

Nokalakevi, Georgia: potential in ruins

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Global attention has focused on Georgia as a result of the recent political and military conflict. However, the country also has a rich archaeological heritage which is little known in the West. The Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi (AGEN), set up in 2000, aims to explore the archaeology of a major site that was occupied from at least the 8th century BC to recent times. It also offers training to Georgian archaeologists and international students and outreach work to the local community. In this article two British members of AGEN describe the aims of the project and some of the results of recent field seasons.

their heritage and cultural identity. In the post-medieval period the town became the estate of the powerful Dadiani family, princes of Samegrelo, who repaired and added their own structures to the ancient site. Archaeological findings so far have shown that the site was occupied from the 8th century BC through the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods right up to current times. This prime location was so attractive that several families lived within the actual grounds of the site until the 1970s when they were offered new houses within the main village by order of the Soviet authorities, to allow the site to undergo full-scale excavation. Many of the site's standing structures date to the Late

Recent political events in the Republic of Georgia have brought the country into the global spotlight. Modern Georgia is a relatively young country and one of the many republics that were formed after the break-up of the former Soviet Union, although its political and cultural roots stretch back to the ancient world. Georgia is poorly known or appreciated both culturally and archaeologically by people in the west.¹ Our aim in this article is to use the site of Nokalakevi to highlight both the importance of Georgia's archaeological heritage in an international context and to illustrate the potential and the threat posed to that potential in light of recent events. Sites such as Dmanisi, Vani and Pichvnari are better known than Nokalakevi, both domestically and internationally, but Nokalakevi may have an equal role to play, as we hope to show.²

Ruins where once a town was

Nokalakevi (translating literally as "ruins where once a town was") is located in the west of Georgia in the province of Samegrelo. Located in the loop of the River Tekhuri overlooking the Colchian plain with hills surrounding the northern and western perimeters (Fig. 1), its situation would have made it an ideal location for settlement and excavation at the site has certainly confirmed this. The remains of the ancient town overlook the river in its deep gorge and consist of a lower, middle and upper town as well as an upper citadel.

Nokalakevi is mentioned in historical documents: the important Byzantine historian, Procopius of Caesarea, refers to the town by its Greek name of Archaeopolis (*old town*) and details a siege of the Byzantine garrison by Persian forces.³ Further back Archaeopolis was also a significant settlement in the Kingdom of Colchis, the home of the mythical Golden Fleece. Nokalakevi was also the seat of the semi-mythical ruler Kuji and thus gained its other name Tsikhgoji (fortress of Goji/Kuji).⁴ In the 4th–6th centuries AD, Nokalakevi functioned as the capital of Lazica, the medieval successor kingdom in

western Georgia to ancient Colchis. The modern-day Laz population of eastern Turkey consider the site important to

