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## AUTHENTIC AND THERAPEUTIC ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PAST FOR VETERANS AT NOKALAKEVI, GEORGIA, AND ON BREAKING GROUND HERITAGE PROJECTS IN THE UK

*This article presents a study of the value of archaeological excavation as a non-medical intervention to support mental health and wellbeing among military veterans. Beginning by discussing quantitative psychological data that shows that it is effective, the article considers qualitative data from UK, Georgian, and Ukrainian veterans to begin establishing “how” archaeology is effective.*

*Keywords: archaeology, veterans, mental health, wellbeing, excavation, Nokalakevi, Samegrelo, Georgia, Sakartvelo.*

### Introduction

The notion of archaeology as a form of applied sociology is a new one (Everill, Burnell forthcoming, p. 27). It is a concept that frees the discipline from its definition by method (i.e. excavation) and shifts the focus to the subject: human society. It also recognises that, as archaeologists, our interest in society is not simply about ancient, or even past societies. As a discipline we now routinely investigate sites and landscapes of the recent past, sometimes adding detail to events that are still within living memory. This concept also allows light to be shone through the narrow gap between archaeology and history — collaborative disciplines al-

most always situated together as “students of the past”, informing each other’s work and yet somehow, even discounting method, almost imperceptibly different. This interest in the people of the past is often apparent through the individual or small-scale stories that archaeology allows to be placed in the foreground, set against the grand narratives of history, the natural sciences, and perhaps even anthropology, which focus on the species, the race, the culture, the kingdom, the tribe. Taking this view of archaeology, it is argued (Everill, Burnell forthcoming), provides both context and explanation for the empathetic content of the humanities end of the discipline, as well as for the engagement with charitable, participatory, and therapeutic initiatives that are increasingly supported by archaeologists around the world. These initiatives are often based around enabling participation on archaeological excavation; a working environment which naturally combines cerebral and physical activity, empowers individuals to develop their own skills and interests, and emphasises teamwork and supportive group activity. The work is supervised by experts to ensure that the excavation is undertaken properly, allowing participants to contribute authentically and unlocking some of the therapeutic benefits of the experience.

For over a decade, military veterans in the UK have been supported therapeutically through archaeological initiatives, however, the shift in perception of veterans and their needs is a remarkable transition. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, returning UK service personnel were often advised not to talk about their traumatic experiences primarily so that they did not alarm or frighten their loved ones. Research in recent years, however, has demonstrated that this may have also prevented veterans from processing these experiences and prolonged their damaging effects into old age (see Everill, Bennett, Burnell 2020 for a summary of literature).

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There is now a recognition of the importance of making sense of those experiences by talking about them, with peer support networks provided by individuals with shared or similar experiences providing an effective non-medical intervention. Academic literature in this area increasingly underlines the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions, delivered through social and peer support, in the treatment of PTSD (see Everill, Bennett, Burnell 2020 for a summary of literature), and the value of outdoor, physical pursuits in improving wellbeing among veterans (e.g. Caddick, Smith 2014; Caddick, Smith, Phoenix 2015; Poulton 2015; Hawkins, Townsend, Gareth 2016).

With this in mind, the frameworks and processes of archaeological fieldwork lend themselves very naturally to such an intervention, alongside the key role of camaraderie among field teams highlighted in surveys of professional archaeologists such as “Invisible Diggers”. In 2011, an initiative called Operation Nightingale was developed in the UK by Richard Osgood, Senior Historic Advisor at the Defence Infrastructure Organisation of the UK’s Ministry of Defence, and Diarmaid Walsh of the Royal Army Medical Corps. This was the first deliberate attempt to support the recovery and rehabilitation of serving personnel through participation in archaeological fieldwork and post-excavation tasks (Walshe 2013). In September 2011, the first Operation Nightingale excavation saw a group of soldiers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, the Rifles — recently returned from a combat deployment in Afghanistan — investigate archaeological material at East Chisenbury Midden on Salisbury Plain. Specialist support was provided by Wessex Archaeology and English Heritage (Walshe, Osgood, Brown 2012) and the Rear Operations Group Civilian Medical Practitioner and Combat Medical Technician (Nimenko, Simpson 2014). W. Nimenko and R. G. Simpson (2014, p. 296) assessed the project for its potential contribution to the psychological decompression of the soldiers and its effectiveness in helping them to return to operational roles. Using validated scales, they sought to measure any change in relation to depression, generalised anxiety disorder, impaired social functioning, alcohol-use disorders and PTSD in the 24 soldiers who participated over the course of two, five-day excavations. Despite the small sample size and the lack of a longitudinal perspective, the results indicated a positive reaction to the experience (Nimenko, Simpson 2014). Since 2012, Operation Nightingale has focused on veterans and a second study,

in 2015, reported improved self-esteem, confidence and motivation to seek help, and noted that “veterans may identify more strongly with outdoor activities that involve physical challenge, camaraderie and achievement of an objective” (Finnegan 2016, p. 16).

