

TY'N Y TWR, BETHESDA
ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

REPORT NO. 53

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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for the Welsh Office (Highways Directorate)

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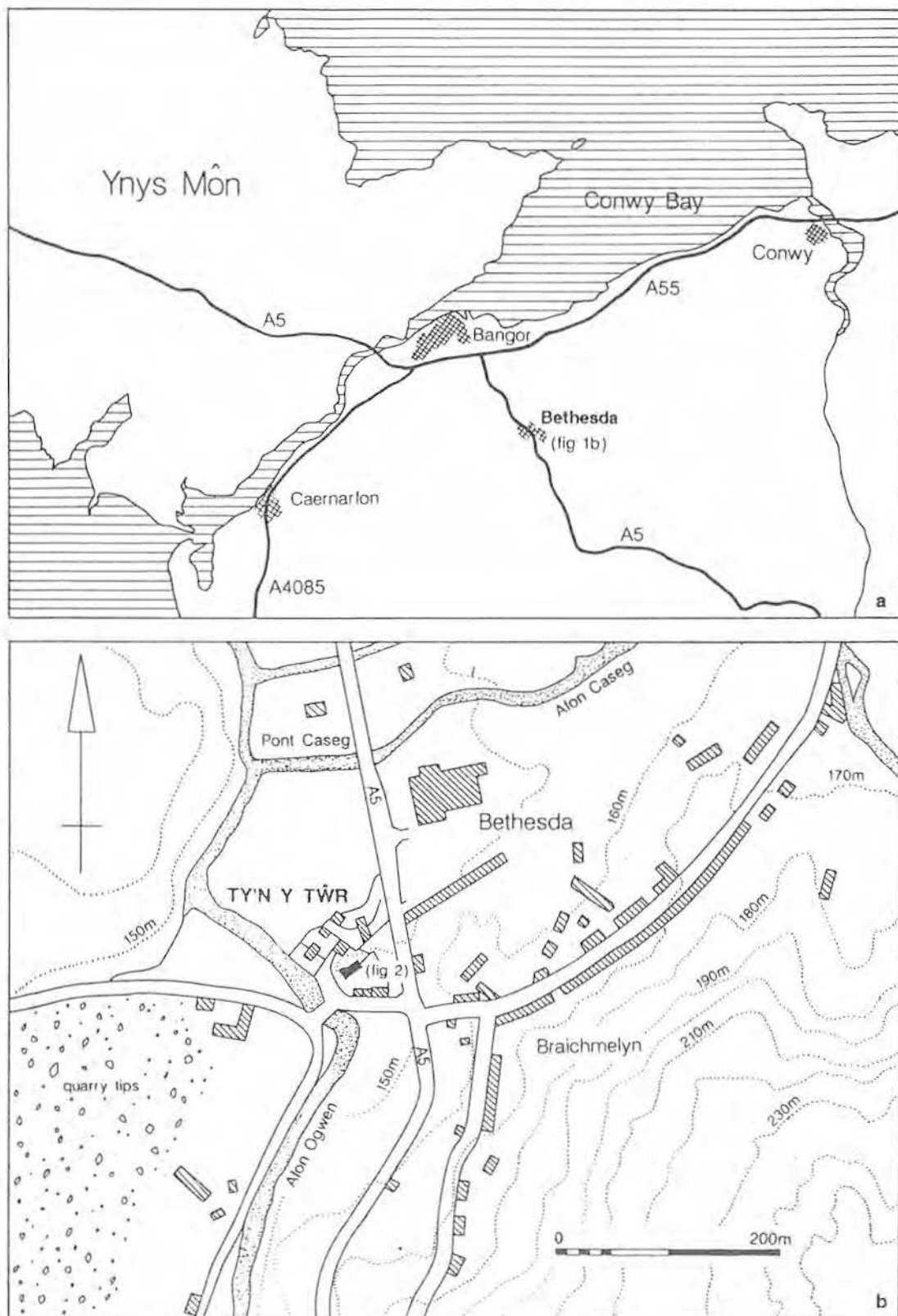


Fig. 1 Location map - Tyn y Twr, Bethesda.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT AT TYN Y TWR, BETHESDA

INTRODUCTION

In May of this year (1993), Gwynedd Archaeological Trust undertook an archaeological assessment on the remains of a building located on a rocky outcrop between the present bridge, Pont y Twr, and the medieval cruck-framed hall house, Tyn y Twr, on the outskirts of Bethesda, at NGR SH62616601. The work was commissioned by the site owners, Welsh Office (Highways Directorate), due to the unstable condition of the structure and the consequent danger of collapse.

