



Interim report on excavations at Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis in 2014

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SUMMARY

The Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi (AGEN) carried out excavations in the Samegrelo region of western Georgia for the fourteenth consecutive season at the site of Nokalakevi (ancient Archaeopolis). The main field season took place between the 30th June and 25th July 2014 and was carried out by a team of British and Georgian professionals with the assistance of student volunteers from Georgia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. Further archaeological work in and around the Forty Martyrs' Church took place from 25th August to the 12th September 2014.

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 B, and the final closing of this area after ten seasons' investigation that produced archaeological evidence dating from the Bronze Age to the 18th/ 19th centuries AD. The closure of Trench B enabled the team to open Trench C, on the site of the old dig-house and village hospital. Excavation of the upper deposits revealed the structural remains of these buildings and shed light on the work undertaken to convert the hospital into an expedition base in the mid-1970s. Underlying the structures mixed colluvial deposits were found containing material culture dating from the Hellenistic period to around the 10th century AD.

Investigations were also undertaken within the Forty Martyrs' Church by a small team, on the invitation of the Bishop of Senaki and Chkhorotsku. This work was focused around the south nave and south porch, and revealed various phases of construction and adaptation that had taken place within the church. A burial dating to between the 7th-10th centuries AD was found underneath the south porch, with the grave capped by 40 round pilae tiles.

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); David Connolly (B.A.J.R.); and Professor Michael Vickers (Oxford University) must also be thanked for their invaluable advice and support.

In relation to the 2014 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 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 2014 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: 2014

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 Expedition), Dr Nino Kebuladze (Finds Conservator), Ana Tvaradze (Site Supervisor) and Tamar Niniashvili (Site Assistant). The international staff consisted of Gemma Ward (Senior Site Assistant) and Sean Doherty (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: Lela Seperteladze, Davit Alania, Tiko Antidze and Mariam Akhalkatsi. Our international students/ volunteers were: Corinna Keefe (Cambridge University); Jonny Hunter, Sophie Keepence, Ryan Wolfe (University of Winchester); and Andrei Pribylov.

The staff and volunteers arrived in Nokalakevi on Saturday 28th June 2014. Work began on Monday 30th June with the reopening of both Trench A and B for the season's excavation. Protective layers of plastic and backfill from the end of the 2013 season were removed from the base of the trench. The main period of excavation was between Monday 30th June and Friday 25th July 2014. Subsequent

archaeological investigations at the Forty Martyrs' Church took place from 25th August to the 12th September 2014.

EXCAVATION RESULTS: 2014

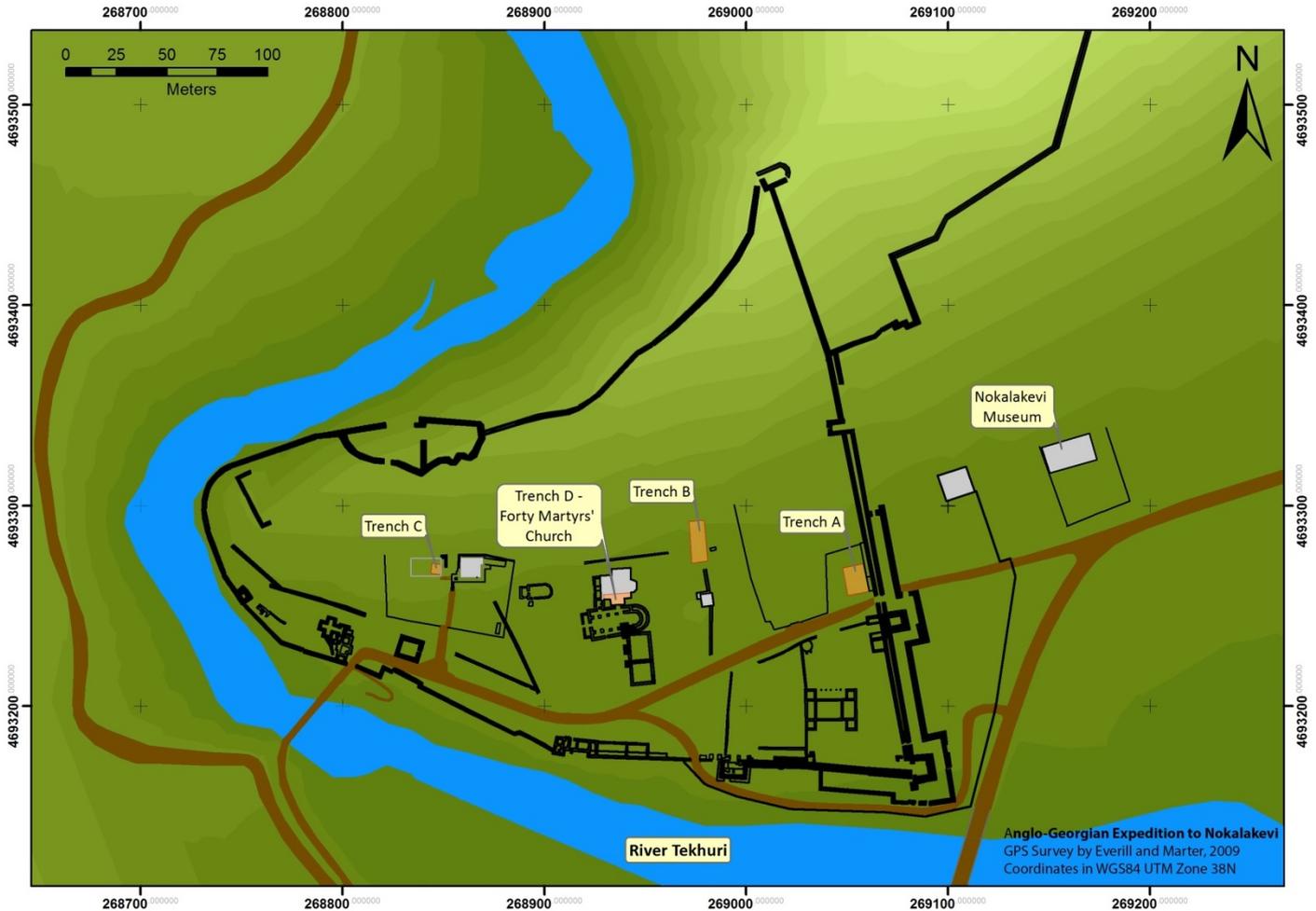


Figure 2: Trench locations shown on the 2009 site plan (see Everill et al 2011b)

The context register for this season continues on from previous seasons' excavations within each trench and therefore begins at **314** for Trench A and **465** for Trench B. The context register for new areas of excavation, Trench C and Trench D, commenced at **100**. The contexts have been tabulated below.