While it remains active and continues to provide archaeological opportunities for veterans, perhaps one of the most significant achievements of Operation Nightingale was to inspire some of its beneficiaries to establish their own, veteran-led archaeological initiatives in 2015 and 2016, including Breaking Ground Heritage (BGH), Waterloo Uncovered, and American Veterans Archaeological Recovery. Data for the third published study on the therapeutic impact of archaeology on veterans — the largest study to date — were collected by R. Bennett, the Director of Breaking Ground Heritage, in 2018 with analysis reported in P. Everill, R. Bennett and K. Burnell (2020). This evaluation saw data collected from 40 individuals before and after participation on three BGH projects over the summer of 2018. The participants were on-site for between seven days and three weeks, and were assessed through three validated psychological scales to measure different aspects of mental health, namely the Patient Health Questionnaire-8, to measure depression (PHQ-8; Kroenke et al 2008); the Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7; Spitzer et al 2006) to measure anxiety; and the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS; Tennant et al 2007) to measure mental wellbeing. Two bespoke questionnaires were also developed to measure sense of value and feelings of isolation. The results are fully discussed elsewhere (Everill, Bennett, Burnell 2020), but can be summarised as decreases in the severity of the symptoms of depression and anxiety, and of feelings of isolation, along with an increase in mental wellbeing and in sense of value. This improvement in wellbeing was also demonstrated by D. Ulke et al (2022) in the analysis of scores on the WEMWBS recorded by participants of Waterloo Uncovered in 2017 and 2019.

Qualitative data has also been collected from UK veterans on BGH projects in a pioneering mixed-methods analysis (Bennett forthcoming) and from Georgian and Ukrainian veterans on the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi (AGEN; Everill, Burnell forthcoming). This paper will consider some of the common themes that have been observed across these datasets to build an understanding of how archaeology is an effective

tive therapeutic tool. This paper will also consider the different contexts within which combat might be experienced, and the implications for environmental triggers of traumatic memories, as well as the potential benefits for Internally Displaced People (IDP) that can be derived from heritage and archaeological interventions. The authors hope that, in sharing their experience of these varied initiatives, it might provide a framework for archaeological therapeutic interventions for the Ukrainian people once peace has been restored. In order to respond promptly to the call to support this journal, and through it our colleagues in Ukraine, some of the text is adapted from different chapters of the forthcoming publication *Archaeology, Heritage, and Wellbeing: Authentic, Powerful, and Therapeutic Engagement with the Past* (Everill, Burnell forthcoming). However, the consideration of datasets derived from UK, Georgian, and Ukrainian veterans together, and using the thematic framework outlined here, is unique to this paper. The authors also acknowledge, in particular, our Ukrainian colleagues — Denys Hrechko and Oleksii Kritchenko of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences — who initiated their own therapeutic archaeology project for fellow veterans at the Bilsk Archaeological Preserve in 2021, and who would, under different circumstances, be planning the 2022 season and writing up their own results for publication. We offer our friendship and support in the resumption of this important work when it is possible.

### ***Nokalakevi – Tsikhegoji – Archaeopolis***

The site of Nokalakevi itself, situated on the foothills of the Greater Caucasus and overlooking the Colchian plain in Western Georgia (fig. 1), has been excavated almost continuously since 1973 (Everill et al 2021; Zakaraia 1981, 1987, 1993). Situated in Samegrelo — 15 km north of Senaki, the regional capital, and 50 km east of the Black Sea — the site would have commanded an important crossing point of the Tekhuri River, at the junction with a valuable strategic route to the mountains that still winds through the neighbouring hills to Chkhorotsqu. The Tekhuri, rising high in the mountains to the north, has carved a steep gorge which loops around the north and west of the site (fig. 2). Immediately to the south, the river turns to flow east, at the junction of the foothills and the Colchian plain (fig. 3), meaning that the north, west, and south sides of Nokalakevi have

significant natural defences. In addition, the steep and rugged terrain around the hilltop at the north of the site renders it largely unassailable. While the semi-mythical, Hellenistic-period ruler of Western Georgia, Kuji, is often credited with the first fortification of Nokalakevi (indeed the Georgian name Tsikhegoji is translated as “the fortress of Kuji”), the walls that stand today were built in the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. These walls ultimately linked the hilltop citadel with the “lower town” — on level ground next to the river — and enclosed a total area of about 18 ha.

The earliest activity at the site appears, according to optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) dating of a small quantity of early ceramic, to have been in the Bronze Age (Everill et al 2021). By the Iron Age there was clearly a significant population, and the settlement became an important administrative and/or military centre of Colchis and its successor states, from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Double-headed zoomorphic figurines dating to the 8<sup>th</sup>—7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC have only been found at Nokalakevi and at Vani, 40 km to the southeast in Imereti, and are considered stylistically unique to the region. At Nokalakevi these figurines appear to have been deliberately broken, perhaps sacrificed, in an area of the site that geoarchaeological evidence suggests may have experienced periods of boggy conditions during that period. The substantial settlement that begins to develop, according to archaeological evidence, from around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, appears to have continued to flourish through the Hellenistic period (late 4<sup>th</sup> to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC) with a number of structures excavated since 2004. Most of them were broadly dated to the Hellenistic period by association with ceramic, while some appeared to date to the 6<sup>th</sup>—5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, however, all displayed the same physical characteristics. Lines of unbonded, undressed limestone boulders had been laid on the ground — presumably to provide a waterproof base to a timber frame in a very wet climate. From evidence in Trench B, where a large section of burnt wall had collapsed, it appeared that a sill plate of a horizontal beam had been placed on the boulders, with vertical posts rising from it through which wattle was woven and then daub applied. Impressions of both the wattle and the posts, the latter of about 100 mm diameter, were observed in larger fragments of burnt daub in Trenches A and B.

