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# An Archaeological Evaluation at Fishbourne, West Sussex,

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Excavations at Fishbourne, West Sussex, between 1961 and 1969 revealed the remains of a spectacular Roman villa of the late first to third centuries A.D. overlying a series of particularly early masonry buildings which in turn succeeded a legionary depot in use during the invasion of 43 AD. As pointed out in the excavation report (Cunliffe 1971), Fishbourne Palace is at the centre of an area of known Roman occupation of up to 50 acres, including a large informal garden running south from the south wing of the Palace to the coast approximately 110 metres away. A Roman aisled building which was excavated in 1982-1983 on the west bank of the harbour some 600 metres south-west of the Palace was tentatively described as being "under the control of the Palace" (Rudkin 1986) and it has been suggested that Fishbourne is at the centre of a late Iron Age and Roman estate which had its boundaries at Chichester to the east and religious site at Bosham/Broadbridge to the west. A series of excavations from 1983 to 1986 concentrated on the area immediately east of the Palace (Down forthcoming). In 1983 another early masonry building and underlying possible military structures were discovered but perhaps more surprising were the results of work done close to the line of the new A27 truck road in 1986-1987, when a complex of features interpreted as being part of a semi-formal Roman garden were uncovered up to 120m east of the Palace.

When Chichester District Council decided to build a hostel for the homeless on a 0.54 hectare meadow in the angle between Fishbourne Road and the A27 trunk road the District Archaeological Unit carried out an evaluation of the area to establish its archaeological potential.

#### The Evaluation

In the last week of January 1992 a series of trenches were excavated by machine around the area of the most intensive proposed development. The trenches were 2.5 to 3 metres wide and in some cases more than a metre of topsoil and modern disturbance was removed to reveal the archaeological features below (see Figs. 1 & 2). The southern third of the site has been so heavily disturbed in the fairly recent past as to make the survival of archaeological features unlikely, but where the ground slopes gently upwards to the north, away from Fishbourne Road, the archaeology survives well at a depth of approximately 0.4 metre below the surface. Due to a surprisingly high water table the trenches soon became waterlogged, especially in the southern areas A and K, so it was decided that a minimum number of features should be excavated at this stage. At the base of the topsoil is a layer of grey clay with gravel-like flint inclusions (see Fig. 3, sections 6 & 9), this covers a wide range of undisturbed subsoils, varying from brickearth at the north end of the site down to gravel at the south. Below the clay and gravel layer and cutting into the natural subsoils are a large and varied number of archaeological features.

Areas B and C contain a number of small pits and/or postholes, solitary examples of which also occur in areas D and G. Larger pits or occupation spreads which are difficult to interpret in such narrow trenches occur in most of the areas and a series of ditches and gullies similar to those encountered in the 1986-1987 excavations were visible in areas B, D, E, G and H. Several of the latter features were carefully excavated and the spoil sieved for finds. In addition numbers of objects were retrieved from the spoils by metal detector survey.

#### Sample Excavations

Ditches 2 and 4, apparently parallel to each other and cut into a thick spread of occupation debris (layer 8), had black, organic fills. Though not excavated, some finds were collected from all three contexts. Layer 8 produced one sherd of arretine ware and an amphora handle, ditches 2 and 4 had several coarse sherds and tile fragments but ditch 4 had some early samian ware and arretine. All these features potentially date to the first century AD.

Ditch 6, 0.7m deep and 2.6m wide, with a black, organic fill (see Fig. 3) produced very large quantities of tile, pottery and metalwork. The pottery is all of first or second century date except for two intrusive medieval sherds (presumably a medieval feature cuts into the top of the ditch but was not recognised). Among the more than 140 small-finds were a number of fragments of melted lead and copper alloy, window and vessel glass, a knife blade and at least two coins. Of particular interest were very large quantities of iron slag and fragments of crucible with iron and copper slag still adhering.

Ditch 9, 0.45m deep and 1.0m wide, with a black, organic fill including a thick layer of charcoal (see Fig. 3) had relatively small quantities of indeterminate Roman pottery and tile. The small finds again included quantities of slag and melted bronze and lead.

It is likely that ditches 6 and 9 continue as 12 and 27 in areas G and H.

Gully 15, 0.3m deep and 0.4m wide, with a grey, silty-clay fill, only had a few fragments of fire-cracked flints.

Gully 17, 0.15m deep and 0.5m wide, filled with brownish clay, had a few sherds of late or post-medieval glazed pottery and some tile.