TRENCH	A	B	C	D
Number of Contexts	12	1	19	34
Plan and section drawings	6	-	9	10
Samples	2	-	5	4
Small finds	12	-	2	7

Table 1: Quantification of site archives for NOK14

Trench A: Results

The results of this season's fieldwork in Trench A have been presented below. Ten context numbers were taken out for this trench this year (**314-323**) and excavation continued in some contexts assigned in previous years (**310; 313**). Twelve 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 30th June and the backfill and plastic sheet laid at the end of the 2013 season was removed. The sides and surface of the trench were cleared of silt and vegetation that had accumulated since last year.

The 2013 season had been hampered by poor weather which resulted in only a few days of excavation in Trench A. Consequently the contexts first investigated had been revealed initially in 2012. After an initial clean-back, for which context **314** was assigned to artefacts that were not clearly stratified, context **315** was fully exposed. This was a thick line of limestone rubble that ran WNW-ESE across the trench. To the north lay **294**, a mid-greyish brown clay silt deposit containing very little material culture. As this was removed it became apparent that it was an interface with an even more 'sterile' layer underneath, which was numbered **319**. The limestone rubble (**315**) appeared to form a southern boundary of this deposit and together were interpreted as an area of cultivated ground in which stones had been removed to aid ploughing/ cultivation and placed to one side.

The eastern third of Trench A had been covered by layer **272**, the last of which was removed this year. Layer **272** was characterised by the presence of 8th/7th century BC material - in particular fragments of double-headed zoomorphic figurines. Layer **312**, underlying **272** and east of **319**, continued to produce material culture of this period. South of **312**, and east of **315**, was context **316**. This was a dense deposit of limestone rubble arranged as three sides of a square (or perhaps a square cut by a feature containing **313** - this is yet to be determined) running 5.4m N-S by 3.6m E-W. Within **316** were found further figurine fragments, including Small Find **NOK14/A 10** which was the most complete figurine found this year. A recurring, though not universal, feature of the figurines found this year has been the presence of some kind of necklace or studded collar, perhaps indicating an earlier stylistic tradition being revealed as we progress through the 8th/7th century BC layers.

Extending north-west from the centre of **316** was **313**, which was a dark greyish brown silty clay approximately 1.5 metres wide. The southern edge of **316** was marked by an extremely clear transition to **310** - a light brown silty sand with frequent sub-angular grit and small abraded shreds of pottery 10-15mm² x 2mm thick. This layer was indicative of a prepared surface and was very compact. The removal of **311** in the southwest corner, and Hellenistic period structure (**306; 307; 308; 309**) immediately to its north, revealed the full extent of **310** within the trench. Layer **310** was approximately 70-100mm thick and up to 2.8m wide, dropping away to the north and south in a manner suggestive of a cambered street surface. It had the same WNW-ESE alignment as the Early Medieval street surface (**203**) revealed 1.5 m to the south in 2007. Immediately north of **310** was a thin band of dark grey brown, silty clay with medium sub-angular limestone fragments and burnt daub (**323**). Situated between a cambered street surface and a possibly cultivated area (**319**) might suggest that this is a drainage ditch, but it was not excavated this year. The make-up for the street surface was a clean reddish brown silty clay (**320**). To the south of **310** was a more rubbly deposit (**321**) within a matrix of sandy clay, which may represent a yard surface immediately adjacent to the street (**310**). In the east of the trench, a feature (**322**) was identified with a quantity of burnt daub. Removal of the daub revealed an apparently circular feature. However, initial investigation indicated that this might simply be the effects of heat on the underlying deposits. The surrounding area will be further investigated during the 2015 season.

Context	Type	Description	Dimensions/ Details	Max. Depth/ Thick.	Max. Height/ Level
314	Unstrat.	Cleaning layer	Trench		-
315	Masonry/ Deposit?	Unbonded linear spread of limestone blocks (ranging in size from 300-180mm to 600-600mm) running WNW-ESE	Runs full width of trench, max width 3.07m		
316	Layer	Mid brown silty clay deposit in southeast of trench containing large quantities of limestone rubble (and some riverstone and daub)	5.4m N-S; 3.6m E-W		
317	Fill	Dark grey silty clay. Occasional fragments of limestone and burnt daub	>0.5m E-W (continues beyond trench edge); 0.71m N-S.	0.42m deep	
318	Cut	Cut of pit containing 317	>0.5m E-W (continues beyond trench edge); 0.71m N-S.	0.42m deep	
319	Layer	Dark brownish grey compact silty clay. Very low frequency of material culture	10m E-W; 7m N-S	0.2m deep	
320	Layer	Clean reddish brown silty clay, underlying WNW-ESE street surface (310) and probable make-up deposit for it.	7m WNW-ESE; max 3m wide	0.25m deep	-4.20
321	Layer	Compact, mid brown sandy clay to south of 310/ 320	Max 3.1m wide, 2.3m long	Unex.	-4.29
322	Layer	Mid brownish grey silty clay, with green sandy (cess?) patches throughout. Fragments of burnt daub.	Sub-circular 2.3m x 2.55m	Not fully excavated	
323	Layer/ Fill?	Dark grey brown, silty clay with medium sub-angular limestone fragments and burnt daub.	7.4m E-W; 1.4m N-S	Unex.	-4.27

Table 2: Recorded contexts from NOK 14/A (All levels refer to the zero established in the 1980s)

Trench B: Results

Only one new context was assigned this year (465).

Context	Type	Description	Details	Max Depth/ Thick.	Max Ht/ Level
465	Layer	Sterile natural silty clay (north of cemetery walls)	Not numbered in 2013	-	-0.8

Table 3: Recorded contexts from NOK 14/B (All levels refer to the zero established in the 1980s)

As natural deposits had been revealed across the trench in 2012 and 2013, the work this season consisted purely of a small exploratory excavation to determine the nature of rocks (462) partially exposed in one area of the trench in 2013. Excavation by workmen under archaeological supervision determined 462 to be a colluvial deposit of large limestone blocks which had apparently collected up against a topographic feature a metre north of the east-west cemetery wall.

The colluvial deposits overlying the natural (465) exposed in 2013 are characterised by alternating layers of predominantly soil and predominantly rubble. It seems likely that this reflects periods of different climatic and cultural factors, with spells of wetter weather resulting in more soil coming down the hillside, and perhaps colder winters weathering greater quantities of rock. Against this climatic backdrop, presumably the extent to which the hillside was cleared of vegetation was a mitigating factor.

Trench B was finally closed on 3rd June 2014.

