.
- Heavy attrition of all teeth; only LM³ has erupted of the wisdom teeth. Severe dental calculus on LM¹, LPM^{1/2}, LC¹ and LI¹. No caries.
- Heavy spur formation on lumbar vertebrae.
- Congenital holes in the olecranon fossa of both humeri.

- Severe fracture\break with extensive bone remodelling to the left distal radius.

393	Cut	Grave Cut. Unclear. Cuts (394)
394	Fill	Grave Fill Same as (376)
395	Skeleton	East West, Articulated Adolescent Supine, with head at west. Lies directly underneath the north south burial (392). Covered over at end of 2005 season when we ran out of time. PARTIALLY EXPOSED BUT NOT EXCAVATED
396	Cut	Grave Cut Unclear
397	Layer	Hellenistic “Cobbled” surface in front of building Large area of densely packed, rounded, medium to coarse limestone pebbles and fine cobbles. Extends across the width of the trench (7.5m) and for 7m south of the building. Average size of the stones is 50mm x 30mm x 40mm, but they are larger near the structure and less densely packed further away. There also appears to be a slight step up towards the building, indicating that there may have been a doorway at that point. EXPOSED BUT NOT EXCAVATED <u>Interpretation:</u> This appears to be a fairly crude ‘yard’ surface in front (to the south) of the Hellenistic building. Following Schneider’s excavations in Nokalakevi he wrote that he had found a road surface and we believe that he was working close to where Trench B is located. I infer from this that either this surface extends down towards a road or, more likely I believe given the presence of the Byzantine cemetery to the south, that Schneider mistook this surface for a road during his excavation.

Graphics

326	Plan	Pre-Ex plan of (326) – mid west of tr.B	1:20	ARD; JEM; LJT
327	Plan	Pre-Ex plan of (326) – mid east of tr.B	1:20	CR; CD; LK; YS
328	Plan	Pre-Ex plan of (326),(103),(104),(105),(102)	1:20	ARD; JEM; LJT
329	Plan	Pre-Ex plan of (303),(340) – north of tr.B	1:20	CD; LK; YS
330	Plan	Pre-Ex plan of (303) – south of tr. B	1:20	ARD; JEM; LJT
331	Plan	Grave Cut [378]	1:20	Paul E
332	Plan	Demolition Layer (326) and structure – east	1:20	Chris R + Larissa K
333	Plan	Demolition Layer (326) and structure – west	1:20	Yasmin S and Cliodhna D
334	Plan	Demolition Layer (326) and structure – east 2	1:20	Chris R + Larissa K
335	Plan	Demolition Layer (326) and structure – S.W.	1:20	Chris R + Larissa K
336	Plan	Demolition Layer (326) and structure – S.E.	1:20	Yasmin S and Cliodhna D
337	Plan	Human Skeletons (383) and (386)	1:10	Julia M and Lauren T
338	Plan	Plan of pottery dump (388)	1:10	Yasmin S
339	Plan	Human Skeleton (392)	1:10	Cliodhna D
340	Plan	End of Season Plan (397)(381) – west	1:20	Geoff T and Chris R
341	Plan	End of Season Plan (397)(381) – east	1:20	YS;CD; LK
342	Plan	Plan of Hellenistic Foundation (381)	1:20	Paul E

Small Finds

<u>#</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Grid Ref</u>	<u>Height</u>
NOK05/B 1	(303)	Folded Lead Sheet – curse/ prayer?	100/ 203.2	-1.84
NOK05/B 2	(379)	Cu Alloy ear ring	103.22/ 218	0.58
NOK05/B 3	(382)	Cu Alloy ?coin? found by right hip of skeleton (383)	101/ 199.9	-2.25
NOK05/B 4	(326)	Pottery vessel from within building collapse layer (326) – next to wall (381)	100.85/ 218.65	0.60
NOK05/B 5	(326)	Piece of Fe knife blade	104.88/ 218.6	0.05