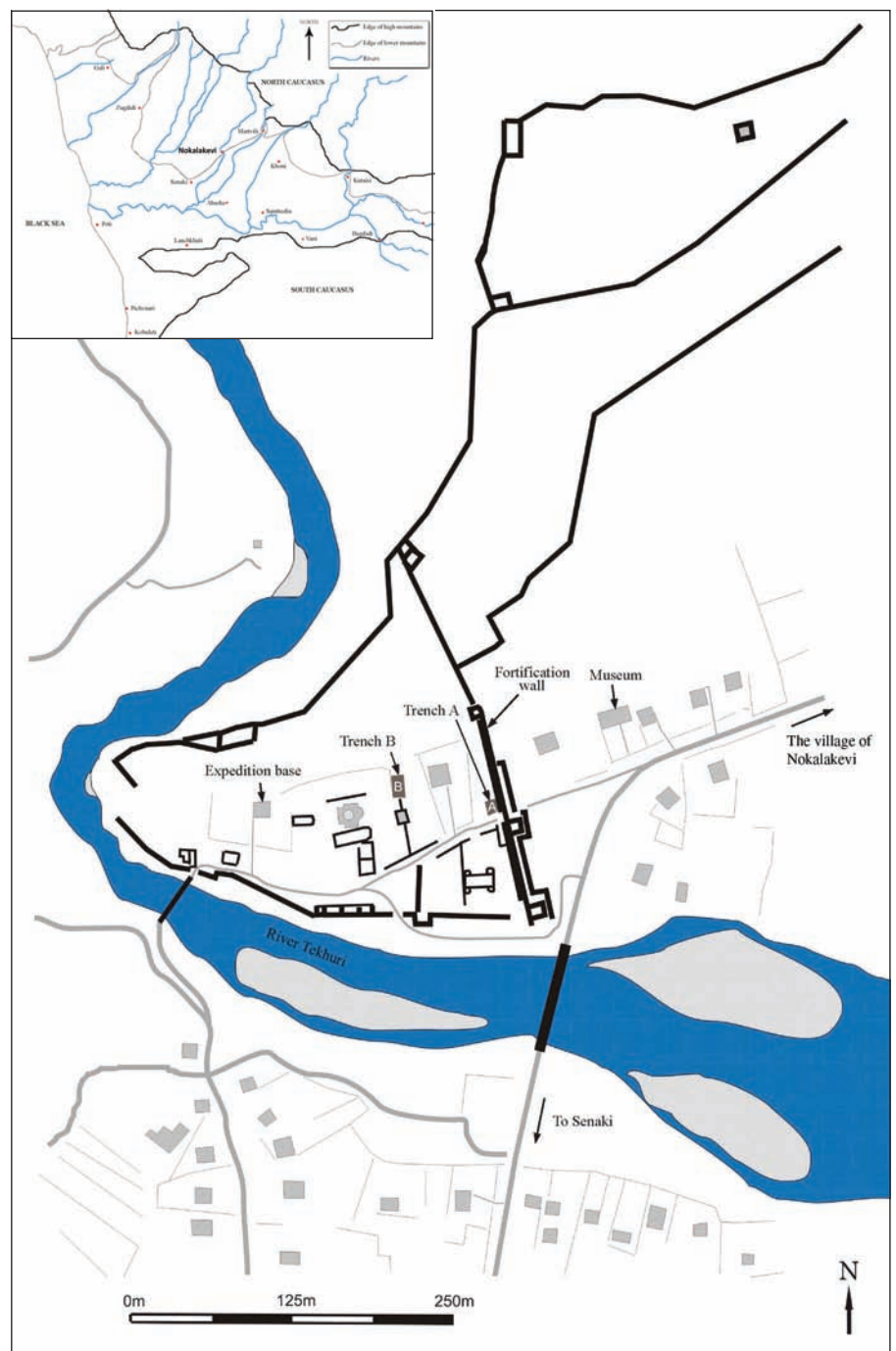


Figure 1 Plan showing the site surroundings and trench locations (map of West Georgia drawn by Benjamin Neil site plan drawn by Dr Paul Everill)

Roman/early Byzantine period (4th–6th centuries AD), but remain visible today as a result of several repair and rebuilding phases and more recent conservation and restoration work.

Early study at Nokalakevi

Archaeologically, Nokalakevi has also been the subject of some considerable investigation. In the 1930s, a Georgian commission headed by Javakhishvili and the German archaeologist Alphonse-Maria Schneider investigated the layout of structures and fortifications at the small town. The team were successful in revealing many of the site’s fortifications, including a number of towers and they also discovered a hoard of 23 golden coins of the Byzantine Emperor Maurice (583–602).⁵ Their work formed the beginning of a series of larger-scale excavations headed by Parmen Zakaraya from the 1970s until 1991.

David Braund’s book *Georgia in Antiquity*, which is a primary resource for understanding ancient Georgia, uses a synthesis of documentary and archaeological evidence. Tsatskhelidze too emphasizes the importance of archaeology: “to write a history of ancient Georgia is impossible without analysing archaeology and making an historical interpretation of it”. As an expedition we want to be able to provide the archaeological evidence to complement the documentary sources.⁶

The Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi (AGEN)

The Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi (AGEN) operates as a research and training project that provides international students and keen amateurs with a key grounding in field archaeology. The project encourages participants to learn and develop a variety of archaeological skills through active fieldwork and training in post-excavation processes (Figs 2 and 3). One of AGEN’s aims is to train the next generation of Georgian archaeologists in the methods used in British archaeology.

Since starting in 2000, following discussions between Professor David Lomitashvili of the National Museum in Georgia, and Ian Colvin, the expedition has developed and expanded and it now comprises an enthusiastic team of British and Georgian staff with diverse specialisms in archaeology, history and conservation.⁷ Running annually with a digging season of four to five weeks, the project’s staff, students and volunteers are able to experience Georgian day-to-day life first-hand through living with host-families and socializing with local people within the community.



Figure 2 Georgian and British students undertake an exercise using a Dumpy level



Figure 3 Bradford student, David Crowther, wet-sieving an environmental sample containing cremated remains

Recent excavations

In the 1980s traces of hearths and several double-headed zoomorphic ceramic figures possibly dating to the 8th–7th century BC were uncovered in a test trench at the site. Parallels to these figures have been found at Vani. Other important finds, such as the arm of a 3rd–4th century Greek inscribed cross, stimulate historical and archaeological debate about the introduction of Christianity to Georgia.

