

Excavation report for Sewage Works Settling Tank Replacement
System, R.A.F. Lakenheath –
Eriswell, TL 7292 8075, ERL 023.

Contents.

1. Introduction.
2. Location and Topography.
3. Background Archaeological History.
4. Methodology
5. The excavation.
6. Trench 0014.
7. Trench 0013.
8. Trench 0012.
9. Burial 0124.
10. Phasing and dating.
11. Prehistory.
12. Phase I, Roman.
13. Phase II, Roman.
14. Phase III, Anglo-Saxon.
15. The finds
16. Conclusions and Discussion

Figures

1. Site Location
2. Trench Location
3. Plan Phase I -Roman
4. Plan Phase II -Roman
5. Plan Phase II -Anglo Saxon
6. Small Finds
7. Appendix I -Key to Fig 1
Appendix II -Finds Index
Appendix III -Photographic Index

1. INTRODUCTION

A small excavation was carried out in advance of the construction of a new settling tank associated with the R.A.F. Lakenheath sewage works for the Ministry of Defence. Although much of the site had previously been disturbed, a significant area remained providing evidence for Iron Age, Roman and Anglo-Saxon occupation. Finds included a Romano-British inhumation.

2. Location and Topography

The site is situated 150m to the west of Caudle Head mere, at approximately 10m OD in the skirtland between the high Breckland and the Fens. The mere is formed from underground water flowing westward off the Breckland and drains away towards Turf Fen, which is about half a mile west of Lakenheath village. The geology of the area consists of chalk underlying peat and sand. Before the area was levelled during the construction of the airbase, the site was open heathland and the light sands had been subject to wind erosion and deposition since prehistoric times.

3. Summary of Archaeological History

The first recordings of finds from the site were made by Lady Grace Briscoe in 1950 when she reported that skeletons buried in coffins were found during the construction of the sewage works in 1948. Other finds had been made previously in the area and since that date, Roman pottery, bones and coins have been found in various locations around the Mere (see Fig 1 and Appendix). Roman finds have also been recovered from a wider area as have both Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon. The Anglo-Saxon finds include an extensive cemetery, which has been partially excavated, about 500m to the south east.

4. Methodology

The excavation was confined to the dimensions of the circular settling tank which was 16.8m in diameter. The topsoil was removed by a wheeled excavator using a four foot ditching bucket, a number of modern disturbances uncovered were investigated and these were shown to be fairly substantial. The whole surface was cleaned and three areas of what appeared to be slightly 'dirty' natural sand were identified and investigated with shovels. This turned out to be a 0.45m-0.6m deposit of wind-blown sand concealing an earlier ground surface. It existed in three areas over about 25 square metres of trench, approximately 10% of the area available for excavation. This layer was removed with shovels, small sections were temporarily retained although the principle soil profiles used for recording were those in the sides of the excavation. Following this most of the exposed features were totally excavated by hand (with the exception of 0110 of which only half was dug). A metal detector was used fairly extensively producing finds from the excavation and the disturbed areas. Plans and sections were drawn at a scale

of 1:20. Small finds were three dimensionally recorded (Appendix II) and a photographic record was kept (see Appendix III).

5. The Excavation

The wind-blown sand (0002) showed broadly three horizons, an upper light brown sand, a lower grey sand and a band of dark "blue-grey" sand close to the buried soil layer. These layers had been quite heavily disturbed by rabbits which have been very active in this area in recent times.

The interface between the blown sand and buried soil was labelled 0003 and the initial exploration of the soil layer 0004. However, separate context sequences were soon established for each of the three trenches except in the case of ditch 0017 which was clearly common to trenches 0013 and 0014.

6. Trench 0014

The buried soil level in this trench was 0008; this context was used until finds could be clearly separated and, in practice, most of the finds probably originated from the upper fills of ditches 0015 and 0016.

The first distinct feature was 0017 which was a grey-brown sand-filled ditch. This fill was fairly uniform with sticky grey and brown sand at the base. It was 0.6m deep from the top of the buried soil and about 1.4m wide with a somewhat rounded profile. This feature was clearly later than others in the trench, distinguishable by its clean sandy fill and general lack of occupation-type debris.

Following the removal of 0008, a palimpsest of features was revealed. The most prominent were three parallel ditches 0015, 0016 and 0102, possibly a fourth much shallower ditch 0117, 0130. 0015 and 0016 were similar in appearance and they are respectively 0.5m and 0.8m deep from below the occupation layer; 0.6-0.8m wide at the top narrowing to 0.2m at the base, which gave them very steep sides. Both 0015 and 0016 contained pale orange and grey sand towards the bottom and included fine peaty lenses at the base. The upper fill was of dark grey sand with chalk flecks and charcoal and included both pottery and bone. Ditch 0102 was much shallower; it cut the upper fill of 0016 but was filled with a similar dark grey fill. Running beneath these ditches was 0117 (west) and 0130 (east), two contexts probably from the same feature -an east-west ditch truncated by 0016. 0117 was about 0.3m deep with a flat base and probably 0.6m wide although no complete profile was excavated, it was less than 0.2m deep and appeared to butt end before feature 0131.

