



ANGLO-GEORGIAN EXPEDITION TO NOKALAKEVI
ქართულ-ინგლისური ექსპედიცია ნოქალაქევი

2006 AREA A FIELD REPORT

BENJAMIN NEIL

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY IAN COLVIN, PAUL EVERILL AND NICK ARMOUR

Report Summary	3
Staff and volunteers	4
Funding	4
Introduction	5
Figure 1: Showing Archaeopolis within the geography of West Georgia.....	5
Background to Project and Area	6
Setting.....	6
Figure 2: Composite plan of Archaeopolis and surrounding area.....	6
Expedition History.....	7
Overview chronology of Archaeopolis	8
Excavation Methodology	9
Trench History - overview	9
2006 Results	11
Figure 3: Plan showing features 3, 4 and 5.....	11
Burials	16
Skeleton (183)	16
Skeleton (185)	17
Appendix A: Matrix	19
Appendix B: Graphics	20
Figure 4: Plan of Trench ‘A’ excavated in 2006.	20

Report Summary

The aim for the 2006 season's work was to bring the 2004 North and West extension of Area 'A' into phase with the original 2003 10x6m area. Complementing this were 2 objectives: the first to determine the stratigraphic interplay between the Byzantine period surfaces and underlying Hellenistic deposits found in previous years; the second to investigate whether the Hellenistic period burials found in 2003 would continue into the area extension, thus suggesting a continuation of the extensive necropolis previously identified by Professor Parmen Zackaria.

By the end of the season, the aim of bringing the extension into phase had been accomplished in good time. More burials were discovered, suggesting subsequent seasons are liable to increase the scope and magnitude of the burial assemblage. Furthermore the 2006 excavations have allowed us to identify the stone foundations of a structure or structures also dated to the Hellenistic period. This superimposition of possible occupation or mortuary structures with the necropolis is a hitherto unrecorded phenomenon within the bounds of the Archaeopolis fortifications.

Staff and volunteers

CORE STAFF

Georgia:

- Prof David Lomitashvili: head of the expedition, senior researcher, deputy director of the Tbilisi State Museum.
- Dr Besik Lortkipanidze: deputy head of expedition, Historian, curriculum instructor for the Ministry Of Education.
- Dr Nino Kebuladze: Metallurgy specialist and conservator, Tbilisi State Museum.
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Funding

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Introduction

This report documents the excavation of Area A during the 2006 field season undertaken by the Anglo-Georgian Archaeological Expedition to Nokalakevi (AGEN), Republic of Georgia; We are an independent organisation that works in collaboration with British and Georgian university and museum institutions.

The site is situated in the Senaki District of the Samegrelo region in the west of Georgia, at the northern edge of the Kolkheti plain, GPS reference 42°21'26.10"N/ 42°11'39.60"E

Our excavations are conducted within the protected ancient monument at Nokalakevi, identified as the Archaeopolis of Procopius and Agathias and the Tsikhegoji of the Georgian chronicles, and were undertaken in collaboration with the National Museum of Georgia (Tbilisi). The work has been accomplished in accordance with Georgian state legislation regarding excavation within ancient monuments and the relevant permissions were sought from and granted by the Ministry of Culture.