In addition to the excavated sections, large quantities of Roman tile, pottery and small-finds were recovered in cleaning the bottoms of the trenches in order to see the features more clearly. The finds included some prehistoric flintwork and (Iron Age ?) pottery and a few medieval lead seals and one coin. Amongst the Roman material were a number of tile objects such as have previously been excavated from the early masonry buildings on the Palace site.

## Discussion

The 1992 Fishbourne evaluation has shown that the site is one of some archaeological importance. Prehistoric, early Romano-British and medieval activity comparable with that on the 1985-1986 site is reflected in the finds, particularly in the large quantity of Roman pottery which at first glance seems relatively early. The quite large quantities of tile and brick probably came as rubble from the Palace site as almost certainly did a single example of opus spicatum, which was used to make herringbone floors in the early masonry buildings, and a cylindrical spacer, used in early heated wall flues. The ditches, pits, postholes and gullies are difficult to interpret at this stage. Though they may be akin to those seen in 1986-1987 as part of a semi-formal garden the fact that one small sample of one ditch (6) contained over 20 kg of iron slag and that the site has also produced crucible fragments, melted lead and copper objects, indicates the presence of at least one phase of quite intense industrial activity.

The site is clearly of some importance in understanding the environment of the Fishbourne Palace nucleus. Any development should be preceded by complete archaeological excavation.

Fig. 1. The location of archaeological excavations and evaluations 1983-1992, in relation to Fishbourne Palace.

Fig. 2. A plan of the 1992 evaluation trenches.

Fig. 3. Features sectioned in the 1992 evaluation.

The cover illustration is of a samian form 37 bowl of the late first century A.D. which was found during the 1985-6 excavations.

## Bibliography

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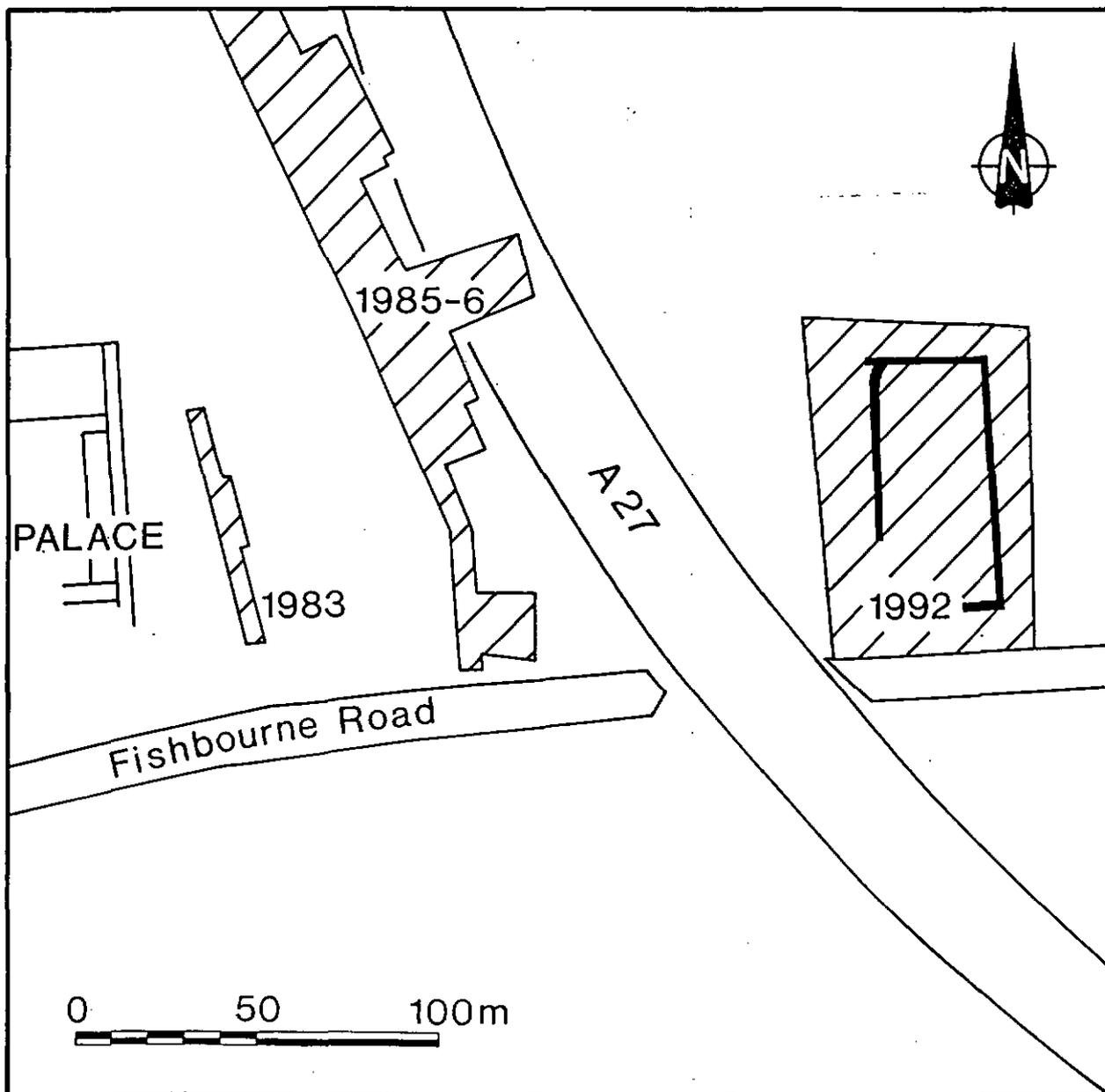