Trench C: Introduction

It was decided to locate a new trench on the site of the former village hospital, adjacent to the current ‘Dig House’. The hospital is thought to have been built towards the end of the 19th century, or early in the 20th century, and appears in photographs taken by D. Gozalishvili during the 1930-31 expedition (Figures 3 and 4). When the S. Janashia Museum Expedition to Nokalakevi was first established in 1973, it initially operated from a building on the south side of the Tekhuri, but a few years later (perhaps 1975 or 1976) it was given the old hospital to use – presumably after medical facilities had been centralised at Senaki. From the mid-1970s to 1991 this building served as a ‘Dig House’, accommodating supervisors and students. The current ‘Dig House’ was built next to it in about 1977 or 8, initially to accommodate the project directors (Parmen Zakaraia and others) and more finds processing and analysis space on the ground floor. Throughout the 1980s, until Georgian independence in 1991, the expedition operated out of both buildings for six months each year. With an annual budget peaking at around 280,000 roubles (about 200,000 US\$) and a huge team, the scale of excavation, conservation and restoration was enormous. The civil war that erupted shortly after independence saw a great deal of damage to the infrastructure of both the expedition and the local museum. Some of this was due to small arms’ fire, but the majority was a result of the looting of salvageable materials. The original ‘Dig House’, by this time an old building anyway, was damaged beyond repair and was demolished in 2000/2001.

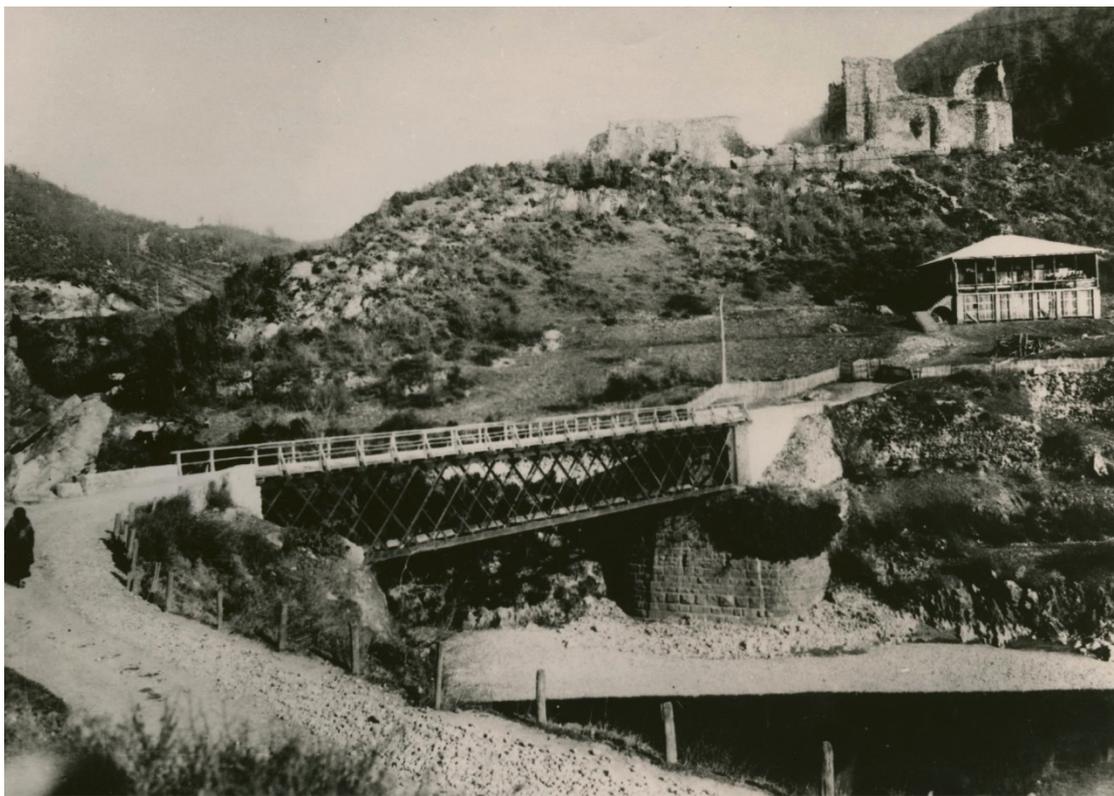


Figure 3: The hospital viewed from the south bank of the Tekhuri (D. Gozalishvili Archive, 1930-31)

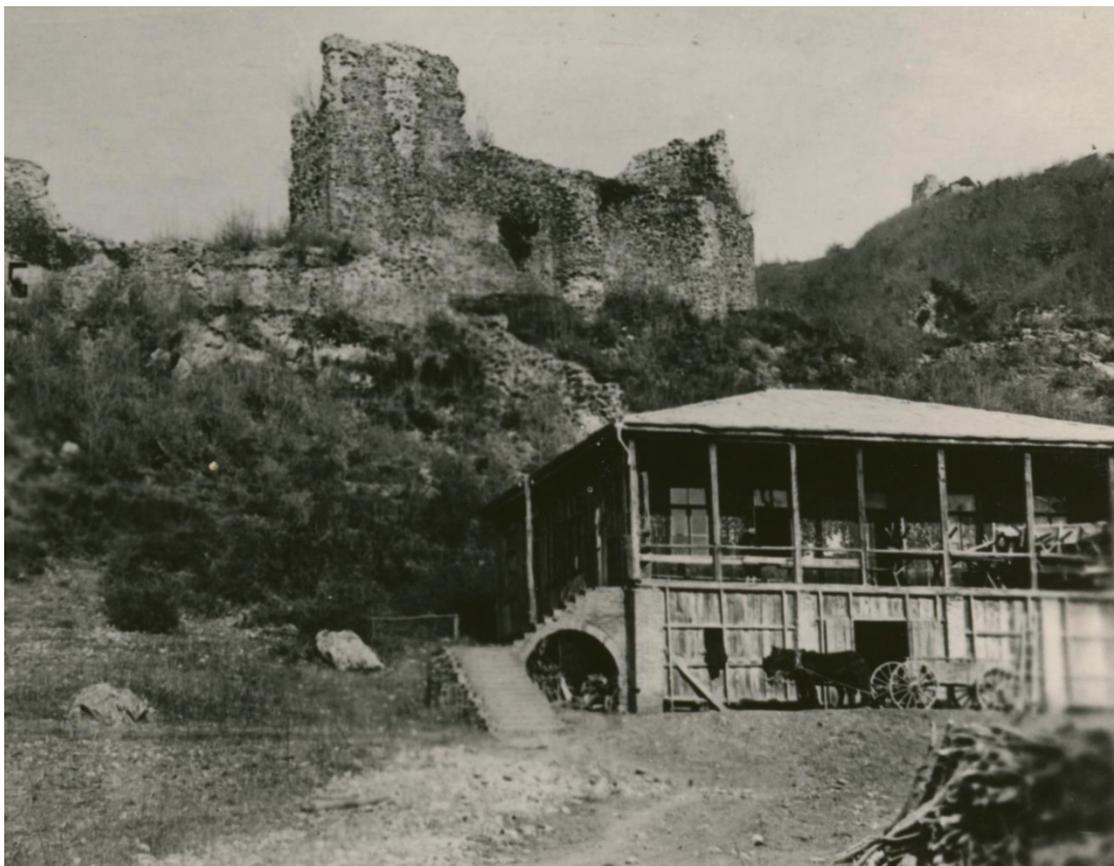


Figure 4: The hospital viewed from the south (D. Gozalishvili Archive, 1930-31)