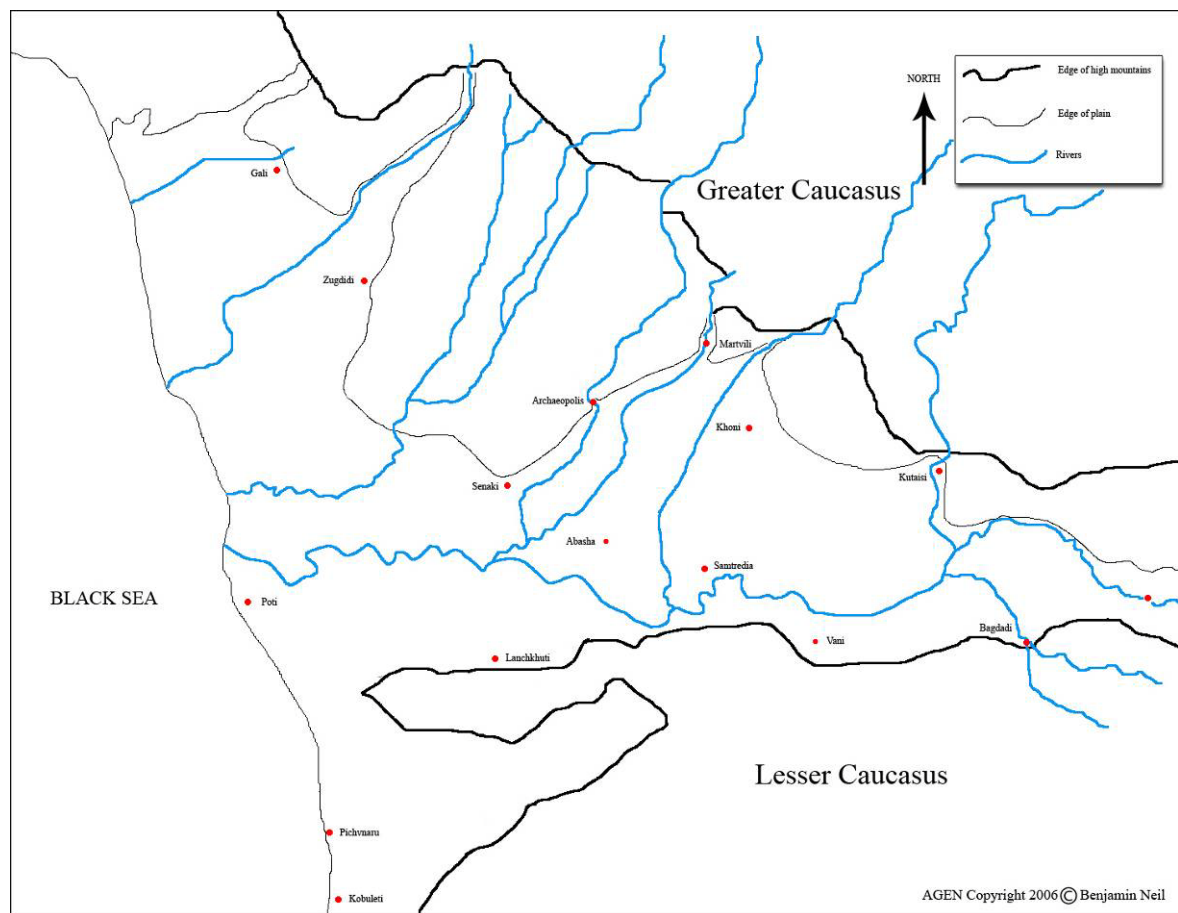


Figure 1: Showing Archaeopolis within the geography of West Georgia

Background to Project and Area

Setting

Archaeopolis, (now situated within the village of Nokalakevi) sits against a high NE-SW running ridge of the northern uplands that extend from the North Caucasus Mountains into the Colchian plain.



Figure 2: Composite plan of Archaeopolis and surrounding area.

The acropolis atop the escarpment commands a 180 degree panorama from the South West to North East across the lowlands out towards the South East. Walls running down the mountainside connect to a second level area and lower town, where its position takes strategic advantage of an acute meander in the River Tekhuri, which flanks the complex to the south as it emerges from a narrow gorge. On the east side of the lower town, successive rulers built three parallel defensive walls (with towers and a strongly fortified gate) to meet the river, which effectively encloses the area within these fortifications. Six churches, two bath-houses, two kilns, a 'palace', cistern and tunnel amongst other standing and buried remains of the 4th to 6th century AD.

Expedition History

Work in Nokalakevi began when Alphonse Maria Schneider from the University of Freiburg went to Georgia in December 1930. Over two months, he planned and sampled the settlement by excavating 30 small trenches in different areas throughout the site.

In 1973, the National Museum of Georgia formed the Nokalakevi expedition under the leadership of Academician Parmen Zakaraia. During the following 17 years, the site was systematically cleared of vegetation and most village occupation before the excavation and restoration of the standing archaeology could begin. The standing ruins of the walls were almost completely covered in rubble and soil, all of which had to be excavated before conservation. The work took a considerable amount of time and money but thankfully allowed the site to be preserved. However it has also meant that in many areas of the site, particularly those where standing masonry was absent, very few deeply intrusive archaeological investigations were undertaken. However a few deeper excavations undertaken by Professor Lomitashvili suggested a depth of stratigraphy under the later ruins which could possibly run back to later Bronze Age.

The present collaboration was first raised in private discussions between Mr Colvin and Prof. Lomitashvili in 1999. In 2000 the British and Georgian directors of the expedition travelled to the site to explore possible research agendas and work out details of strategy for archaeological excavation and post-excavation work. It became clear at an early stage that there was still an exceptional amount of information to be gleaned from the site, especially from earlier phases of occupation and that in general it would be beneficial to link up all existing records of survey and excavation results with an ongoing programme of archaeological works.

