

Nelson's Island 2002

Preliminary report on the excavation of British military personnel c1798-1801

19 October to 29 November 2002

Background

Dr Paolo Gallo, Professor of Egyptology at the University of Torino and Director of the Italian Archaeological Institute at Aboukir, Egypt (Missione Archologica Italiana ad Aboukir: MAIA) contacted The Nelson Society regarding the finding of some burials of British military personnel c1798-1801 during excavations on Nelson's Island, Aboukir, and nr. Alexandria, Egypt. Dr Gallo requested specialist assistance in the excavation and recording of these burials. The Nelson Society's Vice-Chairman, Nick Slope, himself a qualified archaeologist and Royal Naval historian, was given the task of assisting Dr Gallo with his request. Mr Slope took part in Dr Gallo's excavations on Nelson's Island for the period 19 October to 29 November 2002 with the specific remit of working on the military burials under Dr Gallo's overall direction.

Mr Slope's initial desk research on Royal Naval archives of the period revealed that soldiers, sailors, marines and other military personnel had indeed been buried on the island following the Battle of the Nile in 1798 and the British landings of 1801.

Aims and methodology

The aim of The Nelson Society's involvement was to assist in the excavation and recording of British military graves and associated materials under threat from erosion and excavation in order to allow the human remains to be scientifically evaluated and subsequently reburied in a British military cemetery in Alexandria. Also, if possible, to establish to what extent British military graves were present on the island and to develop a strategy to meet future excavation and research needs.

The excavation methodology employed was consistent with Dr Gallo's own procedures and recording processes and concentrated on the careful excavation and recording of burials. All burials were comprehensively photographed during excavation (both digitally and video) and drawn (scale 1:10) before lifting, all artefacts found were recorded and stored and sampling of organic materials was carried out.

Excavation

A total of 15 burials of the Nelsonian period were uncovered during excavation and listed below is a summary of those burials:

Burial #1

This burial was located in a shallow grave on the southwestern corner of the northern Hellenistic platform. The burial had been disturbed (the skull and left shoulder had disappeared) not long after burial (some of the disturbed finger bones were articulated) and there was nothing of particular significance that emerged during excavation. This burial has been drawn, photographed, lifted and stored.

Burial #2

This burial was located in a shallow grave on the central southern half of the island and had been identified during the previous season's excavation. Excavation revealed a musket ball (unfired) placed on the individual's right shoulder (thus indicating that it was a soldier or a marine) and some iron fragments were found in the ribcage underneath the sternum and it is likely that these are battle injuries. This burial has been drawn, photographed lifted and stored.

Burial #3

This burial was located in a very shallow grave (in fact the top part of the skull was visible before excavation) just south of the Hellenistic platform on the western side of the island. The body was wrapped in a shroud that was put over a uniform. Military type buttons, heavily corroded clasps and a shoulder board were found and, like Burial #2, an unfired musket ball had been placed on the right shoulder and another unfired musket ball was found resting on the left hip (perhaps from a pocket) which would indicate that this individual was a soldier or a marine. There were particular difficulties excavating this burial as the root system of a dune bush had taken over the lower half of the body. This burial has been drawn, photographed lifted and stored.

Burial #4

This burial was located close to Burial #3 and consists of some fragments of bone washed down from a burial and as such provided no other information. The bone fragments have been lifted and stored

Burial #5

This burial is located in a shallow grave on the centre of the Hellenistic platform and is in association with Burials #6, #7 and #8. Excavation revealed military buttons and some fabric residue, which would indicate that this individual was a soldier or a marine. This burial has been drawn, photographed lifted and stored.

Burial #6

This burial was located in a deep (approximately 1 meter) grave on the centre of the Hellenistic platform and is in association with Burials #5, #7 and #8 and is directly north of a large cross cut into the platform. Excavation revealed a well-made coffin with metal letters attached to the lid with the date 1801, the age of the deceased (34) and the letter 'H', presumably the individual's given name. Unfortunately the second letter, the family name is missing. However this confirms the period of burial as well as giving us the possibility of naming the individual. The coffin was opened to reveal an individual in a uniform with the face covered by a cloth and metal (bronze or copper) deposits around the eye sockets suggesting that coins were put over the eyes after death (a common custom of the time). This burial is a significant find and it was decided to await the arrival of an anthropologist next season so that a careful excavation of the individual can take place. Therefore the burial was protected and re-covered.

Burial #7

This burial was located in a shallow grave on the centre of the Hellenistic platform and is in association with Burials #5, #6 and #8. This burial is almost certainly that of a sailor who has been wrapped in his hammock. The evidence for this is that a rope, attached to the burial from head to toe was uncovered as well as patches of material. Damage to the front teeth indicates sewing activity (biting threads continually damages teeth) that would also point to this burial being of a sailor. This burial has been drawn, photographed lifted and stored.

Burial #8

This burial was located in a grave on the centre of the Hellenistic platform and is in association with Burials #5, #6 and #7. This individual was buried in a crudely made coffin that had subsequently collapsed onto the burial. There was evidence of cloth on the skeleton but no military type buttons or clasps. This would indicate that this individual was a sailor of petty officer rank. This burial has been drawn, photographed lifted and stored.

Burial #9

This burial was located in a small, shallow grave on the south centre of the Hellenistic platform and is in possible association with Burials #13 and #14.

Excavation revealed a small coffin with a baby (new born?) inside. It was known that women and children were present during the period (soldier and sailor's wives) and the stratigraphic evidence is consistent with the Nelsonian period. This burial is a significant find and it was decided to await the arrival of an anthropologist next season so that a careful excavation of the individual can take place. Therefore the burial was protected and re-covered.

Burial #10

This shallow burial was located on the south end of the island on a small cliff on the east coast. The burial had been heavily disturbed (the skull, part of the left shoulder and feet had disappeared) before excavation and there was nothing of particular significance that emerged during excavation except that there was a heavy deposit of a white mineral substance on the skeleton. The burial was located next to a wall, which could indicate that this it is earlier than the Nelsonian period, perhaps Late Roman in origin. This burial has been drawn, photographed lifted and stored.

Burial #11

This burial was located on the south end of the island on a small cliff on the east coast six meters north of Burial #10 but not in direct association with it. The feet of the burial are missing due to erosion of the cliff face. Excavation revealed a woman (?) holding what looks to be a rosary of red and dark green beads with an attached bronze medallion bearing a cross on one side and the Virgin Mary on the other. This burial has been drawn, photographed and lifted.

Burial #12

This burial was located in a deep (approximately 80 cm) grave on the east side of the Hellenistic platform. The burial is similar to Burial #6 but there appeared no lettering on the coffin lid and there were no metal deposits around the eye sockets. This is clearly another high status burial and it was decided to await the arrival of an anthropologist next season so that a careful excavation of the individual can take place. Therefore the burial was protected and re-covered.

Burial #13

This burial was located on the western part of the Hellenistic platform and is in association with Burial #14 and possibly Burial #9. Excavation revealed a small

coffin with a baby (new born?) inside. The coffin was packed with wood shavings and sawdust and there is evidence of cloth deposits surviving. Again, this is a significant find and it was decided to await the arrival of an anthropologist next season so that a careful excavation of the individual can take place. Therefore the burial was protected and re-covered.

Burial #14

This burial was located on the western part of the Hellenistic platform and is in association with Burial #13 and possibly Burial #9. Excavation revealed another coffin burial holding what looks like a woman in a dress with a face covering. It seems that she might well be related to the two baby burials (evidence is association, stratigraphical and burial practice). It was decided to await the arrival of an anthropologist next season so that a careful excavation of the individual can take place. Therefore the burial was protected and re-covered.

Burial #15

This burial was located on the western coast of the island south of, but not in association with Burials #3 and #4. This was another coffin burial that was discovered last season and re-covered. However the burial has been subjected to unauthorised digging by tourists to the island, was very disturbed and the skull and mandible broken and moved. Evidence of clothing was found on the skeleton as well as a possible face covering. This burial has been drawn, photographed lifted and stored.

Preliminary Findings

The 1798-1801 burials on Nelson's Island are of considerable significance to study of this period. They have so far revealed a pattern of burial that appears to be ship-based. That is there seem to be clusters of associated burials (Burials #5, #6, #7 and #8; Burials #13, #14 and #9 (?); Burials #3 and #4) and individual burials (Burial #2, #11, #12). This would point to ships burying their dead together as well as individually. It is possible that future excavation will reveal further associated burials and evidence of this has already emerged in the shape of grave-like features close to Burial #1 and Burial #3/#4 that are yet unexcavated. If this supposition is correct then it is possible that the individuals in some graves might be identified through ship's records. In the case of the burial (Burial #6) with the coffin inscriptions this is quite likely.

Much has been learnt concerning burial customs of the Royal Navy and the British Army of the period from this season's excavations. Excavation has revealed that burial practice was in large measure dictated by status. High status burials (Burial #6, #9, #12, #13 #14 and Burial #15) have the common feature of being buried in a coffin and it would appear that the higher the individual's status the deeper the burial. The highest status burial (Burial #6) had the following features:

- Buried the deepest of all the burials so far excavated
- Had a marker cross cut into the Hellenistic platform next to the burial
- Buried in a well-made coffin
- Lettering nailed onto the coffin lid
- Face covered by a piece of cloth
- Coins placed over the eyes
- Buried in his uniform
- Head supported with packing

Burial #12, clearly another high status burial, lacked an extant marker, lettering and coins and was buried not quite as deep as Burial #6. Burial #9 and Burial #15 were not buried as deep as Burial #6 or #12, their coffins were not so well made and no lettering, marker or coins were present. It is likely that these were petty officers; probably from the Royal Navy as no military type buttons were found. Other, lower status burials varied in their burial customs. One burial (Burial #3) contained an individual buried in a shroud (the outline of the shroud could clearly be seen in the surrounding sandstone) that had been put over a uniform (military type buttons and a shoulder board were present) indicating that this was a soldier or a marine. Burial #5 and Burial #2 were likewise likely to have been soldiers or marines as they too appeared to have been buried in a uniform (buttons and an unfired musket ball were discovered). Another individual appeared to have been buried in a hammock (Burial #7) and the hammock rope and fragments of the hammock were present and this would indicate that the burial was that of a sailor. Both Burial #2 and Burial #3 were found with an unfired musket ball placed on the right shoulder. It would appear that this was perhaps a regimental or marine custom although further research needs to be carried out to establish this.

Perhaps the most surprising element of the Nelson period excavations on Nelson's Island is the discovery of two baby burials and two women (?). Burial #11 was found to have a beaded rosary wrapped around the right hand with a small bronze medallion attached. The medallion had on one side a floret style cross and on the other the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus. This rosary led us to believe that this was a female burial although anthropological study is required to verify this assumption. The two babies (Burial #9 and #13) were both buried in coffins and there was evidence of clothing (shroud (?)) and of the coffins being packed with wood shavings and sawdust. Burial #13 was in direct association with Burial #14 and appears to be that of a woman buried in a coffin. The coffin contained the letter 'G' nailed onto the coffin lid and it is likely that there was another letter although this was not found. The individual had a cloth covering across the face and a wooden bolster at the top of the head. Wood shavings also appeared to be present as packing. A bronze disc was found between the left side of the torso and the left arm and was at first thought to be a coin but there seemed to be no relief on either face and so its function remains unknown. The individual appears to be wearing a covering or dress that stretches from the throat to the feet. It is assumed that due to the close association of the baby burial (Burial #13) that this burial is that of a woman, possibly the mother of the baby but this needs to be confirmed by a physical anthropologist.

Conclusion

Therefore in conclusion it would appear that we have two commissioned officers (Burial #6 and #12), two naval petty officers (Burial #8 and #15), one sailor (Burial #7), three soldiers or marines (Burial #2, #3 and #5), two children (Burial #9 and #13), two women (Burial #11 and #13) and three undetermined (Burial #1, #4 and #10). With the exception of Burial #10 it is clear that they are all from the period 1798-1801. Much work needs now to be done on ship and army records in order to establish, if possible who these individuals were and the context in which they died and were buried. We also look forward to the services of a physical anthropologist that will be able to reveal much concerning the individuals excavated.

Nick Slope

Vice Chairman of The Nelson Society

Alexandria, Egypt

December 2002

2002 Reports

As most of you know I am currently working in Alexandria, Egypt on the excavations of Nelson's Island, Aboukir Bay (site of the Battle of the Nile in 1798 and the Keith and Abercrombie landings of 1801) under the direction of Dr Paolo Gallo Professor of Egyptology at the University of Turino for the next six weeks. As the most rare of those birds, a combined archaeologist and naval historian, it has fallen on me to be responsible for the excavation of the bodies and artefacts related to the Nelsonian period. Following on from the practice of Dr Shimon Gibson, whom I have worked with over the last couple of years, I thought that it might interest people to do a daily report on the dig and post it every couple of days.

I am recording the whole excavation with digital photographs and video.

Day 1: 22 October 2002



View of Nelson's Island looking north with Culloden's Reef just visible

Photograph courtesy of Dr Paolo Gallo

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After arriving in Alexandria on the evening of Saturday 19 October I was ready for excavation on the next day (the excavation week is six days with Friday off). Unfortunately we had counted without the opening of the new library at Alexandria and the sixty year anniversary of the Battle of El Alamein that ensured, for security reasons, that we could not get out to the island. So it was relax and acclimatise for two days. The morning that I left England I had to scrape frost off my windscreen but out here it 90F plus! However the two days waiting to start were lightened by a lecture on the tomb of Alexander the Great by a leading Egyptian scholar and a meeting with a Guardian/Observer journalist who wanted to write an article on Nelson's Island.

Today we finally got out to Nelson's Island and this involves quite a palaver. We rise at six a.m. and carry all the expedition tools downstairs (we live on the fourth floor of an apartment block in which the lift has long since given up the ghost) to the waiting minibus taxi. There follows a death-defying 40 minute taxi ride from Alexandria to the Naval base of Aboukir Bay and then we set out for a 40 minute boat ride to the island. There is no landing stage on the island and so everyone gets a good soaking getting ashore. Once ashore we start work and apart from a 30 minute lunch break we work solidly until 3.00 p.m. We then we get the boat back followed by the minibus taxi to Alexandria, arriving home around 5.00 p.m. We work a six day week and have Friday off.

Straight away we have some finds. Last week, Dr Paolo Gallo the director of the site found the lower jaw and ribs of a skeleton very close to the surface of the Hellenistic platform situated at the northern end of the island. As the skeleton is clearly from the Nelsonian period he left it for me and two of our Arab workers to excavate. Paolo also asked me about some mysterious iron bars that had been found on the east side of the north end of the island that appeared to be embedded into the sandstone. As soon as he described them I had a fair idea of what they were and closer inspection strengthened my hunch. They look to me like bar-shot that was fired by the French

during the Battle of the Nile (from bow chasers?) that missed the British ships and ended up hitting Nelson's Island and embedding themselves. The iron bars have a rounded end at each end of the bar and a hinge in the middle. Bar shot was designed to destroy enemy sails and rigging and was made with a hinge so that as it left the cannons mouth it would open out producing a long bar that would spin and cause maximum damage. They are now in a delicate state and we are looking at the best way to conserve and excavate them. I started work excavating the skeleton mentioned above and it soon became clear that the skull and part of the left arm and shoulder is missing. The grave is so close to the surface due to erosion of the island that the rest of the skeleton would also soon disappear. Therefore we feel that there is no choice but to excavate it.

Day 2: 23 October 2002



Royal Navy Graffiti:

'W. Moore 1798'. British sailors were allowed recreation on the island as it was said that they could come to no harm due to the lack of ale-houses!

Photograph courtesy of Dr Paolo Gallo

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We started work in cleaning up the skeleton for photography and drawing. One of the Arab workers is skilled in excavating mummies and so his careful approach is very welcome. Apart from the missing skull and upper left arm the skeleton appears in good shape. The body was laid with the feet facing the north (roughly), the right arm is laid next to the right side of the torso and the left arm (the surviving lower part) rests on the abdomen. The finger bones have disarticulated and are lying around the burial. We also found a number of teeth from the missing skull. We did not quite finish cleaning up the skeleton before we left the island today and so we took some 'emergency' photographs and covered the burial. We will be back tomorrow to finish the job.