Part of the reason for opening Trench C at this location stemmed from an interest in the material remains of the previous expedition; and an opportunity to combine archaeological evidence with oral testimonies from those who were part of that team. However, the main driver was the fact that it was in a part of the site not previously excavated. In addition, it was towards the western end of the lower town – some 124 metres west of Trench B, and 200 metres from Trench A and the eastern fortifications. The nearest previous excavation was at the small rectangular ‘tower’ of the Dadiani period (17th-early 19th century AD) 35 metres to the south. There was consequently a great deal of interest in examining the nature of prior occupation in the western end of the lower town.

Trench C: Results

Excavation began with the removal of the thin topsoil and substantial overburden (100), which had formed over the demolished building. This largely consisted of loose building material and domestic rubbish and sat directly on the surviving *in situ* structural remains to a depth of up to one metre. Having removed this material and cleaned the underlying remains it became clear that the trench had been situated across the full east-west extent of the kitchen at the north (Figures 5 and 6), with a red tiled floor (101), walls covered with white-glazed tiles and the remains of water pipes. To the south of the kitchen, separated by a wall only one brick thick (103), was a second room with a concrete floor (102). Fragments of light blue painted plaster survived in patches on the wall inside this room, and the concrete floor corresponded with the description of it as a 'safe' (i.e. a secure storage space) by those colleagues who remembered the building. To the south of this room was a third one, defined largely by the southern edge of the concrete floor (102) and the presence instead of wooden floor joists (105) running north-south. Three joists survived, approximately 0.9m apart, but were overlain by a number of much thinner, more degraded pieces of timber (110). These were initially thought to represent remains of flooring, but it soon became apparent that they were also orientated north-south and not east-west across the joists. Instead they were interpreted as fallen remains of a wooden frontage at the south of the building - an interpretation borne out having subsequently found the 1930s' photos of the hospital (Figures 3 and 4). All three rooms were exposed to their full east-west extent, with another brick wall being exposed in the western trench edge (116). This wall, colleagues recalled, separated the east of the ground floor from the large dining area. South of the wooden frontage, and outside the trench, was an external area of tarmac, some of which is still visible in places, on which benches were positioned in the shade of a well-established grape vine.

At the east of the trench, remains of the substantial external wall were found. This wall (106) was constructed with large river stones set in mortar, and was 0.6m wide. Ironwork was revealed in the north-eastern corner of the trench, which was set into the external, eastern face of the wall. This ironwork represented the base of metal steps which had led to the first floor. Wall 106 sat on a foundation (111) of large, flat river stones laid at an angle of about 45 degrees from the vertical in two alternating courses, creating a herringbone effect when seen in elevation and clearly providing a very strong foundation. Both 106 and 111, however, represented remains of the original hospital construction that had been adapted, and the latter was not visible until other structural elements had been removed. Underlying the concrete into which the red-tiled kitchen floor had been set was an earlier concrete floor (108) which abutted, and therefore post-dated, the kitchen wall (103). The concrete floor to the south, 102, was laid on a sandy levelling layer (109). Both 109 and 108 were laid directly over the original timber joists (105) supporting the earliest floor of the hospital building, which were visible across much of the trench. It can therefore be stated with some certainty that the original floor right across the building was wooden. At some point the ground floor was reorganised and dividing walls added on top of the joists, with no other foundation. Subsequently concrete floors were added separately in the kitchen and 'safe'. Another significant alteration was the bricking up of a recess set into the substantial eastern external wall. Originally, it was observed, the predominantly

riverstone-built external wall incorporated a brick element (107) that enabled a recessed sink to be set into the internal face of the wall. The sink, constructed in plaster with fragments of the white glaze surviving in places, was fed with a metal waterpipe and stood just above floor level. At some point - certainly prior to the final kitchen phase - this recess was bricked up with a short wall (104) which was faced with the same white glazed tiles, at the same time, as 103.

Once all the structural elements were removed, the terrace cut (112) was exposed across the trench. This had been cut into sloping ground and created the level platform on which the hospital stood. Where it was visible it had a maximum depth of 0.6m, but clearly to the north of the trench (i.e. higher up the slope) it would have been approximately a metre deep. The latest surviving underlying deposit, truncated by this terracing, was a mixed colluvium (113). This layer contained ceramic material dating from the Hellenistic period to as late as the 8th-12th centuries AD, according to OSL dates obtained from the material. These dates, if accurate, provide a *terminus post quem* for the formation of the colluvial deposit, and most importantly indicate the presence of archaeological material from these periods higher up the slope. Contexts underlying 113 were not fully excavated this season, and 114, 115, 117, 118 will be further studied in 2015.



Figure 5: Trench C (Post-1975 Dig House Phase) with outline of original building identified in grey



Figure 6: Photograph of Trench C (Post-1975 Dig House Phase) looking northeast

Context	Type	Description	Dimensions/ Details	Max. Depth/ Thick.	Max. Height/ Level
100	Layer	Topsoil and demolition rubble	Trench		-
101	Structure	Floor (red-tiled kitchen floor)	1.5m N-S (extends beyond trench); 4m E-W	50mm	125.98
102	Structure	Floor (concrete floor of 'safe')	1.8m N-S; 4m E-W	50-70mm	126.00
103	Masonry	Wall (brick wall at south and west of kitchen). Kitchen side covered in white, glazed tiles. 'Safe' side plastered – blue paint survives in places.	4m E-W; returns to south at western end for 0.88m before terminating. Returns to north at some point for 0.7m – continues beyond trench. One brick thick (0.1m)	Survives to a max height of 0.5m	126.45
104	Masonry	Wall (brick wall sealing up recess)	1m N-S visible; One brick thick (0.1m)	Survives to a max height of 0.5m	126.45
105	Structure	Floor (timber floor joists)	Three surviving joists, 0.9m apart	0.2m deep joists	125.86

