

## 6 Outreach: an International Perspective

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As is often the case in the 21st Century, there appears to be an increasing need for a connection to be established between the community associated with a site and the archaeological team digging it, particularly when an excavation commences. I noticed this whilst undertaking research at the University of York in relation to excavations at Hungate, the single biggest excavation in York in the last 25 years, which are ongoing.

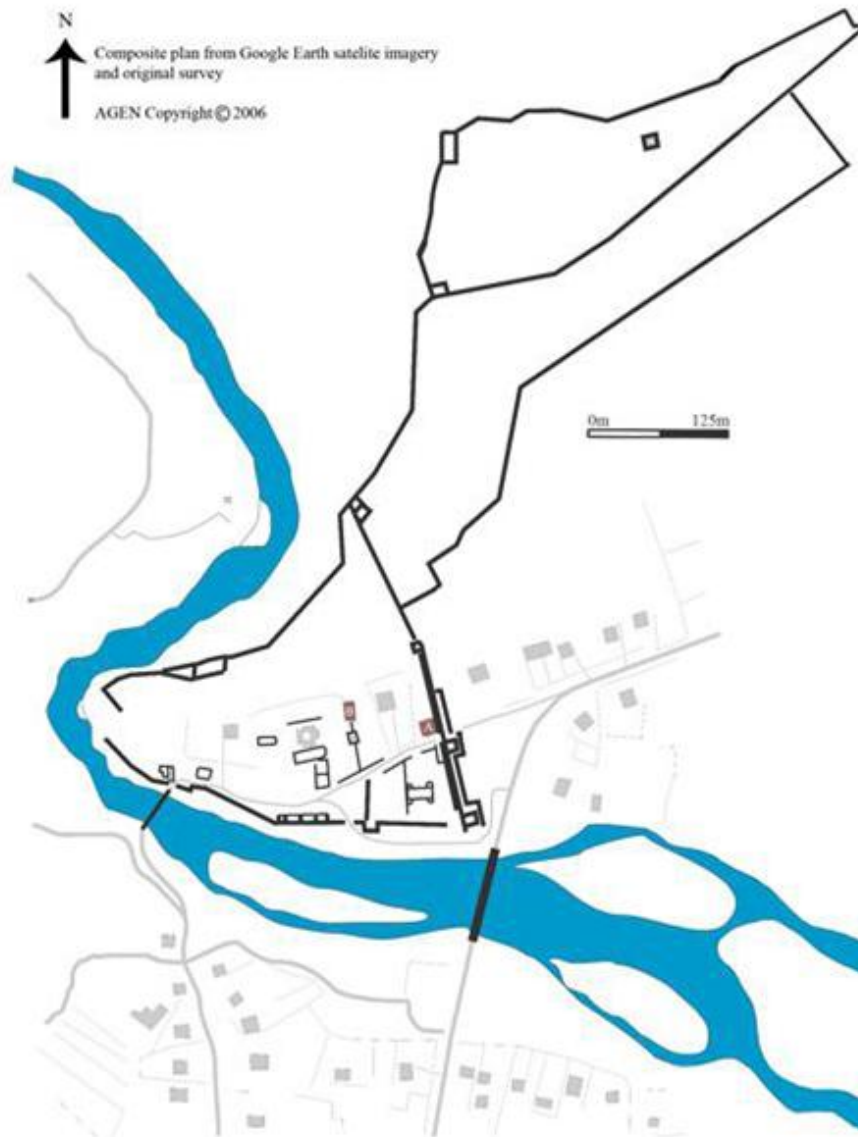
This article presents the link between archaeology and the local community within an international perspective, specifically with relation to the ongoing excavations and expeditions to Nokalakevi, Georgia (ex USSR).

### Background of the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi

The current excavations at the site of Nokalakevi began in 2001 with the establishment of the joint Anglo-Georgian expedition to Nokalakevi (AGEN) in 2000 (Grant and Everill 2009). AGEN is collaboration between English and Georgian specialists including archaeologists, historians, finds conservators, a palaeobotanist and a ceramic specialist.

Nokalakevi (which roughly translates as the ‘ruins where once a town was’) is located in the Samegrelo province, in the west of Georgia around 15.5km north of Senaki. The site consists of a citadel on top of a high hill and a town on the river terrace below, linked by strongly fortified walls (Grant and Everill 2009). Nokalakevi is a deeply stratified settlement and fortress site with distinct cultural contextual layers, in the 8th/7th centuries BC, the 4th-2nd centuries BC and the 4th-7th centuries AD, and imposing standing remains. The archaeology of the site reflects its location on the edge of the Graeco-Roman world, with influences from Iran and Mesopotamia, the northern steppes and the indigenous cultures of the South Caucasus.