Day 3: 24 October 2002



Burial in a coffin found on the west coast of the island

Photograph courtesy of Dr Paolo Gallo

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Today we got to work on preparing the skeleton for photography and drawing. During the drawing I noticed that although the bones of the left hand and the lower right hand were scattered around the burial – obviously disturbed by whoever disinterred the skull and left shoulder – that a couple of the fingers were not disarticulated. This means that the body was disturbed some time after burial but that the body had not completely decomposed. It is likely that whoever disturbed the body was robbing out stones (the body is buried in the middle of a Hellenistic platform) and on discovering the burial stopped their work – who could blame them! The skeleton was cleaned, photographed and re-covered as there was not time to properly extricate the bones. In another area was found some military brass buttons (leather-backed) and what looks like the iron spike of a flag post. Tomorrow (Friday) is our day off and on Saturday we return to look at the possible bar-shot embedded in the east side of the island.

Day 4: 26 October 2002



Life's a Beach

Lunch-time on Nelson's Island

Next time waiter could we have a table nearer to the piano!

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Today we decided not to lift the skeleton as planned. The reason for this is that we are desperately short of funds and I would like to hope that before the dig ends we could raise enough money to employ an anthropologist to come out and study the bones. However they are best looked at initially in situ if at all possible and so we will leave excavating them as long as we can. Therefore we turned our attention to another burial that was found last season, partially looked at and then re-covered. During excavation an unfired musket ball was found on the right shoulder of the skeleton as well as a couple of iron nails nearby indicating a coffin. However no coffin was found. Therefore I marked out a 2.5 meter x 1.5 meter rectangle and started excavating with two Egyptian workers. We soon located the burial as it was only a few centimetres below ground and by the end of the day had uncovered the skull and left forearm. We covered the exposed bones to protect them – the island is a local picnic and fishing spot and we often have unwelcome visitors.

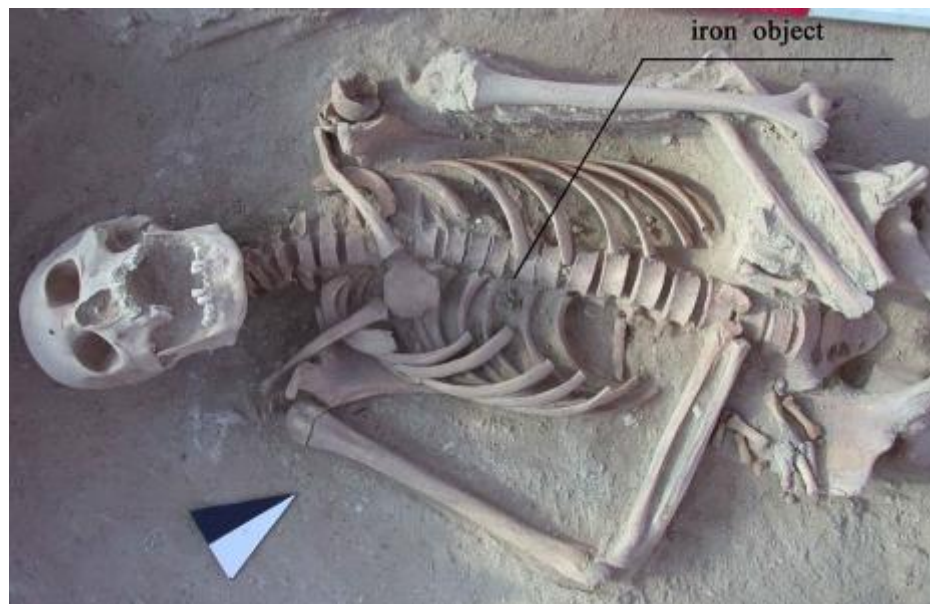
Day 5: 27 October 2002

Our unwelcome visitors struck after we left the island and when we got there this morning it was to find that they had uncovered the skull and also gone to the main site and destroyed all the labels recording stratigraphic sequencing! What impels such mindless vandalism?

However this bad start to the day was not an omen. Things started to happen rapidly and we ended up having quite an exciting day. First of all Dr Paolo Gallo the dig director had spotted some black fabric sticking out of a cliff edge and organised a dig of the area. The area excavated was quite spectacular, situated on the cliff edge and it was immediately dubbed the suicide squad. However by lunch time the black fabric was revealed to be the wrappings of a mummy and shortly after another was found

next to it. They are not in a very good condition but then they have been there a long time! This find gives some idea of the antiquity of the island. It was sobering to think that when Nelson arrived at the site the mummies had already been there over two thousand years.

The next bit of excitement occurred when I left the Egyptian workers to continue cleaning up the skeleton and I started scouring the beach edge. There is a line of low cliffs, not much more than two meters high, and I was looking for evidence of burials. I soon found some bones sticking out of the top of the cliff and have identified two new graves. One has been lost up to the pelvis and the other has lost some toe bones. Their shallow depth and lack of any mummification suggests that they are from the Nelsonian period and if we do not do something over the next couple of weeks they will not survive the winter rains and storms. I rescued the bones lying at the foot of the cliff and will return soon to excavate the burials fully. On my return to the skeleton that was being cleaned I found that it was nearly ready for photography and that Mahmood was indicating that he had found something. Closer inspection of the newly exposed rib cage, on the right hand side of the skeleton was a small piece of iron. We immediately cleaned up and took a series of digital photos of the iron fragment. It is impossible to tell what it is at present but it is likely to be connected with the death of the individual.



Burial showing iron fragment found inside the rib cage

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It could be a mortar or howitzer shell fragment or even a sword or bayonet point; time will tell.

An exciting day!

Day 6: 28 October 2002

With the skeleton completely uncovered it was time to peg out a grid and draw it in detail (scale 1:10). As I drew the skeleton I could not help but think about his life and

how he met his end. One famous archaeologist said that archaeology was the study of other people's rubbish, but for me archaeology is about people – they may be dead people – but they lived and breathed and had hopes and aspirations just like we do and studying their material remains, hopefully, brings them closer to us. Paolo suddenly appeared and asked me to come and look at some interesting features that he had found, interrupting my musings. We went to the north end of the island and Paolo showed me a human vertebrae lying on the ground beside the faint outline of some bone poking out of the ground – it looks like another burial although how much remains is difficult to ascertain at present. A few meters away Paolo showed me some black marks on the ground that he had spotted. A quick trowelling showed them to be fabric – another mummy – close to a Nelsonian period burial? It seemed unlikely and so I decided that next day I would excavate a small square around the fabric in order to ascertain exactly what it was. This evening we were invited to dinner at the apartment of Hamid, our Egyptian Inspector from the Department of Antiquities. It was a grand occasion with 'top nosh' and we were regally entertained.

Day 7: 29 October 2002

What an exciting day!

I started the square (one meter square) around the possible mummy working with Aden, one of our Egyptian workers. Almost immediately we realised that we were excavating around a skull wrapped in fabric.



This is our possible 'mummy' that turned out to be a Royal Navy (Royal Marine?) burial in a shroud

This illustration shows how much under threat these burials are – this burial would not have lasted another rainy season and already the front part of the skull has been lost.

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Clearly this was a mummy. We also established that there was a burial cut either side of the skull running in a north-south direction. This was strange; mummies are not normally buried in this way. No matter, I extended the trench to one meter wide by two meters long in order to cover the whole burial. As Aden and I were slowly excavating, working with dental tools and paint brushes, we uncovered a bronze military type button. This was no mummy! Further excavation revealed what looked like the shoulder board of an epaulette complete with another bronze button attached to it and fabric attached to the other side. It looks, at present, as if the individual has been buried in his uniform with some sort of covering around his head and is almost certainly from 1798 or 1801 (most likely 1801). This is most exciting and begs a question that has been troubling me for some time. Why have we found no fabric on any of the other burials? Popular history would have us believe that the men were sewn into their hammocks and then buried. If this is so why have we found no cloth remains on any of the other burials? It would seem strange that men were buried stark naked and up until now I had believed that any cloth in the burials had not survived. We will now have to reassess this assumption.

As Aden and I were packing up for the day and re-covering the burial we were excavating (we had had some rather unsavoury visitors again) the captain of our little boat that takes us to and from the island asked me to come and see something that he had spotted on the ground very close to where we were working. I took my trowel but did not need it, staring up at me from the ground was a set of upper teeth – another burial! I am beginning to wonder if we might be excavating a cemetery plot or even a mass grave as the grave cut of the burial that we are currently excavating seems to stretch much further than usual; time will tell. So we now have a total of eight burials under threat to excavate and I am sure that there are more to be found.

As I was packing up I popped over to see how the removal of the second mummy located a couple of days ago was proceeding and was stunned to see it lying there absolutely complete in its wrappings. This is a unique find this far north in Egypt and tomorrow it is hoped that we can lift it and get it into storage before our 'visitors' take a fancy to it.

After such a day I thought a swim was in order, much to the amusement of our Egyptian workers who were already splashing about. On the way back to harbour we were treated with Arabic music and dancing which I managed to video for posterity. What a day!

Day 8: 30 October 2002

The omens were not good for this day as the weather took a turn for the worse. We survived the mini-taxi ride to Aboukir only to find that the sea was too rough for us to venture out. Therefore we all returned to Alexandria for a quiet day catching up with paperwork. Hopefully tomorrow will be more rewarding.

Day 9: 31 October 2002

Another exciting day. Luckily the sea was a little calmer today and we were able to reach the island although the ride was a bit bumpy and I got a good soaking when a big wave caught me as I was wading ashore. However with the sun and wind you dry

out pretty quickly here! We continued work on the fabric covered body and the question about whether he was buried in a uniform or a shroud was answered. Excavation showed that the fabric covered his body completely and that therefore he was buried in a shroud. However further excavation revealed another cloth button and a bronze button, which seems to indicate that he was buried in his uniform as well.



Shroud Burial

Shroud burial showing the musket ball found placed on the right shoulder and a bronze button on the left side of the top of the pelvis. The shroud impression can clearly be seen – why have no other burials shown signs of any clothing/shrouds?

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Unfortunately the right shoulder board had not survived very well and was crumbling. Therefore I decided to remove it and some of the cloth that it was attached to in order to preserve it and study it at a later date. As I was carefully collecting up the bits my trowel struck a metal object. I immediately assumed that it was another button but after cleaning up around it the object was revealed as an unfired musket ball. This was quite startling as this is the second burial that we have found that contained an unfired musket ball deliberately placed on the right shoulder of the deceased. I can only presume that this man was, like the earlier burial, a Royal Marine and that his comrades put the ball there to honour him. However this is only guess work; any one out there know anything about such a practice?

Today I also took a long look at what I think is bar shot fired by the French during the Battle of the Nile that overshot the British ships and embedded themselves in the natural sandstone.



Barshot

Close up of remains of one of the possible bar shots fired in the battle

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I cleaned them up and studied them carefully. There are three in total, each just under a meter from each other, in a line and at the same height. Paolo also says that there was another one embedded in the Hellenistic platform wall but that it had not survived excavation. The three objects are in a pretty poor state and the iron is heavily corroded. However after studying them I am even more convinced that my theory is right.



Barshot

Photograph looking north from where Nelson's fleet rounded the island on 1 August 1798 showing the possible bar shot *in situ*. In the background next to the devilishly handsome archaeologist can be seen part of the Hellenistic platform structure.

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Later that day one of the supposed bar shot was painted with liquid resin in order to preserve it so that we can excavate it at a later date.

Day 10: 2 November 2002

As the day started I thought that it could not be as exciting as the previous days – I was right; it was much more exciting! We started work on the burial of scattered bones close to the burial wrapped in a shroud. It soon became apparent that this was not a burial as such. There was no trace of a grave cut that has been quite apparent on the other burials and it seems that what has happened is that the bones had been washed out of a burial and deposited further down the slope. Therefore I extended the area of excavation up-slope and back to where I think the grave originally was located. We had just started work on this when Paolo signalled me to join him on top of the Hellenistic platform. The reason for his calling me over was that another burial had been found cut into the hard sandstone of the platform. This was quite interesting as there were three related features one of which was this new grave. Running parallel to the grave was another grave type cut but much larger and just behind (to the south) of this was cut into the sandstone a cross approximately one meter by half a meter. We had discussed the possible function of these features – I had suggested jokingly that the cross indicated buried treasure! We thought that perhaps they were somehow related to the battery that the French had established on the island just before the Battle of the Nile in 1798.

Work on the new burial went ahead quite rapidly as the grave was cut through hard sandstone and the grave fill was quite loose. It soon became apparent that the occupant was buried in a jacket and some patches of white on the upper part of the skeleton could indicate that pipe-clayed cross-belts were also present but this is still very tentative. Meanwhile work on the other large feature went on steadily until the workers had got down to a depth of over a meter. By then we had given up the idea of another grave, as this was considerably deeper than the burial that we were working on. However, suddenly we all heard a clunk as Said, the Foreman of the workers, hit something solid. We all rushed to have a look and after a few minutes trowelling what emerged was the lid of a coffin. After much cleaning, photographing, videoing and recording the coffin was seen to be complete and ready to be opened. Paolo kindly gave me the honour of opening the coffin and after a few minutes I managed to prise it open and remove the three planks of wood that made up the coffin lid. The whole excavation had come to a complete stop by then and all were crowded round to see what would emerge.

I was expecting a skeleton, similar to the one that we were excavating 'next door'. Imagine my surprise when the first thing that I saw was hair around the head of the inhabitant and a linen 'bandage' laid across the face. The uniform of the individual was clearly visible and he seemed to be in a semi-mummified condition. The coffin

appears full of bits and pieces that await proper recording and excavating. Most bizarrely was that, on closer inspection, the right eye had had a thin copper plate covering it that had come loose and dropped to the side. The plate had some kind of funnel behind it that seemed as though it had been placed in the eye socket and its locating pin could be seen inside the socket. Looking at the left eye covered by the bandage a copper stain could be seen which makes it look like a similar arrangement. Paolo and I have discussed the possible reason and function for these copper plates and we are both stumped! Neither of us has seen anything like it before. We took photographs of the body and replaced the coffin lid as time had run out for the day. We have decided to cover up the burial and leave it for a while in order to allow us to consider how best to excavate it thoroughly. Preservation will be difficult as the uniform and most of the fabric is virtually dust. However this burial gives us a chance to really study burial customs of the Royal Navy of the Nelsonian period and we must make the best of the opportunity presented to us. An amazing day, the only thing that could have made it more complete was if Victor Sharman, Chairman of The Nelson Society had been there as well to see it. Victor's enthusiasm and hard work to help make the excavation happen, despite many setbacks, has been tremendous. And so Paolo and I finished the day with a glass of Irish whiskey and drank Victor's health. Cheers!

Day 11: 3 November 2002

After yesterday's findings it was hard to think what else could turn up today, but turn up it did! I started the day by getting Aden and Ibrahim (two of our Egyptian workers) to finish cleaning up the burial next to the coffin burial on the Hellenistic platform for final photography and drawing. Paolo and I had spent some time discussing the strategy related to the Nelson period burials the previous evening. We had decided that the best thing would be to close the coffin burial for the moment in order to work out how best to excavate it. I would very much like to raise the coffin if at all possible and to try and preserve it. So we prepared to cover up the burial for the moment and to support and protect it as much as possible. Before doing that we thought that we should have a look at the burial again as we found that the video record we made of the opening the day before was not very good. Therefore I took the coverings off the coffin lid and removed the three planks that made up the lid and passed them up to our workers. I was just about to take a look at the burial when I heard Paolo call me up. I climbed out of the grave and went to see what the fuss was about. One of the workers thought that he could see something written on the lid. We cleaned up the coffin lid to reveal a number of metal letters and numbers that had been nailed down. After much cleaning and debating from all the team we managed to piece together what it said although one vital piece was missing.



