

2002 Anglo-Georgian Nokalekevi Expedition.

Osteoarchaeology Report for Trench B

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Summary

The Excavation of a multi-cut grave in Trench 'B' is reported. In total, 4 individuals were found and the survival of the bone was fair. However, there were no associated grave goods and the multi context nature of the grave is untypical in Georgian Orthodox. The period of the burial is open to discussion but did appear to be contemporary with a nearby enclosure wall, which is thought to date between the 16th and 17th centuries. The study of the skeletal remains indicates 2 males, 1 female and 1 unclassified juvenile.

General description of the grave

The soil matrix in which the skeletons were found exhibited little evidence of any grave cut, so the formative representation of the individuals' contemporary nature to each other was challenging. The soil matrix exhibited subtle changes between the natural and fill, such as its porosity; but its inclusions and colour were uniform throughout. A burial sequence was determined through levels within the grave and patterns of truncation throughout the individual burials.

The first burial [117] of a male in his early twenties was later re-cut to accommodate a second burial [114], a female in its late teens. The truncated skeletal elements of [117], known as context [108], were placed on top of [114] after its interment. A child [111], believed to be the last burial in this group, was placed on top of [117]. It is uncertain whether [111] was contemporary with or later than [114] as there was no discernable grave cut or evidence to indicate otherwise.

Grave Catalogue

The following is a description for each inhumation within the grave, detailing-

- i. The context number
- ii. The orientation
- iii. The skeleton with comments on its sex, age, stature, preservation, pathology and position.

An overlay of all four skeletons within the grave cut can be seen in the appendix.

Skeleton A. ([117]; see appendix Plate A) male aged 22-24 years, ht. 170.63cm +/- 3.94cm

The head was in the West of the grave and the body was supine. The bone was in fair condition with some of the flat bones being friable. Although the skull was complete, its integrity had been severely compromised in-situ. The left radius and ulna, the left and right hands, the lumbar vertebrae and the lower appendicular skeletal elements were missing due to truncation by cut [115]; by contrast, the right fibula and

foot remained. The right arm was flexed at the elbow indicating that his hand rested over his pelvis. His clavicles were un-fused. His dentition was seen to be in good condition with no caries. No pathologies or trauma of the bone were observed.

An unassociated maxilla fragment was found in the fill adjacent to skeleton A's right lower arm.

Skeleton B. ([114], cut [115]; see appendix Plate B) female aged 20-21 years, ht. 172.3cm +/- 3.94cm

The head was in the West of the grave, lying North of, parallel to yet 0.056m above skeleton A. The body was supine and the bone was in fair condition. The skeleton was gracile in appearance and in full articulation except for the skull, which was turned 90° through its mid-horizontal axis to face south. The legs were extended, the right arm flexed at the elbow so her right hand rested on her right clavicle. The left arm was flexed at the elbow so her left hand rested over the right side of her true ribs (breast). Her dentition was in good condition with no carries. Her third molars had not erupted and her upper right incisor was seen to have a small chip or thread notch. Two of her cervical vertebrae had fused, which was deemed congenital.

No pathologies or trauma of the bone were observed.

Skeleton C. ([111]; see appendix Plate C) Juvenile, *unclassified*.

The head was in the West of the grave and lay supine 0.07m directly above skeleton A and 0.014m above and south of skeleton B. The preservation of the bone was fair, but the flat bones were friable. Its face had been truncated during (the process of) area excavation and its head was turned 90° in articulation to face south. The legs were extended; the left and right arms were flexed at the elbow so its left and right hands rested on the respective sides of its pelvis.

No pathologies or trauma of the bone were observed.

Skeleton D. ([108]; see appendix, Plate D) Male.

The missing truncated elements of [117] (skeleton A) was seen on excavation to comprise of the skeletal elements that determined the majority of context [108], being as it was an extremely disarticulated jumble of lower appendicular skeletal elements lying above skeleton B on a west-east axis. On post excavation analysis, the two contexts [108] and [117] were indeed deemed to comprise the same individual. However, this context also included a deposit of calvaria and facial fragments from an adult human male skull. These are considered as the fourth individual, i.e. skeleton D. The skull was in the extreme west of the grave and was lying on the same axis as the lower appendicular skeletal elements.

Discussion

The degree of truncation, condition of the bone and which skeletal elements survive all contribute to the accuracy to which the metric and non-metric variations of the individual skeletons can be determined. Fortunately, the pubic symphyses and articular surfaces of [117] and [114] were present, making the ageing of the individuals easier. Time and resources are a critical requirement in making a thorough assessment of skeletal material, yet both were limited in this 2002 season, primarily as the situation of finding skeletal material was not fully considered. This consequently compromised the amount of data that could be taken, thus smaller pathologies could have gone unnoticed.

The apparent good health of the individuals before death contradicts their young age and early demise. This could either be attributed to a disease not evident on bone, or they may have died of unnatural causes. The age of burial is open to discussion. All four of the individuals skulls were compromised; the failure of their integrity might be attributed to a deep burial. By contrast the top of the last burial [111] in the grave was around half a metre down from the foundations of the enclosure wall suggesting a shallow burial. It is known that the area was reduced by a cemetery clearance, which could explain for the discrepancy between the former two observations in favour of an earlier and deeper burial.

With the grave cuts within the burial being virtually indeterminable, each skeleton was issued a provisional cut. It is seen that burial events [114], [111] and [108] are later than [117] due to the latter's truncation. However, it cannot be determined with any reasonable accuracy whether the former 3 contexts were separate or contemporary events. The question of the fourth individual is imbued with similar ambiguity. There was no positive indication of its origin, apart from the suggestion that it might originally have come from beneath [117] and that the maxilla fragment found within this context is a fragment of the fourth individual.

The east-west alignment of the burials suggests a Christian rite, but the method of the burial is not Georgian in practice. As explained by our Georgian colleagues, the traditional burial rite always has an individual buried alone and never in a group. As a result the relationship between the grave and the modified 6th Century Georgian Orthodox church (situated close by) is tenuous, not for the Christian inference but for the cultural circumstances in which these four individuals were buried.

Bibliography.

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