

GREAT CASTLE HEAD DALE, PEMBROKESHIRE

1999

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

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Summary

A single evaluation trench was excavated in the interior and the tail of the inner bank of the promontory fort at Great Castle Head, Dale. Two or, possibly, three post holes and two stake holes were found, cut into the subsoil. There was a considerable spread of material from the bank, which contained medieval pottery and some glazed ware, possibly Roman. Much of the interior appeared to have deep deposits and the proposed excavation of all of the intact area of the interior will have to be restricted in the light of this. All of the fort and the adjacent area were surveyed.

Introduction

This project is part of the programme of investigations developed from the recommendations of Dyfed Archaeological Trust's 1993-94 Assessment Report on the condition of west Wales coastal promontory forts. This site was identified as one of those at high risk from coastal erosion, and the present work is being undertaken on a rescue basis. This evaluation was carried out prior to a planned summer excavation to establish at what depth archaeological features are likely to be encountered and, possibly, the nature of those features, together with the extent of the spread of the inner bank over the interior. A detailed survey was also completed while the vegetation growth was low.

Location

The fort at Great Castle Head, Dale, Pembrokeshire (SM79920565) is located on crumbling Old Red Sandstone cliffs some 50m high. It is strategically placed at the western end of a broad east-west valley that runs from Westdale Bay, below the fort, to the village of Dale at the eastern end. This valley was previously an inlet to Milford Haven, separating the area of St Ann's Head from the mainland, and which partly filled with silt at the end of the last Ice Age. The fort stands on the remains of a much larger promontory; the southern side has suffered a substantial landslip (figure 1), which appears to have occurred after the fort's construction. There are the remains of two massive banks, 28m apart, and two substantial ditches, 1- 2m deep, with counterscarp banks, on the intact part of the site. The inner counterscarp bank is quite spread, especially to the south, whereas the outer counterscarp bank is more pronounced, with a steep outer face. There is a simple entrance through the outer defences, although nothing can be seen in the remains of the inner defences.

Site History

It is proposed to write a full site history after the main excavation has taken place. The fort appears, on surface evidence, to be Iron Age; however, no excavations have taken place on the site and the only finds recorded prior to this evaluation were some flints and a bronze ring.

Fieldwork

This took place over two weeks at the beginning of May. A single hand dug evaluation trench, 5m by 1.3m, was located in the tail of the bank, extending into the interior (figure 1), and was excavated down to the subsoil. The surface of the subsoil appeared to be relatively level; the depth of the trench at the eastern (bank) end was 1.6m deep, falling to 0.6m across the western (interior) end of the trench (figure 2).

The lowest layer encountered was the subsoil (122), which consisted of a light slightly sandy clay loam, with a large number of stones of varying types and sizes; it would appear to be a glacial deposit above the bedrock. Cut into the subsoil were two stake holes, (120) and (123), 250mm apart, two post holes (119) and (125), and a possible third post hole (127)(figure 3). Both of the definite post holes appeared to have packing stones, although these were disturbed. The other possible post hole was located against the north-west corner of the trench, had no visible packing stones and was not necessarily a circular feature. None of the features survived to any depth, possibly being truncated and then overlain by later layers (111), (117) and (107), immediately above the subsoil.

At the east end of the trench the lowest artificial layer (117) contained a considerable amount of charcoal and heat-affected stone. The layer above (116) was very fire reddened or baked soil. A sample of a very large piece of charcoal was taken from the upper part of the burnt material for possible radiocarbon dating. A bulk sample was also taken from layer (117) for identification of any grain or wood. Above this there was a layer of silt loam with a very large amount of angular stone (114); this layer spread from the bank. At the west end of the trench, the lowest artificial layer of silty clay loam (111), possibly degraded or disturbed subsoil, was below a patchy layer of small stones and pebbles (110).

At the western end of the trench there was a particularly soft silty layer (107) which appeared to have filled up a hollow, possibly worn, between the pebble layer (110) and the stony layer (114) to the east. This soft silt may predate a compact silt layer (115) in the centre of the trench. A third silt layer (113) at the eastern end of the trench contained a larger number of small stones and was not compact. The flecking in it was very similar to that in the central area of the trench (115) and no discernible junction could be seen between them.

Two layers of silt loams (112) and (109) above the silts, appeared to be spreads from the bank deposits. Above these was another layer of silt loam (108) containing a large amount of charcoal flecks as well as fourteen sherds of pottery and an iron object, probably a nail. Three different pottery fabrics were identified, of which one was highly fired and glazed.