Burial #8:

Paolo cleans up the coffin lid. The 'H' on the top left can be seen as can 'AGED', below it '34' and below that '1801'

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The wording and numbering goes thus:

H (missing)

AGED

34

1801

It was Enrico (one of Paolo's Egyptology students) who figured out the 'AGED' as the 'G' looked at first like a 'C' and the 'E' was missing. Strangely the digital photographs that we took of the lid made the letters stand out better than looking at them in daylight. It would seem that the 'H' and the missing letter (the vital clue!) is the individual's initials, 'AGED 34' fairly obvious and the '1801' confirms my research of the ship's records. There can be no doubt now that these burials are of the Nelson period. With this information I am sure that I can track down this individual on my return to the UK in a months time.



Burial #8:

Paolo and I preserve the letters with resin

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Paolo and I returned to look at the burial again and after much photographing and debate we now believe that the copper ‘plates’ that we noticed yesterday were in fact the result of a chemical reaction from say glasses or coins covering the eyes although this is only a theory at present. It is also clear that the body was packed into the coffin with some fibrous material, perhaps re-used rope. For a final analysis we must wait and see.

Day 12: 4 November 2002

By the end of the yesterday the coffin burial was secure (hopefully!) from weather and ‘visitors’. So today I went back to the bone scatter that I think has been washed down a gully from a grave higher up. I pegged out an area for excavation hoping to locate any loose bones as well as to try and trace the bones back to their original location. I set Mahmood and Aden working in this area and went back to drawing the burial just east of the coffin burial. I had just started drawing when Enrico (Paolo’s assistant – Paolo is away in Turin for a couple of days) came and asked me to look at a cut in the ground close to and to the west of the coffin burial. A quick look and a trowel scrape and there was no doubt in my mind that we had another burial. So Mahmood and Aden were recalled to the Hellenistic platform in order to start work on excavating the new burial. They came on the burial surprisingly quickly, it was only 25 cm deep compared to the burial I was drawing at 50 cm deep and the coffin burial at over one meter. After some time we noticed that there was a brown streak appearing that ran up the length of the body and around the left side of the skull. After careful cleaning I am convinced that this is rope that was probably used to lower the body into the ground.



Burial #7:

The strands of rope that run from the feet to the left side of the head can clearly be seen. Black patches on the right side of the ribcage and under the right arm are almost certainly traces of a jacket.

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However opinion amongst the Egyptian workers was that the man had been hung and the rope thrown in as lesson to others! Later in the day yet another grave was discovered close to this one that we hope to excavate over the next couple of days. It has become increasingly clear that the Hellenistic platform was used as a burial ground for casualties of the 1801 landing. I now have 12 burials to contend with and who knows what else will appear!

Day 13: 5 November 2002

Today the temperature dropped to a shocking 75F and we even had a few spots of rain. Despite the obvious discomfort of such a cold day we soldiered on! I had finished drawing and recording the first burial located on the Hellenistic platform (Burial #5 by my recording system) and therefore carefully excavated the bones and stored them for anthropological research and reburial at a later date. During the final excavation of the skeleton traces of fabric were found underneath the burial further indicating that this individual was buried fully clothed with the exception of footwear. We also recovered some well-preserved fabric with a military style button attached. This leads me to tentatively suppose that this burial was either a marine or a soldier.

We then moved onto the third burial located on the Hellenistic platform (Burial #7 – Burial #6 is the coffin burial that we will excavate later). Careful cleaning of this burial has revealed traces of a jacket and the rope that extends from the head to the feet that I reported in the last update. We had to stop work on this burial as the wind changed direction and started blowing dust onto our careful cleaning. Therefore we started work excavating the fourth burial found on the platform (Burial #8).

Day 14: 6 November 2002

Today is the start of Ramadan and so we have cut the day by an hour on site for the benefit of our Egyptian workers who cannot eat or drink during the hours of daylight. Thankfully the temperature has risen back up to the low 90F and we had a fine days digging with very exciting events. First of all we started by finishing off cleaning Burial #7 for final photography and drawing. When this was complete Mahmood and Aden went back to excavating Burial #8 while I started drawing Burial #7.

After about an hour's excavation Aden called me over to the grave and showed me a small sliver of wood that he had found.



Burial #8:

The planks of the coffin lid laid across the coffin have collapsed inwards making excavation very difficult

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Our excitement rose and we anticipated the possibility of another coffin burial – we were not disappointed! Emerging from the grave fill could be seen the distinctive shape of a coffin. However it soon became clear that the wooden coffin lid had collapsed inwards into the coffin itself. The coffin measures 188 cm long with the coffin ends about 30 cm wide. The lid, unlike our previous coffin, had been constructed of planks running across the coffin rather than along it. Despite the collapsed lid anticipation runs high for tomorrow when we hope to start excavating it in more detail.

Our excitement was interrupted by another unexpected event. Northwest of our group of burials were located two small features and one larger feature cut into the Hellenistic platform. It was decided to excavate one of the small features as their function was a bit of a mystery. Said, the Egyptian foreman started excavating and soon called us over for a look as he had found something. I immediately recognised that he had found what looked like parts of a coffin! Sure enough, a little further down

he found the tiny skeleton of an infant. Now this has really set the cat amongst the pigeons! Stratigraphically this infant burial is almost the same as the ones that I have been excavating – but not quite. They are certainly earlier than the other burials but not by much. We know that the group of burials is from 1801 from the date on the coffin lid – could these be from 1798? It is a tantalising prospect. Time will, hopefully, tell. ‘En shala’ as we say around here.

Day 15. 7 November 2002

It started out much cooler today and on our arrival at the port of Aboukir the sea was quite choppy and we had difficulty loading on the equipment for the dig. This includes a couple of divers and all their gear from the Italian underwater archaeological organisation ‘Marenostrum’ (‘our sea’ the Roman name for the Mediterranean). We are not doing any underwater archaeological excavation but we are attempting to survey the seabed in the immediate area of the island in order to locate underwater structures and to try and establish if Nelson’s Island was connected to the land in antiquity. I have mentioned to the divers that they might find a wreck site as I believe that there are two previously unrecorded wrecks to be found. The first wreck comes from a reference in the captain’s log of HMS SWIFTSURE for the 17 November 1798: ‘miners employed on the island making a landing place – sunk a Polacre prize for a breakwater’ and secondly one of the troopships used in the 1801 invasion caught fire and blew up when the fire reached her magazines, fortunately without loss of life. But to date they have not been located. However due to the state of the sea and poor visibility the divers could not dive today. Yesterday the visibility in the water was excellent and they went diving although one of them was stung on the hands and face by a ‘medusa’ jellyfish of which there are many in the area.

Landing from our little boat was also awkward due to the sea state and we all managed a good soaking before we started work. I finished off my drawing of burial #7 and Aden excavated and cleaned the infant burial (#9) and Mahmood worked on the coffin burial (#8). When Aden had finished I went over to draw and photograph the infant. It is clear that the infant was very young, perhaps even newly born, and the sight of the pathetic little skeleton was quite moving.



Burial #9:

Baby burial in coffin

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The infant was buried in a well-made wooden coffin and under the tiny chin we found a little bronze pin, probably put there to keep a shroud or garment in place. The question is from what period is this burial? I still think that the most likely explanation is that it is from 1798. However we have a very similar grave-like feature nearby plus a larger one, which we hope to excavate in due course and these will perhaps give us evidence as to date.

The coffin burial is an awkward one to excavate as the coffin lid has collapsed in and at present only the top half of the individual is visible. However this top half has revealed dark stains on the ribs and vertebrae as well as in the surrounding grave fill that indicate that a jacket of some kind was probably worn. At the end of the day we covered the burial as best we could and hope that we do not have heavy rain tomorrow (it is our day off) or unwelcome 'visitors' to the island. Today we found that one of the bar-shot that I had carefully uncovered, preserved and re-covered was dug up either before we arrived today or more likely the day before, after we had left. Realising that it was of no value it was broken up!

Day 16: 9 November 2002

Yesterday was our day off and I spent most of the day recovering from a hard weeks work. The most gruelling aspect of it all is the two-hour travelling each way, not to mention the 'dice with death' in the minibus taxi! Paolo is now back from Turin and last night we eat out at an excellent fish restaurant.



Friday night is eating out night!

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This morning I decided to start recovering the burials that I had seen protruding out of the small cliff face down by our landing beach and so with Mahmood and Aden in tow I set off for the other end of the island. The first burial that we started work on I thought would only contain half a body at best as I thought that I could see the pelvis sticking out from the cliff edge. In the event it turned out to be the bottom of a right femur and in fact we seem to have most of the burial minus the right lower leg and the left foot. The burial has eroded to such a point that the bones are barely below the surface and if we do not act then this burial will not survive another season. We worked on this until midday break time (it is Ramadan and so there is no lunch break for the workers) and as I made my way over to our rest area Paolo beckoned me over to him, another two burials had been located.

The first new burial was at the south end of the Hellenistic platform and was characteristically grave like although it looked rather short – time will tell. The second burial was in quite a large feature that was thought to be too big to be a grave although I had predicted it to be such, however no one likes a smart arse! After some time excavating, a piece of wood was found and yes, you guessed it – another coffin! The grave fill was excavated to reveal a coffin almost two meters long. It was decided that we could not deal with this straight away and that we would protect it until it could be dealt with, however we agreed to open it first to see in what state the burial was in and how therefore we could best protect it. As I opened the coffin lid all worked stopped and even the divers came up to watch. I lifted the central lid plank (running along the coffin) and was amazed to see another well-preserved burial. The face had a linen cover over it and the head had been packed either side with what looks like sailcloth. The uniform is still in place although it is virtually dust and I could see hair around the skull. Then I made a big mistake, I took a deep breath and the reek of two centuries nearly knocked me for six! I can still taste it in the back of my throat as I write! We replaced the coffin lid and covered the burial with plastic sheeting and earth. So we now have four coffin burials to deal with, two of which look like commissioned officers. The situation is driving Paolo crazy as he is

excavating the Hellenistic platform in order to establish its origin and sequence and whilst we all expected some burials it is clear that this was a major burial site from 1801 and this is holding up his work considerably. A group of Italian diplomats and their staff also visited us from the Italian Consulate in Cairo, which added to the day's developments.

This evening I am off to a bash (reception) at the British Consulate, free nosh and drink – every archaeologist's dream!

Day 17: 10 November 2002

The weather forecast was not good for today but we set off regardless. The sea was pretty rough and our workers refused to come out with us! So a very small team set off in the boat towards the island. As we came out of the harbour the swell and wind increased and although we managed to get about half way to the island we decided that we did not want to get stuck there overnight if the weather worsened. So we turned back to the harbour and called it a day. At least it gave us the chance to catch up with some paperwork and that most beloved of archaeological pursuits – the siesta!

The previous evening I had been invited to the British Consulate for an informal reception and this gave me the opportunity to meet the local ex-pat community. I had a very pleasant evening and made some useful contacts and the local Brits seemed very interested in what we are doing on Nelson's Island. Mark Stevens H. M. Consul General and his wife Polly hosted the occasion. Mark has been extremely supportive towards the excavation and has put a lot of time, effort and money towards helping us make it happen and we all owe him a great vote of thanks.

Day 18: 11 November 2002

Once again the weather was pretty rough but we ventured out all the same. Today the workers agreed to come with us and we made the island OK despite a bit of a buffeting. However landing was another matter! The prevailing wind here is north-westerly (the same wind that took Nelson and his fleet into battle on 1 August 1798) and there is a small beach that we land at on the eastern side of the island. However the wind giving us all the trouble at the moment comes from the south and this makes landing a bit tricky. In the end we all got ashore safely but we had to strip off down to swimwear to get ashore. Once ashore I started work excavating a burial (Burial #10) that I had started work on a couple of days ago (see Day 16) in which the feet and lower right leg were already missing. We completed excavation of the burial and found that the skull and most of the right shoulder had also disappeared. I photographed and drew the burial and was about to lift it when Paolo came over and said that the wind was rising considerably and that we would have to leave the island. Therefore we quickly covered the body and stripped off for boarding the boat. Getting onboard was quite tricky with moderate surf and the boat pitching about. We had to wade up to our shoulders in order to reach the boarding ladder, but once again we all got onboard without mishap. The trip back to the mainland was quite 'lumpy' and I got another good soaking from the spray. When we got back to the mission the hot shower was most welcome!

Day 19: 14 November 2002

Another two days lost to bad weather. It is most frustrating not being able to get to the island but there is nothing that we can do about it. Today we managed to get out although the weather remains rough and there was a lot of grumbling from the workers. I finished off the grave that I was working on earlier (Burial #10) and lifted the bones for study and eventual reburial although the skull, left shoulder and feet have all been lost to erosion. I then started work on burial #11 that lies about six meters north of Burial #10. I had found a number of small foot bones lying at the bottom of a small cliff earlier and had traced the burial from these. Mahmood and I started work on the burial that was about 50 cm deep. We located the right foot from bones protruding from the cliff and excavated back from there.

After a couple of hours of excavation the skull and pelvis started to emerge and then suddenly we found that the right hand of the burial was laid across the body and a couple of bright red objects indicated that there was a bracelet on the right hand. This did not seem to be a Nelsonian period burial!



Burial showing the emergence of red and dark green beads

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The beads were about 6mm across, drilled for stringing and had about five red (coral?) beads followed by a bottle green (malachite?) bead. There were two bead strings on the wrist. We also found some fragments of Islamic pottery in the grave fill. As the burial was orientated east-west and given the pottery evidence, it is most likely an Islamic female burial but there is no record of Islamic occupation of the island. Therefore it is a bit of a mystery.

Day 20: 16 November 2002

Yesterday was Friday, our day off, and so we caught up with paperwork. I inked up some of the burial drawings that I had done and sorted out my notes. We finished the day by returning to the quail restaurant and feasting on the hapless birds. While there we bumped into some of the French mission working on a Hellenistic site on the opposite side of Alexandria (near Borg el Arab).

We went out to the island today but the weather steadily deteriorated and the wind picked up considerably. We decided that we had to finish off some of the burials on the Hellenistic platform as time is pressing and the end of the season is only two weeks away.



Collapsed coffin burial after cleaning

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Therefore I returned to the burial (Burial #8) in the collapsed coffin and removed the collapsed coffin lid. I left Adel and Mahmood to continue cleaning up the skeleton that the removal of the coffin lid had revealed and went and started work on the graffiti in the cistern tunnel. Below the Hellenistic platform was constructed a large water cistern, carved out of the sandstone and lined with waterproof plaster. Although the cistern roof has subsequently collapsed and is inaccessible, a tunnel leads from the cistern to the eastern coast. Within this tunnel a number of individuals have carved their names. The earliest graffiti is in Greek and is possibly Byzantine (there are several Byzantine remains on the island) and Cooper Willyams, Chaplin of HMS Swiftsure, comments on them in his Journal of his travels in the Mediterranean during 1798-1801 (the Swiftsure was present at the Battle of the Nile and the 1801 landings). While the good reverend's back was turned some of Nelson's sailors added their own names and it was these that I was looking at. The first that could be attributed to the period was "M H I 1801" and then "ANDRÉ 1799" and "FAYE 1799". I planned these graffiti into my notebook and returned to see how the coffin burial was progressing. Work was continuing but the wind was getting so strong that as soon as something was cleaned then it got covered over again. In the end work became virtually impossible and growing concern about the sea state prompted us to finish work an hour early and return to Alexandria.

Day 21: 18 November 2002

Another day lost to bad weather! I took the opportunity to go into town with Enrico, one of the Italian archaeological team and re-new my visa and get a haircut. The visa was easy but the barber virtually scalped me and my head now resembles one of my

skeletons! This is one of the occupational hazards of having to take off your glasses to allow your hair to be cut – you only have a vague idea of what is happening.

Today the weather had moderated and we managed a full day's work and some exciting finds turned up. I finished drawing and photographing the collapsed coffin burial (Burial #8) and lifted the skeleton. During this operation we found a small bronze pin by the lower left leg. While I was drawing the burial work re-commenced on the possible Muslim burial (Burial #11) near our landing place. Paolo, cleaning up for photography, found that the beads (see Day 19) on the wrist of the burial extend and were not, as we first thought, a bracelet but a string of beads attached to a bronze medallion. On the medallion seems to be a cross and on the reverse the Virgin and child – clearly not Muslim. Does this mean that we have found a woman from Nelson's fleet? John Nicol, a sailor onboard HMS Goliath during the battle recounts that a woman from Leith, Scotland was injured in the battle, died of her wounds and was subsequently buried on the island. We have covered up the burial for now and will return to it later.