Since the turn of the millennium, AGEN’s archaeological focus has been within two trenches. Trench A, located in an area adjacent to the fortification wall in the northeast corner of the lower town (Figs 1, 4 and 5), has produced some

rich cultural layers of Hellenistic date in which lie the wall foundations of two phases of structures. Further excavation is planned to explore the form and function of the structures. Trench A has revealed several infant burials (both inhumed and cremated remains) surrounding one centrally buried inhumation of an adult female. This skeleton was crouched in an east-west grave cut and was adorned with an array of jewellery items (copper bracelets, earrings and a beautiful, rather ostentatious bead necklace) while two pottery vessels had been placed as grave goods next to the skull (Figs 6 and 7). Burial practices in the deeper layers are different. Many of the burials uncovered



Figure 6 *Adult female Hellenistic burial found in Trench A, excavated in 2007*



Figure 7 *A restored necklace made up of beads recovered from the grave of the female individual shown in Figure 6*

Future work

Evidence uncovered last season suggested the potential for further burials within Trench A at lower levels. In 2009 the expedition will need to consider removing the structures, with a view to deepening excavations onto earlier cultural layers. In the years preceding AGEN, Prof. Lomitashvili found evidence of Bronze Age activity in a test trench located near the area now referred to as Trench B. It is now proposed to excavate a sondage in the southern part of Trench B beyond the depth of the burials to reach these layers, which would allow assessment of the level and extent of Bronze Age activity in the area. There are also plans to carry out a topographic survey of the middle and upper towns of Nokalakevi to complement the survey of the lower town undertaken in 2005.

In addition to the proposed excavation plans at Nokalakevi, it is hoped that the expedition can organize an open day in the coming season to pass on the information gathered on the archaeology of the site to the local community. Nokalakevi is a popular tourist destination and receives frequent visits from inhabitants of the nearby town of Senaki and further afield within Georgia. It is imperative that the significance of this site is conveyed to these wider communities, so that Nokalakevi is appreciated for its heritage and not simply as a national beauty spot. A worrying trend of graffiti on the standing monuments at Nokalakevi was evident this year and the expedition endeavours to promote the significance of the site in an attempt to deter this kind of activity in the future. Also, with this aim in mind, it is hoped to designate guides from within the Georgian and English students to explain archaeological activities to the site's visitors and tourists. Another of AGEN's activities is supporting the creation of a Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) for the Samegrelo region. This would be a vital research tool for scholars as well as valuable for cultural heritage bodies and government who have a curatorial responsibility for such sites and may not be aware that they even exist. These activities may be the first steps in raising the profile of Nokalakevi and thus realizing the tourist potential of the site in both economic and cultural terms. A series of interviews carried out within the village of Nokalakevi would also improve our understanding of ethnographic information, folklore and local views on the work carried out at the site.

A longer-term plan of the expedition is to open up more trenches at Nokalakevi for further exploration and understanding of the site. In 2009 Prof. Lomitashvili also hopes to investigate other sites