Fig.1

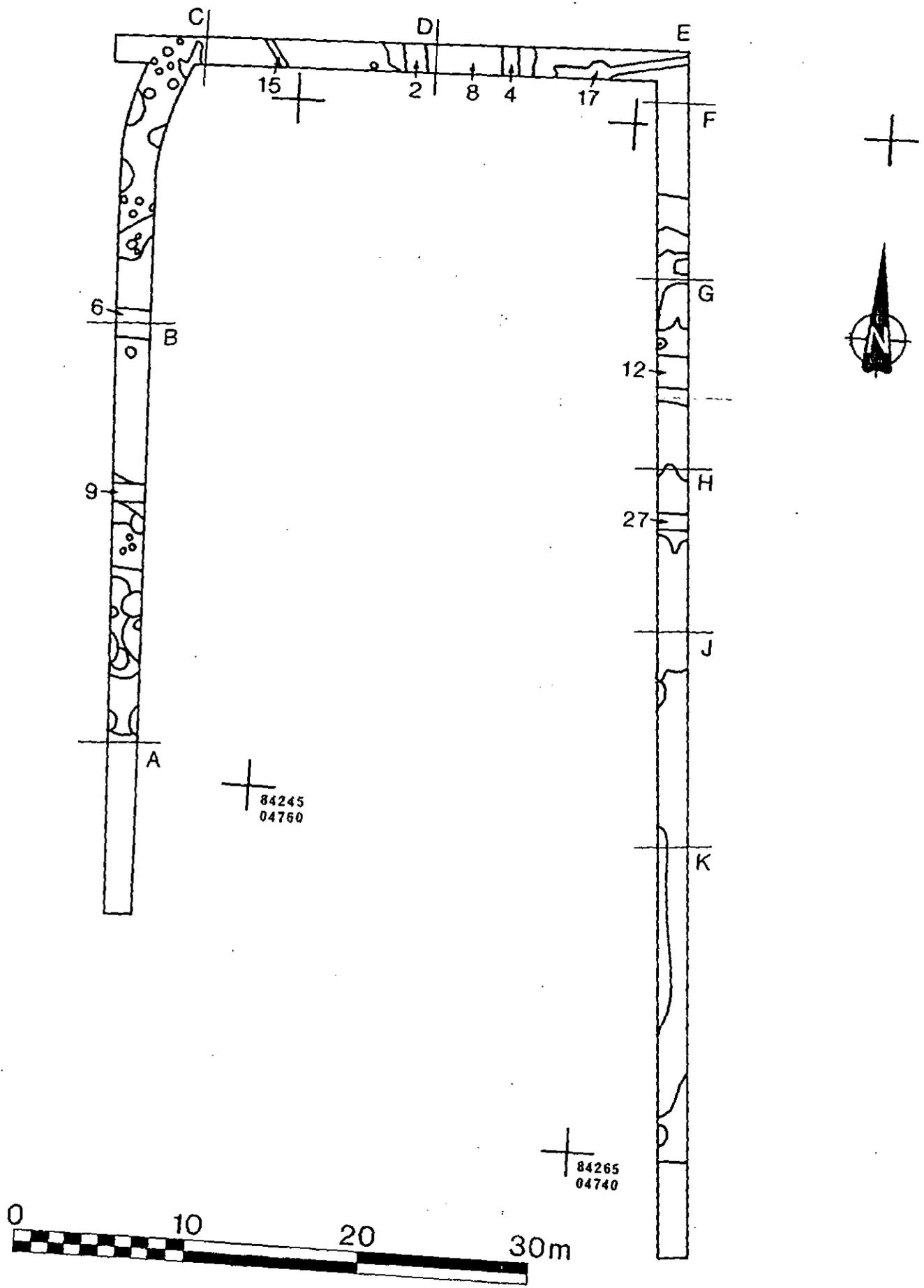