We started work on the two small grave-like features near our baby burial and soon we revealed another baby in a wooden coffin.



Second baby coffin before opening

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The burial cut was only 85cm by 40 cm and so the baby was not a surprise. The coffin lid was in one piece and after photography I lifted it to reveal a tiny baby that appears to be in a coffin packed with wood shavings and with linen or similar material present. We hope to study it further tomorrow if the weather holds out. On the other burial, just as we were packing up, another coffin started to emerge and so we will again have to wait until tomorrow and pray for good weather!

Day 22: 19 November 2002

Today was virtually perfect. The weather had moderated and the wind dropped so we managed a good day's work as well as an exciting find.

I started the day by getting Mahmood to clean up the baby burial (Burial #13) for photographing and drawing. Meanwhile I concentrated on looking at the construction of the coffin burial (Burial #8) that I had lifted the day before. I slowly took the coffin apart and noted how it was made. The general construction is not as high quality as the officer burials that we have discovered. The coffin consists of a head and footboard with three planks laid longitudinally as a base. The two side planks are shaped to give the traditional coffin shape, wide at the elbows, and the whole is supported by four cross planks, one each at the head and feet, one at the wide point of the coffin and one near the footboard nailed underneath. Side planks were added and nailed into place. The coffin lid was made of a number of planks of wood laid across the coffin and these had subsequently collapsed in on the burial. Underneath the body was about 2cms of what looks like sawdust/wood shavings with the head supported by fabric under the skull.

After finishing work on the coffin I was called over to the new burial (Burial #14) that we had discovered yesterday as the workers had finished cleaning it up ready for photography. The coffin lid was in quite a delicate state and so we photographed it and then I carefully removed the two coffin lid planks. Inside we could see a familiar pattern. The face had been covered by a handkerchief or similar and the head was turned to the left. However covering the rest of the body and in an extremely delicate condition was a thin white fabric. My first thought was that this was a shroud but none of the other coffin burials seem to have a shroud and anyway it came up to the neck and did not cover the whole body. The size of the burial would indicate that the individual was either young and/or female and the tentative conclusion that I have reached is that this is a female laid in her coffin in a dress!



Female (?) coffin burial.

You can clearly see the remains of a dress (?) and on the left side between the arm and the rib cage a bronze disc

The close proximity of the baby burials (the baby burial we are now working on is less than a meter away) and the same orientation of them would suggest that this might be a mother and child(ren). If I am correct and this is the case then it is a unique find of the Nelsonian period. Stratigraphically the burials are linked with the other Nelsonian period burials and the method of burial seems to follow the same pattern. During cleaning of the burial for photography a bronze disc was found beside the upper left arm of the burial that looks like a large coin but does not seem to have any relief to it. The burial was covered up and protected and we will look at it in detail towards the end of the excavation. A most exciting day!

Day 23: 20 November 2002

Today the weather was perfect. There was little wind and the temperature rose to the high 80sF. Mahmood and I started work cleaning up the coffin burial that Paolo found last year and re-covered. Unfortunately erosion and unauthorised digging had disturbed part of it and the coffin has largely disappeared. I left Mahmood to get on with this while I went to draw the burial wrapped in a shroud (Burial #3) that I had partly excavated some time ago. Drawing this burial was particularly difficult as the body had been buried with a uniform on (we found military type buttons and shoulder boards) and then covered in a shroud.



Drawing Burial #3

Behind where I am drawing Burial #3 you can see a section of the small sand dune that grew up over the lower part of the burial and the dune bush on top of that. The dune bush's root system has taken over part of the burial

A small sand dune grew up on top of the lower part of the burial (we had to clear this before excavation) and the bush that grew on the dune put its roots down into the

burial. Therefore the lower part of the burial consists largely of a root! However I did my best and drew the burial. While cleaning up what I thought was a button resting on the top of the left pelvis turned out to be another musket ball, we had found a musket ball (unfired) resting on the left shoulder previously. This musket ball also looked unfired and was probably left in a uniform pocket.

At the end of the day almost everyone went for a swim. The water is still warm and the weather beautiful. I have just started a bad cold and so stayed onboard and took some photographs of the happy swimmers.

Day 24: 21 November 2002

Today I drew the coffin burial (Burial #15) that Paolo had found last year. During his initial excavation he found a bronze finger ring and a small clasp that was situated at the throat of the burial. My excavation revealed that the individual was buried in clothes or uniform, fragments of which I took for later analysis and also that there was some kind of face covering. This is consistent with the other coffin burials. I finished my drawing and then lifted the burial. My head cold has begun to get worse and so I had an early night.

Day 25: 23 November 2002

Yesterday was rest day but I felt pretty bad and spent most of the day in bed felling sorry for myself. Cécile, Paolo's partner, is also suffering from a bad cold so we took comfort from our mutual misery!

Today I started work on cleaning up and drawing the burial with the rosary (Burial #11) and this gave us a good chance to look at the bronze medallion attached to the beads. The medallion is quite small and measures about 27mm x 19mm, has a small bronze 'eye' at the top with a metal pin through it. On one side can clearly be seen a floret type cross and on the other is, what looks like, a standing figure (Jesus?). We finished the cleaning of the skeleton and I started drawing it.

The Egyptian workers announced that they had set up a five-a-side football team in their local league and that they were calling it 'Nelson's' in honour of the dig. I pointed out that perhaps with one eye and one arm Nelson would not have been a very good player but they are determined and so we decided to sponsor them by buying some T-shirts with "Nelson's Island F. C." on the back for them.

Day 26: 24 November 2002

Great excitement today as the BBC arrived. Tim Robinson and Mina Panic from the 'Ancestor' series have come to look at the possibility of making a documentary on the Nelson's Island burials and so we took them out to the island to give them a feel for the excavation. They were doubly welcome as they brought our dwindling supply of whiskey up to date! Paolo and I showed them around the island and discussed the significance and relevance of the excavation and burials. We expect a film crew to arrive on Monday and filming to start on Tuesday. Fingers crossed that the weather will hold. It was a bit choppy today and landing was difficult but we hope that the

weather stays fair. After taking them around the island I finished drawing the 'rosary' burial (Burial #11) and covered it up for protection.

Day 27: 26 November 2002

We could not get out to the island yesterday due to rough weather. The BBC film crew arrived and we were very anxious that we could get out to the island today and begin filming.



BBC team film excavations on Nelson's Island

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The day dawned bright and it was clear that the patron saint of the media (St Jude?) was smiling on us. We did encounter some local difficulty concerning official permissions to film but that was soon sorted out and we arrived on the island without having lost too much time. Most of the day was spent with the film crew and they filmed some of the graffiti in the Hellenistic cistern as well as some of the burials.

Day 28: 27 November 2002

Once again we had good weather and made the island without problems. We did a lot of filming and Paolo and I were interviewed about various aspects of the island, the history of the British involvement with the island and the burials themselves. I managed to get away in order to finish off and lift the hammock burial (Burial #7). I kept as much of the hammock rope as I could as well as some material (hammock?) that was with the burial. When we had completed lifting the burial, beneath the skull we found a small quantity of hair, which I also kept.



Tim has another! The great pigeon disaster!

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This evening we took the BBC team out to the ‘King of Quails’ restaurant (yes, it really is called that) and the BBC producer Tim Robinson astounded us all by consuming five quails and two pigeons!

Day 29: 28 November 2002



Mahmood right of picture and Adel left

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This was the last official day of this season’s excavation although Paolo and I decided to return to the island on Friday to tie up all the loose ends. The last day of any excavation is always fraught and nerves and tempers get quite frayed. However the day went reasonably well without any serious mishaps and the BBC continued to film and to interview. We showed them the rosary burial (Burial #11) and after filming I lifted it. We have cleaned up the small bronze medallion on the end of the red and

dark green beads and on it the floret cross with an effigy of Jesus in it is quite clear. On the other side is the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus under some kind of archway. After lifting the burial I decided to check that everything had been removed and I started trowelling the empty grave cut. Suddenly my trowel hit something that looked like bone. I immediately supposed that we had missed a part of the burial but as I continued to dig a left femur emerged! As I already had two femurs this was obviously another burial! It was too late in the day to continue so we decided to cover it and investigate tomorrow.

This evening we invited the BBC crew around to the Italian Mission and had a farewell meal together. They all seemed very happy with the way things went and Paolo and I were very impressed with their professionalism and the way that they handled the shoot. We are hopeful that the BBC will commission a full 50 minute programme on the excavations to be broadcast next year – we will keep you posted on The Nelson Society Website.

Day 30: 29 November 2002

For me this was the final day's excavation. We looked at the new burial that we had found yesterday and after further excavation revealed no new bones we have come to the conclusion that this was probably a Late Roman burial (there is a lot of Late Roman pottery in the grave fill) that was disturbed by the digging of the grave of the rosary burial (Burial #11). We do not have the time to investigate further this year so we covered it up and protected it for next season. I finished off lifting the outstanding burials and during excavation of the shroud burial (Burial #3) we found another metal button and fittings, which are further evidence that this individual was a soldier or a Royal Marine. We finished off with a group photo of Paolo, Said, Mahmood, Adel and myself standing on the Hellenistic platform with the panorama of the Battle of the Nile and 1801 landings behind us.

When we arrived back at the Mission there were fond farewells between us all and pledges for next year – not a dry eye in the house!

End of 2002 Reports.

2003 Reports

This season's excavation on Nelson's Island, Aboukir Bay, Egypt commenced a few days ago and I joined the excavation late on Wednesday 8 October. Like last season I intend to do a daily report

Thursday 9 October. Day One

Rats, octopus, burials and mummies!

I arrived yesterday (8 October) evening and was greeted at Borg el Arab Airport by Paolo Gallo (the excavation Director) and was delighted to find that some of my old friends from last season (Nica and Enrico) were here again for this season. One of the great joys of this excavation is the archaeological colleagues from the Italian Mission whose friendliness and professionalism makes it such a pleasure to work with them.

However getting up at 6 am the next morning and piling into the mini-bus for Aboukir is not such a pleasure! We arrived at Aboukir Harbour at about 7 am and the boat and Egyptian workers were waiting for us. It was great to renew acquaintances with old friends and Adel, the mummy-excavating expert, was there and will be working with me over the next six weeks, which was good news. The bad news was that during the summer months, rats have infested the island! Paolo thinks that some rats probably came from a fishing vessel that had stopped on/near the island to clean its nets. During the summer holiday season the rubbish left by visitors to the island has provided them with enough sustenance to survive, multiply and set up a large colony. Although I did not see any that day the evidence of their activity was everywhere.

The excavation had started a few days ago and Paolo has been excavating in the central area of the island on the west coast. He immediately came on a burial lying only a few millimetres below the surface. The smallish bones looked like they came from the feet and so I started work revealing them straight away and soon came upon other bones and the edge of a grave cut. The burial (burial #16) lies in a rough north-south orientation with the feet at the north end. Although the leg bones up to the pelvis were intact it soon became clear that above that the bones had been heavily disturbed.

Last season, during field walking near where Paolo was expecting to excavate this year, we had come across some teeth sticking out of the topsoil. It was clear that these were human and so we covered them up waiting this season. The winter rains had eroded the topsoil and part of the skull was visible and so I pegged out an area for excavation that we planned to start tomorrow.

During excavation a few days earlier Paolo had come across fragments of a mummy and some of his team were busy excavating these. In the middle of the day one of the local fishermen/divers passed by carrying two medium sized octopus that he had speared. Paolo immediately started bargaining and we look forward to an octopus dinner soon!

Saturday 11th October, Day 2

Yesterday (10 October) was Friday and therefore a rest day. This was good for me as it enabled me to catch up on some well-earned sleep. Today the weather was quite windy as well as being sunny. The sea was fairly rough so we had an 'interesting' journey out to the island.

Once there I finished revealing the burial (burial #16) that we had started work on the day before and got a couple of the workers to start excavating the other one that lay 20 meters to the east of burial #16 that I had pegged out the day before. During the day the top half of this burial (burial #17) was uncovered and I suspect that the entire skeleton will be there. The grave cut is about 60cm wide as are most of the non-high status burials that we have come across. If the weather permits we will finish excavating the remains tomorrow.

The top half of burial #16 is a real mess. It has been heavily disturbed and the skull appears to be missing. Therefore we cleaned it up carefully, I drew it, photographed it and recorded the details around it. It seems to be the remains of an ordinary

soldier/sailor/marine. There are traces of cloth on some of the bones and it seems to be an isolated burial with no associated burials nearby. The grave cuts the building complex that Paolo is excavating and partly butts onto an ancient wall. The grave fill was full of some very nice pottery sherds (probably Greek) but the body's position in the grave is somewhat strange. It looks as if the body was 'dumped' in the grave without much care as the head end is crunched up against the grave edge and the feet are higher than the torso giving it a slight 'banana' shape in the grave. After recording I started lifting the remains carefully and putting them in various plastic bags. Normally I put the small bones such as hands and feet labelled into separate bags for ease of identification later but the top half of the body was so disturbed that this was not possible. However as I was removing the ribs two objects dropped out. Imagine my surprise when I saw that one was an HB pencil with Arabic writing on and the other a small, modern Arabic coin (dated 1997)! When I showed Paolo I think that he thought that I was pulling a trick on him (not unknown in archaeology!) but he eventually believed me.

What I think has happened is that as the topsoil eroded the skull probably became visible and some locals thought that it could be a mummy and dug up part of it until they realised that it contained nothing of immediate value and either discarded the skull or took it away as a trophy. Later that day when Paolo and I were scouting round the island to see what the winter rains had revealed we found, on a small cliff edge, a recent, unauthorised excavation that had a very familiar grave shape and we think that this was locals who had seen bones and decided that there might be valuables there dug it up. No bones were around so presumably they were taken away. This only underlines the importance of us rescuing the remains of the British dead on the island before they are lost to erosion and human action.

Monday 13th October 2003

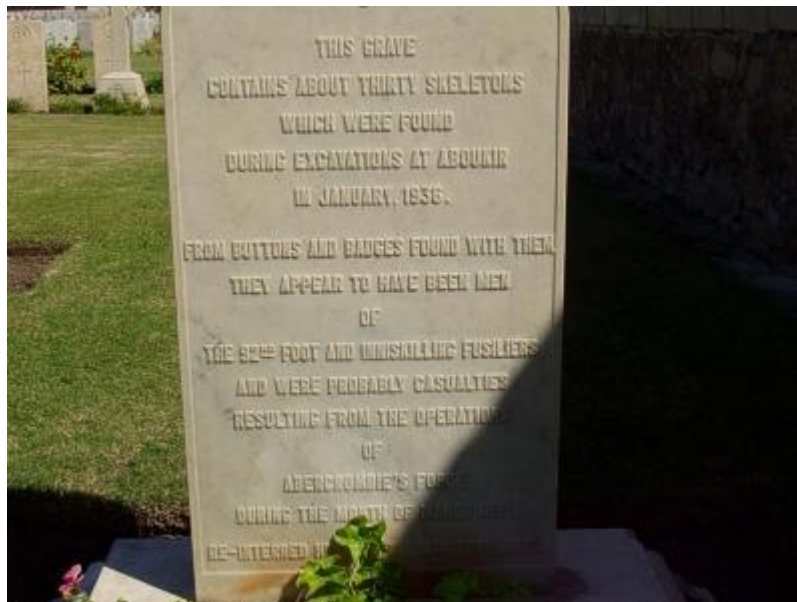
Yesterday the sea state worsened and we were unable to get out to the island. However Paolo and I took the time to visit the two British Commonwealth War Cemeteries that are situated close to the Italian Mission where we were are located. We hope that the remains that we recover from the island will be re-buried in one of the cemeteries. The cemetery closest to us is called Chatsby and already contains two graves from the British 1801 expedition as well as the monument to Abercrombie (the British general who was mortally wounded during the Battle of Alexandria).



Abercrombie Monument

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The monument to Abercrombie was erected in 1901 at the spot where he fell and was moved into the cemetery at a later stage. Of the two graves, one is of Charles Erskine, an officer of the 92nd Regiment (Gordon Highlanders) killed at the Battle of Mandara shortly after the British landing and whose remains were discovered during building works and moved to the cemetery.