Overview chronology of Archaeopolis

Time Line

1850 onwards	Modern occupation of the lower town and agricultural activity
17th - 19th	Occupation by the Dadiani family, who regenerated some of the standing remains and conducted small scale amateur archaeology.
10th – 11th	Period indicated by glazed green pottery. 7 Martyrs Church reconstructed.
Mid 8th	Nokalakevi was occupied by Murvan Ibn-Muhammad (Arabian Military General) and was shortly after besieged by the Byzantine army; they failed in the attempt and were defeated by the Arabs, possibly destroying Archaeopolis in the process.
Beginning of 8th	Possible Byzantine presence, coinciding with the first iconoclastic period: (were they trying to control the region by destroying Islam?)
Beginning of 4th to end of 6th	Byzantine occupation: Renovation and additional construction of Archaeopolis to include bath houses, water cisterns, kilns for workshops and churches. Archaeopolis is the stage for the battle between the Persians, led by Mermeroes and the Byzantines, led by Odonachus and Babas in 551 AD. Coins found on second level marked with Flavius Mauricius Tiberius who ruled 582 – 602 AD. Human, possibly Christian burials found in the lower town near the 7 Martyrs Church.
Beginning 1st BC to end of 3rd AD	Sparse evidence for occupation by the Roman Empire, unconfined to a specific stratigraphical event. A piece of Sinopian pottery has been found and some coins marked with Constantine I who ruled 306 – 337 AD.
last ¼ of 2nd BC to Beginning 1st BC	Archaeopolis currently thought to have been abandoned yet continued in use as a necropolis.
4th to last ¼ of 2nd BC	Georgian Chronicles describe the foundation of Tsikhegoij by the Eristavi (ruler) Kuji. Late Hellenistic pottery, metalwork and glassware; Richly furnished human burials and structural foundations.
6 th to end of 5 th	Antique archaeology
7 th to 6 th	As yet no definitive material from this date.
8 th to 7 th	Zoomorphic figurines (double headed) found in an activity layer
12 th to 8 th	Eagle stamped black pottery found but no cultural layers. 1200 BC: Jason and the Argonauts travel to Colchis to retrieve the Golden Fleece

Excavation Methodology

The expedition uses a modified version of the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) single context recording system (Spence 1990). Site plans are drawn on permatrace draughting film at a usual scale of 1:20 and a special scale of 1:10 for smaller deposits and skeletal material. As a trial in this season, all plans were drawn at a 1:10 scale which aided greater resolution in digital processing.

The plans are levelled to the site datum, which is set at 0.00m to account for both excavation recording and the recording of standing remains. Consequently the levels for area A are set within a negative range below the site datum. Special finds can also be planned and levelled in to give a three-dimensional coordinate relating to their discovery point within a deposit. Coordinates were measured from the site grid's original 100/200 position.

The written record is entered onto pro-forma sheets in biro for longevity and kept according to a series of registers that are cross-referenced and checked. There are separate sheets for deposits, cuts, masonry and skeletons. These contexts are all placed into the area stratigraphic sequence and from there they can be related (in many instances) to disparate areas of the site.

All contexts, significant groups of features and important finds have been photographed in colour slide, monochrome print and digital to create a comprehensive photographic archive. Site written context sheets were entered onto a digital database. The site archive is replicated with one set of materials deposited in the National Museum of Georgia and the other stored in Britain.

Trench History - overview

Area 'A' was opened on 18th July 2001. In this first season, it became apparent that under the top 400mm of soil (which contained mixed deposits of fragmented Hellenistic and late medieval pottery and modern bottle glass) lay the fallen, partial remains of Archaeopolis's fortification wall (103) (see graphic), the reconstruction of which stands immediately east of the trench. One artefact from this season that has drawn particular attention (found beneath the wall, in a mixed Layer 106) is the worn arm of a stone cross bearing a fragmentary Greek inscription. This has been read as 'ΣΤΑΥΡΕΤΙ[Μ]...ΔΟΥ...', meaning 'Oh Honoured Cross, protect Thy servant X' (see figure 5, Appendix: B).

On the 21st of August 2002, excavations resumed. In this season, it was realised that the stratigraphy was not going to follow well-defined horizontal planes, as distinctions between layers were tenuous. It was determined however that there were a series of levelling deposits and activity areas for one of the construction phases of the fortification wall. This was evident though the presence of a hearth and an intensity of inclusions such as small rounded river

stones, moderate chips of limestone, grit, mortar fragments and animal bone. Rich deposits of predominantly Byzantine potsherds and ceramic building materials were also found.

Excavations again resumed on the 25th August 2003. In this season, 6 Hellenistic human burials were recovered; two from layer (136) and four from layer (137) (see figure 4, Appendix B). These were dated through the artefactual finds (which included beads, bracelets and ceramic vessels) and also the cultural positioning of the inhumations. A linear feature of angular limestone blocks running approximately east west for 1.80m was also found in the north west of the trench.

In the months proceeding the 2004 excavation season, it was decided by the directors of the expedition to extend Area A to the west and north in order to capture a better window onto the archaeology. Thus on the 17th July 2004, a 14x9m area was marked out and excavation began. However, it was found that a power cable that supplies the expedition base clips the south west corner of the new area, so its dimensions were modified in order to work around it. In this season, 1.5m of archaeology was excavated, largely analogous to the same deposits and layers recorded in the first two years.

The 2005 season began on the 01st August. In this year, the effort was placed on determining the exact phasing of the extension stratigraphy and tying it in with the 2003 sequence. As excavations ensued, a clearer understanding of the activity in the area was helped by the find of three east-west orientated inhumations in the southern half of the extension.

2006 Results

Work on Area A's extension resumed on the 31.07.06 with the removal of the backfill and plastic sheeting, laid at the end of the 2005 season to act as a buffer between the archaeology and environment. As seen in previous years the degradation of the plastic throughout the intervening 10 months was considerable due to flora activity and other local taphonomic factors, such as physical attrition by limestone inclusions and local fauna.