The Late Roman fortress of Archaeopolis-Tsikhegoji is of particular interest for various reasons. It is a large regional centre within the landscape (the fortress alone covers c.20ha. within the walls). It is well documented in Greek literary sources (Procopius of Caesarea, Agathias of Myrina and Justinian’s Novels) because it was a key strategic point in the Byzantine-Sassanian wars of the 6th century AD. Furthermore it is believed to have been the capital of the successive kingdoms of Colchis and Lazika. With regard to the earlier contextual horizons, there is a distinct lack of evidence for the history of the area from literary sources and the anthropogenic material available is therefore all the more invaluable in writing the history of Nokalakevi, Colchis and the wider region (including the Pontic coast of Anatolia) (Colvin pers comm. 2009). In 1833 Frédéric Dubois Du Montpéreux suggested the site to be Aia, the capital of Homeric Colchis in the Argonautic myths and Archaeopolis, the capital of late antique Lazika.



*Digitised plan of the site, Nokalakevi (by Dr Paul Everill).*

The initial expedition to Nokalakevi was a joint German-Georgian expedition led by Dr Alfons M. Schneider of the German Archaeological Institute in Istanbul. His team carried out the first archaeological excavations at the site in the winter of 1930-31. Schneider's results were published in the German periodical *Forschungen und Fortschritte* in September 1931 and confirmed the identification of the site as Archaeopolis.

In 1973 the S. Janashia Museum of History sent a large and well-equipped expedition to excavate and conserve the historical monument at Nokalakevi. This continued until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 when political upheavals led to considerable disruption and the end of large scale works at Nokalakevi. The fortification walls and the other features at the site which were conserved

and reconstructed are a result of the work undertaken in the early 1970's. Three volumes of results were published, edited by P. Zakaraia (1981, 1989, & 1993).

The very rich archaeological heritage in Georgia is poorly known and not well documented outside of the country. This scholarly isolation, initiated in the 1930's and continuing until the 1990's, was due to the former Soviet Union and the instability it caused. Partly as a result of this instability and political and ideological pressures, Soviet-era archaeological methods seem outdated by western standards. However AGEN's enthusiasm and encouragement, the implementation of western archaeological methods, combined with western engagement with Georgian archaeology and scholarship, have resulted in nine successful expeditions to Nokalakevi to date. This is despite the present political rumblings and aggressive occupation in 2008 by the Kremlin in which Russian troops entered Nokalakevi on 20th August 2008.



*View of Nokalakevi. Forty Martyrs Church surrounded by imposing fortification walls (credit: author).*

### **My involvement with the project**

I initially travelled to Nokalakevi in August 2007 as part of my undergraduate first year field school requirements. After spending 4 weeks there as a volunteer it was apparent that I had found a place of real interest and stayed for an extra 10 days after the excavation in Tbilisi. The fieldwork I undertook included a whole plethora of western excavation methodologies all under guidance from specialists in their particular fields. The work conducted was on Trench 'A' which has been open since 2001 (it was extended in 2006) and contains the Hellenistic necropolis. These deposits, made up of 4th-6th century BC Hellenistic building foundations and richly adorned Hellenistic burials, occupied the majority of the excavation team.

In July 2008, at the beginning of my placement year, I returned to Nokalakevi to for another season of fieldwork as a volunteer. I was fortunate enough to be

continuing with similar work to the previous season and so my experience was invaluable. I particularly enjoyed working on the well-preserved burials of the Hellenistic period in both seasons. I also participated in the field conservation laboratory and worked on the restoration and conservation of pottery and small finds, where I have been able to make a significant contribution to the post excavation work. Consequently I was invited to return as a site assistant during June/July of 2009. This excavation season saw the opening of Trench 'B' which had not been excavated since 2005 and the continued excavation of Trench 'A' which is located east (of Trench 'B') and just inside the imposing standing remains.

Trench 'B' consists of a near uniform square wall which is believed to be a continuation of an earlier or contemporary gate house which encloses a Byzantine-medieval cemetery (from c6th/7th centuries to c16th/17th centuries) which has been dated primarily from the ceramics and homogenous remains. The 2009 season saw the clearance of the section edges and the removal of plastic and vegetation and the further reduction of contextual deposits which yielded a further five inhumations, all of which were orientated east-west (with their heads pointing east); undoubtedly Christian burials.

Trench 'A' on the other hand was excavated further though work ceased due to bad weather around the third week of the four week season. However excavation yielded three further inhumations within the Hellenistic cultural deposits and further evidence of wall foundations and cobbled surfaces within destruction horizons. Further work undertaken was a complete GPS survey of the citadel and locale carried out by Dr Paul Everill.



*The author excavating a Byzantium inhumation in the cemetery of Trench B, July 2009 (photograph by Ano Tvaradze).*

Whilst working with British archaeologists and their Georgian counterparts and training with Georgian students in on-site excavation and off-site post excavation, I have developed a love for the country, the region, the people their

and which has encouraged me to learn the language with a view to reading further into the archaeology and history of the region.

### **Outreach: an international perspective**

Nokalakevi is a small village which when, compared with western standards, would seem to be in a third world state. However the foundation of AGEN and the numerous subsequent collaborative expeditions to Nokalakevi have resulted in improvement to the local economy as well as bringing an awareness of intercultural differences to the local population. In addition to AGEN undertaking archaeological research, it also provides ongoing collaborative training in excavation techniques to archaeological students of many nationalities. In the past American, Australian, Polish, Dutch and Arabian along with Georgian and British students have taken part in the excavations and have learnt a great deal about the implementation of western archaeological methods.