106	Masonry	Wall (riverstone and mortar external wall)	3.8m N-S visible; 0.6m wide		126.18
107	Masonry	Wall (brick wall of recess in 106)	<1m N-S visible	Survives to a max height of 0.5m	126.45
108	Structure	Floor (first concrete floor in kitchen under 101)	1.5m N-S (extends beyond trench); 4m E-W	0.1m	
109	Layer	Grey sandy levelling deposit under 102	4m E-W; 1.8m N-S	0.2m	
110	Structure	Fallen sections of timber wall/ partition overlying 105		5mm – single wooden plank/ board	
111	Masonry	Foundation for 106	3.8m N-S visible; 0.6m wide		
112	Cut	Terracing cut for hospital and foundation to incorporate 106	Building was approx 15m E-W; 10m N-S	0.6m within trench	
113	Layer	Uppermost <i>in situ</i> colluvial layer, truncated by terracing	Whole trench (5m x 5m)	max 0.5m	125.76
114	Layer	Colluvium (finer rubble content than 113)	Virtually whole trench (c. 5m x 5m)	max 0.5m	125.76
115	Layer	Very compact deposit – fine stones (?surface)	Not fully excavated		125.08
116	Masonry	Wall (foundation for 103 – east wall of dining room)	5m N-S visible, E-W extent not fully visible	0.25m	
117	Fill	Dark greyish brown fill of 118	>2.5m E-W – not fully excavated		125.76
118	Cut	Vertical sided N-S cut through 113	Not fully excavated		

Table 4: Recorded contexts from NOK 14/C (All levels are in metres above sea level)

Trench D: Introduction

Archaeological work in and around the Forty Martyrs' Church took place from 25th August to the 12th September 2014. This followed a request from Bishop Shio (Mujiri) of the Senaki and Chkhorotsku Diocese of the Patriarchate of Georgia for the investigation of certain elements of the site, and the work was undertaken by a small team after the main field season had been completed. The work was funded by the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia, and undertaken by members of the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi utilising the expedition's established excavation and recording methodology. Trench D in fact consisted of two foci (the south nave and the south porch) which were unified into one area of investigation during the excavation. Concurrent with the excavation inside the church, an examination of the Dadiani family crypt against the external north wall was also undertaken to assess condition. The archaeological work within the church was primarily intended to evaluate the survival of evidence relating to the Church's dedication to the Forty Martyrs. The results are fully reported by Lomitashvili *et al* (2014b) and the information presented here is simply a summary. Further publication is planned in the form of both an academic article and a chapter within the expedition's 2011-15 excavation monograph.

The Forty Martyrs to whom the church is dedicated were Roman soldiers of the 12th Legion, martyred near the city of Sebaste (modern Sivas in Turkey) during the supposed persecutions of Christians by Licinius (Augustus in the west 311-313; Augustus in the east 313-324). A popular cult was well-established by the second half of the fourth century and many churches were dedicated to the Forty Martyrs across the Christian world from Rome to Syria, including several in Georgia. The church in Nokalakevi is currently believed to have been built in the 6th century in the basilica style before a dome was added some centuries later, although the discovery of 6th century amphorae during recent restoration of the dome may indicate that it was part of the original construction (Lomitashvili pers. comm.). The church has been modified many times, but most significantly in the 17th century, after a branch of the princely Dadiani family which ruled Samegrelo had made Nokalakevi their home and revitalised the once formidable fortified centre. Previous architectural and art historical studies suggest that it was in this period that several porches were added to the church, although this has not been tested archaeologically. A Dadiani family crypt was, however, definitely constructed in this period immediately to the north, abutting the external walls of the church, along with the painting of striking murals inside the church that survive to this day. Early 20th century written sources researched by Bishop Shio revealed a local tradition that relics of the Forty Martyrs might be present at the church. According to written accounts, the Russian Exarch Alex (Opotski) saw 40 tiles, or flagstones, in the south porch of the church in 1903, and Bishop Leonide (Okropiridze) of Guria-Samegrelo saw the same number of round tiles on 28th July 1911.

Trench D: Results

The first stage of the excavations in the south of the church involved the removal of modern flagstones (**100** and **101**) that had been laid in 2000. Underlying these were layers of concrete (**102** and **103**) over a levelling deposit of sand (**104**). After the removal of these layers the stratigraphy of the south nave and the later south porch was clearly independent and was excavated separately.

South Nave

In the south nave, after the removal of the overlying layers, a number of deposits relating to the construction of the church were revealed. In the central part of the south nave, the latest feature revealed was a cut (**125**), which had been dug through an earlier layer of beaten clay (**116**). Cut **125** was 5m long, between 0.5-0.7m wide and 1.2m deep. Within the fill (**117**) of **125**, consisting

predominantly of sand and lime, fragments of glass, metal and newspaper dating to the 20th century were revealed, along with two fragments of adult human proximal femur from a disturbed burial.

The underlying layer of beaten clay (**116**) was found to extend across almost the whole area of the south nave. It was revealed between the walls and column bases of the church, and contained fragments of tile and brick dating to the 17th-18th centuries. Fragments of modern glass and iron were also found suggesting that layer **116** was probably made in the first half of the 20th century.

The column bases (**119** and **120**) supporting the arch into the nave are identical to each other, with columns standing on dadoes cut into well-dressed limestone blocks. Test Pits 1 and 3, excavated adjacent to the columns, revealed that the dadoes were built on top of a significant, pre-existing masonry wall (**121**), which appears to represent the original south wall of the church (Figure 7). Initially this wall was visible between the columns, but subsequent excavation of Test Pits 2 and 3 revealed that it extended almost the whole length of the nave under the columns (length 8m; width 1.40m). Test Pit 2 also revealed two courses of the south façade of this wall, supported by a foundation of river stones bonded with mortar plaster. A similar picture was seen in Test Pit 3.

It should be noted here that concern for the structural integrity of the church was a major factor in the management of this archaeological investigation, and meant that some deposits were not fully excavated, including the beaten clay layer (**116**) between the walls and columns. This was also the case in the south porch, where the deep removal of layers might have weakened the walls. It was decided, therefore, to dig three test pits to reveal the church construction layers and foundations:

Test Pit 1 was excavated between the east wall of the nave and the eastern column. The test pit revealed the foundation of the eastern column base, built with limestone and bonded with mortar.



Figure 7: Wall **121** situated between columns of the nave of the Forty Martyrs' Church

Test Pit 2 was excavated in the central part of the nave adjacent to the entrance to the south porch. It revealed the façade of the earlier wall (**121**) and its foundation. It also produced disarticulated human bones mentioned above and elements of a lime mortar floor surface (**124**), which was 50-100mm thick and found at the same depth as the base of wall **121**, and of the façade of the south wall. This suggests that the lime mortar floor (**124**) represents the earliest floor surface of the church.

Test Pit 3 was located between the west wall of the church and the western internal column, and revealed the western end of the foundation of the large earlier wall (**121**) consisting of river stones and mortar. Also revealed by this test pit was the south façade of wall **118**, which was a crude, later insertion between the current church wall and the western column.