After the trench had been cleared of vegetation, plastic and backfill, it became apparent that the sections had suffered from erosion over the past years, being as they were, aslant by a horizontal factor of between 0.20m to 0.50m. It was decided that they be straightened and then planned and photographed as a measure of good practice and conservation of the stratigraphy.

After the sections were rectified, a trowelling exercise was carried out over the trench area to familiarise the students not only with the tools and techniques of the profession, but with the nature of the underlying deposits. The cleaning revealed a layer of dark greyish brown silty clay, an intermixed material with common limestone inclusions (seen to greater or lesser degree throughout all strata).

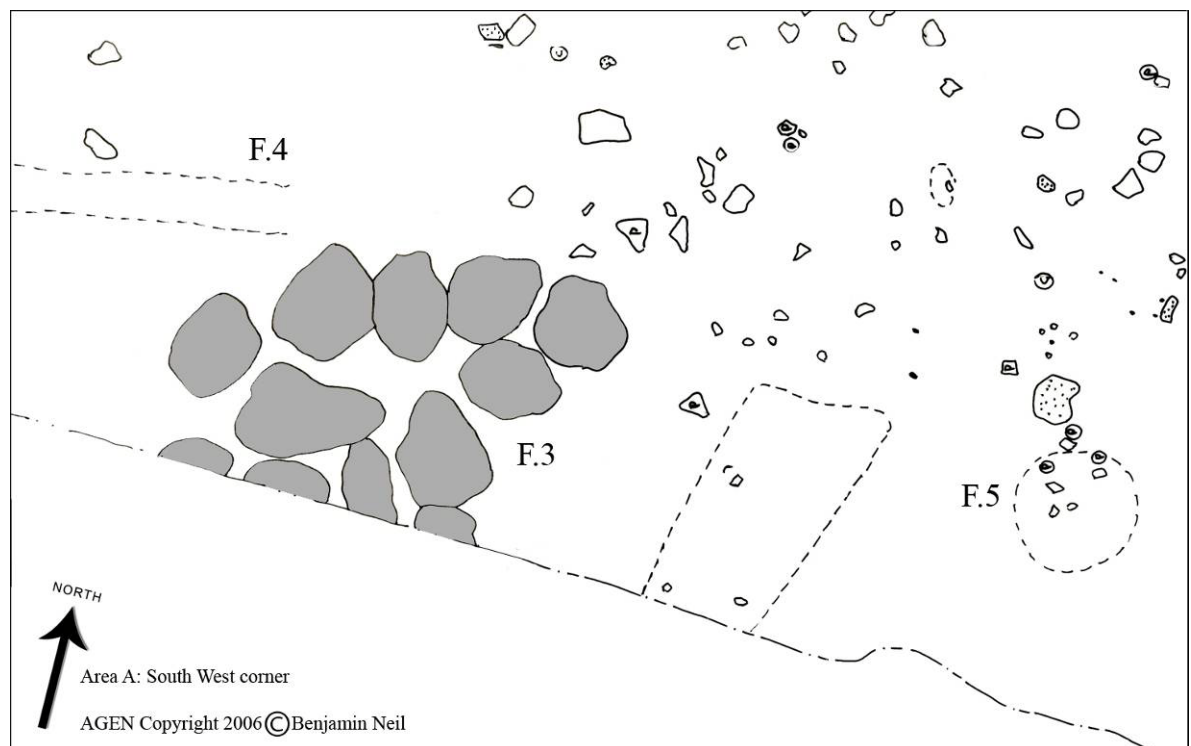


Figure 3: Plan showing features 3, 4 and 5

Excavation proper began at the southern end of the extension with a hard trowel towards the northern bulk. Almost immediately a feature was found through cleaning directly below the north facing bulk; although unexcavated at that time, it was later revealed though the normal

course of excavation to comprise flat, rounded, closely placed river stones, each approximately 0.40m in diameter covering an area of around 1m sq (figure 3). The initial response to this feature was the possibility of it being a path, or more elaborately a road but because the baulk section precludes the potential expanse of the feature, one can only suppose its true nature. It became apparent later in the excavation season that the feature is surrounded by a number of negative features (unexcavated in this season) including postholes and a linear feature, looking much like a gully or beam slot. This may suggest that the placement of stones was more functional as a hard standing if a structure was placed over or near it.

2.60m north of the SW corner, a friable charcoal impression of a wooden beam was found within context (170). This was a limestone rubble layer found in the previous season and covers an area extending 2m east from the west baulk and north by around 7.5m. A working hypothesis for the presence of this context is that it represents left over mason's material and rubble detritus left over from building work on one of the fortification walls



Picture 1: Charcoal impression of wooden beam.

The beam was isolated within this context, so the decision was made to lift it having cleaned, recorded and photographed it first. Despite the care taken to preserve its integrity, it crumbled due to its fragmentary nature. However, for the purposes of species analysis, only a small sample is needed for an effective result. The beam fragments were placed on an aluminium board and then wrapped in aluminium foil.