Fig. 2

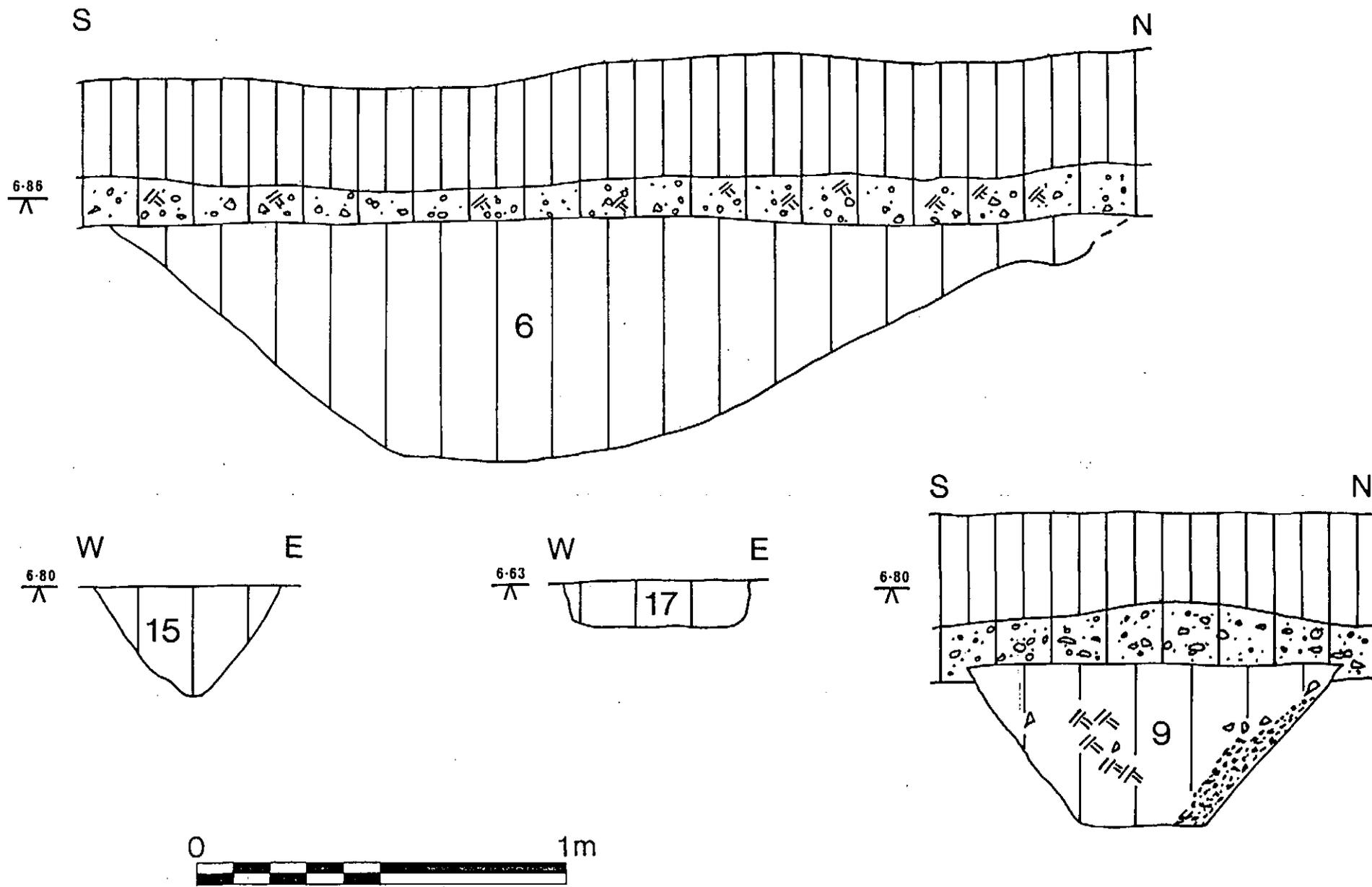


Fig. 3