The south porch

The excavation in this area, following removal of overlying layers **100-104**, revealed a further concrete layer (**105**) and, under this, a gravelly levelling layer (**106**) probably dating to the first half or middle of the 20th century. Following removal of **106**, several contexts were revealed. Two lines of a lime-rendered brick wall (**108**) were revealed by the eastern wall of the porch. This wall was orientated north-south and situated between the south wall of the porch and the eastern column of the north arch into the nave, which it abutted. Subsequently fragments of a further lime-rendered brick construction (**115**), measuring 1.5 x 0.85m and perhaps representing a surface, were found towards the west of the porch adjacent to the western column of the north arch. It is possible that these elements represent the remains of a less substantial structure that was replaced with the construction of the extant south porch.

The floor of the porch had been constructed in large limestone blocks (**113**) (Figure 8) overlying a levelling layer of mortar and stones (**114**). The eastern side of the porch contained a fragmentary



Figure 8: Limestone floor in the south porch (**113**) – Trench D



Figure 9: Trench D pilae grave cover (111) viewed from the west



Figure 10: Trench D pilae grave cover (111) viewed from the south

mortar layer (107) measuring 0.5 x 0.8 m, which was seen to overlie a surface of 17 round *pilae* tiles (111) of the type found at the Byzantine period bathhouse nearby – presumably the source of this re-used building material. Further investigation, and the subsequent discovery of a burial (see below), indicated that 111 had formed an east-west aligned grave cover; originally measuring 1.90m x 0.83m, consisting of 40 *pilae* tiles arranged 4x10, and set in mortar. This cover had subsequently been damaged at the western end (Figures 9 and 10). Where the surface had been disturbed, 20 further broken and whole *pilae* tiles were found in the backfill, bringing the total recovered to 37 and supporting the hypothesis that it had originally consisted of 40 tiles. This is a hugely symbolic number relating to the dedication of the church, but also corresponds to the written accounts of the Russian Exarch Alex (Opotski) and Bishop Leonide (Okropiridze) who describe seeing the 40 tiles *in situ* in 1903 and 1911 respectively.

Four sides of a metal frame were also found in the shallow backfill at the western end of the grave cover along with the disturbed *pilae* tiles (Figure 11). This modern disturbance was not given its own context number, and the finds were erroneously assigned to the underlying fill 110 (see below), but clearly there are two very distinct events separated, perhaps, by as much as a 1,000 years and consequently easy to identify in the post-excavation phase. Among the elements of the frame, two are similar to each other - 400mm x 15mm – while a third is longer and could be the upper, curved element of an icon frame. All three are decorated with a leaf design. The fourth fragment was wider (45mm), and contained a two-line



Figure 11: Fragments of icon frame as they were found in Trench D, and (right) fragment with inscription, following conservation and restoration



inscription bordered by the same leaf design as the other pieces (Figure 11). The artefacts were sent to the restoration laboratory of the Georgian National Museum for treatment. After restoration work by M. Mchedlishvili, N. Tavartkiladze, and S. Akhaladze it was possible to read the whole text as:

"ხატი ესე შევამკუეთა მეგრელიის მთავრინა ეკატერინამ წმინდანი ორმოცნი მოწამენი მელს მეყავნ ორთავე შინა ცხოვრებათა ქმრითა ძეთა და ასულთა ჩუენთა კეთილად აღზრდიით წელსა ჩენაჲ იულისის 22".

Which can be translated as:

"[I] EKATERINA, RULER OF MEGRELIA [Mingrelia] HAD THIS ICON DECORATED. O FORTY HOLY MARTYRS PROTECT ME IN BOTH LIVES TOGETHER WITH [my] HUSBAND AND OUR WELL-RAISED SONS AND DAUGHTERS. YEAR ჩენაჲ . ON THE 22ND OF JULY"

(NB: ჩენა = CH K N A = 1851, under a traditional Georgian system for assigning a numeric value to letters of the alphabet: CH is 1000, K is 800, N is 50 and A is 1)

The written accounts of senior clergymen indicate that the grave cover was intact in 1911. An attractive hypothesis is that the disturbance to the grave, and the burial of the silver icon surround, occurred in the difficult period after the Bolsheviks annexed Georgia in 1921 when the churches and their property came under attack by the new authorities.

Removal of the *in situ* tiles (111) revealed the full extent of fill 110. On excavation of this deposit, at a depth of one metre, a human skeleton (123) was uncovered. The bones were in poor condition, but it was soon revealed to be orientated east-west, in a supine position with the head to the west. The right hand was lying on the chest and the left on the stomach. A bronze buckle was found near the left pelvis (Figure 12). It was identified as an "Heraldic type", which has significant longevity in the region. The closest Georgian analogy was with buckles discovered in Samtavro, which are similar to Avarian types and are dated to the 7th century AD. The buckle found in Nokalakevi was even more similar to the buckles discovered in the Volga Federal District, in the cemetery of the earlier Bulgarians, and these are dated to between the 8th century and the 10th century AD. Consequently the burial has been dated broadly to the 7th-10th centuries AD.

There are a number of possible interpretations of this archaeological sequence. One is that this individual was buried outside the south wall of the church at that time, and was exposed when foundations were being dug for the new porch, perhaps as late as the 17th century, when the grave was respectfully re-covered with the 40 *pilae* tiles. However this would likely result in far greater disturbance to the burial than was seen, and it seems more likely that there was in fact a more complex sequence of construction phases than was previously thought. If the final phase of the porch was indeed constructed in the 17th century, it may have incorporated elements of a much earlier south porch, containing and contemporary with the grave of this individual, of which only the floor of substantial limestone blocks and the *pilae* grave cover survived centuries later. The fragmentary brick structures observed may represent part of this original structure, or perhaps the construction of steps utilizing the surviving surface at some point in the intervening centuries. A final, and perhaps most straightforward, interpretation is that the south porch was added with the principal purpose of including the burial of a person of high standing within the extended church structure, and this would mean the south porch dated to the 7th-10th centuries AD.



Figure 12: The bronze buckle associated with Skeleton **123** in Trench D

Following the removal of the skeleton even earlier structures were observed underneath the grave. One of them (**129**) was a brick and limestone wall, bonded with lime mortar, that was oriented north-south and continues under the base of the east column of the arch into the nave. A further wall fragment was discovered to the west of the first, orientated east-west. A final, even smaller section of wall (**113**) was found in the middle of the porch area, and was also of a mixed brick and limestone construction bonded with mortar. These walls appear to predate the church and their construction would certainly suit a 4th/5th century date. At this stage of the excavation, however, concern for the structural integrity of the church meant that these early remains could not be fully investigated.