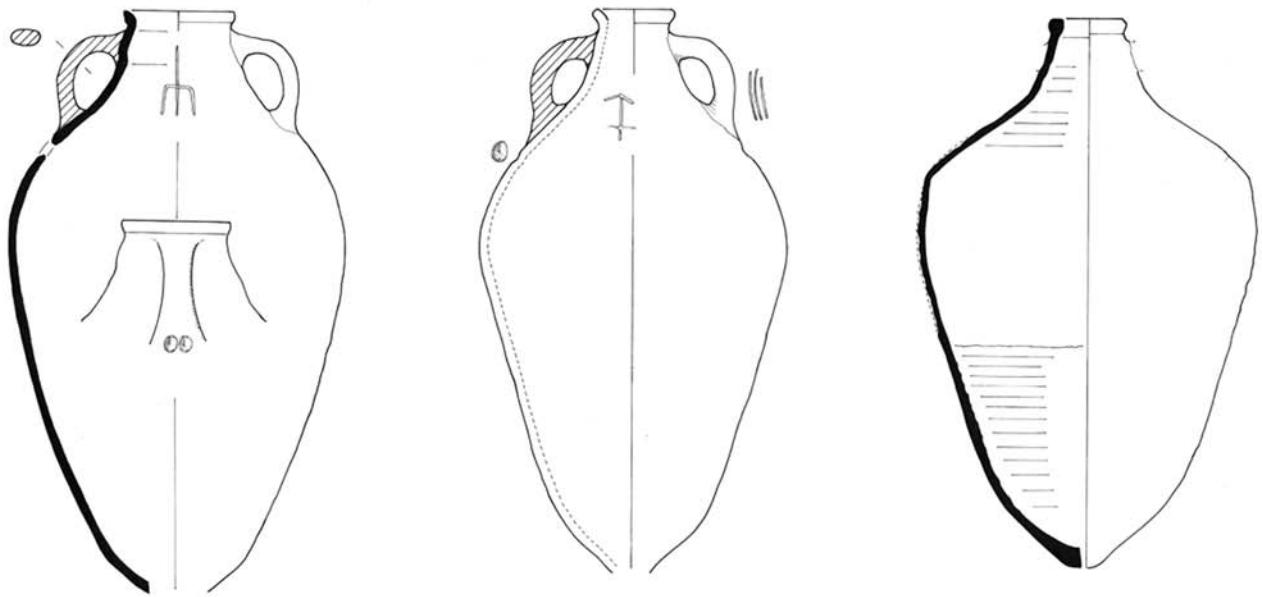


Figure 8 Restored amphorae showing inscribed makers' marks. These vessels contained neonate remains (drawn by Dr Jane Timby)

of archaeological interest within the Samegrelo region with the assistance of a Georgian team.

Conclusion

It is clear that Georgia is home to some major archaeological sites including the well documented and internationally recognized Dmanisi, Vani and Pichvnari. We feel that Nokalakevi deserves the same kind of recognition. As an important town in the kingdom of Colchis, the site of Nokalakevi has the potential to shed light on activities on the periphery of the Roman Empire. Comparative studies on archaeological sites across Georgia would provide interesting information on the Colchian world, eastern Roman Empire and the spread of Christianity in the Byzantine period.

The threat to Georgia's cultural heritage as a result of the unstable political environment may be manifested in several ways. For example, it is possible that such instability may deter future staff, students and volunteers from archaeological projects such as the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi. Logistics may also prove to be more difficult due to the destruction of infrastructure. It is also highly likely that archaeological sites and monuments have suffered damage during recent and past conflicts. Conversely, it is equally possible that recent events may have raised Georgia's international profile and that Georgian nationals may have a stimulated interest in the cultural identity inherent in their heritage sites.

Recent political events have shown Georgia struggling to create a modern identity free of Soviet-era politics. In spite of numerous instances of invasion

and suppression, Georgia survives today as a resilient, patriotic country with unwavering pride in its roots and traditions. It is famous for the inspirational generosity and hospitality shown by its people and the unique and vibrant society in which they live. We hope that through the training of a new generation of Georgian archaeologists and through outreach projects and the dissemination of information, the archaeology of Nokalakevi might help Georgia in the project of developing a new identity. Amongst the ruins of Georgia's political present, the archaeological study of its past has the potential to help it build a new future.

Notes

- 1 However, recent exhibitions of Georgia's archaeological and cultural heritage at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge show attempts to change this (see <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/goldenfleece>) and the Sackler Gallery in Washington's online exhibition (see <http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/on;ine/Gold/default.html>).
- 2 For further information on the archaeology of Georgia, see D. Kacharava "Archaeological Investigation on the Eastern Black Sea Littoral, 1970-80", *Archaeological Reports* 30, 98-101, 1983 and D. Kacharava "Archaeology in Georgia 1980-1990 (Post-Prehistoric to Pre-Medieval)", *Archaeological Reports* 37, 79-86, 1990. See also, Ot. Lordkipanidze *At the beginnings of the Georgian Civilization* (Tbilisi, 2002).
- 3 Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars* 8.14.1-44. See also D. C. Braund & G. R. Tsetskhladze, "The export of slaves from Colchis", *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series 39.1, 114-25, 1989.

- 4 D. Lomitashvili, B. Lortkipanidze, E. Kokaia, *Tsikhegoji* (Tbilisi, 2005). See also, D. Lomitashvili, *The Central Colchida in VIIIth BC - VIth AD* (Tbilisi, 2003).
- 5 Schneider's excavations of winter 1930-31 were reported in the German journal *Forschungen und Fortschritte* 7 Jahrg. 27, 1931.
- 6 D. Braund, *Georgia in antiquity: a history of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia: 550 BC-AD 562* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); G. R. Tsetskhladze "Review: Georgia in Antiquity", *The Classical Review*, New Series 45(2), 358-60, 1995.
- 7 The authors work as supervisors at Nokalakevi and would like to acknowledge the AGEN team: the head of the Expedition, Prof. David Lomitashvili; the site's historian Besik Lortkipanidze; British directors Ian Colvin, Dr Paul Everill, Ben Neil and Nick Armour; supervisor Niko Murghulia; the finds' conservation manager Dr Nino Kebuladze and her team, comprising Marika Mtchedlishvili and Natia Dzigua; ceramics specialist, Dr Jane Timby and palaeobotanist, Dr Maka Bokeria.