0117 was particularly interesting in having shovel impressions visible as grey sand against the natural yellow in the bottom of the ditch. They were all similar in shape and, with the largest (and therefore likely to be the most complete)

measured 0.16m wide by 0.135m in height with the projected shovel blade semi-circular in shape. The preservation of these features implies that the base of the ditch was not exposed to weathering.

A single ditch 0101 cut ditches 0102, 0016 and 0117 which was aligned north-south. It was approximately 0.55m wide and 0.3m deep with a flat 0.2m wide base. It was filled with a dark occupation soil similar to layer 0008. Towards the eastern end of the trench were the remains of feature 0131 which was cut by ditches 0017, 0130 and 0015 with natural sand on its eastern end, in part, western edge. It had a maximum width of 0.8m and was apparently 0.2m deep with a flattish base.

On the south edge of the trench there were two post holes 0120, 0122 and a small ditch 0123. The post holes were 0.5m wide and 0.2m and 0.3m deep respectively; ditch 0123 was 0.25m wide and 0.2m deep. Dark stains in its base may have been animal disturbances rather than post or shovel impressions. The sub-rectangular shape of 0120 suggests it contained a rectangular or similar shaped post which would have been aligned with 0122.

7. Trench 0013

The occupation horizon from this trench (and the undistinguished tops of features) was context 0104. It was clearly cut on the South edge by ditch 0017 (coming through from trench 0014). More or less parallel to this was ditch 0018 along the northern edge of the trench. The base of the ditch contained sticky grey and white, wet sand and above this was a thick band of grey sand, similar to layer 0104. The remaining hollow above this layer was filled with wind-blown sand (layers 0019, 0018). At the eastern end of the trench was north-south ditch 0109 which was the continuation north of 0101 from trench 0014. It was cut by both 0018 and 0017.

Close to this feature to the west was a small post hole 0119 and the remains of a second? 0120. 0119 was 0.25m deep by 0.3m wide. The post holes were situated at the end of slot/gully, 0111-0112, and may have been related. The gully seemed to surface before reaching ditch 0018.

The gully (0111) was about 3m in length, 0.3m wide and 0.15m deep for most of its length. It was slightly deeper at the east end 0112, where a separate cut was detected which contained a very charcoally fill compared to the dark sandy fill in the rest of the feature. The western end of 0111 seemed to fade out where it joined large ditch? 0110 and no relationship was observed. 0111 was cut by north-south slot? 0107. 0107 was 0.3m wide, 0.15m deep with a very sharp rectangular profile. It contained a clean dark sand fill and it is possible it was a slot for a sill beam although firm evidence is lacking. Ditch 0110 was at the western end of the trench crossing it from north to south. It was stratified below occupation layer 0104 (in section 0134). It was 1m deep from below the buried soil and 1.4m wide. An upper 0.15m of orangey-brown sand fill gave way to grey-brown sand which

extended to 0.45m becoming very dark to 0.75m. The remaining 0.2m of ditch contained lenses of white and dark sand in swirls which suggest it had been water sorted. The sand in the base of this feature was damp.

The remaining features in this trench were two ditches, possibly with a recut aligned north-north west, south-south east. They shared a context (0128) until they were clearly separated (the fills being mostly homogeneous) into 0132 and 0133. They were both 0.45m deep and would have been about 1m when complete having a fairly rounded profile. Their uniform fill was of dark grey sand.

8. Trench 0012

The buried soil in this trench was labelled 0009 and later 0011. It is likely that 0009 included the dark grey sand layer above the buried soil from which it was less clearly distinguished in this trench than in trench 0014. In the narrower west end of the trench, two ditches ran from north to south, 0108 and 0115. The former almost directly over the latter although 0115 clearly curved around towards the west. They both contained a dark sand fill with 0108 being noticeably darker than its predecessors. There was a shallow dark feature (0106) in the north east corner-of the trench but the bulk of this feature appeared to be outside the excavation. The principal feature in the trench was grave 0124.

9. Burial 0124

This burial was cut through the lower sand layers 0016 but its relationship with the top of the occupation soil was not observed. The grave was aligned North-South and was between 1m and 1.2m wide. It was a minimum of 2m in length although the south edge had been removed by a recent trench which had also removed the top of the skull.

