

Report SAS talk 8th March 2022: Nokolakevi-Archaeopolis – the triple walled fortress of Lazika by Dr Paul Everill



Paul Everill worked with Southampton City Council Archaeology Unit in the past, and later for Cambridge Archaeology Unit. A colleague came back from working in Georgia which sounded so interesting that Paul decided to join them, and he goes back as often as he can. The site is situated in western Georgia beside the Tekhuri river opposite the Colchian plain, an area which is a crossroads of major routes between eastern Europe and western Asia in the South Caucasus. Byzantine records indicate that the site is very old and it was named Archaeopolis ('old town'); the triple walled fortress has had a number of names.

Geographical and historical context

The Georgian people see themselves as European although their country lies outside the official definition of Europe. Their territory adjoins Armenia and Azerbaijan to the south, with Russia to the north, and there are two climate zones separated by the Caucasian mountains. Western Georgia is lush with a Mediterranean climate, separated by a high ridge from the east which is arid and more extreme. The Greeks considered this area as the edge of their world.

*Part of the site with distant Caucasian range.
Photo: P.Everill*



Nokolakevi lies on a spur of the hills at the east of the Colchian Plain, famed as the land where Jason and the Argonauts ventured in pursuit of the Golden Fleece: at one time sheep's fleeces were used to sift gold from rivers, which possibly gave rise to this myth. There is evidence of trade in the late Bronze Age, 12th century BC, and of Mycenaean trading colonies on the Colchian coast. The Kingdom of Colchis grew rich in classical times from trade with Greek colonies along the Black Sea coast, with finds of 6th century BC coins, and the export of wine to Greece (the area is still well known for its wine).

During the last millennium BC this area was ravaged in the Mithridatic Wars by Roman general Pompey and his army. The largest tribe in the region then took over and the area became a buffer zone from the people to the north of the Caucasus. In the first century AD the tribe of Laz came to dominate in Colchis, with Lazika as their military and administrative

centre, after the death of Justinian in 6th century AD. The 7th and 8th centuries AD are known as the Golden Age of Georgia; the area had been invaded by Arabs who were driven out and the Bagrationi family unified the country. Later Turks invaded from the south and were driven out by King David IV, helped by the 1st Crusade; and their last great Queen was Tamar. The Golden Age was brought to an end by the Mongol invasion in the 13th century, when Georgia became a Christian enclave among Moslem peoples: Ottoman Turks and Persians. In 1918 the country was annexed by Russia and became known as the Trans-Caucasian Democratic Republic.

The excavation site

The fortress was located where it could monitor the mountain roads and river routes, with fortifications above the river. The remains of the 4th to 6th century Byzantine town extends 18-19ha, with a recognisable street plan including buildings such as churches and bath houses, and the walls follow the hillside up to the Citadel above the town, with a rock-cut tunnel to the river from the garrison. Paul showed a GPS plan of the town on a spur in the bend of the river, with the Colchian Plain across the river. The town's foundation myth concerns an alliance of Kuji with Parnavaz king of East Georgia to defeat the despot Avaz (said to have been supported by Alexander the Great): Kuji married Parnavaz's daughter and united east and west Georgia, an event celebrated annually in the festival of Egrisoba (though no archaeological evidence has been found to support the myth).

The fortress of Archaeopolis was described by Procopius in the 6th century AD, and was identified in 1839 as Nokolakevi by the Swiss traveller Dubois de Montpéroux, who made sketches of a recognisable Byzantine church backed by a 'folly'. The first excavations took place nearly a century later from November 1930 to February 1931: German archaeologists from Weimar collaborated with the Russians to trace the walls of Nokolakevi [National Education Commission of Georgia and the Museum in Tbilisi.] They cleared the hillside of vegetation with the help of local labourers (it's now again covered by woodland) and made their HQ in the former local hospital building. Few records remain apart from some images, and it is known that a collection of gold coins was found in one of the towers. After this, sporadic surveys took place between 1931 and 1973, when archaeological conservation work on the walls was undertaken by a team from the Simon Janaschia Museum, Tbilisi and continued for 25 years. It was well-funded and the team were able to use their resources to help the local isolated population to access power for lighting, heating and other modern amenities. In 1991 Georgia became independent of USSR, when economic collapse was followed by civil war and ethnic conflict, and only small-scale work was possible.

The 'Anglo-Georgian Expedition' 2001 -2019



Paul became co-director of the expedition in 2002 and the team have introduced western technology, and trained their Georgian colleagues in methods such as thermoluminescence and OSL. In the early years the work was modest with 7 or 8 students and archaeologists, but since then more than 260 students from Georgia, Britain and elsewhere have trained there. The two trenches have been expanded over fourteen years, and over 3.5 metres' depth of complex stratified deposits uncovered. Veterans have been working with them

since 2017 on wellbeing exercises, and in 2019, their last season at Nokolakevi, Ukrainian veterans were also involved.

There is evidence of human activity from the mid-5th millennium BC (Chalcolithic or Copper Age), and Bronze Age finds include fishing and loom weights, arrowheads and a mace head, dated by OSL. Two-headed zoomorphic figurines of the Iron Age (8th-7th century BC), found only at Nokolakevi and at Vani (across the Colchian Plain), may be related to iron-smelting or perhaps sacrificial objects, linked to a boggy area with evidence of a palaeo-channel. There are traces of large limestone blocks dating to the 6th-5th centuries BC, suggesting a significant settlement at that time. Continuity of occupation is indicated from 4th-1st centuries BC, with multiple phases of timber framed structures resting on stone sills: this is echoed in modern building techniques using timber on a stone plinth, to avoid contact with the boggy ground. By the late Hellenistic period buildings were falling into disrepair and the lower part of the site abandoned.



View of walls showing variation in construction methods. Photo: P.Everill

An investigation of the wall foundations was carried out, finding variations in their construction with three different forms: a 'Roman' fortification of massive limestone blocks, but some were less substantial and built with little regard to earlier walls.

Little metalwork has survived in the wet conditions, and possibly much was re-used at the time. Burials have been recovered from trenches A (28) and B (40+), some of which appear hasty and possibly the result of conflict. Carbon-dates have been obtained through the local museum service for the period of Arab assault, but lack of funding means few burials have been dated in this way. Strontium isotope analysis of the remains suggests most individuals examined were born or raised in or near to Nokolakevi, and in the Hellenistic period millet (C4 plants) appears to be a dominant element in the diet. In 6th century BC Byzantium and Laziki became allies in a war against the Sassanid Persian empire, known as the Great War of Egrisis. Paul and colleagues visited the site of a 'lost' fortress in 2016 to undertake trial trenching, and the following year they opened a trench and were able to identify the site of Onoguris, from pottery with elaborate stamped decoration dated to ~ 646.

The team plan to return in 2022 after two years' absence due to restrictions on travel. The local people are warm and welcoming, the food and wine great and the weather beautiful!

Questions

What was the likely size for the garrison stationed at Lazika?

Paul estimates around 3,000 men, mostly based in the settlement with some on watch in the Citadel. There are churches but little evidence of commerce or civilian presence as Lazika was an administrative centre, although homesteads may have existed outside the town.

How are the excavations funded?

Funding is minimal: £1500 each season, which mainly covers the cost of flights to and from Georgia.

Many thanks to Mandy Kesby for the use of her notes on this lecture.

Sarah Hanna