At the northern end of the trench, 2 hearths were found. Around them, we came across a contrasting soil inclusion, within context (171) being a fine, green grit which was thought to be the remnants of cess effluent. A more likely explanation is that it is a particular degraded stone, possibly consequential to the proximity of the hearths. It was noticed that the baulk area immediately above the hearth features in plan remained consistently damp, even when the rest of the section had dried. Because this phenomenon directly related to the features, the question of what the specific soil mechanics were that caused this phenomenon was contemplated. It was reasoned that because the soil matrix was a lot more dislocated than its surroundings, like a sponge it readily drew water through a natural capillary action via evaporation.

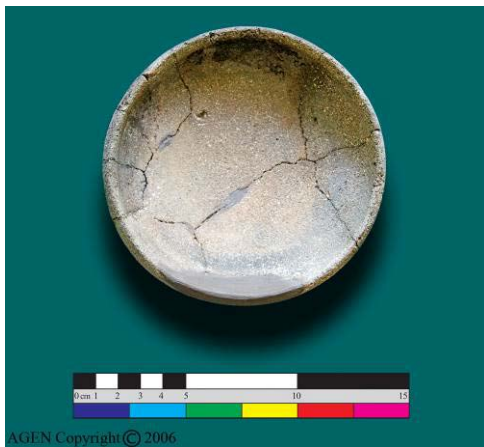


Picture 2: *Western hearth*



Picture 3: *Eastern Hearth*

The trench window onto the hearths precludes their extent and consequently to some degree, their function. It is uncertain at this stage whether the hearths were contained within a structure or not; it was noted that a higher percentage of Byzantine pottery and glass fragments (pictures 4 and 5 respectively) were concentrated in this area within context (171) suggesting either a level of habitation or manufacturing activity.



Picture 4: *early Byzantine period local-ware dish* Also see illustration, *Appendix B*



Picture 5: *glass fragments from one vessel*



Picture 6: *Worked stone, possibly Iranian turquoise*

A further interesting find (picture 6) is a shaped piece stone, likely to be turquoise. Its origin and significance is unknown, but the nearest source of turquoise in quantity is Iran, which raises questions about the nature of exchange between Colchis and Iran and the policy Rome held for their relations.



Picture 7: Aerial shot of Area A, looking west

Lying beneath context (171) was context (173), a firm, blocky, largely sterile dark brown-grey silty clay. As this context was excavated, it became apparent that a structure or structures (187) lay within it to the north and east of the trench (see picture 7 opposite). It is seen to continue under the later fortification walls to the east (see base plan) though to what extent is unknown.

The structure(s) function at this stage is also unknown and will not be until it is fully excavated. It is aligned east-west comprising a single line of at least 2 courses of un-mortared angular limestone blocks; there is evidence of mortar within the surrounding context of (173), yet its significance is somewhat diminished as the majority of the lower town's contexts are suffused, to varying degrees, with flecks of mortar. The dimensions of the stones range from 0.70m to 1.5m in diameter with the whole covering an area of approximately 5m x 7m within the trench window.

Context (174) was determined after the complete excavation to context (170). The similarity and proximity to context (173) might suggest they are one and the same. The rationale that precluded this, despite the distinction that context (174) is mid brown silty clay containing approximately 10-20% flecks of CBM, is the natural lie of the land. At present, the southern end of the trench is around 0.40m lower than the northern end; if occupation and activity occurred directly over it (without levelling the ground), then contexts (173) and (174) match with the sequential phasing of 2003, i.e. context (136) equals context (173) in the north extension, and context (137) equals context (174) in the middle.

At this stage in the season, the decision was taken to re-open a 2.5x2.5m corner of the original trench area, which had lain dormant since 2003 throughout the process of extending the area. The purpose was to find out whether this structure met and aligned with a linear feature of angular limestone blocks found in 2003. Not only did we see a direct continuation of the structure, (see picture 7 above) it meant that the two contexts (174) and (137) are contemporary. However (174) is a good 3cm above (137) suggesting that the context has just been met in the extension.

The phasing of this structure was determined by small finds, pottery (see pictures 8 and 9) and stratigraphical relationships to the Hellenistic period; a direct indication of this being its continuation under the fortification walls to the east. To comment on the whorl (picture 8), it isn't possible at this time to estimate whether it was used to spin a light or heavy fibre but judging from its size and composition, one can reasonably assume it was used to spin short fibres such as short fibre wool, cotton or flax tow. Its relatively slim diameter suggests a fast, short spin so producing a tight thread.