Headstone to 1801 reburials, Chatsby

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The second burial is a mass grave of approximately 30 soldiers from the campaign also found during building works and re-buried in Chatsby. Therefore the dead from Nelson's Island would be in good company there.

Today the weather was fine and we got out to the island OK. I continued working on burial #17 and excavation revealed the skeleton to be intact and undisturbed.

A lot of decayed cloth remains attached to the bones and tells its own story. The arms and hands are stretched out at the sides of the body, not resting on the torso as in other burials. The body had been tightly bound by the cloth that is still in evidence and we have speculated that perhaps the individual died in his(?) hammock at night and when discovered the next day rigor mortis had set in and so he was wrapped in some type of shroud as he was found. There is no evidence of cloth on the head and the jaw bone has dropped forward indicating that the shroud did not cover the whole body. I photographed, recorded and started drawing the burial and hope to finish it off tomorrow.

During our lunch break on the island the rats were very much in evidence. With the close of the tourist season to the island the supply of rubbish has dried up and so they seem to be getting hungry and more aggressive – the smell of our food box being opened spurred them into activity and we had to keep a pile of stones to hand in order to keep them at bay whenever we spotted them. At day's end we put down some poison and hopefully that will rid us of our unwelcome guests!

Thursday 16th October 2003 Day4

We have had two frustrating days when we could not get out to the island. On Tuesday (14 October) we arrived at Aboukir port to find that the licence for the boat that takes us to the island had run out and Medo (our boat captain) was having difficulties renewing it. Therefore we had to sit outside the offices of the port authority for several hours waiting for 'the man with the rubber stamp' to show up – we waited in vain! Eventually we called it a day and headed back to Alexandria. Medo eventually managed to renew the licence but it was too late for us to get to the island that day. We then discovered that the next day (Wednesday) we would not be able to get out to the island as it was the anniversary of the opening of the new Library of Alexandria and the Egyptian President and hoards of political worthies from around the world (including the British Minister for Culture) were due to attend the ceremony. Therefore all coastal traffic was stopped for the day. So we spent another day kicking our heels.



Burial #17 - Jaw

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Today we managed to get out to the island and the weather was perfect. I started work on the Burial (#17) that I had nearly completed and finished off my drawing of it. I then started to carefully remove the bones, clean them, tag the bags that they were put in and look for any peculiarities. When I lifted the skull I found that on the back of the skull was evidence of cloth. This indicates that in fact, contrary to my earlier assumptions, the body had been completely covered in some type of shroud. The material looked quite substantial and I would guess that it could have been sailcloth. Most of the bones had heavy deposits of cloth on them and I would also guess that the individual was buried in clothes or uniform as well as a shroud. The only notable feature of the burial was that the right kneecap was located higher than the left. However when I had finished cleaning out the skull and we were examining it Paolo noticed that on the right upper jaw (maxilla) there was clear evidence of dental work. Examination revealed that two adjoining molars had been cut in half at the rear and removed. I have to confess that the thought of these molars being cut in half and removed without anaesthetic sets my own teeth on edge! There was no evidence of any covering or crowning to these teeth and they actually looked quite healthy. The cutting was very precise and seemed skilfully carried out. I am going to send a photograph of the molars to my sister Lisa who teaches at Eastman Dental Hospital to see if she can throw any light on them.

Following the removal of the remains I moved onto a probable burial that we had discovered last season but that we did not have time to excavate. This burial was located on the northern part of the island and dug into the south western corner of the Hellenistic platform. We had not excavated very far (20cms) when teeth started showing through the grave fill. We uncovered part of the torso area and then covered up the burial as time was running out and we had to return to Alexandria.

At lunchtime our rodent friends reappeared and so it seems that the poison is not working too well! During the day there was a howl of triumph when some of the Egyptian workers caught and killed one. On our way back to the boat I found, lying

on the surface a shin bone (Tibia) that had clearly come from a Nelsonian period burial but I could not establish where exactly. I will have another look on our return to the island.

Saturday 18 October 2003 Day 5

Yesterday (Friday 17 October) was rest day and glorious lie-in! In the evening Paolo and I were invited to call on the British Consul General, Alan Cobden and his wife and to outline progress on the dig. Alan has recently replaced Mark Stevens as Consul General and so we had not met him before. We had a delightful reception and a very positive response to what we are trying to achieve on the island. We invited them out to the island and we expect to see them out there some time in the future.

Saturday 18 October

We had quite a sobering start to the day today. Halfway to Aboukir in our suicidal minibus taxi we were slowed down by the police, as there had been a serious accident. Lying in the middle of the road, covered by a blanket with a large pool of blood around it was a body. Nearby was a car with a large dent in the front and a distraught driver sitting beside it. The traffic slowed for about 2 kilometres and then it was back to manic driving!

The day was really hot, probably around 35-7C with no breeze and the sea like a millpond. We started work on Burial #18 and started cleaning up the skeleton. During cleaning we found a small bone button (9mm diameter and 2mm thick, pierced in the centre) and some pieces of cloth or leather that appeared to lie under the burial. Further work revealed a large patch of red cloth lying next to the left leg. We finished cleaning, I took photographs and then set up a drawing grid (I draw each burial at 1:10 scale). I was then called over to the area Paolo was working on and there, very close to Burial #17 was, what looked like, a new burial. We started work on excavating it and just before packing-up time found the top of a skull emerging.



Paolo negotiates supper!

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On the way back in the minibus I started feeling a bit sick and headachy; sunstroke! On arriving back at the Mission it was a quick shower and off to bed.

Sunday 19 October 2003 Day 6

Today was even hotter than yesterday and without the usual sea breeze that we get on Nelson's Island it was quite uncomfortable and I was still suffering from a touch of sunstroke from yesterday. I started work on burial #18 and it was soon ready for drawing. There appeared nothing remarkable about the skeleton but from the wear on the teeth



Burial #18 - Buttons

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I would guess the age at around mid 30s. However we soon found some more buttons although these were larger than the small one that we found yesterday. The buttons were 13mm diameter by 3mm thick. They look as if they have been made from bone and are pierced in the centre with four smaller holes surrounding the centre. On one side they are flat and on the other ridged slightly. The patches of red cloth/leather are quite clear and seem to lie under the burial, I photographed and sampled them. Patches of cloth on the bones of the skeleton indicate that a shroud or covering was placed over the body. I started drawing the burial while one of the Egyptian workers started cleaning up the other burial (#19) found yesterday.

Whilst I was drawing the burial I heard a sudden shout from the workers and then a round of applause. I went over to see what the fuss was about and during excavation the workers had found a small Pharonic funerary statuette in the shape of a goddess, complete with hieroglyphs. Nearby they found some very fine Greek pottery, one piece with gold leaf on. A photograph of the workers gathered round this small object (about the size of a table football figure) was taken and it was quite amusing to see. On the way home there was dancing and celebration on the boat – quite a fun day!

Monday 20 October 2003 Day 7

Another hot day but a breeze picked up later in the afternoon.



Burial #18 - Red cloth

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I finished off drawing burial #18 and started lifting the skeleton and examining the grave fill and was rewarded with more buttons. In total we found 14 large and one small. Having removed the burial and considered all the evidence I believe that this individual, due to the lack of any battle damage, was likely to have died of disease, that he was either a British soldier or a marine and that he was buried with his uniform coat beneath him. Perhaps he was buried in his hammock and it was not noticed that his jacket was beneath him. There was clearly a red garment beneath him and I also found traces of dark blue that could be evidence of a facing colour (marines and Royal Regiments wore blue facings).

I then started work on getting ready to draw burial #19 as the burial had been cleaned up ready for photography and drawing. This individual was covered in a shroud and the evidence of this was quite clear as traces of the cloth were left on almost all the bones. Before I could get very far it was time to leave the island and head back to the mission.

Tuesday 21 October 2003 Day 8

The sunstroke finally got to me and I was forced to spend a day resting out of the sun. It was frustrating to see everyone leave and go out to the island but it was for the best. As I was taking my ease and recovering my mobile rang and it turned out to be BBC Radio Berkshire. As it was Trafalgar Day they asked me if I would be prepared to come into their Berkshire studio at 4pm as their special guest. There was rather a stunned silence when I pointed out that it was a bit of a long walk from Alexandria to Reading! In the event I did a telephone interview with them so my words went out to a grateful nation! That evening the Mission raised a glass to the Immortal Memory.

When the party got back from the island they informed me that they had found another burial that seemed to be in some sort of boat-shaped coffin and that it awaited my attentions next day.

Wednesday 22 October 2003 Day 9

The next day (Wednesday 22 October) I felt fine and as soon as I reached the island went to look at the new burial. Unlike all the other burials, this one was found during excavation from the side rather than above. The area we are currently excavating is the western coast of the island. Paolo is excavating a large building complex there and in order to establish if the complex is resting on bedrock or a man-made platform he has been excavating from the western cliff edge into the island. This section into the island is about two metres deep and already he has found mummy fragments and Egyptian funerary objects establishing that this is not natural bedrock. It was during the enlargement of this section that the Nelsonian burial was discovered. The burial is quite deep (about 67cm) and the workers had come upon the feet end of the burial. The burial (Burial #20) was definitely of the Nelsonian period but it was not in a wooden coffin but, what looked to me like, a sailcloth shroud. After initial cleaning a clear outline could be seen in the sand of the burial. The cloth shroud was about 4mm thick and produced an elongated kite shape tapering to a point at the feet end. Work started on cleaning the burial for drawing.

Notwithstanding all this excitement I finished off drawing and recording burial #19. On this burial the evidence of a shroud is very clear, as it has left a clear residue on most of the bones, including the skull. The individual was also buried wearing clothing/uniform as well as being put in a shroud as on one of the arms cloth can clearly be seen surrounding the circumference of the arm. After drawing and recording I lifted and tagged the skeleton.

Thursday 23 October 2003 Day 10



A family that studies stratigraphy together, stays together

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Today Cécile (Paolo's partner) and their baby Cleonice joined us on the island. Cécile is a pottery expert and has come to look at the pottery finds from the excavations in order to assist us in dating them.



Darling of the excavation, Cleonice

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They turned out to be a lucky charm for us today.

Almost as soon as we arrived we discovered a new burial. The burial is very shallow and lies in the building complex that Paolo is excavating. The skull is already crushed and broken up but it is possible that the rest of the remains can be saved. This burial was given the number #21. While the workers cleaned up the shroud burial (Burial #20) I finished off going through the remains of the grave fill of Burial #19. At the bottom of the grave I found a Greek(?) amphora bottom and a ceramic roof (ridge) tile. Both were sticking into the grave from the surrounding fill. Having finished that I went over to the shroud burial (#20) and started getting ready to draw it. The Egyptian workers had done a very good job in cleaning it up and the sailcloth shroud, probably the man's hammock, could clearly be seen with the individual's remains inside it. It was remarkably well preserved and, as far as I am aware, a unique view of the burial customs of the Royal Navy of the Nelsonian period.

Just after I started drawing the burial Paolo called me over to look at a possible new burial that he had come across during excavating the building complex. The grave was orientated in a roughly north-south direction and had cut through two adjoining walls. However what was remarkable about it was that it was the largest grave that we had yet seen. By the time we had cleared it up it measured 67cm wide by 236cm long and I gave it the number #22. It was also different to the other burials that we had so far excavated as it was rectangular in shape rather than rounded at both ends. Could this be a coffin burial? It very much looks like it. Despite the temptation we decided to leave it for today as tomorrow is Friday, our rest day, and to start excavation of it on Saturday. However this was not the end of the day's excitement as Paolo found two beautiful vessels lying abandoned in the building complex. One was a complete ancient cooking pot and the other an amphora complete apart from missing handles. It was quite a day and we all celebrated with a lovely swim in the warm Mediterranean.

Saturday 25 October 2003 Day 11

Yesterday was rest day and we were all looking forward to some well-earned sleep. Unfortunately for us there was a nearby Arabic wedding, which resulted in nobody getting any sleep until 1.30 am! Rachael Stone a student at Birmingham University studying to become a medical doctor but with a strong interest in the history of medicine was due to join us. As I was waiting for her aircraft to arrive at Alexandria airport fog descended and her plane was diverted to Cairo. She eventually found her way to the mission but missed coming out to the island on Saturday.

At the excavation work continued on excavating the new grave (Burial #22) that we found on Thursday. We were expecting to find a coffin but in the event we found a shroud-covered burial. Like the previous burial the shroud is perfectly evident and looks very much like sailcloth. The size and depth of the grave has surprised us, it is 64cm depth – much deeper than the surrounding burials. The body has been laid in the shroud with the head turned to the right, the right hand resting on the chest and the left hand on the stomach.



Burial #20 shroud outline

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I finished drawing the previous burial that showed the shroud so clearly (Burial #20) and after recording details of the burial I decided to do some macro photography on the shroud details. During this process I noticed that just above the ankles was a piece of thin rope (4mm diameter). It would appear that the shroud had been tied around the individual's feet to secure the burial.



Burial #20 showing shroud detail

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I sampled the shroud and rope and lifted the burial.

Monday 27 October 2003 Day 12

We had a most frustrating day yesterday (Sunday 26 October) as the local coastguard decided to hold manoeuvres and stopped all shipping in the area. Therefore we ended up with an enforced rest day and the authorities were very vague about whether we could get out to the island today. In the event we managed to get out to the island but only following a series of visits to local officials getting papers stamped. We got to the island late and as Ramadan (the Holy Islamic month) has just started we also finished early and so ended up with a short day. During the course of the day's excavation the marines turned up on the island for a training exercise and started blowing up bits of the island! Nelson's Island is never dull!



Rachael starts work on the island

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Rachael joined us today and for her first day on an archaeological dig she must have been quite impressed. We finished revealing Burial #22 and the shroud is clearly visible surrounding the body. I started to set up a grid for drawing the burial but time ran out before I could get started.

Tuesday 28th October 2003 Day 13

Apologies for the delay in sending this update but Paolo has rented out another apartment in Alexandria, as we are getting a bit crowded. Nicola, an Italian archaeologist, has joined us and so it was decided to expand our accommodation. Enrico and I have moved into the new flat which lies ten minutes walk from the Mission.

The burial with the cut teeth has continued to perplex us. Rachael and I took some time studying the dental surgery that had carefully cut the rear of two pre-molars and one incisor (Burial #17: picture on the Nelson Society website). There is no evidence for the reasons for this surgery but when I was explaining to Paolo that soldiers and marines of the period had to bite into the cartridges (cartridges of this period were supplied pre-made with the powder for firing and the lead bullet contained in cartridge paper, the firer had to bite off the top of the cartridge – the lead bullet – pour the powder down the muzzle after priming the pan and then spit the bullet down the barrel) he suggested that perhaps this individual had quite literally ‘bitten the bullet’ (the lead musket shot) and damaged his teeth as a result – an intriguing theory.

Today I finished cleaning up Burial #22 and it seems that the shroud that the individual was wrapped in only extended to knee level. It is clear from deposits on the shin bones that trousers were worn but there is no evidence of a shroud covering the lower leg. The shroud is very clear above this level but disappears around the knee. This individual differs slightly from other burials in that he(?) has his head turned to the right, his left arm resting on his chest and the right on the upper abdomen. The

grave is large but so is the individual although I have not had time to do precise measurements yet. On the island the wind picked up all through the day and made excavation extremely difficult – during drawing my drawing board was whipped out of my hands and did a short tour of the island! This also meant that we had a lumpy sea trip back to the mainland during which we all got a good soaking.

Rachael spent today at the excavation store looking at one of the burials from last year that I was particularly interested in. This was Burial #15 which I think was a burial from the Battle of the Nile in 1798. I have found only two confirmed burials on the island for this period. The first is a woman (name unknown) and the second is Lawrence Graves a young midshipman. The burial, although in a bad state, is quite small and could easily be a youngster and/or female. Rachael reports that the burial is almost certainly male aged between 18 and 25 and quite short (estimated at 1.56 meters) and therefore a good candidate for Lawrence Graves (I have done a brief biography of Lawrence Graves that I will get put on the Nelson Society website).