The skeleton was supine with the head to the south and the hands folded across the pelvis. Iron hobnails and hooked tags, the remains of shoes, were recovered from around the feet. There was a 0.6m dark stain to the west of the skeleton and similarly dark stains both beneath it and in a small area to the east, which could have come from a coffin but it would have needed to be at least 0.6m wide based on the positions of the bones and there were no coffin nails, which would be usual for a Romano British burial.

The skeletal remains were in a variable condition. The long bones were present but most of the trunk had gone, leaving only a stain. Some realignment of the long bones had occurred due to animal activity. An analysis of the bones has recently been completed in 'The Human Skeletons from Lakenheath Air Base, Suffolk', Sue Anderson, 1993. The burial has been shown to be of a male. The ageing of mature individuals is very difficult but he was at least 40 years old, probably older, showing the wear and tear marks of an old man. He lost at least eleven teeth whilst he was alive probably due to caries and there was evidence for several abscesses. Bone growth in

the spine was evidence for osteoarthritis and he had suffered infections of the feet and legs which had caused the bone to thicken, probably causing him some discomfort.

10. Phasing and Dating

A detailed understanding of the site is clearly precluded by its small size but a broad phasing is offered, based on the stratigraphy and the large quantity of finds.

11. Prehistory

The Prehistoric occupation of the area was indicated by a scatter of flint flakes, blades and at least three cores. These were located both in the "natural" sand and as redeposited material in various features. They indicate activity during the Mesolithic period and later, which is hardly surprising given the proximity of Caudle Head Mere which would have provided a focus for early settlement.

The earliest pottery from the site was Iron Age and although some was found within the earliest features, it was probably residual. 11 sherds were found in total, 5 of which were recovered from the buried soil horizon in trench 0012.

12. Phase Plan I (Fig 3)

This phase was represented in trenches 0014 and 0013. In trench 0013 the double ditch 0132 and 0133 was sealed by the dark soil layer 0104. 0132 and 0133 produced just 6 pottery sherds of which half were Iron Age and the others, undated Roman. These ditches either terminated under a modern disturbance or butt ended as feature 0118, although this association is speculative based on their relative positions.

Ditch 0110 was also sealed by dark soil 0104. It produced just 16 pot sherds some of which were second century or later. However, given the size of this feature, it is possible to argue that the finds located in the upper fill accumulated long after the feature was originally excavated.

The intersection of 0132, 0133 with 0110 occurred beyond the excavated area but the alignment suggests they were not contemporary and 0110 was probably the latest. Speculatively included in this phase are post holes 0121, 0122 and ditch 0123. These features produced no finds and their relationships to the occupation soil was lost but their proximity and their lack of finds, suggests they preceded the many ditches in this area and that they were all related. The plan is incomplete but they could represent the entrance to an enclosure.

13. Phase Plan II (fig 4)

This plan deals with the majority of features in all three trenches. The various east-west ditches in trench 0014 were probably recuts of the same feature, although at least two of these were cut by 0101 (0109) and ditch 0108 cut 0115 in

trench 0012. The pottery from the fill of these features mostly ranges in date between the third or fourth century. This was also the period for most of the occupation soil layer 0008 which produced over one-third of the finds from the site. Four sherds of hand-made pottery, probably early Saxon, came from 0101, 0015, 0016, 0010 and there were 12 sherds from 0008. 0008 was probably a midden deposit which started to fill the abandoned ditches, 0015 and 0016, but the presence of the Anglo-Saxon pottery suggest the timescale and sequence of events leading to the collapse of the Roman culture in this area, may be quite complex.

Aside from the recuts, it is possible some features were associated -ditches 0108 and 0115 (trench 0012) may continue as feature 0131 in trench 0014 and perhaps relate to the east-west ditch systems (0130 terminates in this area). Similarly ditch 0111 and 0112 terminate just short of ditch 0109 where there are two post holes 0119 and 0120. These features were probably contemporary.

Grave 0124 has also been included in this phase plan. It produced only 11 sherds of pottery dating from the late second century to late third century but of course the feature was excavated and backfilled virtually simultaneously and the finds are a sample of what was lying on the surface at the moment of burial, rather than a later accumulation, as is often the case, with ditch fill. However it could belong with ditch 0110 from Phase I.

14. Phase Plan III (Fig 5)

This is based on the two parallel ditches 0017 and 0018. These features were both stratigraphically late; 0018 cut occupation layer 0104 and had an upper fill (0019) of windblown sand, contrasting with the dark organic soil from the earlier features. Ditch 0017 was cut from higher in the section and was almost entirely filled by wind-blown sand. 0018 produced late third century and late fourth century pottery and two hand-made sherds which were probably early Saxon. 0017 also contained third century and fourth century material (although not in large quantities) but included a single sherd of Ipswich ware pottery which dates from the mid-seventh century to the mid-ninth Century.