Above layer (108) was a layer (106) containing a large amount of pea grit and some stones, plus three sherds of coarseware pottery and two iron objects, again probably nails. Above this was a reddish brown layer (105) with a few stones and no pea grit; some of the stone had been heat-affected. A very stony layer (104), lying over (105), was thicker and more stony towards the bank but almost petered out at the western end of the trench; there was a considerable amount of bracken root disturbance down into this deposit. Four iron objects, probably nails, and five sherds of coarseware were recovered. Above (104), and extending over the whole area of the trench, was a layer of loam (103), probably former topsoil, which lay directly below the existing topsoil (102).

The total depth of deposits on the interior was far deeper than anticipated; within the evaluation trench it is more than 0.5m deep. Observation of the cliff face indicated a

layer of charcoal 0.7m below the surface, suggesting that the deposits are probably a similar depth over most of the interior.

Interpretation

The post and stake holes cut into the subsoil indicated activity within the fort, but could not be interpreted in a wider context; the pebble layer (110), however, could represent a floor or path. There was evidence of burning in the lowest layer (117), under the tail of the bank, although the material was considered to be slightly too soft for archaeomagnetic sampling, although there may be better material in areas adjacent to the trench. However, there was sufficient charcoal present for radiocarbon sampling.

Layer (114) would appear to be an early stone spread from the bank and the site then appeared to have silted over (layers (113), (115) and (107)), probably indicating a period of abandonment. These silt layers appeared to form a horizon across this part of the site. After this possible period of abandonment a series of spreads of bank materials ((112), (109), (108) and (104-106)) occurred. Some of these contained a large amount of pottery (given the small area of excavation), the analysis of which indicated a date in the medieval period. The nature of this medieval activity could not be defined, but may have taken place on the bank, at least, with the material subsequently spreading onto the interior. The tail of the bank then appeared to stabilise and there was subsequently a steady build up of topsoil-like material. Bracken has now taken over much of the defences and is spreading onto the interior of the fort; this will be causing a considerable amount of root disturbance.

Finds

There were three struck flints, two of which were found directly above the subsoil. A possible smoothing stone was found in the lower stone spread (114). All of the metal objects are probably nails. The pottery, a total of 25 sherds, has been examined by Heather James, who confirmed a medieval date for the coarseware, which is probably Dyfed Gravel Tempered Ware, and possibly of 13-14th century date. The highly fired green (lead) glazed ware, however, could be Caerleon fabric, of Roman date.

Survey

The whole of the monument and the adjacent area west of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path was surveyed using an EDM, and has been tied in to the Ordnance Datum. The data from this has yet to be processed but a plan will be prepared for further annotation, e.g. hachures and small areas of erosion, during the summer excavation. It may also be possible to plot the far western, very eroded tip of the site.

New proposals for the summer excavation (figure 1)

The primary result from the evaluation has been the demonstration of the depth of the deposits, which were roughly twice as deep as anticipated. Furthermore, the spread of the bank over the interior was considerable and contained evidence of medieval activity.

The original proposal to excavate all of the interior, to the west of the inner bank, opening up first one half, backfilling, then excavating the second half, is now impractical within the allocated six weeks, due to the depth of soil to be moved. It is

not practical to position a spoil tip anywhere other than on the interior, nor is it possible to take a mechanical excavator onto the site. It is now proposed, therefore, that the excavation of the internal area be limited to a wide strip along the western end and northern side of the promontory. The new area will avoid the tail of the bank, but could possibly connect to the evaluation trench. This area, or broad trench, will be expanded if time allows, and is positioned in the area considered to be most at risk from erosion.

A possible trench was originally proposed across the northern end of the inner bank; it is now considered to be less desirable than slightly cutting back the exposed section at the south end of the bank, thereby creating a sloped section from top to bottom with minimum effort. It will then be possible to combine the main section drawing of the evaluation trench with this, to compile a composite cross section. Every effort will be made to re-surface the exposed face of the bank, but some short term erosion is possible because of this disturbance. However, as this end of the bank is actively eroding, there will be no additional loss in the long term. A trench is still proposed in the landslip area to look at the nature of any archaeology. If time permits a further trench is suggested at the bottom of the northern edge of the landslip area, south of the remains of the inner bank, to ascertain if there are signs of a later (medieval?) entrance.

Conclusion

The survey of the site has been completed before it is obscured by summer vegetation. The evaluation has been invaluable in demonstrating the depth of deposits likely on the interior of the site. Without prior knowledge of these deep deposits, the summer excavation would have met considerable problems in trying to excavate this area with insufficient time or resources. Medieval activity has been demonstrated which was previously unknown.