Phase 1

The earliest phase of the structure consists of a rectangular building (approximately 12m x 6m) of dry stone masonry construction. At their highest point the walls survive up to 2.20m high and 1.20m wide. A centrally-placed window and blocked doorway to the south are located in the eastern gable. The southern wall does not appear to be bonded into the gable end, and sections of this wall have been repaired with rough slate slabs.

Phase 2

The possible later phase may be distinguished by a narrowing of the width of the wall. Rebuilding of recent collapse created a new access into the building, and the position of the entrance probably marks the original extent of phase 1 (see also below). The rebuilding does however obscure the original relationship between the two phases and does not allow positive interpretation. Phases 1 and 2 could therefore have been contemporary.

Phase 3

What looks like an annexe on the western end of phase 2 is in fact a series of modern field walls abutting the earlier building.

RECORDING THE STANDING BUILDING

A plan was made of the surviving remains (Fig. 1), on which the possible different phases of building are marked. The building was largely obscured by dense undergrowth and ivy, in particular on the southern side, but an almost complete record of the interior of the site was obtained by photographic survey and elevation drawing. Considerable clearance would have to be undertaken to complete this record.

Trial excavation was conducted in four areas (see fig. 1), trenches 1 to 4. Trench 4, located against the southern side of the east gable and measuring approximately 4.25m x 1.50m, is possibly the most informative. The outcropping bedrock and natural clay soil was overlain by a mixed deposit of angular stones (averaging 0.35m x 0.30m) and slate chips in an orange sandy clay soil. A comparatively compacted surface had been obtained by the dumping of this material (up to 0.30m deep in places). Against the blocked entrance, a slate slab and two edge-set stones are probably the remains of a threshold. On this surface were a number of roofing slates and subsequently a demolition layer of mixed slate fragments and mortar flecks in a grey silty clay soil.

Further details regarding the wall construction were also recovered from this trench. The wall foundations consisted of small angular stones, 0.30m to 0.15m; these were overlain by a 0.30m high section of laid slate slabs and the subsequent build was of dry stone rubble masonry (see Fig. 2).

Within trench 2, part of an oval cut feature, 0.70m x 0.90m, was located. This had been filled with a deposit of angular stones and slate chips (Fig. 3). Trench 3, 2m x 1m, revealed an outcrop of bedrock with a vertical face on its western side. This had subsequently been built upon with slate slabs; the resulting wall was approximately 1m wide, though only 0.30m

of additional material had been added to the height of the faced bedrock.

The pottery assemblage recovered from the excavation contained material from the 13th century through to the 19th. The later material was all recovered from the topsoil. Context 012, the demolition layer in trench 4, contained the bulk of the medieval material. One sherd of 13th/14th century Saintonge ware was also recovered from the fill of the feature in trench 2.

DOCUMENTARY

Written references

Penrhyn catulary folio 6 recto, now at UCNW archive, contains the following information:

1 Bodveio 1458 1 Ithel ap Ieuan ap Kynferth
 November 1 2 William Griffith
Conveyance of all no 1s lands and tenaments near le tour de Abergassek

This is the earliest known reference to a tower at this location, and as such is valuable confirmation of the antiquity of the place name 'Tyn y Twr'.

Two antiquarian sources are known to mention the site.

Pennant: Tours in Wales

" I must not omit that the passage through this dreary bottom was once defended by a fort, about a mile from the Benlog, called Tyn y Twr; but at present there is not a vestige to be seen."

H D Hughes: Hynafiaethau Llandegai a Llanllechid

(p. 16) " Y Twr; Safai hon ar glogwyn o graig rhwng shop Mr D Thomas Pont y twr a Thyn y Twr, ac yr oedd ychydig ohono yn aros oddeutu 80 neu 100 mlynedd yn ol, fel y dywed hen ysgrif sydd yn meddiant yr ysgrifenydd;"

(p. 38) "Yma fel y coffawyd bu John Iork, am ryw hyd yn llechu, ac o fewn ergyd careg i'r dwyrain, y mae hen dy a elwir "Capel John Iork," ac yn ddiweddarach mewn ffordd o wawd , ar ol i rywrai fod yno yn pregethu a elwir "Capel Cwta." Dywed rhai na bu erioed yn gapel, ond cyfeiriau eraill at hen ddrws, a'r ystafell wisgo a berthynai iddo i gadarnhau y gred iddo fod."

The site is mentioned in the RCAHMW Inventory, although no mention is made of the ruined building.

" The tower whose name survives in Pont y Twr and Tyn Twr was perhaps a motte formed by revetting a boss of rock east of the bridge (SH62616600). Possible traces of early wall can be detected on the north east but the ground is now too much built over for certainty."