15. Finds

A prodigious quantity of pottery (722 sherds in total) was recovered from the site, the sherds were mostly small but generally unworn. Over half were recovered in or over the top of ditch 0016, which also contained lots of animal bones and was probably a rubbish heap.

Most of the pottery was probably made in Suffolk, including shell gritted pottery made near the present village of Lakenheath. Pottery, however, was brought in, particularly in the third and fourth century, with colour coated products from the Nene Valley, Much Hadham ware and a small amount of Oxford ware.

The site produced a significant quantity of copper alloy finds given the small area of the excavation. These included: a brooch dating from the first or second century (a Colchester derivative), a small decorated bracelet from the third or fourth century, a rivet in sheet bronze, a small terminal, possibly from a boot lace and a small square sectioned ring. There were also other pieces of wire, bronze strips and offcuts that were less obviously functional. These finds all originated in the 'rubbish layer' over palisade ditches 0015 and 0016.

This layer also produced copper alloy slag or dross and possibly some hearth or crucible lining along with various droplets and dribbles of bronze. It is clear from this that copper alloy objects were being manufactured in the vicinity and, given their position in the ground, probably late in the fourth century. Five bronze coins were also recovered either unstratified or from late contexts. Two were third century and three were fourth century, of these one had the head of the Emperor Honorius (393-402 AD), the last Roman Emperor of Britain.

16. Conclusions and Discussion

The flint remains suggest the area was occupied in prehistory as far back as the Mesolithic, but the most intense and sustained period of occupation may date from the late Iron Age to Early Saxon period, with the majority of features originating during the three and a half centuries of the Roman occupation. The features were nearly all ditches or fences and probably built to delineate property and contain livestock.

Ditch 0110 was a substantial feature which presumably had an adjoining bank and certainly the later trenches 0015 and 0016 could have supported a solid, close set palisade fence. The quantity of animal bones recovered from the site was small and has not been analysed but the light Breckland soil has only been suitable for arable farming since the introduction of modern fertilisers and the economy of the settlement was probably pastoral with Caudle Head mere providing a common watering hole for the livestock.

The area of the excavation was minute and provides only a keyhole into a much larger settlement and any interpretations must be qualified by this; for example the centre of activity across the site may have shifted and the substantial fourth century rubbish deposits found within our excavation may not be representative of the wider picture. Given this qualification, the evidence does suggest the settlement was at its peak in the late fourth century with fine pottery being brought in, the manufacturing of copper alloy objects and a very late coinage, which suggests it was part of an extensive trading network.

It is impossible to tell from the evidence the precise chronology of the late Roman features as the presence of Saxon pottery within them seems to suggest there was an overlap but the parallel alignment of 0018 and 0017, which appears to have

filled in quickly during the middle Saxon period suggests the amount of activity in the area was much reduced before the sand blows began to bury the site.

Finally one of the most intriguing aspects of the site is the single adult burial.

Several burials have been found in the area, the most recent being two at site LKH 146 (about 200m north of Caudle Head). The implications seem to be that burials may be encountered widely dispersed throughout the settlement.

Roman funerary practice varied during the occupation and no set values or beliefs were imposed until perhaps the fourth century, when Christianity became the established religion. The disposal of the dead within Roman towns was against Roman law and both cremations and burials tended to occur alongside roads leading out of settlements often in formal cemeteries. The picture in the countryside, however, is less clear and other factors may have prevailed.

It would be interesting to know if these burials represent local celtic religious traditions or even suggest a religious character to the settlement, possibly focused on the mere, the sort of natural feature the Celts often associated with their deities. Alternatively they may all be late and reflect changes in organisation and the social structure, which occurred at the end of the fourth century or early in the fifth century. Certainly it contrasts with the Anglo-Saxon traditions represented by the large cemetery, ERL 008, 500m to the south east of the area.

A. Tester
1st September 1992

ERL023.DOC (floppy disc)