The once thriving settlement in the area of the “lower town” appears to have been abandoned by the late Hellenistic period, and the apparent hiatus

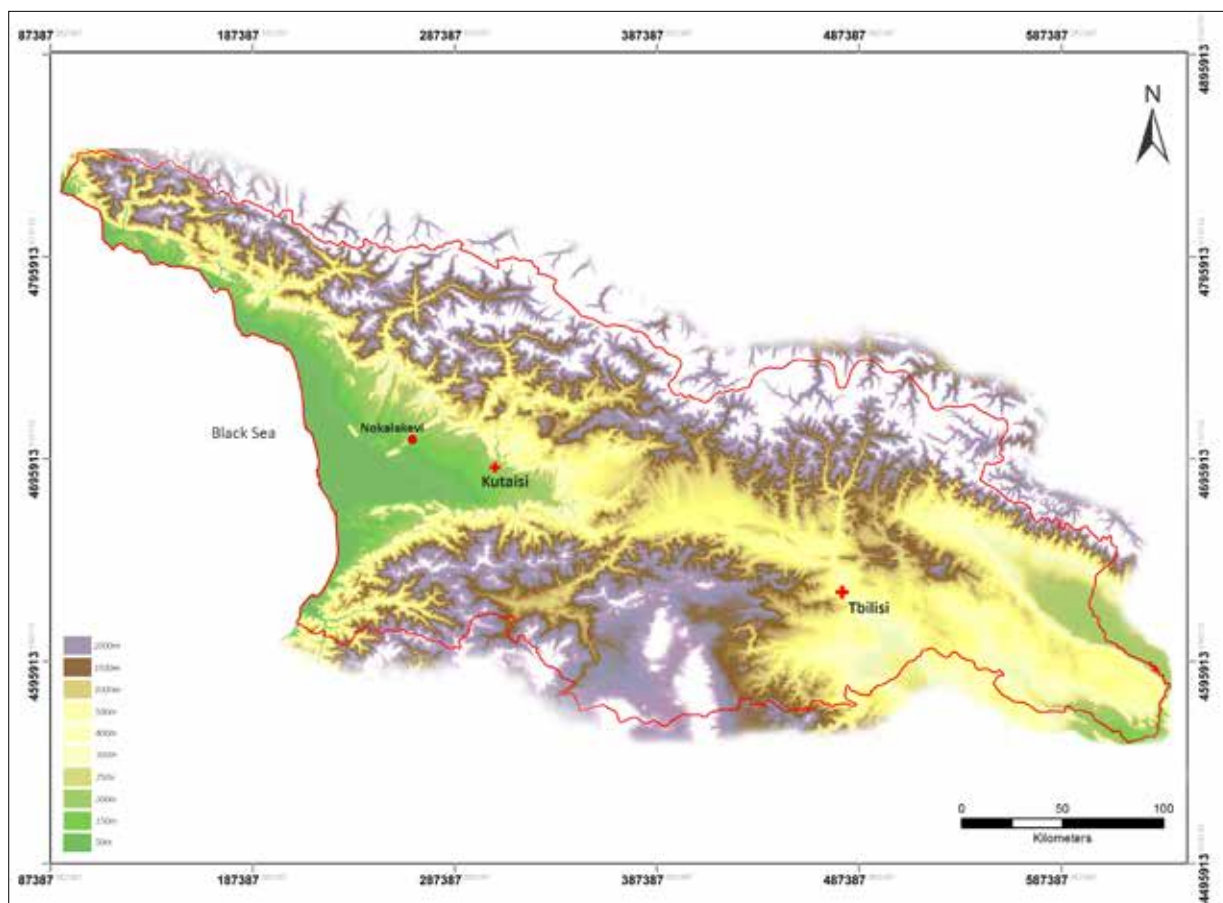


Fig. 1. Topographic map of Georgia, generated from the ASTER GDEM produced by NASA and METI, showing the location of Nokalakevi. Coordinates in WGS84 UTM 38N.

that followed seems to mirror the situation across the whole of Colchis after the devastating impact of the Mithridatic Wars (88—63 BC). However, by the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD the Laz had come to dominate the other tribes of Western Georgia, establishing the Kingdom of Lazika (known as Egrisi in Georgia) with Nokalakevi as its capital, and building impressive fortifications. Both the East Romans and the Persians sought the allegiance of the Laz, partly to stop the other empire expanding further and partly for the protection it offered against the nomadic peoples to the north of the Greater Caucasus. Competition between Byzantium and Persia led to a near permanent state of war, including the “Great War of Egrisi” (541—562 AD) during which Nokalakevi (known as Archaeopolis to the Byzantine chroniclers) was successfully defended against Persian attacks.