The Commission revisited the site in October 1992. Although it was considered impossible to analyse or date the structure, the building was not thought to be agricultural and the thickness of the walls was considered to be suggestive of a medieval date.

Maps

The earliest available map which provides any detail of the site is Penrhyn mss 2188, of 1855. This gives the outline of the present ruined structure. The 1888 1:2500 OS map shows the structure as clearly ruined at this date, and with numerous internal partitions.

Some comment is possibly called for on the above information.

H D Hughes' account contains a garbled list of possibly relevant information about the site. The site of the "Tower" is specifically located in the area now occupied by the present ruinous structure, although Hughes believed that nothing remained to be seen of the Tower. The ruinous building investigated by the Trust was known as "Capel John Iork" and sometimes as "Capel Cwta". There was, says Hughes, some disagreement that the building had ever been a chapel; those in favour of this interpretation would point to the doorway and the "dressing room" in support of their interpretation. One must conclude that at the time that Hughes was writing his account the building had been in a ruinous condition for long enough for its original function to have been forgotten.

CONCLUSIONS

The building appears not to have any particular merit architecturally. It has been rebuilt in places on more than one occasion and the north wall is leaning and in danger of collapse. There are no diagnostic features which allow accurate dating on architectural grounds; nevertheless, the proportions are not inconsistent with a medieval structure.

Medieval pottery of the 13th to 16th centuries has been identified from contexts within the building, but a direct relationship for this material with the building cannot be demonstrated at present.

While no firm conclusions can be drawn from the pottery evidence for occupation on the rock in the medieval period, it would seem perverse to deny the possibility.

Therefore, there may have been occupation on the rock in the 13th to 16th centuries and that occupation may be represented by elements of the present standing structure, particularly at the east end, or by a structure or structures replaced by the present building.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When a decision is reached on a suitable treatment for the north wall, any work should be preceded by detailed archaeological recording of that wall. Any demolition should be restricted to the minimum necessary for safety. No ground disturbance within or adjacent to the standing building itself should proceed without archaeological advice which might require mitigatory measures involving preservation *in situ* or preservation by record.

