

ANGLO-GEORGIAN EXPEDITION TO NOKALAKEVI – 2017

July 28, 2017 Paul Everill Byzantine, Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2017, Early Medieval, Excavation, Expeditions, Explore Posts, Historical Archaeology, Iron Age, Medieval, Post Medieval Byzantine, Caucasus, Excavation, Georgia, Georgian National Museum, Hellenistic, Nokalakevi, Research, training, University of Winchester

The Anglo-Georgian Expedition first excavated at the stunning, multi-period site of Nokalakevi (in Samegrelo, western Georgia) in 2001, when a handful of British students travelled to a relatively unknown corner of Europe and were taught archaeological skills by an equally small number of British and Georgian professionals. Going from strength to strength – helped, it must be said, by the huge improvement in the stability of Georgia and its economy since 2001 – the expedition is now the longest-running international collaboration in Georgian archaeology, with a team this year of about 30.

The site itself is most well known for the surviving fortifications, dating to the 4th to 6th centuries AD, which still dominate the landscape. The eastern fortifications add to the impressive natural defences provided by a steep hill to the north, and a deep limestone gorge carved by the Tekhuri river which meanders in a loop around the west and south of the site.



The site of Nokalakevi at the base of the steep hill (left) where the Tekhuri emerges from the gorge onto the Colchian Plain

Since 2001, the Anglo-Georgian Expedition has worked in six trenches. Complete sequences from Trenches A-C have revealed 3.5m of stratified deposits, with settlement at the site having begun at the latest by the 8th century BC, and some evidence that it was even earlier.

This season we are working in Trenches F and G. The first is revealing a large Hellenistic-period building, terraced into the lower slope of the hill where it begins to level out onto what we refer to as the 'lower town' area. Constructed in clay and timber, the bases of the walls consist of lines of unbonded limestone

blocks – presumably providing a waterproof sill to prevent groundwater in this very wet and humid part of Georgia limiting the lifespan of the buildings. Having found fragmentary remains of Hellenistic-period structures in Trench A in 2007, this is the first time we have been fortunate enough to find an apparently complete structure. In the last few days a burial was found close to the structure, complete with ear-rings and a large number of intricate glass beads.



A large Hellenistic-period building being revealed in Trench F



Work beginning in Trench G towards the start of the 2017 season

Trench G was only opened this season, and so far it has taken a great deal of effort to remove 1980s conservation deposits; overlying a large quantity of limestone blocks that fell from the fortifications once they ceased to be properly maintained. Having excavated through these deposits we have revealed post-medieval features, including part of a 'qvevri' – a distinctive variety of large ceramic vessel in which Georgian wine has been made for thousands of years, in a process now on the Intangible World Heritage list.



Remains of the large qevri in Trench G, perhaps once full of wine

Trench G had one last surprise for us, however. Just as we were cleaning up ready to draw our sections in the middle of the last week, a coin fell out of the section and was spotted by Giles, one of our trench supervisors. Although it needs to be properly cleaned by our colleague Nino at the Janshia Museum laboratory in Tbilisi, it appears to be a 30 nummi coin of the late 6th century AD, probably dating to the reign of Byzantine Emperor Tiberius (578-582).



The obverse and reverse of a 6th century 30 nummi coin

This year's 'Day of Archaeology' falls on our last full day in Nokalakevi before we head back to Tbilisi tomorrow after a month's excavating. Today we will be tying up loose ends, and protecting the archaeological remains with sheeting and backfill so that we can return to it next year.