Excavations in the area of the “lower town” have revealed substantial stone buildings of the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, including the remains of two early churches immediately to the south of the extant Forty Martyrs’ Church which was built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Immediately to the south of these

churches lies the ruin of a large stone-built building, interpreted as a palace, constructed around the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD and converted into a wine-cellar in the 16<sup>th</sup>—17<sup>th</sup> centuries. A small vaulted, stone gatehouse, or bell-tower, lies approximately 25 m east of, and centred on, the first church. The surviving walls along which it is located suggest that it was constructed as the entrance to the earliest ecclesiastical precinct. Other stone structures revealed over many years’ work in the lower town include: the remains of baths along the inside of the southern fortifications; a tunnel down to the river at the south-west of the site; a bathhouse 35 m east of the tunnel, apparently supplied by a cistern constructed up the slope, 50 m to its northwest; and a substantial rectangular building near the southeast of the area, which possibly housed the military commanders of the Byzantine and Laz garrison of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Excavations have also shed more light on the fortification works. These include the protruding towers of the first wall, dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, made flush in the construction of the second phase in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and the 6<sup>th</sup> century re-modelling





*Fig. 2.* Vertical drone photo of the “lower town” of Nokalakevi, enclosed within a loop of the Tekhuri River (© National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia 2016).



*Fig. 3.* Oblique drone photo, looking east, showing the location of Nokalakevi at the junction of the foothills to the north (left) and the Colchian Plain to the south (© National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia 2016).

that included moving the gate and changing the approach to it so as to prevent a frontal attack. Excavations in the upper town, or citadel, have revealed multi-phase towers at the northwest and northeast of the fortifications, and another small gate and probable guardhouse in the southwest corner.

### ***The “Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi” Wellbeing Programme***

In 2015, the same year that Breaking Ground Heritage was founded, discussions began between Paul Everill, of the University of Winchester and

the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi, Richard Osgood, of the UK Ministry of Defence and Operation Nightingale, and Giles Woodhouse, of the charity Help for Heroes. By 2016 the University of Winchester had launched its pioneering fee-waiver studentship scheme for veterans wanting to study archaeology at a degree level, supporting those who were aiming to develop their interest in archaeology and wanting to retrain as professional archaeologists. The first group of four UK veterans enrolled as students at the University of Winchester that autumn, and the following summer three of those veterans travelled to Georgia to participate in work at Nokalakevi as a part of the requirement for assessed fieldwork within their University of Winchester degree.

Unlike the existing veteran-led archaeological initiatives, the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi — founded in 2001 — is fundamentally a research project, but with an emphasis on providing training for Georgian, British, and international students (fig. 4). However, combined with the quiet, rural location, Georgian hospitality, and the visceral impact of both the natural and cultural landscape, the project provides the perfect setting for a therapeutic archaeological intervention.

During the build up to the 2017 field season, contact was also made with the Office of Wounded and Injured Military Servicemen Support of the Georgian Ministry of Defence by colleagues at the Georgian National Museum and the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia, in order to explore the possibility of hosting wounded Georgian service personnel alongside the British veterans. With a population of only about 4 million, the need for innovative recovery and rehabilitation pathways for veterans in Georgia was determined by a combination of its significant *per capita* contribution to the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, adding to the casualties already suffered in the Russian invasion of 2008. As a result of these discussions, and with support from the Georgian government, the Anglo-Georgian Expedition was able to host three Georgian veterans alongside the three UK veterans in 2017 and, in the process, make Georgia only the sixth country after the UK, Cyprus, Belgium, France and the US to host such an initiative.

In 2018 the expedition hosted only Georgian veterans with a variety of injuries — in terms of nature and severity — received in Afghanistan or the Russian-Georgian war. As before, the veterans participated alongside the staff and students of the expedition, and were encouraged to contribute as

much as they felt physically able in terms of on-site work. They were also reassured that they should feel free to take breaks whenever necessary, and that the extent of their involvement should be determined by their own needs.

In 2019 the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia was able to organise the participation of Ukrainian veterans in addition to Georgian participants. In advance of the season, it was decided to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, and this was undertaken by collecting qualitative data in the form of written feedback from the veteran participants, alongside a participant-observation diary maintained by P. Everill (in an “observer as participant” role as described in Gold 1958) in order to gauge external changes in each individuals, demeanour/behaviour.

The four Ukrainian veterans — referred to here as OS, SS, AH, and VR — were with the project from the 29<sup>th</sup> June to 9<sup>th</sup> July. OS had been married very recently (two weeks or less) and asked to bring his wife, HS. Understandably, OS and HS functioned somewhat independently of the other three, though it became apparent that as an internally displaced person (IDP) following the invasion and annexation of the Crimea by Russia in 2014, HS also benefitted from the therapeutic properties of the archaeological project. The four veterans had all volunteered for service in the Donbas region of Ukraine, when the war with separatists began in 2014, leaving careers in business, teaching, the fire service, and physical fitness to experience combat deployments in various actions. The Ukrainian participants were joined by three Georgian veterans — referred to as KK, IK, and GN — from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> July. KK and IK had both been wounded in Afghanistan, serving as part of Georgia’s commitment to the multi-national operation, while GN was wounded during the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. In the second half of the month-long field season the team hosted a second group of three Georgian veterans — referred to as MJ, BS, and BG — from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> July, of which the first two had also been wounded in Afghanistan and the third during the 2008 war. The veteran participants of the 2019 field season at Nokalakevi therefore represented a varied mix of experiences, including regular soldiers wounded in a foreign conflict, like many participants of Operation Nightingale in the UK, but also regular soldiers defending their own country against a hybrid military action which incorporated both conventional and unconventional tactics, and volunteers facing the same strategy deployed a few years later.