After archaeological work was completed the whole area of the south nave and the south porch was made good and the flagstones re-laid.

Dadiani Family Crypt

Whilst undertaking archaeological excavations in the south nave and in the south porch of the church, the 17th-19th century Dadiani family crypt located to the north of the church was cleared of vegetation and examined. After cleaning it was determined that the known entrance, from ground level at the west side, was not the only one and that a large flagstone (700x800mm) had been placed in the middle of the vaulted roof to provide access. Although initial plans had included an interior condition survey of the crypt it was decided that the risk of damage to the structure, and to those entering it, was too great.

Context	Type	Description	Dimensions/ Details	Max. Depth/ Thick.	Max. Height/ Level
100	Masonry	Flagstones in the south nave of Forty Martyrs church laid in 2000	10.00m x 2.42m		122.47
101	Masonry	Hexagonal flagstones in the south porch of church	4.58m x 2.28m		122.33
102	Layer	Concrete under flagstones 100 in the south nave of	10.00m x 2.42m		122.44

		church			
103	Layer	Concrete under hexagonal flagstones in the south porch of church	4.58m x 2.28m		122.30
104	Layer	Sand layer under concretes in the south nave and in the south porch of church	10.00m x 2.42m	0.20m - 0.40m	122.41
105	Layer	Concrete under sand layer in the south porch of church	4.30m x 2.30m	0.27m	122.26
106	Layer	Gravel under concrete 105 in the south porch of church	4.3m x 2.3m	0.05m	122.25
107	Layer	Lime plaster layer in the middle of concrete 105		0.05-0.10m	122.24
108	Masonry	North-south aligned brick and stone masonry discovered in the east edge of the south porch	Length 1.20m. Width 0.15m.	Two courses	122.27
109	Layer	Tinted mortar and gravel along the walls of the south porch	0.35m x 1.5m	0.05m	122.16
110	Fill	Fill of cut 112	1m x 0.9m	0.50m	121.80
111	Masonry	Grave cover made with pilae. Cover of cut 112	0.83m x 1m surviving. (originally 0.83m x 1.9m)	0.06m	122.20
112	Cut	Grave cut	0.83m x 1.90m	0.90m	122.02
113	Masonry	Floor made with large limestone blocks in the south porch of church	2m x 3.4m	0.18m	122.24
114	Layer	Infill of lime and stones for making a floor	1.6m x 0.75m	0.10m	122.1
115	Masonry	Floor made with bricks in the west part of the south annex	1.5m x 0.85m	0.25m	122.15
116	Layer	Beaten clay in the south nave	1.80m x 2.10m/ 1.30m x 3.60m	0.40m	122.2
117	Fill	Lime and pebble fill in the south nave	0.70m x 4.40m	1m	122.10
118	Masonry	Later built-in construction between wall and column in	0.80m E-W; 0.90m N-S	0.70m	122.10

		the west part of the south nave			
119	Masonry	Base of the west column	2.5m x 1.5m		122.56
120	Masonry	Base of the east column	2.30m x 1.45m	0.90m	122.38
121	Masonry	Massive wall fragment discovered between the west and the south columns and in the base.	8m E-W x 1.40m N-S	>1m	122.29
122	Masonry	Foundation of the south wall of church	Length 10.10m x Thickness 1.45m	1.15 m	122.12
123	Skeleton	Adult burial in the south porch of church, within grave cut 112			121.23
124	Layer	Floor surface of mortar found in Test Pit 2 in the central part of the south nave	0.41m E-W; 0.56 m N-S (continues south under 121).	0.1m	121.60
125	Cut	Cut in the beaten clay 116	5m x 0.5-0.7m	1.20 m	122.01
126	Masonry	Foundation of the west wall of church	1.30m visible length	1m	122.26
127	Layer	Layer found under 123 and 114	1.40m x 1.50m	0.1 m	120.85
128	Masonry	The east wall of the south nave (and the west wall of the deacon space)	Visible length 2.40m		
129	Masonry	Masonry discovered under the south column of the north arch and skeleton 123 in the south annex	Length 1.60m Width 0.85m	0.30 m	121.25
130	Masonry	West-east oriented laying under 129	Length 1.35m Width 0.35m	0.30 m	121.16
131	Layer	Lime banked under foundation of the south wall of the church	0.7m x 0.75m	0.3 m	120.98
132	Layer	Soft, black layer between 130 and 131	0.40m X 0.60m	0.30 m	120.59
133	Masonry	Structure under 113 and 114 in the middle part of the south annex of the church	Length 0.80m Width 0.60m	0.40 m	121.41

Table 5: Recorded contexts from NOK 14/D (All levels are in metres above sea level)

OPTICALLY STIMULATED LUMINESCENCE (OSL) DATING RESULTS

In 2013 £1650 was raised from the University of Winchester to pay for three ceramic samples from the earliest archaeological layer(s) in Trench B to be dated. The samples were sent for OSL dating at the *Research Laboratory for Archaeology & the History of Art* (RLAHA) at the University of Oxford. The dates produced from those samples showed that two dated from the Middle Bronze Age (2552 BC +/- 420 years; and 2492 BC +/- 415 years); and one dates from the Late Chalcolithic (4042 BC +/- 485 years).

The success of this approach to obtaining absolute dates from ceramics – derived from measuring radiation levels in ceramic material to provide a date since the vessel was fired – encouraged a continuation of this work in 2014. A further £2750 was raised through the University of Winchester, allowing five more samples to be dated. Those selected were ceramics from Trench C assessed in the field as belonging to the Byzantine period (Samples **NOK14/C 2; 3; 4** and **5**) and a fragment of zoomorphic figurine thought to date to the 8th/7th century BC from Trench A (Sample **NOK14/A 2**) (see Table 5).

Site code	Sample No.	Context	Site grid co-ords	Depth below turf line	Weight of soil sample	Dimensions of sherd	On site observations
NOK14/A	2*	316	106/205	2.4m	315g	70g; 50mm x 50mm x 25mm	Piece of figurine body. Estimated diameter 90mm. Minimum thickness 10mm, maximum thickness 20mm. Fabric appears predominantly yellowish red (5YR 4/6) with frequent, fine white temper. Exterior surface smooth and predominantly dark reddish grey (5YR 4/2)
NOK13/B	2*	113	102/204	1.2m	46g	23g; 55mm x 35mm x 6mm	Byzantine period plate/ dish – possible local copy of Byzantine type. Estimated diameter of vessel 25-30cm. decorated with a 5-6mm wide, 1-2mm high raised horizontal band. Fabric appears predominantly yellowish red (5YR 5/6).
NOK14/C	3	113	102/204	1.2m	99g	59g; 40mm x 35mm x max 25mm	Byzantine period colchian amphora handle. Oval shaped in cross section. Fabric is red (2.5YR 4/8)
NOK14/C	4	113	102/204	1.2m	90g	62g; 60mm x 40mm x 13mm	Byzantine period colchian amphora/ large vessel handle. Flattened oval/ sub-rectangular in cross-section. Fabric is red (2.5YR 4/8) with fine mixed temper.
NOK14/C	5	113	102/204	1.2m	62g	50g; 73mm x 65mm x 7mm	Byzantine body sherd decorated with four 6-7mm wide, 1-2mm high raised horizontal bands. Estimated diameter of this part of the vessel is 220mm. Fabric is red (2.5YR 4/5) with very fine temper.