Thursday 30th October 2003 Day 14

The high winds continued and it became impossible for us to get out to the island yesterday and so we had an enforced rest day. Today the wind had abated enough for us to return to the island.

I spent the day finishing off the drawing of Burial #22 and Rachael then lifted the burial making extensive notes about the skeleton. Meanwhile I returned to the Hellenistic Platform to recover the burials that we left last year. I started by uncovering the baby that I did not have time to draw last year. The burial had been well covered and secured and we soon had uncovered it. I started drawing and recording it further.

Rachael reported that Burial #22 was definitely male between 1.82-1.88 meters in height and aged between 25-35. The most notable feature of this burial was the poor state of his lower molars, which showed extensive decay and possible abscess on the right hand side and healed extractions on the left; nasty.

Saturday 1 November 2003 Day 15

Yesterday was Friday, our rest day, and we spent the day catching up with paperwork and sleep in equal measure. Rachael and I decided to visit the new Alexandrian Museum that had opened up recently and is virtually next door to the Mission. It is very modern and well presented, well worth a visit if you chance to come to Alexandria. However the English labelling is a little suspect and underneath two pocket/fob watches of the eighteenth century the label read 'Taken from Napoleon's naval' – must have been painful!

The weather is holding out well and despite being the start of November the temperature was 32C today and the sea calm. Rachael finished off lifting Burial #22 and I returned to the baby burial that we found last year but did not have time to excavate. It is a baby burial (Burial #13) and lies on the Hellenistic platform at the northern end of the island. I finished drawing and recording it and after Rachael had finished Burial #22 she came and lifted the baby. Rachael had nothing particular to

report on Burial #22 except that it was definitely a male, was quite tall (about 5' 11"), early thirties in age and had a very nasty hole in the molars of the lower right hand jaw. On the left hand side some molars had been removed and the bone healed over and so this indicates that they had been extracted some time before death. The baby burial revealed that although the coffin had been crudely made the infant had been carefully packed in wood shavings and had been wrapped in a shroud and Rachael found a small, heavily corroded bronze clasp under the infants chin. Rachael estimates that the infant was not aged more than a few weeks, if that, and was quite possibly stillborn or died at birth.

Sunday 2 November 2003 Day 16

Today Rachael spent her time at the Mission storerooms studying some of the burials in store there. I went back to the island and started work on excavating the burial (Burial #14) next to the baby (Burial #13), which we think could be a female and possibly the mother of the infant. The reasons for us thinking this is that the burials are next to one another (about 40cm apart), in the same orientation and the coffins of both are clearly made by the same hand. A third of the way down each side of both of the coffins are seven saw cuts that have been made in order to bend the coffin walls into the typical anthropomorphic shape of a coffin. None of the other coffins so far examined displayed this construction technique. On the coffin lid of Burial #14 is the single letter 'G' (it is possible that this is a 'C' but I do not think so). I re-excavated the burial and started to draw it. This was extremely difficult as the body was buried in what seems to be several layers of clothes and some sand had got into the lower part of the coffin.

I also got the workers to start re-excavating Burial #6, the officer burial from last years with the writing on the coffin lid ('H', AGED 34, 1801). I relocated where it was and the workers started digging out the backfill that we had put in last year. Due to the importance that we attached to this burial we covered it and protected it with thick wooden slats and plastic sheeting. Towards the end of the day we found the covering and left it for the next day.

Monday 3 November 2003 Day 17

Today Rachael started to lift Burial #14. She had to be very careful as the bones were covered with what appeared to be a dress as well as what looked to be a thick set of underwear! The burial also had a fine handkerchief/covering over the face. After some time Rachael reported that the signs were that our 'woman' seemed to have a strongly male set of bones although this was no mean certain (sexing skeletons, even mature ones, can be problematic and often relies on a number of bone shapes and sizes that in the end can only produce a percentage 'probability' of gender). During excavation Rachael found a small bronze button(?) around the second rib on the right hand side of the burial. This button was of very thin bronze, 5mm in diameter, attached to a cloth backing and with a faint pattern of three sets of 'spokes' or ribs. By day's end Rachael had lifted all but the skull and jaw.

Work continued on re-excavating Burial #6. The packing that we had left last year was carefully removed and the coffin appeared intact, in reasonable condition and undisturbed. Due to the importance of this burial I decided to extend the grave cut

further and so asked the workers to cut the grave back a further 60cm; not a popular decision as this involved moving a lot of earth and they were as eager to clean up the burial that we had only managed to glance at last year. This took until the end of the day to achieve.

Early on in the day Paolo and I decided to field walk the southern part of the island and consider our strategy for next season. One of the factors that has been bothering me is the nature and position of the burials that we have so far discovered. None of the burials so far excavated from the northern and middle/northern end of the island has shown any sign of battle damage. The burials are in two main groups, one group is cut into the northern Hellenistic platform and the other is on the western side of the middle/northern part of the island. In both groupings none of the burials are set in rows or conform to one orientation. This suggests to me that what we are discovering is burials that come from the ships from 1801 where the individuals die from sickness and disease over a period of time. If this theory is correct it means that we have the main 'British burial ground on Nelson's Island' (referred to and illustrated by a print by Cooper Willyams, Chaplin of HMS Swiftsure), that relates to the battle casualties still to find let alone excavate! Cooper Willyams shows the burial ground at the southern end of the island (care must be taken when ascribing exact geographical locations to prints of this period as they can often be representational rather than accurate) and this is where we were looking. Suddenly Paolo stopped and picked up a human bone! We both searched the area and soon came up with a handful of foot bones, normally the first to break the surface, and later I returned and soon discovered a grave cut. I will come back to this burial after I have finished the individuals on the Hellenistic platform.

Just as we were packing up I had a look at the deep section that Paolo was having cut into the western edge of the island and saw that the workers had gathered a small pile of bones together. I went and had a look and realised that they were human foot bones and when I asked to be shown where they came from immediately saw another Nelsonian burial! The worker said that he thought that they were dog bones and so did not bother anyone! He has subsequently received quite a lot of ribbing from the rest of the workers as well as me. This burial I have given the number of #24 and I will start excavating it tomorrow. With the early burial find this means that we have now found 25 burials on the island and still have to locate the main cemetery!

Tuesday 4 November 2003 Day 18

What a day!

Rachael continued to complete excavating burial #14, our male-like female! She soon came back with the news that despite the poor condition of the skull (the weight of the earth on the coffin had broken it up considerably) the features were more female than male. Therefore the gender is the balance and she is taking back to the UK some photographs for a second opinion.



Female (?) coffin burial

You can clearly see the remains of a dress (?) and on the left side between the arm and the rib cage a bronze disc

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Rachael also removed the bronze disc that we had located last year laying between the upper left arm and torso. The disc is about 5mm thick, 25mm diameter, bronze and flat on either side. We thought that perhaps this was one of a pair put over the eyes that had moved during burial but we have not found another despite a careful search of the coffin contents; its use remains a mystery.

Work started on Burial #24 that we had located yesterday. We soon came down on the main burial, which seems complete. Once again the outline of a shroud can be seen. The material used must have been very stiff as the outline around the skull is clear but it seems that the head itself has rolled to the left side of the burial. The right lower arm and hand rest on the groin area and the left arm and hand lie beside the left side of the body. As Ibrahim was cleaning up the burial he called me over and pointed out what looked like the edge of a bronze disc (it looks remarkably like the disc we found in the coffin of Burial #14) resting on the chest in what looks like some sort of purse or small bag. I photographed it and we covered it up for tomorrow.

Adel, our super-mummy cleaner, worked on Burial #6 and finished cutting back the grave cut to allow us access. When that was complete we opened the coffin and were reassured to find that it seemed just as we left it last year. A lot of sand had fallen into the coffin and Adel starting cleaning it up. Just before the end of the day he had cleaned the legs and feet up to the pelvis and when I went to take final day photographs I was amazed at the state of preservation. There was too much to really study and so it will have to wait until tomorrow but I could see buttons, metal and leather – stay tuned!

Paolo also had a really exciting day he found a beautiful Greek bowl intact as well as a huge amphora and several smashed ones. We celebrated with a swim as the weather was very hot and the sea beautiful although our Egyptian inspector told us that there

was a hammerhead shark in the area! Today is a little sad as Rachael Stone leaves us and returns to her medical training at Birmingham. She has been a great asset to the excavation as well as a fine ambassador for her faculty, hopefully she will return to join us next season.

Thursday 6 November 2003 Day 19

Tomorrow is rest day and I am looking forward to sleep and food. Enrico and I share the second Mission apartment and we have found a small corner shop that sells crisps and Bounty Bars and so the last couple of days we have been mounting 'tuck shop raids' (I explained the principle to Enrico who thinks the concept excellent) and the topic of conversation on the boat and minibus trip back is scoff! Paolo stated that we could not possibly be able to eat crisps and Bounty Bars and then have a full-blown meal – we proved this theory to be patently false!

On the island the weather continues to hold and the temperature is still around 32C. Today quite a lot happened. While Adel continued to clean Burial #6 I started work on lifting Burial #24 that I had finished drawing yesterday. I got quite a shock when I got to it as half of it had disappeared! The section where I had been standing and drawing yesterday had collapsed. I had been quite lucky to avoid a bit of a fall and to have finished the drawing. We managed to retrieve all the bones that had fallen and I finished my recording. During lifting the skeleton I excavated the bronze disc resting on the chest that we had spotted earlier. The disc is in fact a large (24mm diameter) bronze button with a bronze eye on the reverse. The button itself seems to have no pattern or engraving although it is quite corroded. Attached to the back of the button is thick material with a distinctive weave that is quite plain to see. This material also covers half of the front of the button and button and cloth seem to have been cut and placed in a small bag that looks very similar to the shroud material (sailcloth?) and placed on the chest. Perhaps it is a regimental insignia or a personal keepsake?

I also started work on Burial #25, which Paolo and I had spotted while looking at a possible excavation strategy for next season. Excavation revealed only one leg bone and a number of loose foot bones. It would appear that most of the burial had gone either through erosion or illegal digging.

Having finished with these two burials I went to see how Adel was getting on with Burial #6. The degree of preservation still amazes me as well as the care that Adel has taken. I studied the burial very closely and took a lot of macro photographs and video footage. Adel told me to look at the hands of the burial and I could see that although all the soft tissue had disappeared the fingernails were still present. The individual appears to be dressed in a Royal Navy uniform of the Nelsonian period. Tight trousers and possibly stockings seem present although as yet no trace of shoes. Around the stomach there is tape clearly visible and some metal showing through, although this is in a very corroded state. The upper body seems to be dressed in a shirt or waistcoat and overlaying this appears to be a thicker coat that is cutaway around the midriff. I spotted at least one metal button and I suspect that there are more. At the neck is at least one bronze/gilt button. Yesterday I reported that there appeared to be some string or twine around the right arm and when I studied this more closely it seems to be associated with an object beside the right arm and looks suspiciously like part of a hat. All of the above is still speculative and will have to wait until Saturday and Sunday

for a real investigation. We covered the burial and left the island for our 'weekend' however I am consumed with worry that unwelcome visitors do not visit the island and disturb the burial – I will just have to wait!

On landing in the harbour at Aboukir I managed to stumble over an old bit of steel cable and one of the strands went between my big toe and the toenail -which made my eyes water a bit! So I am writing this update with my foot in a bowl of warm disinfected water.

Saturday 7 November 2003 Day 20

Today was spent drawing Burial #6 and so there is not much to report. The weather has turned bad and it was touch and go as to whether we were going to make it out to the island or not. The wind has picked up considerably and the augers for the next couple of days do not look good.

Sunday 8 November 2003 Day 21

The weather has beaten us today and we could not make it out to the island. But as I had work to do in the excavation storeroom the day was not wasted. I have agreed with Paolo that I will sort out all the small finds and number them and I also wanted to check that all the burials that we have lifted were numbered correctly. Whilst I was sorting out the small finds I came across the two musket balls that we had found last year on Burial #3. This burial was unique as the individual had been in uniform and then wrapped in a shroud. On his right shoulder we found an unfired lead musket ball and later on a similar musket ball on his hip. When I compared the two balls I noticed that one is slightly smaller and lighter than the other (the smaller is 17mm diameter and the larger 18mm diameter – unfortunately I could not weigh them). It is very frustrating as all my reference books are in the UK, but if memory serves me correctly, the French used a slightly smaller calibre of musket ball than the British. If this is correct then why did this individual have a French ball in his pocket and why was a British ball placed on his shoulder? Burial #2 also had a ball placed on his right shoulder and I then compared it with the other two and it is smaller than both and looks to me like a pistol ball (15mm diameter). I still have not solved the puzzle of why pistol/musket balls were placed on the individual's shoulders – any ideas?

Monday 9 November 2003 Day 22

Still no let up in the weather and we are confined to the Mission again. Yesterday it rained which was a bit of an event but we are hopeful that we can get out to the island tomorrow.

13 November 2003 Day 23

After four frustrating days of not being able to get out to the island due to bad weather, we finally made it out today. Unfortunately it was my last day at the excavation and as a result of not being able to get out to the island I had three days work to do in one day. The most important job was to finish work on Burial #6. Luckily a young French archaeologist, Amandine, had joined us and she very kindly offered to help me.

We got straight to work on the burial after I had finished the last bit of drawing and final photography. We started lifting the burial and sampling the clothing that had survived. I took samples from the feet, legs, stomach area, and chest area and from the face covering. Surrounding the head of the burial is extensive packing, which I also sampled. There was also, on the right side of the skull and right arm some twine connected to some bulky material that could well have been a hat of some kind but it was all indistinguishable from the packing. There had clearly been at least one iron button left on the coat or jacket but this was so corroded that it could not be retrieved. Likewise a small (12mm diameter) bronze button was recovered from the neck area but it disintegrated as we sampled it, luckily I managed to draw and photograph it. The most remarkable part of the excavation was when we lifted the skull. The individual's hair was completely intact. Up until now I have occasionally found small patches of hair remaining, normally on the back of the skull, but this was the complete head of hair. It was so well preserved that the individual's haircut and small queue (extending 10cm from the base of the skull) was quite clear and all was still attached to the skull.

When we removed the face covering we found that there were indeed two bronze discs placed over the eyes. The right hand disc had fallen out and was lying on the right side of the burial and the left disc was still in situ on the eye socket and covered by a cloth that had been wrapped around the skull. The bronze discs were 26mm (right) and 25mm (left) in diameter and had the feel and weight of large coins but due to heavy corrosion it was impossible to say if they were coins, medallions or simply flat discs of bronze – we will have to await cleaning and conservation before we can tell.

Halfway through our work I was interrupted by Enrico who had come over to tell me that they had found a suspicious looking cut in the middle of the room that they were excavating. I went over to have a look and sure enough we had another Nelsonian period burial. It was clear from the size of the cut that it was another infant and excavation soon revealed a small crushed skull. I did not have time to draw, record or lift the infant and Amandine has kindly agreed to do this for me within the next couple of days as it is in the way of the excavation and cannot wait for next season. Before I left the island I examined the infant burial (Burial #26) as best I could and it would seem that the infant was (best guess) between six and nine months old – the skull was more developed than a newborn baby's and we found some small milk teeth. The infant had been wrapped in a shroud (two bronze pins were found on the chest) and put into a box. I would hesitate to call it a true coffin at this stage as there was no lid and it seemed to be rectangular in shape. Quite an end to this year's excavation! Paolo will be continuing work for about another week before closing the excavation for this season.

On the way back on the boat we had a bit of a party when I said goodbye to the workers (they know that I support Arsenal FC and so they were chanting 'Arsenal' most of the way back to the harbour!), our Egyptian inspector and the team. It has been another rewarding season and we have rescued a total of 26 burials and learnt much about the burial customs of the Royal Navy of the Nelsonian period.

I must finish my account of this season's work with a round of thanks. To Paolo and Cécile for their hospitality and kindness, Nicola for his wisdom and archaeological

'nose', Enrico for his enthusiasm and friendship (not to mention his brilliance at making coffee), Rachael for her equal enthusiasm and good humour, Mattaio for his computer excellence, Amandine for help when I really needed it, Mohammed for his friendship and help, Cleonice for being the darling of the excavation and Victor Sharman and The Nelson Society for their support of the excavation. It has been a privilege to work with such a nice group of people that display such a high professional standard - thanks to you all!