The involvement of the National television channel has also played an important role in the last 2 years, in advertising the site's historical and archaeological importance. Interviews have taken place with members of the expedition team from both Georgia and the United Kingdom. Successive broadcasts have highlighted the cultural and historical importance of the site to the Georgian population. The raised profile of the monument outside Georgia has been helped by the improved infrastructure and the collaboration with the international front which the Georgians are particularly enthusiastic about. The invasion by the Russians and the continued occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from 7th August 2008 has given worldwide publicity to the region's problems.

AGEN benefits not only from the Samegrelo regional government in the Samegrelo region but also from Nokalakevi itself. The funding, raised by AGEN and in particular David Connolly, has often been matched with an increased amount from Professor Lomatishvili who has successfully negotiated funding from the Georgian government and the National Museum in Tbilisi. Our presence at the monument raises the prestige of Nokalakevi which in turn has led to further maintenance and conservation work at the monument which has been directed and carried out by Professor Lomatishvili and his team.

This further work has included the redevelopment of the museum, including a new roof, which has made the building water-tight. In addition the building has been rewired and provided with electricity through the purchase of a new generator. The exhibits were improved by purchasing new display cases to replace those which had previously been broken when their contents were stolen. These valuable artefacts were stolen by rebels supporting the ousted president Gamsakhurdia in the 1990's (Colvin 2008). The installation of signs in Georgian, Russian and English was implemented in 2007. The money raised has also been used to employ local men and women to run the museum as well as to archive the artefacts and give guided tours of the fortified walls, the bath houses, palaces, the foundations of two churches as well as the excavation trenches and other standing remains.

The redevelopment of the 'dig house' (previously marred by bullet-holes from the civil war) took place in line with the improvements to the museum. Stories from colleagues suggested that, due to the instability of the country in the 1990's the site was not a particularly pleasant place to be. This was made worse by the occupation of the village by rebels during the uprising which resulted in the

looting of the expedition's equipment. On a more positive note the continued support and funding from both the AGEN and the numerous volunteers who have populated in the site in recent years has led to a vast improvement in the 'dig house' which has been modernised. The 'dig house' is now a suitable residence for the archaeologists as well as acting as a location for post-excavation work and a field laboratory for several archaeological sites in western Georgia. The well equipped kitchen enables all members of the excavation team to be fed with this service being provided by local women employed by AGEN (Colvin 2008).



*Forty Martyrs Church (6th century AD), winter 2008 (photograph by Varnika Kenia)*

The employment of workmen both locally and within the Senaki district during the excavation season and throughout the remainder of the year has provided worthwhile jobs as well as a basic income for. This in turn has created a well-maintained and safe environment, set in beautiful and very peaceful surroundings, for the archaeologists to work in. During the non-excavation period it is the duty of the workmen to maintain and control the spoil heaps, clear vegetation and refuse, remove graffiti, back-fill trenches and cover them with plastic sheeting for protection. Many of the imposing wall foundations, including the unstable wall surrounding the Byzantium-medieval cemetery in Trench 'B' have also been secured and restored. The workmen have also re-roofed the 6th century AD Forty Martyrs Church. This is located within the citadel and is of significant historical importance as well as being the centre for the Christian beliefs which are a focal point within the community.

Collaboration between the project and the community has also included the local police force and the regular Georgian army, both based in Senaki. This year a rugby game between the expedition members and the army took place which, ultimately, led to a defeat for the expedition! Interested local people are also encouraged and welcomed to become involved in the excavations. This

gives them an opportunity to learn about archaeology and history as well as improve their English and meet various like minded people.

In the last 2 years of my involvement with the project I have taught English to local children in Nokalakevi as well as school children from Senaki. The lessons took place throughout three weeks of the four-week excavation season with a maximum of 4 lessons a week. These lessons were taught at the archaeological museum of Nokalakevi with the use of aids. The major teaching component consisted of the students themselves actually speaking and holding discussions in English. The lessons gave those students a time to reflect upon different cultures and discuss better ways of learning English at their schools. Those who were more advanced in their knowledge of the language arranged to meet with me for additional coaching. Not only has this given me a sense of confidence in terms of teaching but has given me a chance to personally help the people of Nokalakevi.

In 2009 an excursion for the excavation team and the local children I had been teaching was organised by the Senaki government. We went to the Black Sea and the port of Batumi, took a guided tour around Batumi museum and attended concert by Katie Melua. This was a very successful day which served to further cement the relationship between all parties.

## **Conclusion**

I believe that all of the above has contributed to promoting Nokalakevi as an archaeologically significant site and at the same time advertising its historical, cultural and spiritual richness. This has demonstrated that similar archeologically important centres which may be located in other remote regions can be excavated easily and successfully. I can testify to this because of my time in Nokalakevi and my ongoing association with the project. The overwhelming friendship and hospitality received from our Georgian colleagues and the residents of Nokalakevi as well as the local government in Senaki has been an integral part of our collaboration and has contributed to the success of the project.

## **Acknowledgements**

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