* Because of Trench-specific sequential numbering, there were two sample 2, but these were carefully identified with Trench code and context number throughout.

Table 6: Details of ceramic samples selected for for OSL dating

Unfortunately it was not possible to determine an accurate date for NOK 14/C Sample 2, as so little quartz was present within the fabric. Usually calculations are based on the mean of 8-12 repeat measurements with each individual measurement representing the OSL signal detected from 500-4000 grains of quartz (Dr Jean-Luc Schwenninger, pers. comm.). In the case of this sample, only a dozen grains could be measured and the laboratory reported that the age estimate should, therefore, not be considered reliable.

With regard to the other dates, which achieved a high reliability, they broadly correspond with what was expected (Table 6). The zoomorphic figurine fragment (dated relatively to the 8th/7th century BC) appeared within the range of 795 BC to 415 BC, however with the middle of that range at 605 BC it may suggest that the date assigned by relative and stylistic analysis is a little earlier than it should be. The three sherds from Trench C that produced dates certainly fit within the Roman/ Byzantine period on part or all of their likely range, however it was surprising that they appeared to date to the earlier Roman, or even Hellenistic, period at one extreme, and the 8th-12th centuries AD at the other. The period when Nokalakevi is best represented in the historical sources and when, consequently, most Byzantine-period activity at the site is thought to date to (namely the 4th to 6th centuries AD) was not represented. This is all the more interesting because it is commonly believed that the site was abandoned following the taking of the fortress by the Arab general, later Umayyad Caliph, Marwan ibn Muhammad in 735-7 AD. However, it seems likely that Nokalakevi was reoccupied, though perhaps on a much smaller scale, before too long. Certainly by 1008 AD, when Georgia was a flourishing, independent and now unified kingdom, one would expect to see some resumption of occupation in the former capital of Lazika.

Client code	Lab code	Years before 2015	Error	Middle of date range
NOK14/A [2] (316)	X6678P	2620	190	605 BC
NOK 14/C [2] (113)	-	2660	500	Not considered reliable
NOK14/C [3] (113)	X6680P	2050	190	35 BC
NOK14/C [4] (113)	X6681P	1130	160	AD 885
NOK14/C [5] (113)	X6682P	870	120	AD 1145

Table 7: OSL results from the RLHA, University of Oxford

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APPENDIX

Small Find No.	Context No.	Description	Trench Coordinates	Level
1	272	Head and part of body of animal figurine with necklace/collar	105.90/208.42	-4.17
2	272	Large fragment of fired clay (representing roughly a quadrant of a hollow circle)	105.30/205.65	-4.28
3	272	One horned animal figurine	106.00/205.20	-4.24
4	272	Fragment of leg and body of animal figurine	103.85/204.30	-4.26
5	294	Copper alloy fragment	102.06/204.20	-4.95
6	294	Folded copper alloy object	100.40/204.40	-4.25
7	294	Wood fragments (NB probably intrusive)	104.62/210.30	-4.15
8	272	Ceramic vessel	104.20/208.60	-4.14
9	310	Copper alloy fragment	100.90/202.80	-4.32
10	316	Zoomorphic figurine – head and partial body with collar	105.00/205.00	-4.31
11	316	Zoomorphic figurine – incomplete head and elongated neck	103.48/202.18	-4.30
12	316	Large Zoomorphic figurine – partial body, leg and neck	105.85/ 203.65	-4.32

Table 8: Trench A 2014 Small Finds Register (All levels refer to the zero established in the 1980s)

Small Find No.	Context No.	Description	Trench Coordinates	Level
1	113	Pale blue mineral for pigment/ preparation of dye	103.00/202.00	125.64
2	113	Fe nail (Byzantine?)	101.50/200.50	125.36

Table 9: Trench C 2014 Small Finds Register (All levels are in metres above sea level)

Small Find No.	Context No.	Description	Trench Coordinates	Level
1	(106)	Soviet Union Coin produced in 1957	109.10/202.20	122.13
2	(110)*	Silver (?) fragment of frame of book or icon	107.70/200.80	121.84
3	(110)*	Copper (?) thread wrapped on wooden rail	107.90/201.10	121.83
4	(110)*	Silver (?) fragment of frame of book or icon	107.80/200.60; 107.30/200.60	121.83
5	(110)*	Silver (?) fragment of frame of book or icon	107.40/201.25; 107.70/201.10	121.75
6	(110)*	Silver fragment (wide one) of book, icon or coffin	107.10/200.75; 107.30/201.10	121.73
7	(110)	Buckle of belt (bronze?)	107.30/200.93	121.18

* Although these finds were assigned to context 110, the modern disturbance at the west end of the grave cover should have been given its own context number

Table 10: Trench D 2014 Small Finds Register (All levels are in metres above sea level)

Sample No.	Context No.	Description	Sample Size
1	294	Sample of soil found in base of pot	200g
2	316	Fragment of zoomorphic figurine and associated soil for OSL dating – 106/205 2.4m below topsoil: 12/7/14	Figurine fragment and 20g soil sample

Table 11: Trench A 2014 Sample Register

Sample No.	Context No.	Description	Sample Size
1	113	Bulk environmental sample	2 bags
2	113	Byzantine period plate - ?local copy of Byzantine type – plus soil for OSL dating	1 sherd and 20g soil
3	113	Byzantine period Colchian amphora handle plus soil for OSL dating	1 sherd and 20g soil
4	113	Byzantine period Colchian amphora/ large vessel handle plus soil for OSL dating	1 sherd and 20g soil
5	113	Byzantine period decorated body sherd plus soil for OSL dating	1 sherd and 20g soil

Table 12: Trench C 2014 Sample Register

Sample No.	Context No.	Description	Sample Size
1	110	Sample taken from under the left thigh of skeleton (123)	30gr.
2	110	Sample taken from under the right thigh of skeleton (123)	35gr.
3	110	Sample taken from under pelvis of skeleton (123)	30gr.
4	110	Sample taken from under the cranium of skeleton (123)	20gr.

Table 13: Trench D 2014 Sample Register