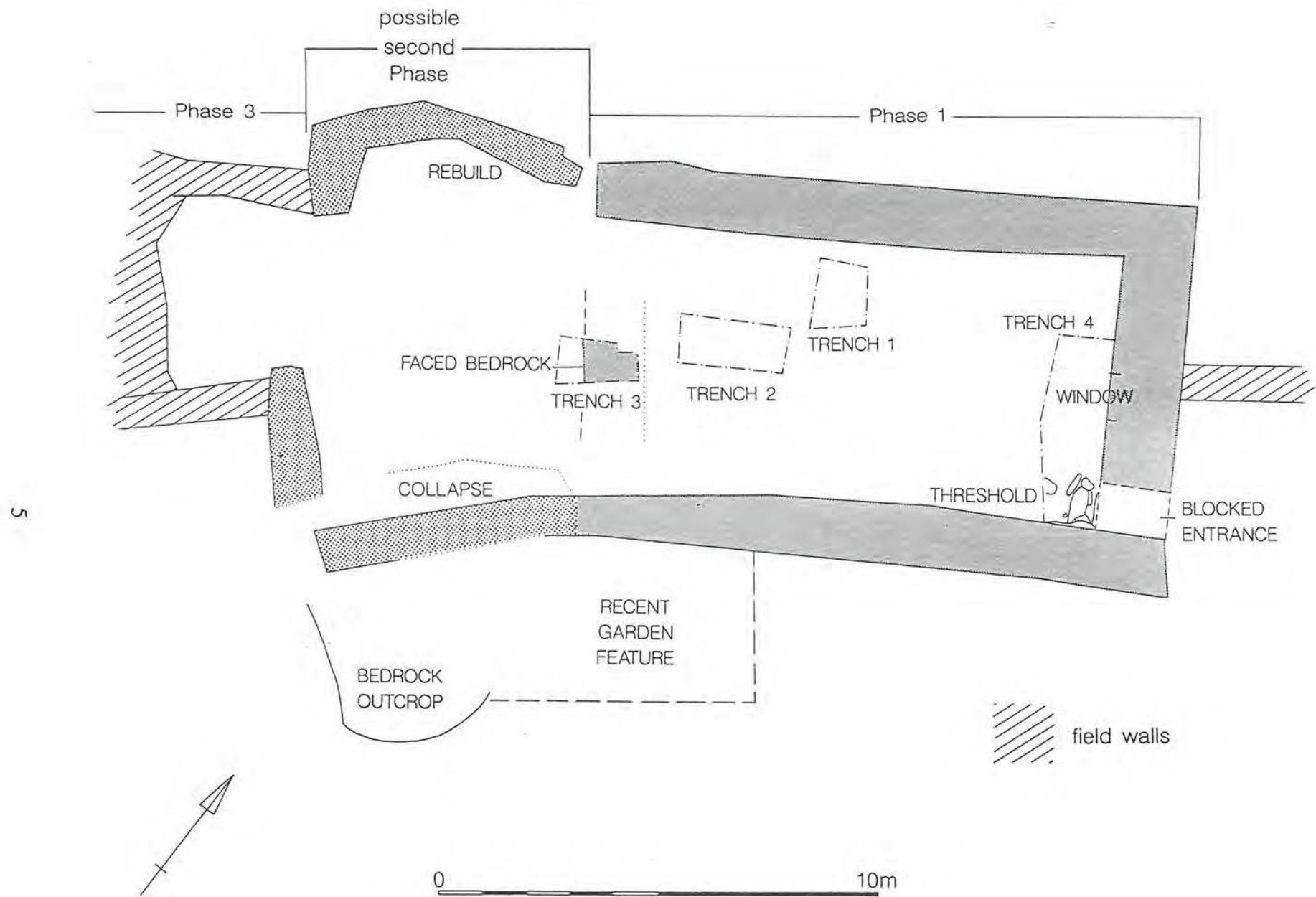


Fig. 2 Plan of building remains at SM 6261 6601

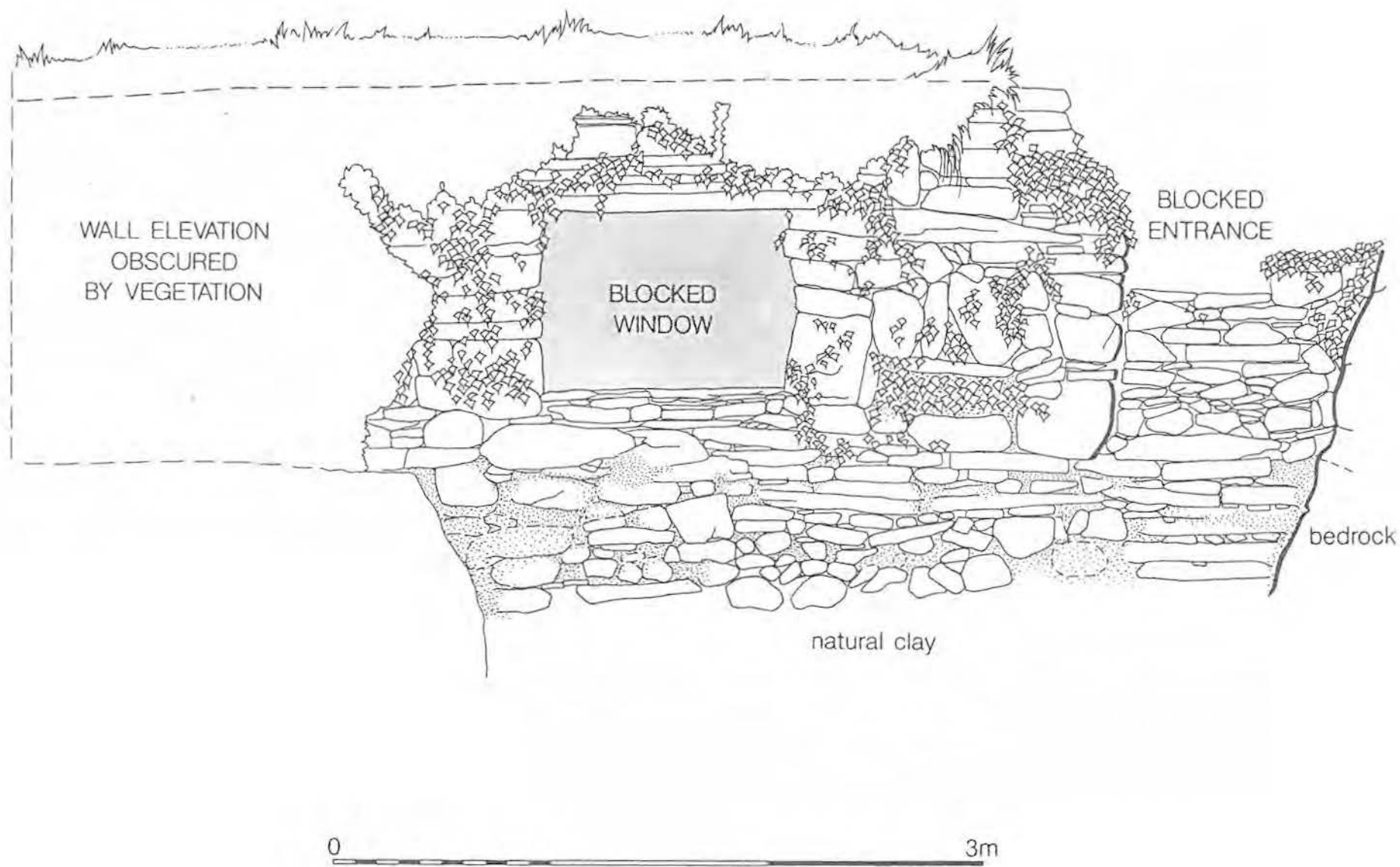