Fig. 4. Georgian and British students working together next to the standing fortifications of Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis.

### ***Qualitative analysis***

The results of this work at Nokalakevi are fully reported elsewhere (Everill, Burnell forthcoming), from which extracts have been adapted below, but here the intention is to set this data alongside the qualitative analysis undertaken by R. Bennett (forthcoming) on data collected in the UK, in order to draw out the common themes that were observed.

Taking a thematic analysis approach, R. Bennett developed three primary themes from the qualitative data from UK veterans. These related to the impact of participation at one or more UK-based Breaking Ground Heritage projects on three aspects of individual experience: interpersonal; developmental; and holistic personal development (Bennett forthcoming). By making use of these same themes here, we seek to highlight a number of the shared experiences. The written feedback from the Georgian and Ukrainian veterans was translated during the project by Nikoloz Murgulia and Besik Lortkipanidze, with the Georgian veterans providing feedback in Georgian while the Ukrainian veterans provided feedback in Russian so that Georgian colleagues could

translate into English. All of these responses have been deliberately left in this original translated form in order to preserve idioms, precise meaning and the “voice” of the participants.

### ***Interpersonal***

This theme, as defined by R. Bennett (forthcoming), relates to the social aspect of being involved in projects; being a part of something and having something to look forward to. It recognises that a key element in terms of promoting positive wellbeing is the interpersonal aspect, with social support often identified as crucial to the development and maintenance of strong relationships and for the development of mental resilience (Cherry 2020). The UK participants in R. Bennett’s study demonstrated a belief that socialising was a primary influence in the development of positive wellbeing during projects. One participant reported that “*My mental health made me isolate myself and I lost lots of my old friends*”, demonstrating how mental ill-health might also result in loneliness, exacerbating its impact. Participation on vet-

eran-led/focused archaeological projects, R. Bennett (forthcoming) argues, can give individuals the ability and the tools to redress some of these negative influences. One of his participants stated that *“Being together with a group for an extended period of time demonstrated how others developed coping strategies which made me reflect on my own needs”*.

The sense of belonging has been highlighted for some time as an important aspect of involvement in veteran-focused archaeological projects, and this is particularly important in light of C. Castro and S. Kintzle’s work (2014) on the Interpersonal-psychology theory of suicide within the military community. This theory proposes that death by suicide occurs when three conditions are met; a perceived high sense of burdensomeness; low belongingness/social isolation; and the acquired ability to enact lethal self-harm. Participation in veteran-focused archaeological projects can, argues R. Bennett, improve the individual’s sense of belonging and purpose, and thus reduce the feeling of burdensomeness: *“Having that sense (sic) of achievement is something I have not had since been medically retired. I also felt useful and not a burden or totally useless, which has been my state of mind for two years”* (Bennett forthcoming).

A Georgian veteran (BG) also acknowledged the power of that interpersonal connection at Nokalakevi, when he wrote *“first day was different, just to get to know each other. Second and third days were more interesting and better. I got to know things I did not know before. There was a change in my feelings. I feel you are very close and treat you as family members and when I leave I will miss you very much”*. In reflecting on the most important experience for him, he wrote that it was *“to meet expedition members and to get a new family. I have a feeling like I know you all my life.”*

The interpersonal connections at Nokalakevi were both a powerful therapeutic element of the programme as well as an important attraction of involvement. While some of the Ukrainians had expressed a desire to meet Georgian veterans, BG had written that *“when they called me they said there would be Georgian and foreign students. I participated in such projects, sports projects, before and I was interested. I want to meet more people, and more people to know me”*. Similarly, another Georgian veteran’s (BS) response to the same question was that he wanted *“to see new atmosphere, to meet new people, to do something I never knew before*

*and thought it would be good for rehabilitation”*. In reflecting on their positive experiences, nearly all of the participants mentioned the inter-personal relationships that the project had fostered.

One Ukrainian veteran (SS) described how he *“got a really positive emotion from meeting with good people, with nature, and national cuisine”*, while another (AH) wrote that *“most valuable for (him) was meeting new people and relationship with veterans from Georgia and Ukraine”*. IK responded similarly from a Georgian perspective: *“I want to say big thanks to you for your warm and friendly meeting. I am very happy with this ten-day participation in expedition. Also I will tell you that I am proud that I met such good people like you are, as friends. Thank you very much to all of you. Also, I thank our Ukrainian and English friends”*.

