

THE TEMPLE OF MINERVA, HARLOW.

In the summer of 1927 the late Sir Mortimer Wheeler spent a day at the very first and very amateur excavations on the temple site at Harlow and the following year produced a brilliant paper which made Harlow the type site for Romano-Celtic temples in Britain. In 1962 the West Essex Archaeology Group began a decade of work which showed the importance of the site in Roman times and before. Their work raised many new questions so between 1985 and 1989 Harlow Museum carried out further excavations under its archaeologist Richard Bartlett. Many of the questions raised by the previous excavations were answered and there were several surprises. Much research remains to be done on the finds but we can give a preliminary account of this nationally important site extending over several thousand years.

The earliest finds date from the Old Stone Age, from 250,000 to 12,000 B.C. and include an axe from the Roman courtyard and waste flakes from toolmaking. The first major use of the site dates from the Middle Stone Age between 8000 and 5000 B.C. when part of it was used for making flint tools. This low hill near the river Stort was an ideal summer camping site for a group of hunter-gatherers. The New Stone Age farmers virtually ignored it but about 1500 B.C. the hilltop became the site of a Bronze Age cemetery. Several cremations were found grouped around an oval depression just below the brow of the hill. This is believed to be the remains of one of the few pond barrows known in Britain. An area of intense burning inside it may have been where the dead were cremated. Any burial monument in the logical place on the hilltop would have been totally destroyed when the Roman Temple was built.

The religious use of the site continued during the later Iron Age with the deposition of large numbers of coins, brooches, tools and other offerings. In addition the Museum totally excavated a ring ditch enclosing an area 13 metres in diameter with a disturbed foundation deposit in the ditch terminal east of the

entrance. No internal features had survived later Roman treasure hunting but the offerings and the absence of domestic refuse tell us this was a shrine, though we have no idea who was worshipped there.

Although only part of the Roman building was examined we now know it had a more complex history and was much more elaborate than used to be believed. Before the temple was built about A.D. 80 offerings continued to be left on the site. These included coins, brooches, miniature swords and pieces of military equipment. Some of these last would have been left by Roman soldiers while items like the armour fragments might have been plunder offered by the Britons during the Boudiccan Revolt in A.D. 60. Quite a large number of the coins feature Minerva, goddess of warfare and the arts. The lifesize limestone head of the goddess found in 1985 is almost certainly the cult statue of the temple from the cella and we are confident that the building was dedicated to her. Unfortunately none of the inscription fragments found confirms this. The A.D. 80 masonry temple consisted of a tower-like shrine or cella surrounded by an enclosed passage or ambulatory with a south facing porch overlooking a cobbled courtyard. For comparison the reconstruction includes the massive cella of the so-called temple of Janus at Autun, France, the only temple tower of this type known to survive. In the 120's extensive additions were made in timber which seem to have consisted of colonnaded structures east and west of the public courtyard, some additions to the front of the temple and a fence enclosing an area to the north.

The site continued to prosper and about the year 200 the courtyard buildings were rebuilt in stone as was the large entrance gateway. Up to six possible treasuries for votives were added onto the temple, the porch was enlarged and an inscribed altar for public sacrifices erected at the foot of its steps. Either now or later the rooms in the buttressed east range received stone or tessellated floors and at least one had its walls painted. These rooms may have