In a few days I will do a summary of the excavation and post it to you all. I will also take up Tom's debate about the musket balls as soon as I have settled back in Dear Old Blighty and consumed a couple of pints of Adnams Ale.

End of 2003 Reports

2004 Reports

This is the third, and for The Nelson Society, the last season of excavation on Nelson's Island.

19 October 2004, Day 1

I arrived at Borg el Arab Airport last night and was ill-prepared for the early morning start. We take a minibus taxi to Aboukir from the Italian mission in Alexandria and then by boat out to the island. The whole operation takes a little under two hours and is rather fatiguing! Paolo is excavating an area on the east coast of the island in search of Pharaonic and Hellenistic remains. My task this year is to excavate any Nelsonian period remains that Paolo discovers and to locate and excavate the burial ground from the 1801 landing and subsequent battles.

On arrival I started laying out my grid for excavation for where I believe the burial ground to be. Straight away we found the outline of a burial only a few centimetres deep. It is about 60cms wide by 180cms long lying in a rough NNE by SSW direction. We started excavating slowly but found nothing else today. So it was back to Aboukir harbour by boat only to discover that the minibus had not shown up to take us back to Alex! Therefore we had to walk into the old town of Aboukir with all our kit and negotiate a taxi ride home. A hard first day!

20 October 2004, Day2

Work continued today on my area, which lies to the south of the island. I decided that the area needed a name and with Paolo's agreement have called it 'Vanguard'.



The area known as Vangurd

HMS Vanguard was Nelson's flagship at the Battle of the Nile in 1798 and so it appeared an appropriate name. For recording purposes we tend to keep to a couple of letters (this is because that when pottery is recorded by inking its provenance onto the potsherd that the recorder does not have to write large amounts of text and given the number of potsherds located this is a lot of work) and I had to explain that 'VD' for 'Vanguard' had unfortunate connotations in the UK! Therefore we settled on 'VG'.

We have been having some technical difficulties with the archaeological licence concerning the Nelsonian burials and Paolo had to shoot off to Cairo to sort them out and so work was restricted to enlarging the area. We are still in fairly modern levels and expect to have to excavate further before we locate anything. Nothing of great interest was found today.

21 October 2004, Day 3

Paolo has returned from Cairo and the difficulties with the licence have been sorted out – a great relief to all! Work in locating the battlefield burial ground continues and area Vanguard has been expanded. We have had to clear out dune bushes and level some small dunes. The area is now 13 metres by 5 metres and quite big.

Our old friends from last season the rat population of the island are still with us, we were hoping that they would not survive the winter but there seem more of them than ever.



Fishing boats often clean out their nets at Nelsons Island

We think that they came ashore from a fishing vessel that stopped to clean its nets and they live off the tourist rubbish that is left behind during the summer months. Paolo has concocted a poisonous tomato puree that he has left to try and get rid of them – I am not convinced that it will work!

Today is Trafalgar Day and I made all the rest of the excavation staff aware of this and we raised a class this evening. On Saturday, before flying out to Alexandria, at The Nelson Society AGM at Bath I was elected to be Chairman of the society for 2005. This is a great honour of which I am most sensible of. It was a terrific AGM organised by Louis Hodgkin and Clinton Lee who did an outstanding job.

22 October 2004, Day 4

Today is rest day and time to stock up on sleep and food (the two overriding concerns in Middle Eastern archaeology). As the Mission is getting rather crowded we have rented an apartment nearby and myself and some of the other staff have moved in. The rooms are decorated in the Arab style – the dining room looks like the inside of a Hellenistic tomb – but it is quite comfortable. We have had some difficulties with the plumbing and a cockroach presence that we are trying to eradicate.

23 October 2004, Day 5

Work on area Vanguard continued today. We excavated more of the area including what looked like a burial. However on excavation it turned out to be a modern pit. Another feature that we excavated turned out to be modern when we found what looked like an old lemonade bottle. It is quite hard work at present as it is very hot on the island, it rose to about 28 C today, there is no shade and for the Egyptian workers it is the holy month of Ramadan and so they cannot eat or drink until after sunset. However there is the compensation of the Mediterranean!



The Hell that is Nelsons Island

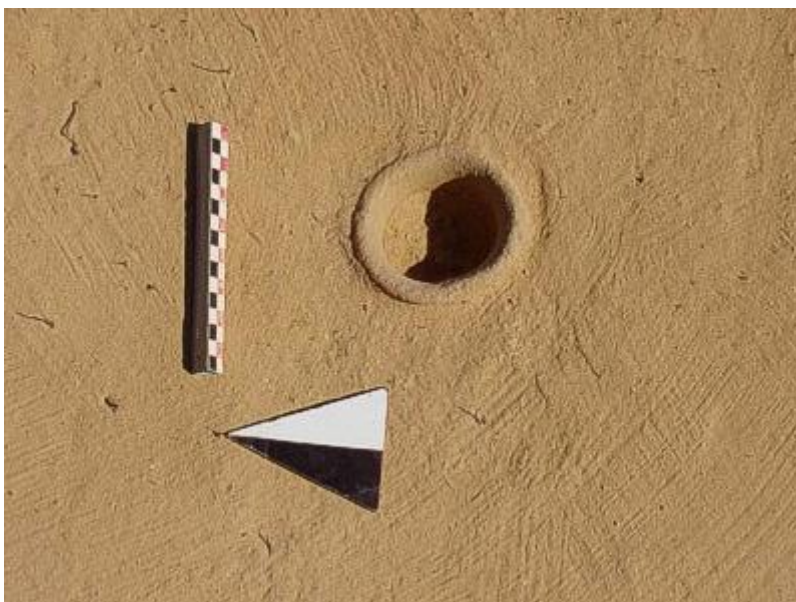
At lunch break we go swimming. The sea is beautiful at the moment and it is a real joy to cool down after a morning's excavation.

24 October 2004, Day 6

Still not much to report. We finished our preliminary excavation of area Vanguard but nothing has been revealed. The reason that we are excavating this area is that in 2001 Paolo discovered a grave of a soldier or marine, probably from the 1801 Egyptian Expedition. I excavated the remains in 2002 and found, along with an unfired musket ball placed on the deceased's right shoulder, some metal fragments inside the ribcage that must have entered from behind as they were below the sternum (breastbone). This makes it likely that this was a soldier who had been killed by howitzer or mortar bomb fragments fired during the Aboukir beach landing in March 1801. There are reports on both sides that such bombs were used and one such landed on a British flat boat (purpose built landing craft) killing many of the occupants and injuring others. Therefore I wish to extend this area to try and locate more burials. The main problem is that the sand, although fairly firm, is very homogeneous and it is almost impossible to detect any grave cut so we must hit the level of burial in order to find any remains.

25 October 2004, Day 7

Due to a reduction in the number of workers assigned to my area (we are now down to four) I had to reduce our ambitions in area Vanguard. Therefore after cutting and cleaning the sections - this is to ensure that the stratigraphy can be read properly - we excavated the southern four metres of the area. We excavated approximately 10 cms down and cleaning then revealed the possible outline of a grave fill at the southernmost part of the area. The sand is so homogeneous that any features are extremely difficult to identify. Just as we were finishing off one of the workers found a pot rim protruding slightly from the sand.



Our pottery find

We cleaned it up and I photographed it. It is 11cm in diameter and is lying flush with the level of excavation. How much of the pot is intact below the level of the rim is unclear. The pot is probably a Byzantine cooking or water vessel. All the potsherds that we have recovered so far from the area are Late Roman/Byzantine (affectionally known as 'RomBiz'), including a rather phallic looking Byzantine amphora handle. We covered over the pot rim and left it for tomorrow when we hope to excavate further.

26 October 2004, Day 8

We continued excavating area Vanguard but found nothing of significance. Everyone is getting a little frustrated at continually finding nothing. We managed to establish that the original grave that we discovered is empty! It looks as if we excavated a natural, grave-like feature. However we must press on. The weather is still beautiful but starting to get a little cooler (around 25C). Although the rat population seems to have decreased thanks to Paolo's poisoned tomato regime we now have to contend with large numbers of 'Medusa' jellyfish that are filling the waters of the bay, something of a deterrent to swimming which I have abandoned for a while.

27 October 2004, Day 9

Not much excitement occurred today until just before our midday break. We were continuing to excavate the area looking for signs of burials in the soft sand when Mahmoud, one of our Egyptian workers called me over saying that he had found a 'mummia' (all bodies are referred to by the Egyptian workers as 'mummia'; their pet name for me is 'Docktor Mummia' – loosely translated as Dr Death!). When I went and had a look I found that he had come across some parts of a clavicle that had been broken by a pickaxe and, sure enough, there were more bones protruding from the section. It looks as if we have our first burial of the season. Despite a hard look there was no sign of a grave cut, the sand seems to leave no trace. I immediately slowed down work and we cleaned up the area for photography.



Post hole

After photography I started thinking about a group of stones that were protruding out of the section that we had created. We have had small, random groups of stones before but something looked different about these. I suddenly realised that this was a very large posthole. This is the first posthole that we have so far found on the island. All the structures so far found have been constructed from the island's sandstone – there is ample evidence of quarrying on the island. There is no timber locally available and so no timber buildings that we have found. The posthole is quite clear and only about two and a half metres from the burial. I began wondering if they could be connected? There are reports that a large cross had been placed on the site of the British burial ground – could this be the hole, supported by stones that the marker was placed in? During cleaning up for photography and drawing of the posthole Mahmoud once again called me over. This time he had found, lying 50cms from the posthole an unfired lead musket ball! I photographed the posthole and associated musket ball. Hopefully the weather will stay fair and we can get out to the island to see how all these finds relate tomorrow – I will let you know!

28 October 2004, Day 10

As soon as we got to the area we started to carefully excavate above the bones that we found yesterday. It took most of the day to get just above where we believe the skeleton to be. It took so long because it is possible that we may have come upon a number of burials and I wanted to ensure that we did not disturb them before proper excavation. I cleaned the posthole that we found yesterday very carefully. At the bottom of the hole where the post would have gone I found a fragment of human bone. The bone was broken, although the breaks are not fresh, and I cannot yet identify which bone it is but it is definitely human. This means that the posthole was dug and the post, most likely a grave or cemetery marker, put in after at least one burial had been carried out. From the cleaning of the posthole it is clear that the post was around 11cms diameter and therefore quite substantial. I then planned, drew and photographed the cleaned up posthole.

Later on in the day we found a small black piece of coal-like substance close to where we found the musket ball yesterday. I think that this is most likely to be gunpowder that has solidified and the two items could well have been a musket cartridge. We also found some human bone fragments that had old breaks on them and this is making me increasingly concerned that any burials might have been disturbed. We will find that out in due course. Mahmoud also found a rectangular iron object 9cms by 4cms and about 5mm thick. It was pretty corroded and its purpose is unclear, I am concerned that it might have been a coffin nameplate and that this is further evidence that the burials might have been disturbed.

I finished the day by having a beautiful swim (keeping a weather eye out for jellyfish!). Tomorrow is rest day and so there will be a short break in my updates while I catch up on my shuteye!

30 October 2004, Day 11

Last night I woke up to the sound of mosquitoes buzzing around the room accompanied by a slightly unpleasant smell (no, not a personal disorder!). This is quite significant as it means that the prevailing wind that blows from the north and northeast, off the Mediterranean had changed direction and was now blowing off the land. To the south of Alexandria lies lake Mariout and the surrounding swamps and this where my bloodsucking friends and smell comes from, brought in by the wind. The importance of this is that the sea tends to get high and the wind force increases when it comes off the land. This is exactly what happened and the sea crossing to the island was OK but later in the day whitecaps started appearing on the waves and the wind rose blowing sand onto us and making the day a little unpleasant. However by the time we left the island the wind had subsided and we had an easy crossing back to Aboukir.

We continued excavating the northern part of area Vanguard, coming down on the burial that we had discovered earlier. However it soon became clear that the bones that we had found were not, as we hoped, a full skeleton but further fragments. We discovered various bone fragments during the day and I have filled a small bag with them. I would guess that they were all from the same set of remains and they all look to have come from the upper torso area. Last season we found a skeleton that had been disturbed by having the upper torso pulled apart and scattered and the skull probably taken as a trophy. When bones emerge it is often thought by the ignorant that they are 'mummies' and so they are pulled apart in order to get at where the 'treasures' (scarabs etc) are normally stored, in the chest and stomach cavity. I guess that this is another example of this and reminds us why we are here.

During the course of the day a number of interesting artefacts appeared. We found another couple of unfired musket balls, some more iron plates identical to the ones we found on Thursday (I now have no idea of their purpose!), a gun flint, a large piece of coal and a large (4cms wide) elliptical iron pole driven vertically into the ground. It certainly looks as if some kind of activity related to military matters took place around this area. The metal pole is very corroded and we have excavated it to a depth of about 15cms. It could well be a grave marker but we will have to wait and see. We also found what looks like a metal badge that could well belong to a burial. We will

excavate the area again tomorrow, providing the weather holds fair, and I will let you know what we find.

31 October 2004, Day 12

The weather started out OK today and we made the island in good time. I continued excavating area Vanguard but we found nothing of interest except a small copper coin in the area where we found the disturbed bones, musket balls and gunflint yesterday. The coin was not clear enough for a date but it was certainly Arabic and we are going to have it cleaned and to try and establish its date. We also found a large collection of Byzantine pottery. Nothing very fancy, mostly cooking pots and household vessels but we filled a large plastic bag with the potsherds. As the day progressed the wind steadily increased, blowing from the north. We were expecting a 'bumpy' ride back in 'Marbruk' our boat, but in the end the wind moderated a bit just as we left the island and we did not get too wet.

Nelson's Island is small for an island but large for an archaeological site! It contains Pharaonic, Hellenistic and Byzantine structures and pottery. It would appear that in antiquity it was an important trading and customs post and when one of Alexander's generals, Ptolemy I took over Egypt after the death of Alexander he built a fortification on the northern end of the island. Paolo excavated the fortification in 2002 and I rescued the burials from Nelson's period that we found there. Part of the Hellenistic fortification is a cistern that is located directly below the fort and it was in this cistern that Paolo found the graffiti from Nelson's sailors. It really is quite strange to have burials from the Napoleonic Wars next door to Pharaonic mummies! When the British occupied the island in 1798 they dug for fresh water (fresh water was essential to Nelson's ships as they had to soak their salted meat in it before it was fit to eat) as the French, at that time, held mainland Egypt. Cooper Willyams, the chaplain of one of Nelson's ships, *HMS Swiftsure*, reported in his journal that they found no fresh water but they did find some ancient Egyptian funerary objects, which he drew. Most of them were then given to Sir William Hamilton, husband to Emma Hamilton, as he was well known as a collector of antiquities.

As I write this we have just been told that the wind has risen and that we will not be able to get to the island tomorrow; lie in!

3 November 2004, Day 13

Bad weather has cost us two days. The seas were too rough to allow us to get out to the island until today. We started work by continuing to excavate area Vanguard. In the southern part of the area that we were excavating we started to find much Roman/Byzantine pottery and were surprised to discover a large piece of marble. The fragment was roughly rectangular, 16cms by 9cms and 9mm thick. We only really noticed it because it was hit by a tool and a corner broken off which revealed it to be marble. Paolo said that small fragments had been found before but nothing of this size. No sign of any burials have come to light in Vanguard and we are beginning to wonder if we are in the right spot! However later in the day we found a musket ball and some toe bones (these are normally the first to show themselves when a grave is exposed to erosion and weathering) to the northwest of our present position and it

looks as if we will have to move there in order to rescue any burials before we finish this year's work.

On Monday evening Paolo and I were invited to visit HM Consul General in Alexandria Alan Cobden. Alan and his predecessor, Mark Stevens, have been most supportive of the excavation and it was good to update him on what is currently going on and our plans for the future – not to mention the nice cold beer that we received!

We are hopeful that the weather will stay fair for tomorrow and that we can get another good day's digging in.