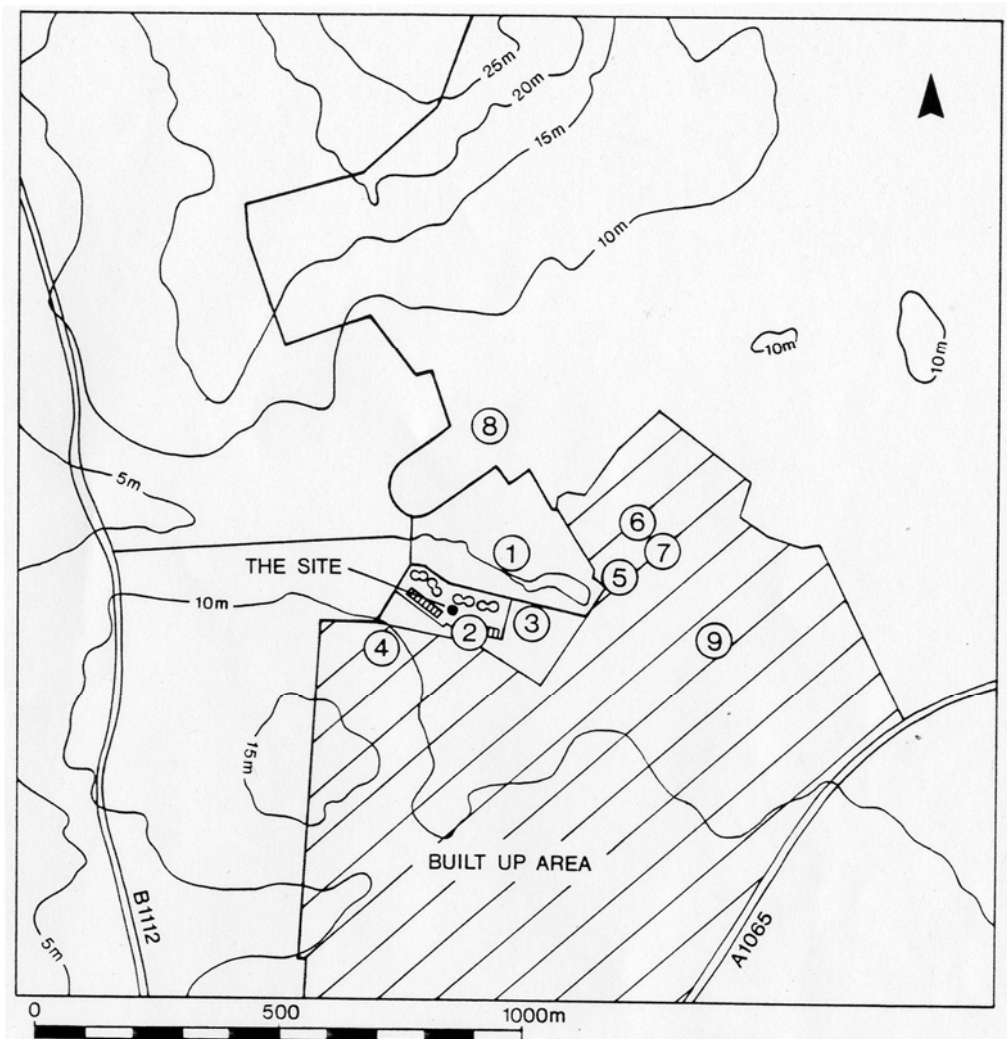


FIG 1. Site location plan showing Roman British findspots recorded in the country Sites and Monuments Record within 300m of the site.
(For key-see appendix)