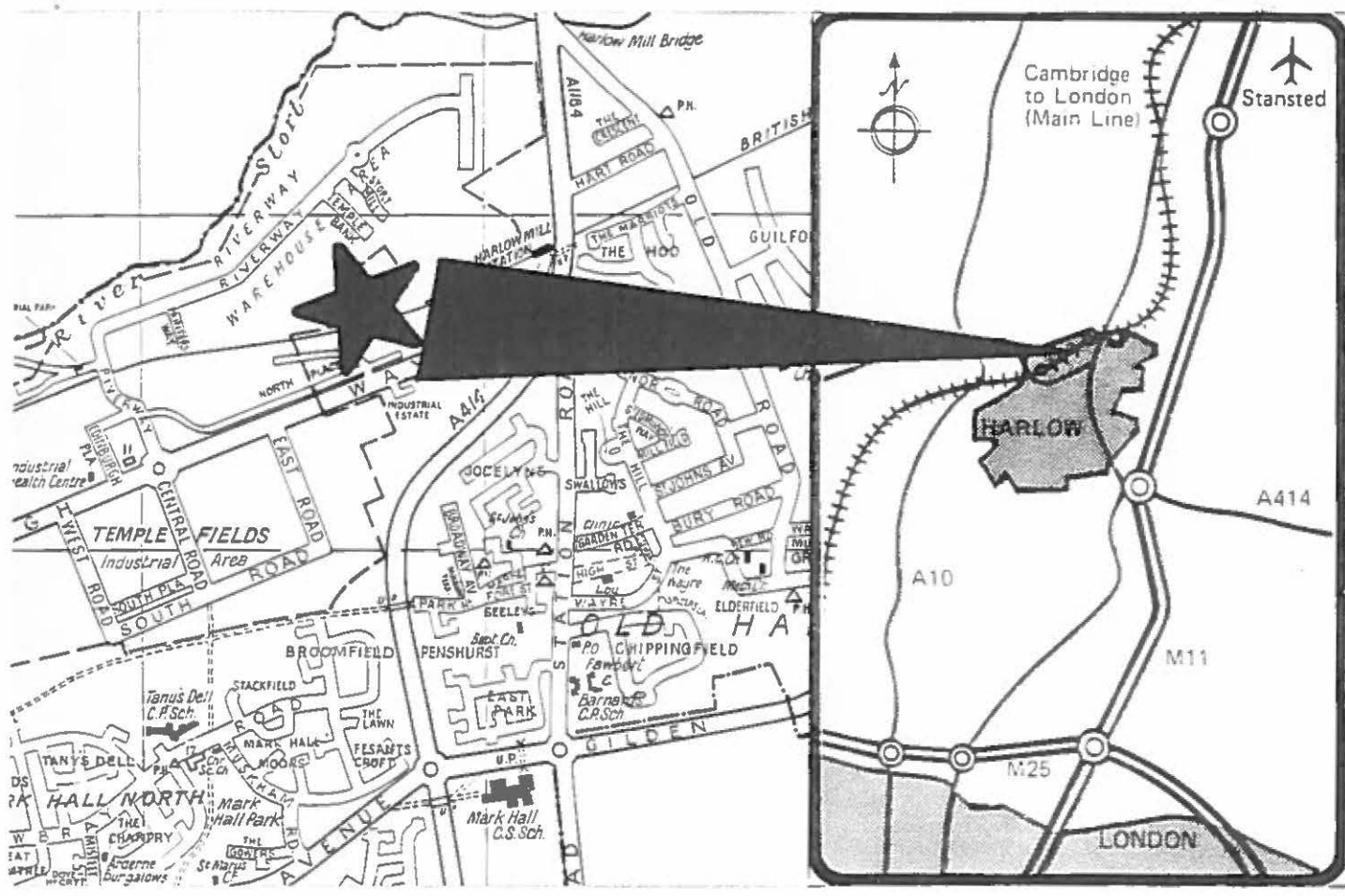
been used for accommodating visiting pilgrims. The apparently less elaborate west range may have been used for less important pilgrims or storage. The temple was richly decorated with carved stone and painted plaster while in the courtyard were carved altars and other offerings. Inside the rather gloomy temple stood Minerva and a large bronze candelabra. Pieces of the priests regalia found include an elaborate bronze chain, gold and bronze leaves while amongst the votives is an unusual bronze and ivory miniature breast and a miniature pewter chalice.