The Georgian traditions of hospitality, welcoming guests, and sharing are key ingredients in forming and strengthening social bonds, and are not entirely dependent on verbal communication (fig. 5). The Georgian table — the cuisine, and customs around making and responding to toasts — provided multiple opportunities over the course of the field season for toasts to be made, translated, and heard by the whole team at special meals, or by smaller multinational groups on other occasions. With the focus on the person making the toast, and willing translators to ensure that everyone was able to understand, it presented a cathartic opportunity for speakers to express heartfelt views to everyone present. On one evening, the diary recorded, a Ukrainian veteran (VR) responded to some long and poetic toasts about war. *“In contrast, seemingly making a point, VR asked to make a toast and said starkly (translated to me from Russian) when you come back from war no-one cares about you, and no-one understands; and you can leave the war, but the war will never leave you”* (Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2019). It felt, from the outside, a moment of catharsis through which VR was able to share a very personal view of his experiences with people he had come to trust. In his written feedback on the eve of leaving Nokalakevi, as well as highlighting the importance of the archaeology and history in his experiences, VR’s response from the Ukrainian perspective is probably an accurate reflection of the views of all the veterans:

*“Expectation changed? Yes. A lot of communication with different people, different age, different language, and different character of people, and also that there were our friend veterans from Georgia. I will repeat, communication with differ-*





Fig. 5. The expedition “dig house” during the 2019 field season. As well as work, e.g. processing finds off-site, it was a social space where the whole team gathered for meals, and downtime after the working day.

ent people and, of course, nature. Most valuable communications were with veterans and our Georgian brothers.”

In terms of their reasons for getting involved in the programme, the Ukrainians expressed an interest in archaeology, history and travelling, but the opportunity to visit Georgia was also a significant social element in terms of promoting wellbeing. The two countries enjoy close relations as independent nations, and soon after the collapse of the USSR Ukrainians could be found fighting alongside Georgians against Russian-backed separatists in Abkhazia in 1993. One Ukrainian veteran (AH) reported that he had served with “several people who participated in conflict in Abkhazia in 1993. From them I heard many good things about Georgia. Because of it participating in expedition in Georgia was very valuable for me”. The presence of Ukrainian veterans in Nokalakevi also provided unexpected opportunities for the villagers to experience positive interpersonal relationships, as recorded in the diary:

“Late afternoon Gela (from the village) called Niko and invited the veterans and anyone else who

wanted to go to his house in the evening. He was distilling this year’s batch of Chacha, and thought they would like to see the process. He also wanted to thank the Ukrainian veterans, because a number of Ukrainians had fought alongside Georgians during the war in Abkhazia. Gela lived in Sokhumi (in Abkhazia) and had fought in the war too, before being forced to flee as an internally displaced person (IDP) when the Russian-backed separatists had driven the Georgians from their homes (...). We had a number of toasts, to the Georgians who had served their country; to the Ukrainians who fought for their homes; to peace; to the expedition for hosting them and making this possible; and to me as the «architect» of it here, etc. It was a very special evening.” (Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2019)

### **Developmental**

This theme is defined by R. Bennett (forthcoming) in terms of developing new skills; improving confidence; reassurance of own abilities and developing a passion for heritage. The sense of “be-



Fig. 6. Ukrainian and Georgian veterans working alongside the expedition's student volunteers in Trench G, Nokalakevi 2019.

longing” goes beyond mere acceptance here, and responses from UK veterans reported by R. Bennett also suggest a renewed sense of purpose:

*“Great sense of being amongst oppos (firm friends), in the true sense. Not just acquaintances, but shipmates.”*

*“I couldn't wait to get back to the island (the project). In a nutshell, the joy of doing something meaningful is back in my life.”*

Personal development, according to R. Bennett, can be identified through the responses as being physical; *“it has shown that I can do some kind of physical activity”*, psychological; *“I've not left the house for almost 2 years. Being so long trapped away, leaving becomes a challenge in its-self”*, or upskilling; *“I undertook a lecture at the University in Dundee, and I actually understood it. I am now thinking about going back into education.”*

Furthermore, the development of new skills seems to relate to an improvement in overall confidence; *“I feel happier. I am not so isolated now and can speak to people that I have a lot in common with”*, and the mechanism of change — the archaeological activity — was also highlighted; *“Ab-*

*solutely fell hook, line and sinker for the whole subject. Such knowledgeable people to rub shoulders with who didn't seem to mind how many (hopefully constructive) questions I asked. Learnt so much I'm still processing but I've researched so much as well. Went home filthy and wet but loved it.”*

In terms of the project in Nokalakevi, the Ukrainians expressed a prior interest in archaeology, with OS having experience of the archaeological recovery of casualties of the Second World War through an official programme, and SS reporting that he had found coins, musket balls, and a Scythian arrowhead near his home in Mariupol. For AH it was even one of the main reasons for participating, reporting that *“during the visit I wanted to get experience of archaeological research, wanted to see Georgia.”* In terms of the Georgian veterans themselves the feedback generally indicated no prior experience of, or interest in, archaeology. BS was very open about his initial misgivings when he wrote, *“I got a call from my work and they asked if I would participate in archaeological expedition. At the beginning I was in doubt, thinking boring to dig the earth, but as I have never been there*



*in expedition I said «yes»*. The main exception was IK, who had taken part in the second veteran-focused project funded by the National Agency the previous year, and described himself as being “*very interested to participate in Nokalakevi expedition.*” As a result of the varying levels of prior interest and expectation alongside, undoubtedly, cultural and linguistic factors, the initial picture was one of the Georgian veterans seeming more comfortable to adopt purely labouring roles among the local workmen, while the Ukrainian veterans tended to work alongside the students in archaeological tasks. Setting aside the issue of injuries and physical ability, in some respects this provided an opportunity for some of the Georgian veterans to watch and learn about the archaeological process, and manage any prior anxiety around making mistakes. By the end of their time with the project, two thirds of the Georgian veterans had engaged fully and positively with the finer work of archaeology (fig. 6), and even BS had overcome his initial scepticism to enthusiastically join a trowelling line for as long as he was able.