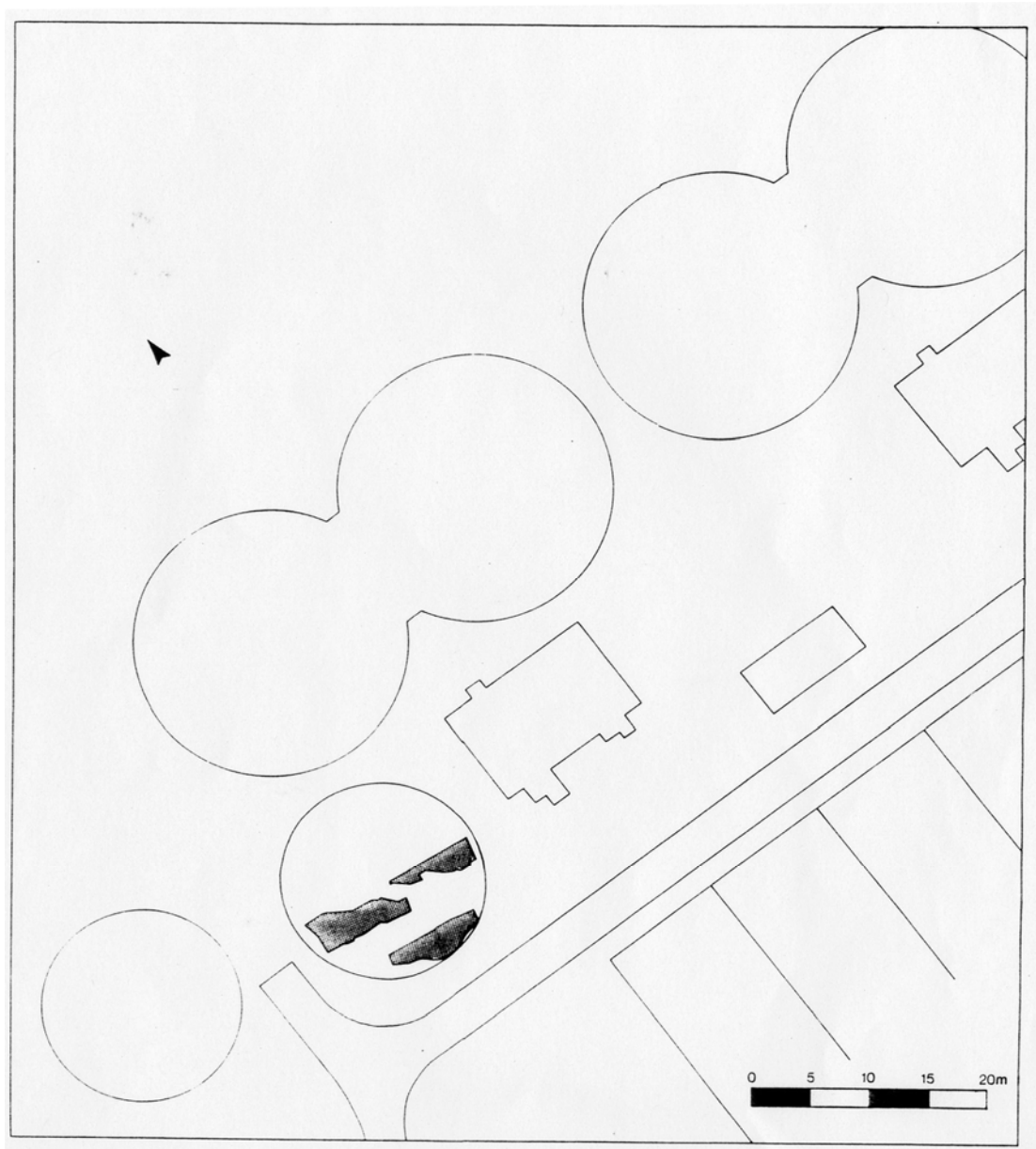
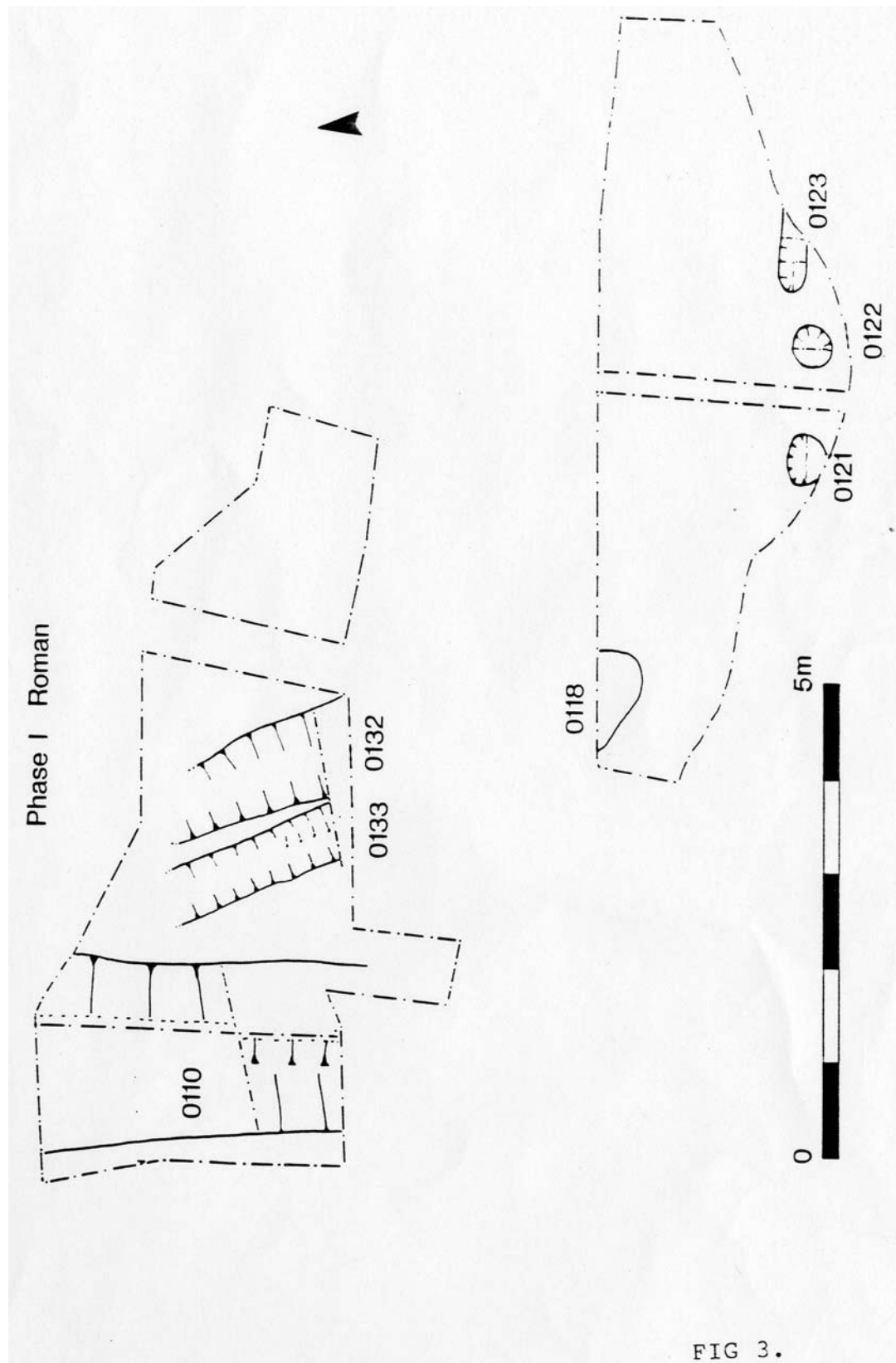