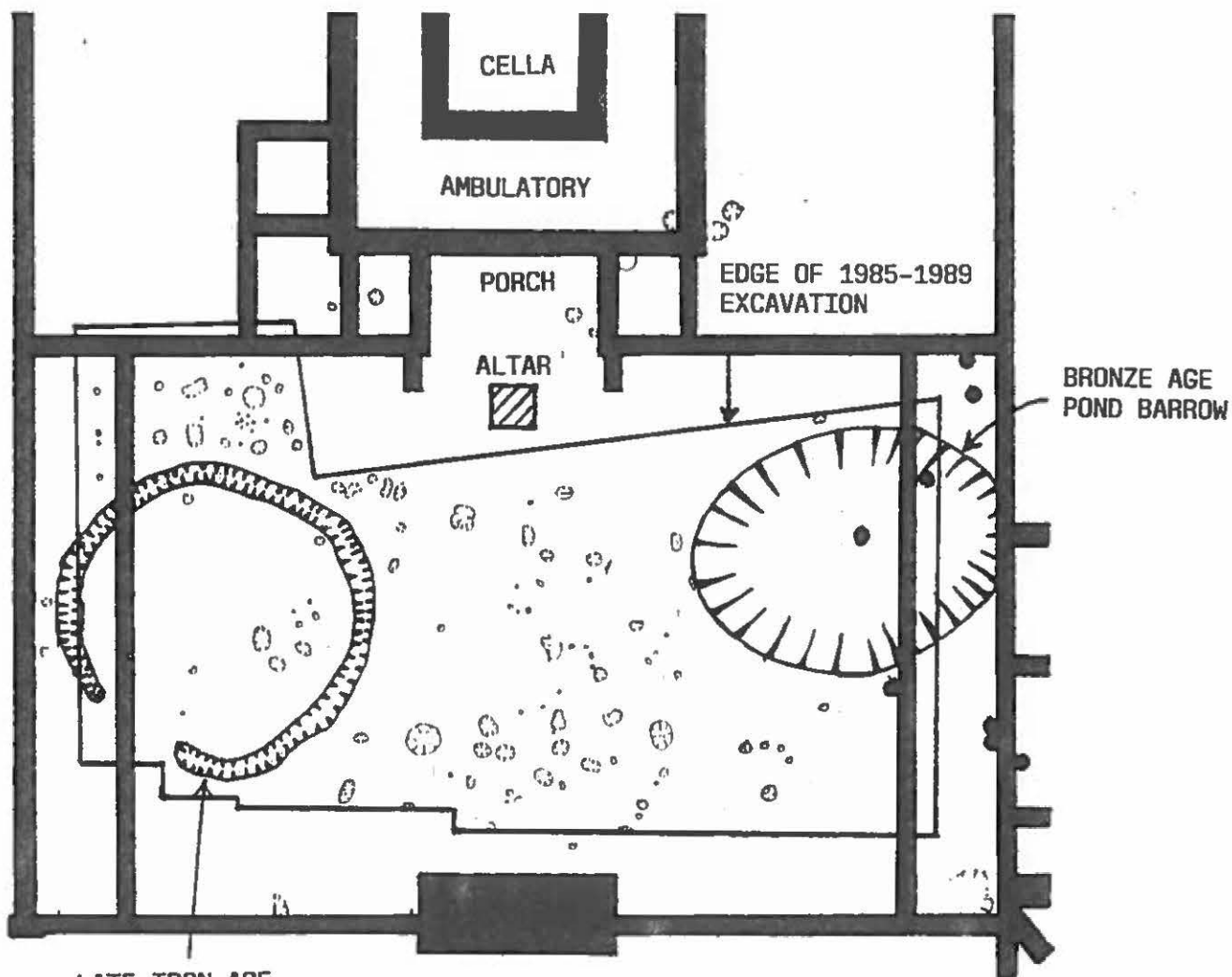
Until well into the 4th century the site continued to be well-used though the increasing influence of Christianity led to its decline and eventual closure sometime after 350. The depositing of coins, including some of Julian II the last pagan emperor, increased considerably and seems to have continued until around the year 400 though by that time most of the site had been demolished. Little is known of these late visitors though one in the 370's was probably a soldier. He lost his belt plate, a rare find from Britain decorated with the Christian symbols of a peacock and the tree of life. Towards the end of the 1989 season a final important discovery extended the sites history into the Dark Ages. Several postholes packed with rubble marked the remains of a sizeable timber building, use unknown, in the north corner of the courtyard.

Finds from the 1960's excavations are on permanent display in Harlow Museum. From April 1st to May 7th the Museum will be mounting a temporary exhibition on the 1985-1989 excavations. Admission is free and the Museum is open seven days a week from 10am to 5pm. Copies of the Report on the 1960's excavation are available price £10.30 including postage and packing from Harlow Museum, Passmores House, Third Avenue, Harlow, Essex. CM18 6YL

TEMPLE OF MINERVA, CAPTION LIST

1. Location Map.
2. Members of W.E.A.G. excavating the Cella in 1962.
3. 1985-1989 Excavations, pre-Roman features.
4. Terminal of Iron Age ring ditch and inside wall of Roman west range.
5. Coins (not to scale) top: Late Iron Age gold quarter staters.
middle: Iron Age bronze coin of Cunobelin.
bottom: Bronze coin of Vespasian, A.D. 69-79
6. Four iron miniature votive swords including one with its bronze scabbard.
7. Side view of the head of the cult statue of Minerva.
8. Temple of Minerva, phase I, Flavian.
9. "Temple of Janus," Autun, France. Walls of the Cella.
10. Temple of Minerva, phase II, Hadrianic.
11. Temple of Minerva, masonry features.
12. Temple of Minerva, phase III, Severan.
13. Part of the bronze chain from a priests regalia.
14. Late 4th century Christian belt plate showing a peacock and the tree of life.





