

A Report on My Participation in the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi

By Rose Ormond

My name is Rose Ormond, I am a student at Durham University, and I am now in the third year of my undergraduate Classics course. The money kindly granted to me through the British Institute at Ankara's Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies Fieldwork Award helped to fund my participation in the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi, an annual archaeological dig run by a mixture of British and Georgian volunteers on the archaeological site at Nokalakevi, Georgia (formerly Archaeopolis).

I initially decided that I wanted to participate in the expedition because, as I reached the midpoint of my degree, I felt an increasingly pressing need to consider my future career path. One option that appealed to me was the field of Classical Archaeology, since I am fascinated by material culture and want to pursue a more hands-on job than academia. When the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi came to my attention, it seemed ideal, since it would allow me to gain real-world experience on an archaeological dig and get to grips with the daily realities of a career in archaeology. I was also attracted by the fact that the dig was in Georgia – it was a country I had never travelled to before, but I had been specifically interested in the Ancient World east of the Mediterranean for years. I am fascinated by the Ancient Persians, the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, and the Byzantine Empire. For a month, myself and the other volunteers stayed in the small village of Nokalakevi, and spent each day patiently excavating two trenches on site and then documenting our finds. We spent six days a week on-site, and on the seventh the expedition leaders would take us on day trips to other interesting archaeological and cultural sites or museums nearby. Over the course of the month, we visited Batumi Archaeological Museum, Gonio fortress (Apsarus), Vani Archaeological Museum, Bagrati Cathedral and the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi. These trips helped me gain a broader perspective on the historical cultures of the area and gave me context for the finds that we were excavating ourselves. It was also incredibly special to see so many fascinating artefacts. I was also intrigued by the different ways in which each museum managed their collection to make it accessible, educational and interesting for visitors.

Something that surprised me about my time in Nokalakevi was that the trip was just as much a Georgian cultural exchange as it was an archaeological dig. The expedition entrenched us deeply within Georgian daily life as we were each staying with local families, many of whom didn't speak English. Over the course of the month I learnt a handful of Georgian words, and at the end of the month, the head of the Georgian side of the expedition patiently helped me translate a thank-you message into Georgian and write it in the Georgian alphabet. Still, much of my communication with my host occurred through charades. The Georgian dig volunteers and the inhabitants of Nokalakevi were so hospitable and generous to us in welcoming us to their country and inviting us to share in their culture. One longstanding tradition of the expedition at the end of each week and on special occasions was the celebration of a *supra* – a Georgian word meaning “banquet”. A *supra* is a celebratory dinner where the head of the table (the *tamada*) periodically makes toasts throughout the meal. There is something deeply moving about sitting around a long table with people from several different countries, all of whom have come together to participate in

the excavation and preservation of a wonderful historical site, toasting to friendship and to your home countries and to archaeology and history. I was also introduced to Georgian music – one Georgian volunteer taught me and some other British volunteers how to sing several Georgian folk songs, and at our final *supra* in Tbilisi the night before we left, we heard a Georgian folk band and saw Georgian traditional dancing. It was magical.

The excavation also allowed me to gain many valuable skills. I learned the proper technique for excavating an area by trowel, but also when to use more delicate tools versus when to use more heavy-duty tools such as a mattock. I also learned how to use a Dumpy level to measure the locations of finds and the depth of certain parts of the trench, and participated in drawing detailed plans of the trench floor in order to record the excavation process. In addition, I helped clean finds before they were sent away to museums to be catalogued. While I had very little prior experience of archaeological field work in comparison to some of the other volunteers, I was continually learning new things from my fellow volunteers (many of whom were professional archaeologists or archaeological students). I am incredibly grateful for all the new skills that they taught me. As I said, when I embarked on this expedition, I was considering a career in archaeology but without any experience as to what that would actually involve. Having now spent a month on a dig, I am determined to volunteer on more dig sites, since I loved it. I am not sure that I want to immediately commit to a career in archaeology, or to doing a Master's Degree in Archaeology, simply because the time I spent with archaeologists and archaeology students has made it clear to me how much I do not know. I very much want to pursue more training in this field, but I think I should learn to walk before I run, so to speak. However, my month in Nokalakevi and our various field trips have further amplified my love for material culture, so I know that I definitely want to work with historical artefacts in the future. The trips to museums have brought to light an interest that I didn't even know I had in the way that museum collections are presented and maintained. A friend who was also on the expedition with me remarked to me on our trip home that I seem to have an awful lot of opinions about museums, which completely shocked me since I hadn't even noticed until he pointed it out. However, I realised that it was true. I would like to continue to explore this interest, in the short term by seeking out volunteering and holiday job opportunities at museums near me, and in the long term by looking into courses in artefact conservation and museum studies.

My participation in the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi has been an incredibly valuable experience for me, since it helped me to explore a potential future career path of archaeology, but also to discover my interest in museum curation and artefact conservation. While I still don't fully have a plan as to what I want to do after university, I now have a clearer idea of the next steps I might take towards a future career. The expedition also allowed me to discover how beautiful Georgia and its culture is, and to make so many wonderful and close friendships with my fellow volunteers. It has truly been a life-changing four weeks, and I cannot thank you enough for granting me money from the SPHS Fieldwork Grant to allow me to have this experience.



The veranda of the dig house had the Georgian and the English flag hung side by side for the entire duration of the expedition.



A picture of our host Diana, whose house we stayed in.



The site of Nokalakevi, as seen from above (taken at Schneider's Tower, the ruined Byzantine watchtower up the hillside surveying the fort). You can see the River Tekhuri bordering the site, with the Lesser Caucasus in the background.



Pictures from the dig itself!



Here I, along with several other volunteers, am helping to make *khinkali* (Georgian dumplings).



The expedition volunteers on the steps of the dig house on our final day in Nokalakevi.