FIG 2. Trench locations within the sewage works.



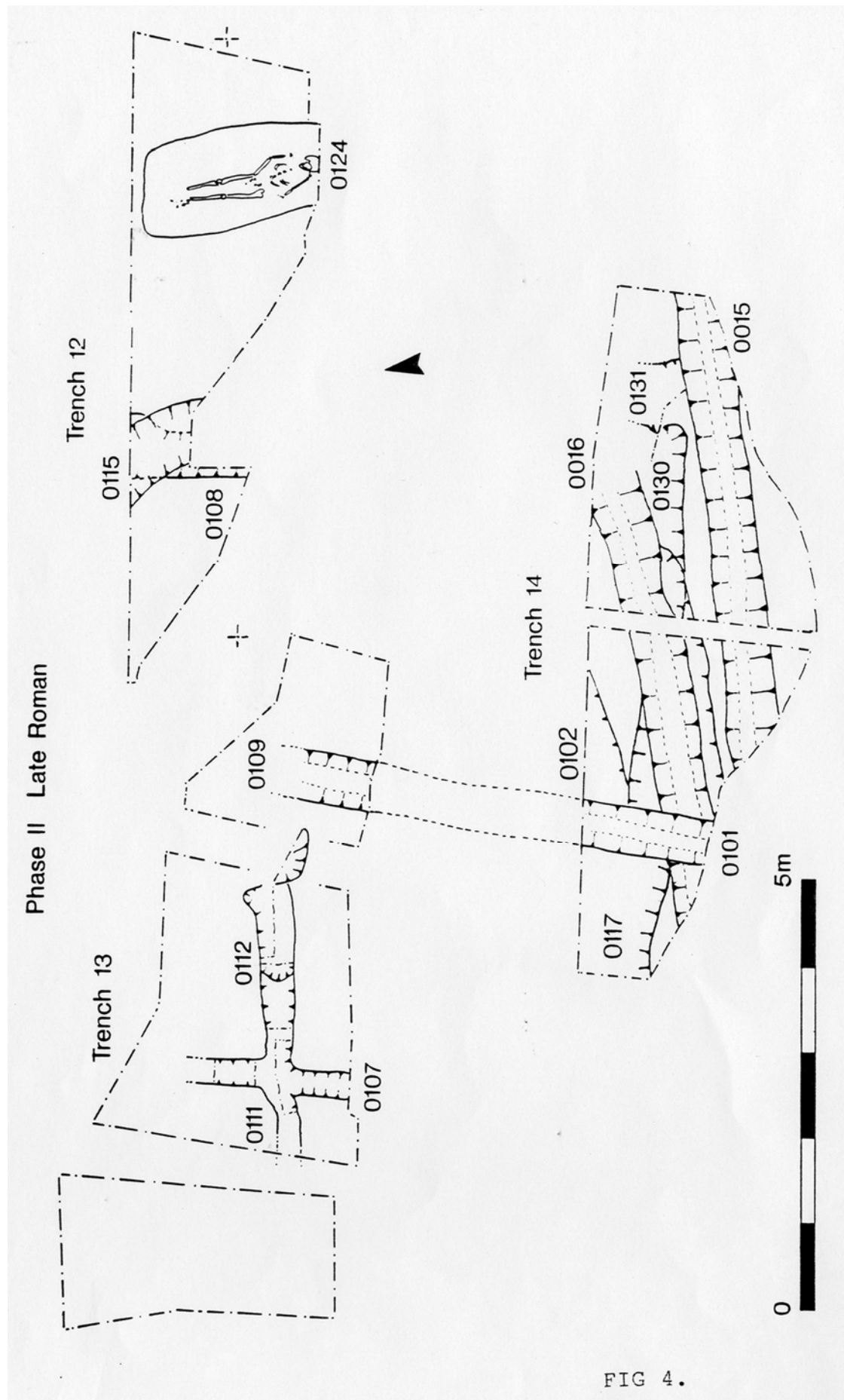