Acknowledgements

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Record Numbers used

101 - 128	Context
301 - 308	Drawing
601 - 629	Photograph
801 - 825	Samples

Great Castle Head, Dale. SAM Pemb 1296 PRN 2960
Proposed work 1999

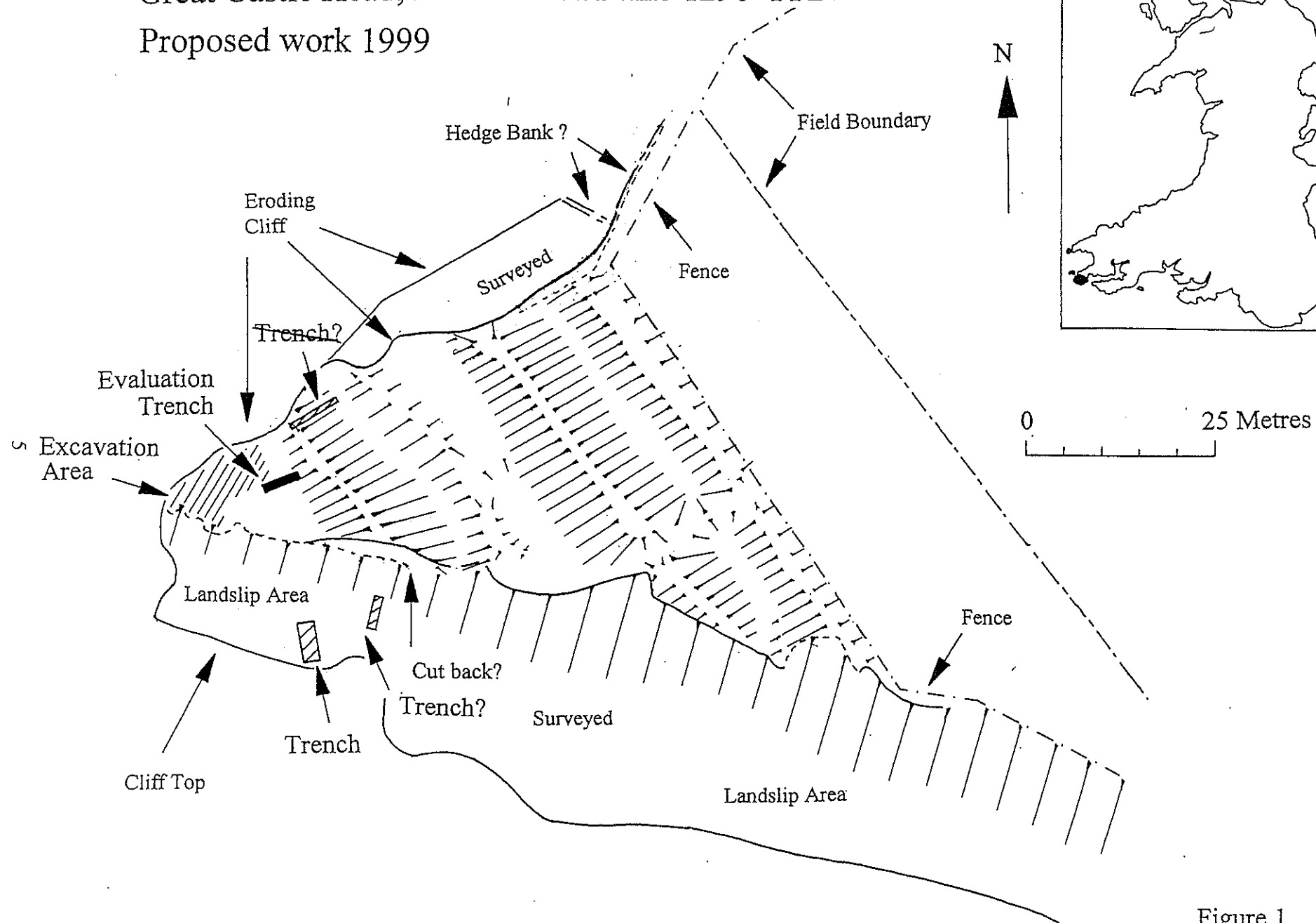
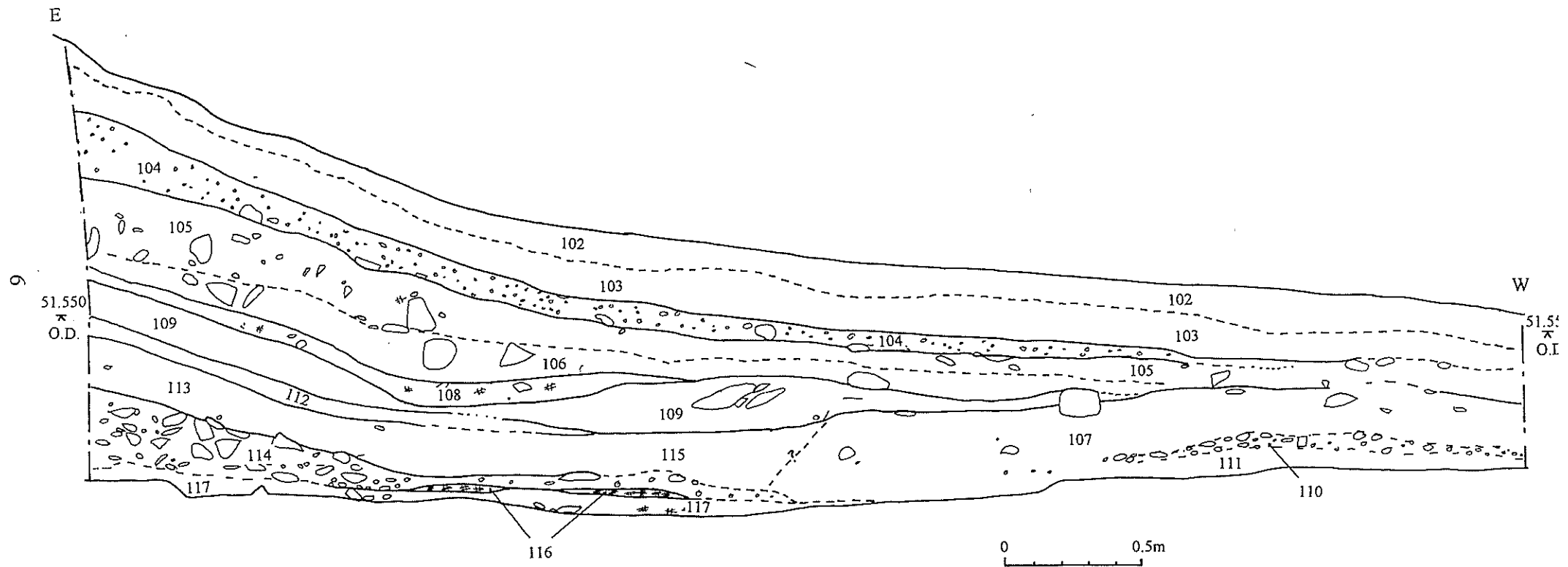