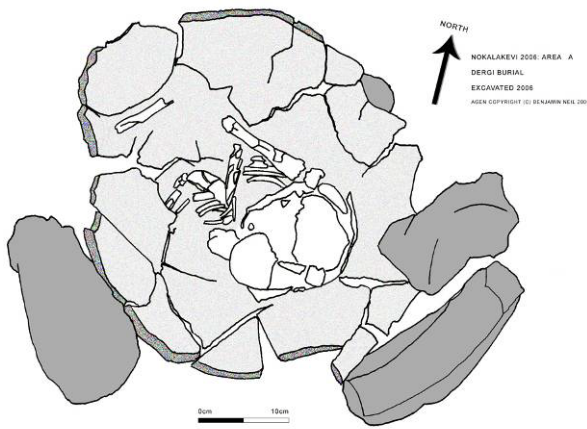
Picture 8: A spindle whorl



*Picture 9: typical Hellenistic pottery fragments
Also see illustrations, Appendix B*

Burials

Skeleton (183)



Skeleton (183) (left) is a unique find to Nokalakevi; contained within one half of a cooking pot (see pictures 10 and 11 below) the partial remains of a pre-adolescent child lay interred within or underneath (unknown at this time) the foundations of the Hellenistic period structure. Although pot burials are not unusual in this region, a *dergi* burial is and as yet, no other example is known of. A similar burial in Nokalakevi was found outside the fortification walls in

which a horizontally cut amphora contained a human skeleton. There is no sign that this particular cooking pot was deliberately cut in half for the purpose of the burial; the break is irregular despite the few missing pieces.



Picture 10: reconstructed *Dergi* burial pot (outside)



Picture 11: reconstructed *Dergi* burial pot (inside)

There is no indication that it has been scored or incised in order to split the pot, especially on the exposed fabric. This suggests that that the pot was either damaged prior to its consideration as a burial vessel (perhaps suggesting a lack of effort and care for this particular inhumation) or that it was truncated by the act of laying the structural wall. A further consideration is whether the situation of the burial is significant enough to confer a related meaning between interment and structure. It is perhaps unusual that it is a partial burial with no associated artefacts such as coins or jewellery, which would otherwise be a trait of a Greek burial. One might consider the funerary practice of Zoroastrianism, which may not be so unusual if we regard the influence of the Seleucid Empire with an Iranian weight. This however is pure speculation whereby the skeleton's muddled position is accounted for by the practice of exposing the body to the elements where its polluting flesh is consumed by fauna.

A compelling piece of information comes from the child's skull fragments. On the left parietal bone, there is environmental taphonomic damage, (which is likely to have occurred through exposure) and a sharply demarked, irregular aperture of approximately 5mm diameter; there is no macroscopic indication of radial fracturing or healing and no indication of scoring or scraping that would suggest trepanning. Endocranially, (picture 12) a symmetrical loss of cortical bone tapers away from the perforation, either due to the splintering effect of a penetrating trauma or the involvement of pathology causing localised erosion (such as a meningioma). Because restrictions of time and resource impeded a comprehensive analysis, answers remain provisional. If it is a perimortem trauma, the implication that it was a result of sacrifice is a compelling one and in turn has implications for the function of the Hellenistic period structure.

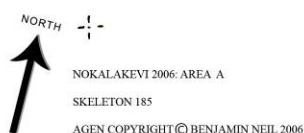


Picture 12: Skeleton (173) endocranial view

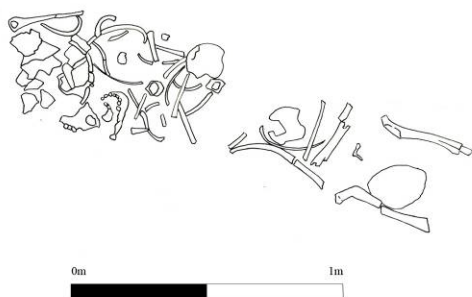


Picture 13: Skeleton (173) ectocranial view

Skeleton (185)