FIG 4.

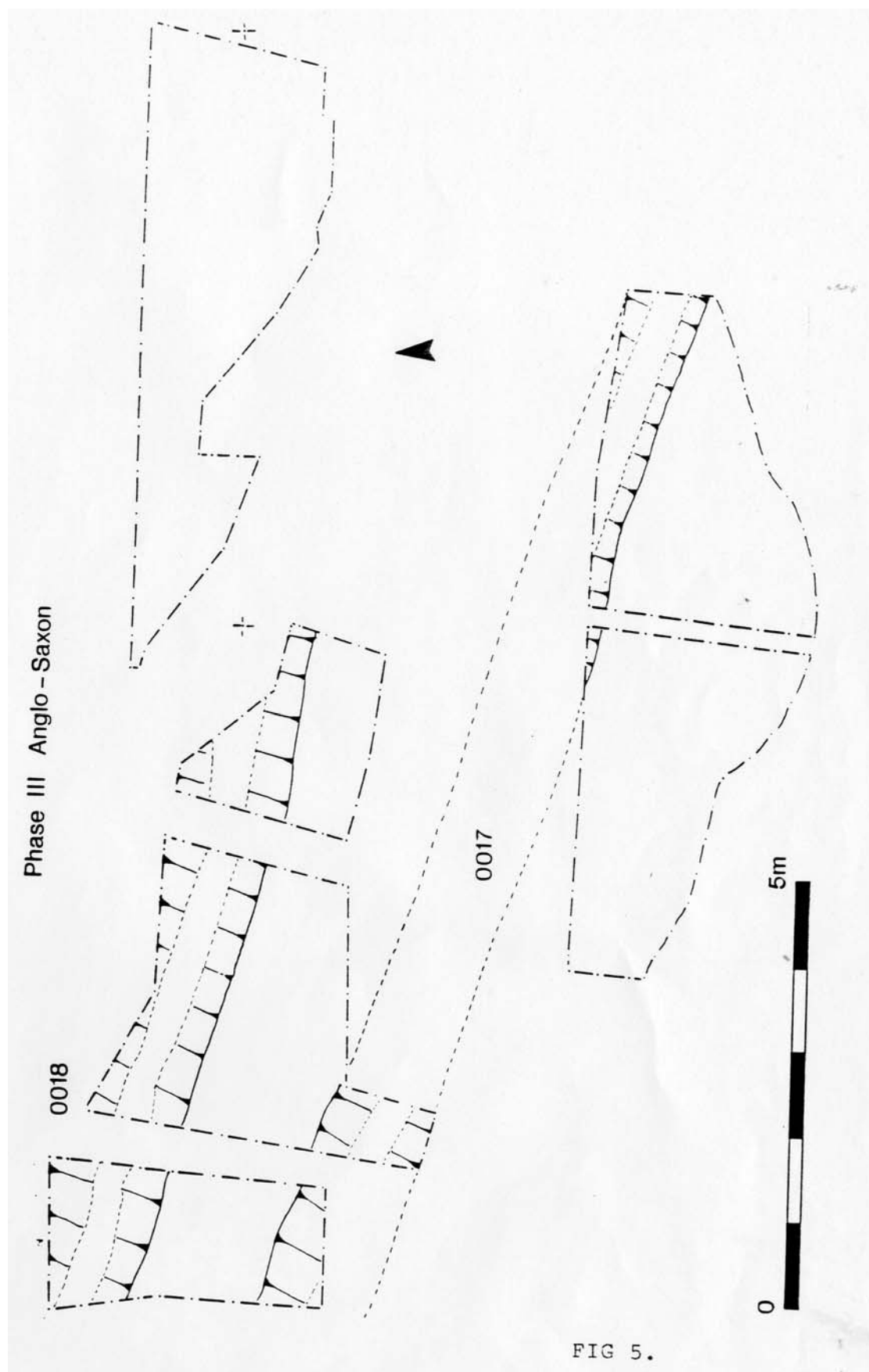


FIG 5.