Figure 1

Great Castle Head, Dale
Evaluation trench 1999 main section



Pottery from layers 104, 106 and 108

Figure 2

Great Castle Head, Dale
Evaluation trench 1999 final plan

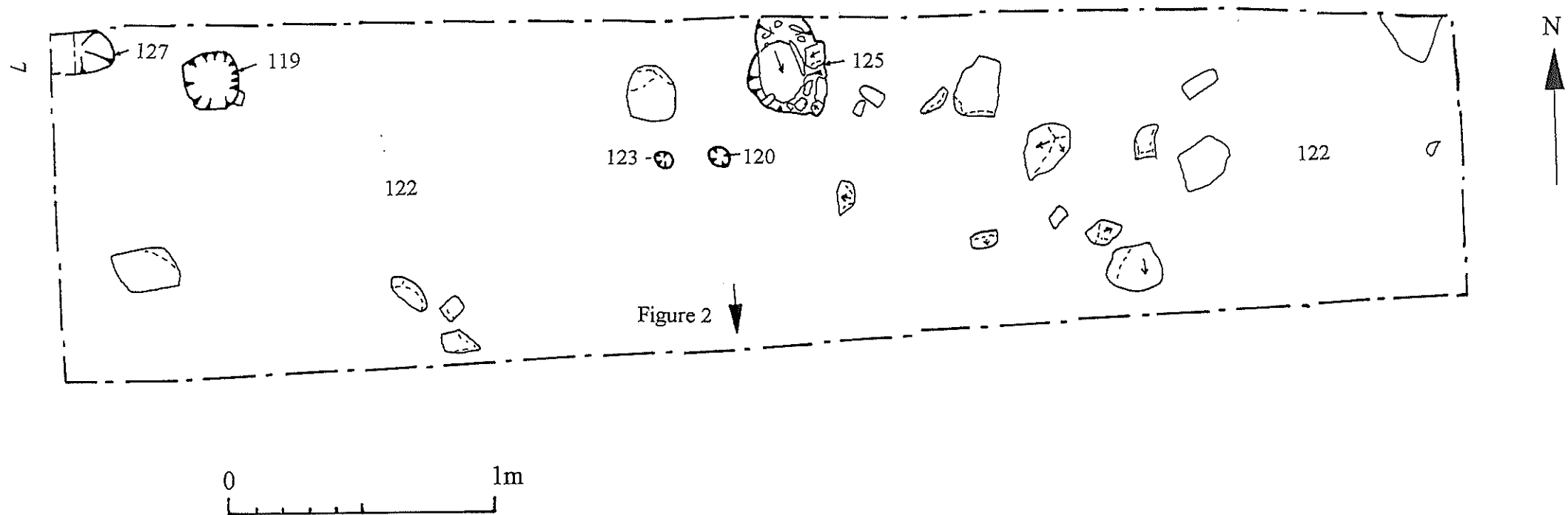


Figure 3