Fig. 3 West facing elevation of eastern gable

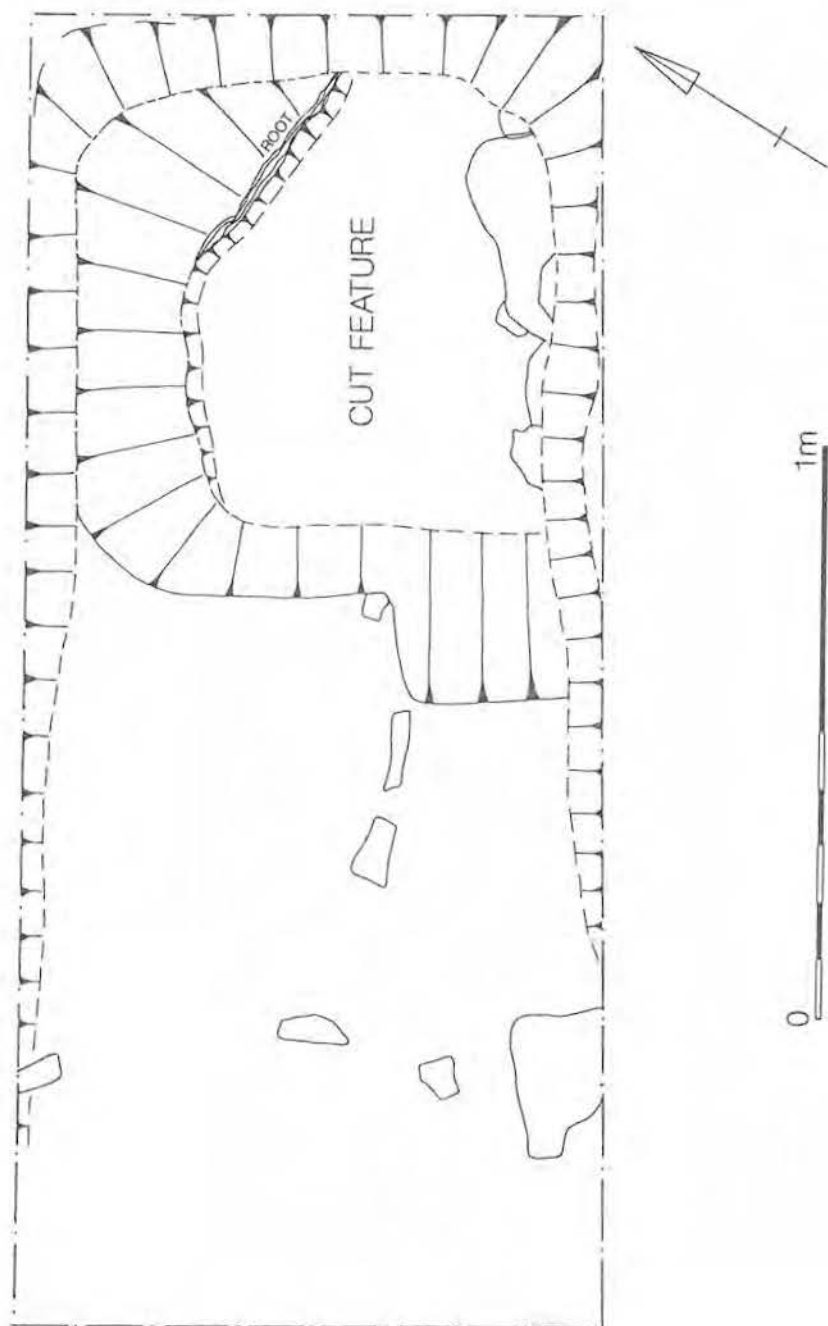


Fig. 4 Cut feature, Trench 2.