The positive experience of feeling a connection with the history of the site was almost universal among the participants, regardless of the extent to which the veterans could engage with the archaeological process. Dr Besik Lortkipanidze — a leading Georgian historian and educator, and founding member of the expedition — gave regular informal talks to the veterans on the history of Georgia and Nokalakevi, which provided invaluable historical context to the work they were engaged in. For BS, learning “*to respect old things more than (he) did before*”, was one of his most important experiences, while BG reported that “*I have never been in Zugdidi Museum before, even though I live next to it, after visiting Batumi Museum (on the day off) I decided to see it as soon as I will go back.*” SS wrote that he “*touched history when we discovered old things and touched them by hand, and (he) was full of emotions, because these objects were held by people who lived hundreds of years ago.*”

### ***Holistic personal development***

The third and final theme identified by R. Bennett (forthcoming) relates to improved mental health; the ability to talk without judgement, and the saving of lives. R. Bennett reports that UK veterans describe an increase in their own wellbeing and that this change is also noticeable to others. One noted that: “*I had a «spring in my step» that*

*wasn't there before. My wife also noticed the difference in my wellbeing, commenting that I was a far happier person.*” The promotion of a “safe space”, giving participants the ability to talk to staff and/or each other without judgement is also identified as being important; “*It is good to have the opportunity to talk and not be judged.*” This safe space enables participants to open up about sensitive issues that they may be dealing with in an informal setting, which can help them come to terms with traumatic memories “*plenty of people to talk to, but no pressure. If you want to talk you can talk, if you don't — just work.*”

The individual improvements of the Georgian veterans at Nokalakevi were also reported by specialists from the Physical Rehabilitation Unit, of the Office of Wounded and Injured Military Servicemen Support who had accompanied them. These specialists not only had the training and expertise to manage any physical or mental health issue that might arise, but they also knew the veterans personally through working with them over a prolonged period. Nino Kimadze, Senior Specialist with the Physical Rehabilitation Unit, wrote in her feedback at the end of the project:

*“In terms of military servants (sic), at the beginning there was alienation, but during these ten days they opened and started communication and became happier. The soldiers are better; they broke away from monotony they had before. BG looked much better, more communicative, happy. He had wish to participate in expedition again.”*

Alexandre Nishnianidze, from the same unit, had an even more positive response to the initiative particularly with regard to its impact on IK whose psychological trauma was perhaps the most severe. IK had been caught in the blast of a suicide bomber at the checkpoint he was guarding in Afghanistan, escaping catastrophic physical injuries only because the interpreter was between him and the bomb.

*“I think that the Nokalakevi Expedition completed its objectives over the ten days. There were three wounded soldiers in the expedition. Their physical condition was supported by the conditions of the expedition. The established daily schedule of the expedition positively affected the wounded soldiers' mood, especially IK (...) who had nervous excitation, which was expressed by easy excitation (agitation?), bad mood, often sweating, limb tremors. It was happening every second day before he arrived in expedition and during ten days he had this condition only once. The improvement of his*

*condition is due to the daily schedule and the situation which the wounded soldiers meet in Nokalakevi. Also I want to mention building of friendly relationship between Ukrainian wounded soldiers and Georgian wounded soldiers. They found common language very easily and I hope their friendship won't stop in Nokalakevi and will continue."*

### ***Additional considerations***

Unlike Breaking Ground Heritage, the Nokalakevi project was not able to utilise validated psychological scales, for a variety of reasons including cultural sensitivities, and the project is primarily a research/training excavation which hosts veterans, rather than a bespoke veteran-focused initiative. Despite this, all of the 2019 participants of the veteran wellbeing programme at Nokalakevi self-reported moderate to significant improvements. In reflecting on the common experiences of UK, Georgian and Ukrainian veterans throughout this paper, prior experiential differences have also become apparent which may have huge significance on Ukrainian and other initiatives in the future. The Nokalakevi study (Everill, Burnell forthcoming) is the first review of a veteran wellbeing initiative to consider the impact of conflict trauma on service personnel fighting in defence of their own country – and therefore potentially encountering sensory triggers of traumatic memories on a regular basis at home. It has also become apparent that the nature of the conflict and the nature of the service might both be important variables, with three distinct groups of veterans participating in Nokalakevi:

- Regular soldiers who had served/been wounded on international deployments.
- Regular soldiers who had served/been wounded in wartime domestic defence.
- Volunteer soldiers who had served/been wounded in wartime domestic defence.