4 November 2004, Day 14

Excavation continued on Area Vanguard. In the southern part of the area we have cut through the topsoil of sand and started to come down on Late Roman/Byzantine levels. We have found a lot of Rom/Byz pottery and large stones (probably wall tumble) are starting to emerge. In the new Area F, to the northwest of Area Vanguard, a total of nine musket balls were found as well as a small number of human toe bones. Emerging from the western most part of the area is a large building complex that is likely to be Hellenistic in date. The building has thick walls (only the bottom layer of stones survive) and is internally plastered.

6 November, Day 15

Yesterday was rest day and suitable fortified we set off for the island. The weather was quite strange. It was a bit chilly early in the morning with a light mist. As the mist burnt off it got very hot and a heavy swell developed in the sea. This made getting off the island a little difficult and we all got a bit wet.

We finished trowelling back Area Vanguard and I photographed it. During trowelling more of the late Roman/Byzantine levels became visible. I found a small lead shot close to the western section. The shot is too small to be a musket or pistol ball (10mm diameter) and I guess that it is likely to be birdshot. During cleaning we also found another iron stake driven vertically into the ground, the same as the one we found some days ago. It lies about 11 metres away from the other one and its purpose is a mystery.

7 November 2004, Day 16

The weather was fine, although a little cloudy, and the sea state was fair. On arriving at the island I decided to have a little look around as the recent bad weather had eroded some more of the cliffs to the east of the island and yesterday we had spotted parts of an Egyptian mummy poking out of the recently exposed sandstone. Mummies are quite easy to spot as, unlike Hollywood would have us believe, the cloth that they are wrapped in shows up black as opposed to white.

During my poke around I suddenly saw a human femur lying at the base of a small sand dune just next to a rat's nest (the rats burrow into the roots of the dune bushes that normally sit on top of our miniature sand dunes). A quick trowel around the femur showed that it was still attached to part of a pelvis. This is important as it

demonstrates that the bones are *in situ* and had not been washed down from somewhere else. Although the whole left leg is missing and the leg below the right femur has also been weathered/washed away, we should be able to rescue the rest of the remains after we finish in Area Vanguard. Encouraged by this find I got the workers going on excavating Vanguard and went back for another look. As it appears that the east coast has had most of the recent battering I returned there and soon came on at least one other burial that the weather had exposed. Looking at a small cliff face (only about a metre and a half high) I could see toe bones protruding and further along a human clavicle and other bones. For those of you who can remember my first reports in 2002, I found a burial that contained a rosary and silver medallion of the Virgin that we rescued. These new burials remains are right next door to them. I rescued all the loose bones and marked the area for excavation in a few days time, as these burials will not survive another winter.

8 November 2004, Day 17

Scorchio! Today was very hot and we all sweltered under an unrelenting sun. The sea was a flat as a millpond and there was no breeze to speak of. Notwithstanding this we continued our excavation of Area Vanguard. It would appear that there are no burials here but we continued to uncover the Byzantine level. We are also digging a 'sondage' in the northeastern corner of the area. The purpose of this sondage is to try and find the bedrock in order to give us some sort of idea of the stratigraphy of the area. We have excavated to a depth of two metres and have come down to Hellenistic pottery below the Byzantine level. One of the workers sank his pickaxe into the compacted sand and we all heard the distinctive 'crack' of pottery splintering. We stopped and cleaned up and found the bottom of a large pot (35cms in diameter) *in situ* with whatever it was holding still inside it. It looks as if the pot has been put into a hole as the outline of the hole is still visible as well as a couple of stones that helped keep it upright. I photographed the pot, sampled the interior and covered it over for further investigation tomorrow.

9 November 2004, Day 18

What a day! The day started fine and wind free and turned into one of the hottest days so far. Leaving Area Vanguard for the moment we decided to concentrate on excavating one of the burials that I had found earlier. On leaving the boat I had spotted a human femur protruding from a sand dune and after investigation had found that it was attached to a pelvis (thus proving that it had not been transported by wind or water). We decided to excavate this burial and rescue any other remains that were associated with it. It was a pretty tricky area to excavate for a number of reasons. Firstly it was a sand dune with a large and tough dune bush covering it. Secondly it was honeycombed with rat's tunnels that collapsed any excavating that we did – we were also mindful that there was a large black rat community that resided inside the dune. As an aside, we found out from the captain of our ship, Medo, that a fishing vessel had been shipwrecked on the island two years ago and this is where the rats came from. The third problem, that we were unaware of when we started excavating, was that the dune was infested with dune fleas that made up for their small size with a nasty nip. Every now and then we had to run down to the beach and rid ourselves of our unwelcome guests by swimming in the sea (well that's my excuse and I'm

sticking to it!). Despite all these difficulties we soldiered on in the name of archaeology!

We started by cleaning off most of the dune bush, half-sectioned the dune and started coming down on where we thought the rest of the burial should be. We had not been at work long before some toe bones emerged, not quite where I had expected them, but at least it showed that some remains were present. We then found the other foot and two legs started to emerge. It was at that point we realised that something was amiss – we had three femurs! We had found the first double burial on the island. We cleaned up some more and it looks as if there are two burials placed next to one another separated by about 25cms. Although we only have the legs, feet and some of the pelvis, we will now be able to rescue them for reburial. It is clear that another season or two and they would have disappeared altogether. Tomorrow I hope to finish cleaning them up and start drawing them before we lift them. This makes a total of 30 burials that we will have rescued so far.

However my day was far from over. On the boat trip back to Aboukir from the island my mobile started ringing. It was my youngest daughter who was ringing to inform me that I was going to be a grandfather (for the second time)! We will raise a glass tonight!

10 November 2004, Day 19

Once again we have had a hot day with little wind. However a heavy swell had built up and as we drove the 15 miles to Aboukir in the morning along the Corniche (the six-lane highway that follows the Alexandrian coastline and is used by most drivers as an F1 circuit) we could see the breakers coming in and smashing onto the beach and rocks. The boat trip out was fine but when we reached the island we all got a good soaking in the surf. It also seemed that all the rubbish from Alexandria was washing around the boat and so it was not a very pleasant experience.

We finished off cleaning up the burials that we had been working on yesterday (Burials 29 and 30) and I started to draw them. One of them, burial 30, seemed to be very short. Going on the leg measurements (that is all we have) I would guess that this individual was not much taller than 5' 1". It is possible that it was a boy but the lower leg bones, the tibia, looked rather strange and slightly deformed. Perhaps this was a victim of rickets? Tomorrow I will lift the remains and take some more measurements. We started work on the other burial that I had identified that lies only about five metres away from the two that I am currently working on. We cut off the top of a small dune to come down onto the burial and will hopefully expose it tomorrow.



Interested Rats !

It was still quite awkward working in our sun, flea, fly and rat trap! While our attention was on the burials one of the local rats decided to come and investigate our proceedings. We looked up to see him just a few metres away looking quite interested in our operations. A few not-so-well-aimed stones soon saw him scuttle off although I did manage to take his photograph! We had much trouble getting back on board our boat and all got another soaking. Captain Medo says that he thinks that we will not be able to get out to the island tomorrow, but all seamen like to be prophets of doom when it comes to the weather and so we will wait and see. Before we left the island I talked to some local fishermen who told me that about 12 years ago erosion on the island had exposed a number of burials near where I am currently excavating but that the sea had claimed them. This convinces me more than ever that we have located the main burial ground that exists on the island from the Nelsonian period.

I would like to thank all those who sent me congratulations on being a grandfather to be.

11 November 2004, Day 20

True to form Captain Medo's prophecies of storms and high winds turned out to be completely false and we sailed to the island on a veritable millpond. I started lifting Burials 29 and 30 and measuring and recording the bones. The bones were quite decayed and so I could not get all the measurements that I wanted. However I have managed to establish that both were probably male and that Burial 29 was about 170cms tall (that's 5' 7" in real money) and Burial 30 about 161cms (5' 2"). Strangely, for Burial 30 no kneecaps were found. It is possible that they had been displaced after burial but I do not think so. I searched carefully through the *radim* (spoil) but found no trace of them.



Tamur- Nick - Mahmoud

Meanwhile the Egyptian workers that make up my team, Mahmoud and Tamur were working on uncovering the bones that we had discovered earlier about four metres away. However these turned out to be just a few human toe bones and a lot of animal bones.

However there was great excitement further north on the island when the remains of two mummies were discovered in a broken tomb. The mummies had been robbed but some interesting artefacts were located. What is extremely interesting is that the Chaplain of *HMS Swiftsure*, one of Nelson's ships at the Battle of the Nile in 1798, wrote a journal of his travels in the Mediterranean and included descriptions and a drawing of Nelson's Island. The Reverend Cooper Willyams states that during attacks on the French held fort of Aboukir following the Battle of the Nile, that some Turkish *Djerms* (a lateen rigged vessel) were involved and it was decided that they needed their hulls cleaning and so some docks were cut into the island with 'much effort' by ex-Cornish miners who were sailors on the *Swiftsure*. The captain's log of the *Swiftsure* (ADM51 1274) for 1798 records that:

10 November: 'miners employed on the island'

17 November: 'miners employed on the island making a landing place – sunk a Polacre prize for a breakwater'

21 November: 'at 11 died James Rich (seaman)', 'miners employed on the island'

27 November: 'people employed heaving the Turkish gun boats down at the island'

4 December: 'sailed hence all the Turkish gun boats and vessels'

During the cutting of the docks Cooper Willyams records that ancient Egyptian funerary artefacts were found and he drew them and published them in his journal. The artefacts were then presented to Sir William Hamilton (husband to Emma

Hamilton, Nelson's lover) who was a keen antiquarian. The mummies found today are right next to a small bay that has been cut into. Therefore it is possible that this is the site of the *Swiftsure's* docks. However we have to be cautious, as there are many areas where the local sandstone has been cut for quarrying. On my return I will try and trace Cooper Willyams original records and see if I can find the Egyptian funerary artefacts.

Tomorrow is rest day and then we have the holiday of Eid so I do not know quite when we will be back on the island.

13 November 2004, Day 21

The calculations for the three-day holiday of Eid have now been made and they begin on Sunday 14 November. Therefore it was decided to work today, Saturday. Unfortunately due to a minor industrial dispute we have no workers for today! Two of the Italian team are also away for Eid, Simone is in Sharm el Sheik and Mattaeo has gone to Luxor. So a rather depleted team of Paolo, Artef (our Egyptian Inspector), Matilda and myself set out for the island.

I spent the day continuing to excavate the area around the burial site of Burials 29 and 30. I wanted to ensure that I had missed nothing and that there were no further burials lower down. My search was rewarded when I found some large fragments of bone from the burials that the rats had dragged down. I came upon the main rat's nest (thankfully vacated) and found what a mixed diet that they enjoyed. Amongst all the junk was a pile of chicken bones scavenged from the litter that tourists to the island had left and 12 tiny bird skulls. The island has a small population of quails and robins and it would seem that the rats are raiding the nests for fledglings.

We finished early today and headed back to Alex amid glorious sunshine.

14th November, Day 22



Remembrance Sunday at Chatby

No work on the island today but I attended the small Remembrance Day Service held at Chatby Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery. The Cemetery is only ten minutes walk from the apartment that we are staying in and is beautifully maintained. The graves of thirty soldiers from the 1801 Egyptian Expedition are buried there and the CWGC have agreed to rebury the sailors and soldiers from Nelson's Island there close to their comrades. We are not yet sure of a reburial date but I will keep you informed of progress. Alan Cobden HM Consul General, Alexandria, carried out the readings at the Service. Alan has been most helpful towards the Nelson's Island project and we owe him and his predecessor, Mark Stevens, a vote of thanks for their efforts.

15th November, Day 23

Again no work today so we scuttled down to the Greek Club located close to the harbour citadel where we sat on the beach, watched the world go by, drank cold beer, eat calamari and chips and soaked in the sunshine. People do not realise what a tough job archaeology is – how is the weather in dear Old Blighty?

16th November 2004, Day 24

Eid finished on Tuesday 16 November and we were all ready for two days work on the island but on Tuesday evening at about three in the morning I was woken up by the sound of shutters banging – a storm had arrived. The racket sounded like someone running a stick around the inside of a galvanised dustbin and made sure that I could not get back to sleep! The wind increased and there was no hope of us getting out to the island. Another minor disaster occurred when I finished off my last Earl Grey teabag! However we did have some good news. Rachael Stone a medical student from Birmingham University who had worked with us last year has managed to get some time off and will join us, *en'shAlla*, on Tuesday 23 November for one week. David Horn, curator of The Guards Museum is also due to join us shortly so my lonely vigil as the only Brit will shortly be over.

End of 2004 Reports

Nelson's Island Update 2005

Whilst excavating Pharaonic and Hellenistic relics on a small island off Aboukir Bay, Egypt Italian Egyptologist Paolo Gallo found more recent remains. These turned out to be burials of sailors, marines and soldiers from Nelson's victory at the Battle of the Nile (1798) and the British Egyptian Expedition of 1801. The burials are under direct threat from erosion and illegal excavation and so The Nelson Society, supported by The 1805 Club, have sponsored the rescue and reburial of the remains. As a Near Eastern archaeologist and naval historian I have lead the recovery of the remains over the last three years under the direction of Dr Gallo and this is the fourth season of my involvement. In April this year we reburied the remains from the first two seasons of excavation in Chatby Commonwealth War Cemetery, Alexandria, Egypt.

Reports 2005

29, 30 and 31 October 2005

I arrived at Borg Al Arab airport at 4.30 in the morning and following an argument with customs officials about the number of bottles of booze that I was allowed to take in (a vital component to the well-being of the excavation personnel) I met my taxi driver who took me to the Italian Archaeological Mission in downtown Alexandria. There I was greeted by old friends from previous years just leaving for the island. I was too late to join them and crashed out for a few hours. When they returned I heard that bad weather had set in and that they had had quite a rough trip back from the island. Unfortunately the strong winds stayed with us for a couple of days and we were unable to get back.

1 November 2005

At last we were able to get out to the island. Following the traditional nightmare taxi ride from Alexandria to Aboukir we met the Egyptian workers that work with us, our Egyptian archaeological inspector and an officer from the Egyptian Navy. I also discovered that we had a new boat to take us out. The owner of our old boat Marbrok ('congratulations' in Arabic) had sold it and replaced it with a smaller vessel although we still had our old friend Medo as skipper. We reached the island without incident and Paolo and I went for a walk around to see what was new. Paolo pointed out a bone sticking out of a recently weathered cliff that was clearly a femur. On investigation it would appear that this is a single disturbed bone. However I will investigate it further later. Paolo had started excavating to the southwest of the central modern lighthouse on some Hellenistic structures. No burials had come to light so far and so I had no immediate task. Therefore I started examining the low lying area in the south of the island where I believe there may be burials from the British landing in 1801 and the following Battle of Alexandria in which the British defeated the French. Nothing came to light and we returned back to Alex without incident.

2 November 2005

We managed to get out to the island again today despite heavy rain during the night and although storm clouds passed around us we were lucky enough not to get rained on. I continued excavating the small group of 'suspicious' looking stones and came across the metal end of a large beach umbrella stand and a number of cigarette ends - clearly I was excavating someone's picnic!

After discussion with Paolo it was decided that I would open a small trial trench in the centre of the southern half of the island. We are still searching for the main battle cemetery that we are convinced lies somewhere in this part of the island. Following the opposed beach landing by the British Egyptian Expedition in 1801 led by General Thomas Moore (of Corunna fame) and the Battle of Alexandria a few weeks later many casualties came back to the ships and some of those that subsequently died are recorded to have been buried on the island. Cooper Willyams, the Chaplain of HMS Swiftsure, drew a picture of these burials located in the southern half of the island so we are pretty certain that they are around somewhere! So I staked out a one metre by three metre trial trench in a large depression in the centre of an area of dune bush and

started excavating. The topsoil is heavy sand of a very homogeneous nature that will make any grave cuts difficult to spot and so we will have to go quite deep to ensure that we have not missed anything. After about 30cms we finished for the day and got back to Alexandria without major incident. For the next three days there is the festival celebrating the end of Ramadan and so it will be Sunday before we can get back to the island.