205.90/104.50

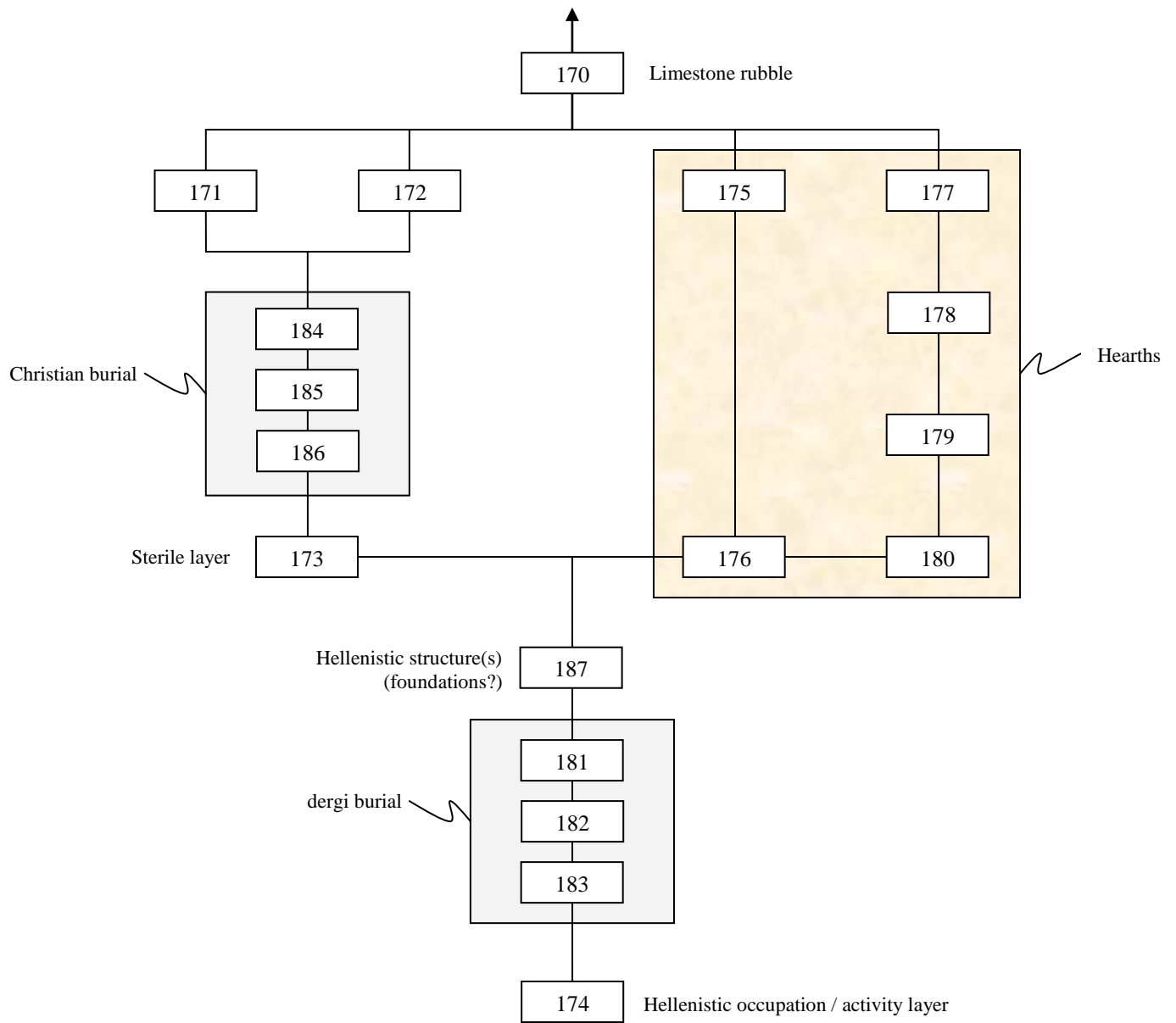


Skeleton (185) is a burial of another child but it is uncertain whether it is Colchian, Greek or Roman Christian such is the ambiguity of an east-west orientation and situation. The possible contention lies with the fact that it has been cut into the top of context (174) a Hellenistic layer yet we see the base of the cut only, which may mean it was cut in from later deposits. The cut is also very narrow, barely being large enough to fit the body. This suggests the absence of a coffin, (which would

otherwise suggest a Greek trait) so may be interpreted as a native Colchian interment. We should also consider why the skeleton is so disarticulated and without any obvious sign of truncation. Natural in situ movement would not account for this alone; there are no indications of scavenging on the bone (which would require the burial to be relatively shallow)

so one may assume that it occurred before or at the time of burial. It is also natural to assume that being a child amongst many contemporary child interments in the Hellenistic level of Area A, it was a victim of a time where higher infant mortality rates were common, possibly due to malaria (which no longer exists in the region) as in periods of flooding, large areas of standing water exist (and still do).