While each group might be characterised in a variety of ways, they retain a common identity, and a number of features relating to their traumatic experiences. It is clearly also important to recognise that their stories are as unique as they are, and that each veteran will respond to different elements of any wellbeing programme. The veterans of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war hosted at Nokalakevi from 2017 to 2019 had almost universally presented as quiet and introverted to begin with. It was not clear whether this was related to the time since they were wounded or wheth-

er the type of war they had experienced was itself somehow markedly different from the other veterans. There is, of course, another factor to consider, and it must be noted that while both the Ukrainian volunteers and the Georgian veterans of 2008 had fought in the defence of their homeland, the Georgians had never physically left the battlefield — their home country — or been able to leave behind the common sensory triggers of traumatic memories. In terms of the archaeology and history of the site at Nokalakevi, however, its representation of Georgian cultural heritage might also represent a more powerful connection, and perhaps therefore a more authentic and therapeutic experience for those Georgian veterans engaging with it.

The Ukrainian participants proved to be a real asset to the project, bringing with them an enthusiasm for Georgia and archaeology and a willingness to get involved and make friends. In some respects, OS and HS were independent of the other three, who benefited in more predictable ways through the veteran-focused programme, though HS's own experiences as an IDP meant that she was also able to benefit from many of the same mechanisms within the project. In offering her own feedback in 2019, HS wrote "*great thanks, as I saw my house. Not only from the plane window, but also here. It looks like here everything reminds me of the Crimea. The place where I was born and grew up. I was not in my tiny homeland for five years, thank you for the chance to see it here.*" Clearly, for the Ukrainian participants, travelling was a significant element of the appeal, and perhaps also the beneficial results, of the programme, but it was their engagement with the work and desire to build connections with the Georgian veterans and the archaeological team that ensured a positive outcome.

### ***Conclusion***

This study brought together two independent datasets to shine light on the shared experiences of veterans of different nations and their engagement with archaeology for wellbeing. The analytical framework of previous work in the UK with British veterans was used to re-analyse the feedback provided by Georgian and Ukrainian veterans taking part in archaeological fieldwork in Nokalakevi. Meaningful parallels were drawn between the value of social connectedness and being with other veterans, learning new skills, as well as the importance of the archaeological fieldwork itself. These findings complement the growing literature con-



cerning archaeology and heritage for wellbeing, particularly in veteran groups, but now expanding to other groups too. In the UK in particular, there is increasing emphasis placed on *social prescription* of activities such as archaeological fieldwork in place of, or to complement, medication to support mental health and wellbeing; literally meaning that activities such as archaeological fieldwork can be prescribed by health and social care professionals. However, in doing so, there is a need for all parties to be confident that the activities being prescribed meet best practice guidelines; that is, they are able to safely support the mental health and wellbeing needs of those invited to take part. In addition, it

is essential that heritage itself is protected and that heritage professionals form part of the team that provides these activities alongside mental health professionals. To this end, guidelines have been produced to support heritage projects (Burnell et al 2021) in safe delivery for both participants and heritage. What remains clear is the truly therapeutic impact that authentic and meaningful engagement with the historic environment can have on people with mental health needs. Moving forward, there will be a significant need for the provision of therapeutic opportunities for not just veterans, but for all those who have experienced conflict in Ukraine.

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## АВТЕНТИЧНА Й ТЕРАПЕВТИЧНА ВЗАЄМОДІЯ ВЕТЕРАНІВ ІЗ МИНУЛИМ У НОКАЛАКЕВІ В ГРУЗІЇ ТА В БРИТАНСЬКОМУ ПРОЄКТІ «BREAKING GROUND HERITAGE»

У статті узагальнено застосування археологічних польових досліджень для покращення психічного здоров'я та самопочуття військових ветеранів. Результати, вперше отримані 2011 р. в рамках ініціативи «Operation Nightingale» у Великобританії, а згодом розширені через «Breaking Ground Heritage, Waterloo Uncovered» та інші програми під керівництвом ветеранів, підлягають все більшому документуванню та вивченню. Відповідаючи на питання, як археологія підтримує ефективне немедичне втручання, запропонована стаття повідомляє про результати програми благополуччя ветеранів у грузинському Нокалакеві, яка приймала грузинських та українських ветеранів у 2019 р.

Аналіз якісних даних, отриманих від учасників, які працювали разом із британськими та грузинськими працівниками й студентами, представлено в межах тематики досліджень, проведених у Великобританії з британськими ветеранами. Зіставлення даних, отриманих в Нокалакеві, з даними британських проєктів «Breaking Ground Heritage» дозволило визначити загальні, але незалежно досягнуті результати. Аналіз демонструє спільні теми для всіх учасників, а відповіді ілюструють важливість трьох аспектів індивідуального досвіду під час археологічної польової роботи: міжособистісного, розвивального й досвіду цілісного розвитку особистості. Передбачається, що ці аспекти сприяють покращенню самопочуття ветеранів, які беруть участь у проєктах розкопок, що передбачають також надання соціальної підтримки та підтримку один одного.

Із цього дослідження зрозуміло, що конструктивне з історичним середовищем може мати терапевтичний вплив на людей із потребою поліпшення психічного здоров'я. Ідеться насамперед про відчуття автентичності, що виникає через участь у проєкті, який підтримують досвідчені археологи та фахівці з питань культурної спадщини. Адже учасники проєкту відчують, що роблять конкретний внесок у краще розуміння та інтерпретацію пам'ятки.

*Ключові слова:* археологія, ветерани, психічне здоров'я, самопочуття, Нокалакеві, Самегрело, Грузія, Сакартвело

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