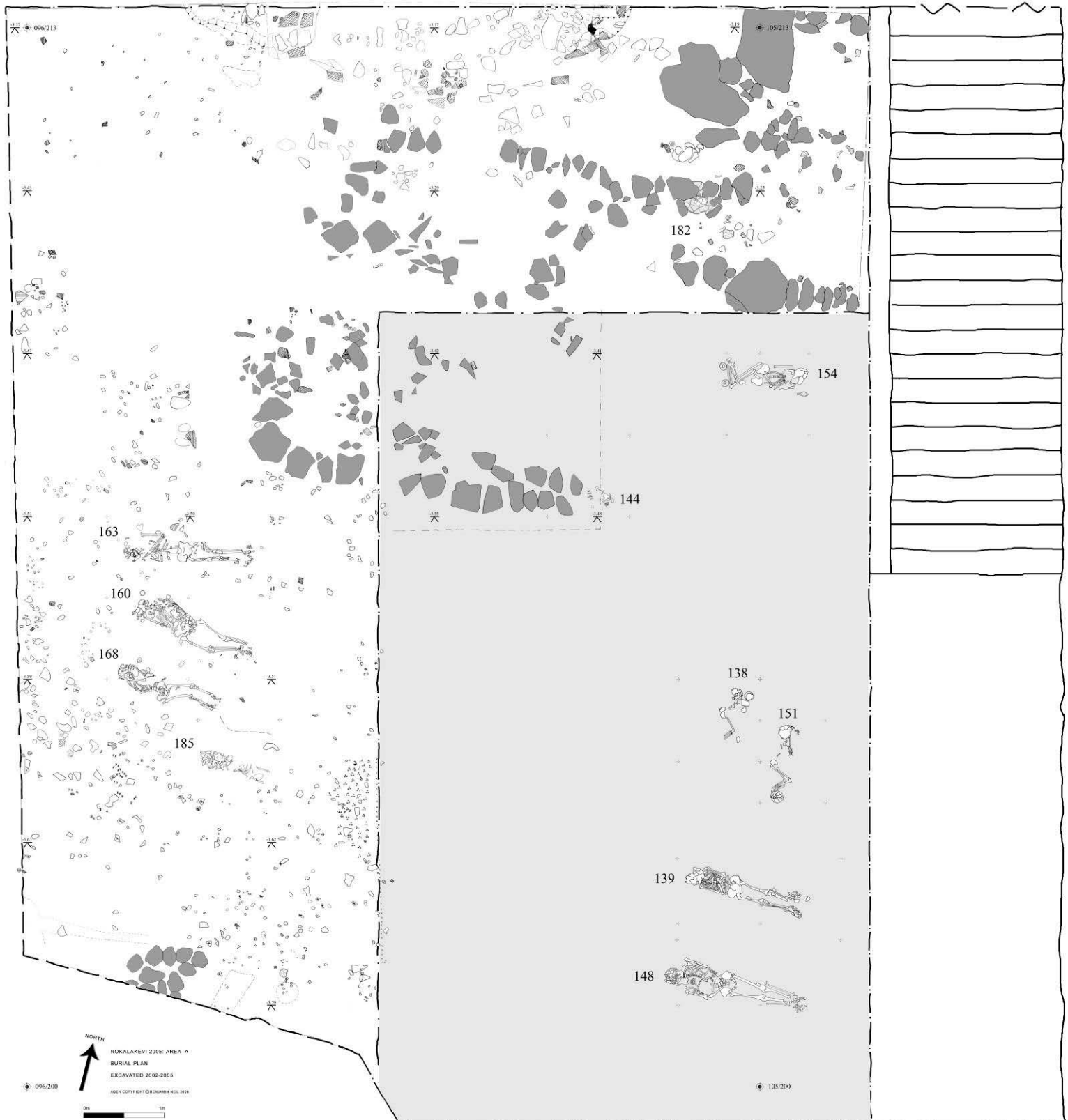
Appendix A: Matrix



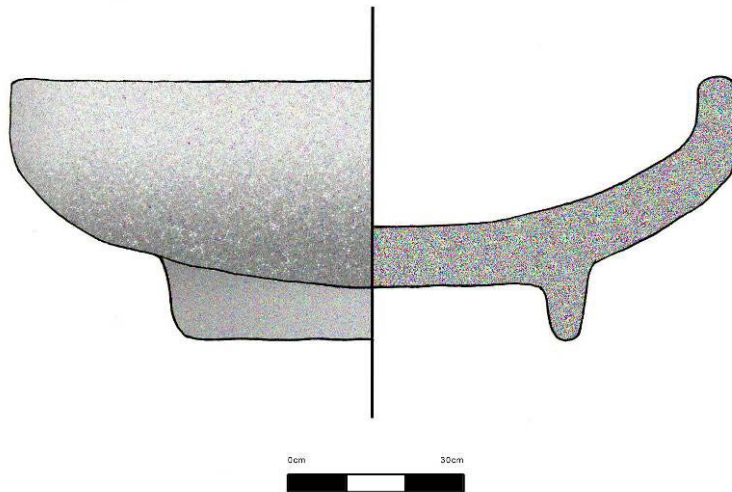
Appendix B: Graphics

Figure 4: Plan of Trench 'A' excavated in 2006.

With all human skeletal inhumations (labelled) excavated since 2003.

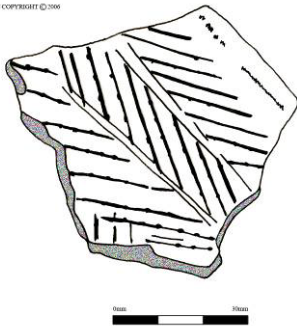


Pottery Illustrations

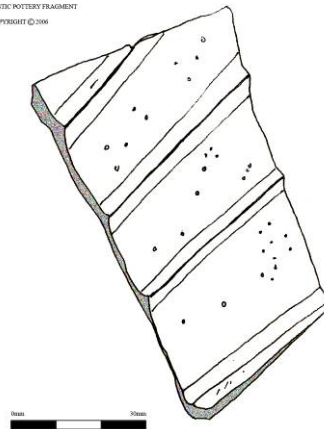


Local ware dish, Byzantine period.

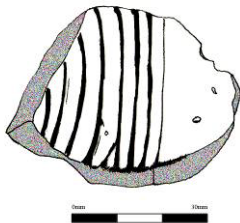
ANGLO-GEORGIAN EXPEDITION TO NOKALAKEVI 2006 AREA A
HELLENISTIC POTTERY FRAGMENT
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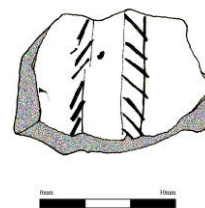
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Hellenistic period pottery shards.



Figure 5: Cross fragment.