● BRONZE AGE CREMATION

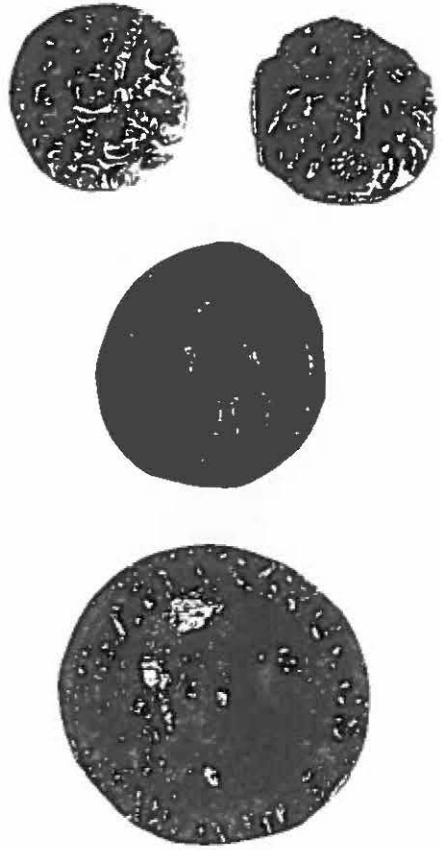
■ ROMAN WALLS

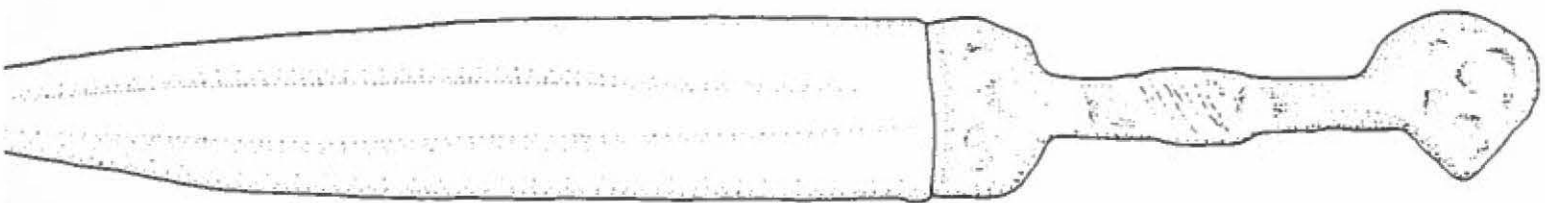
PRE-ROMAN FEATURES



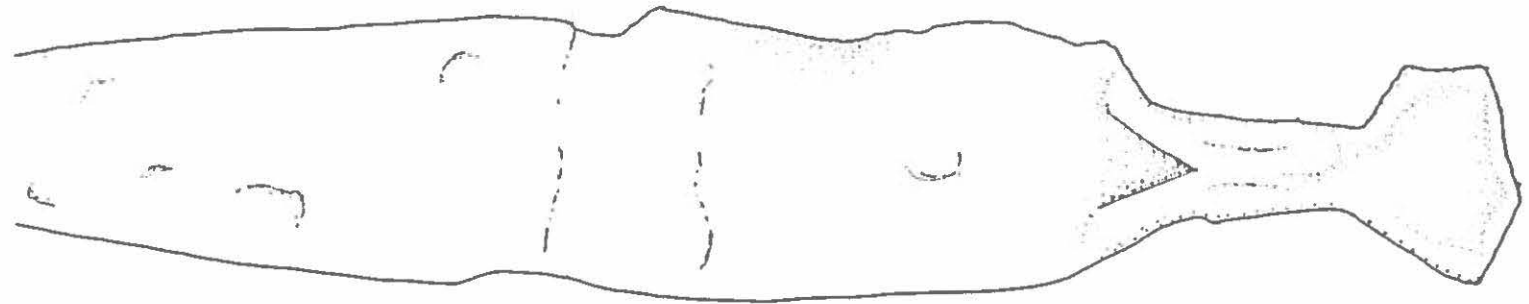
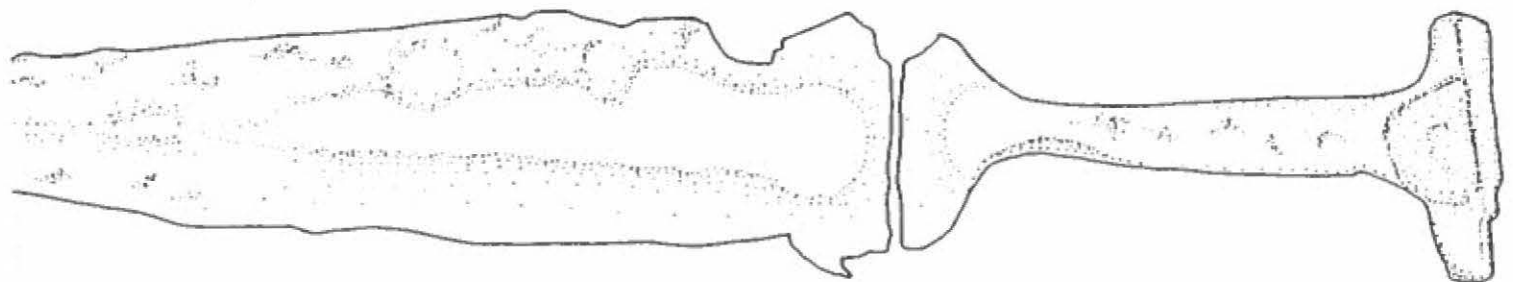
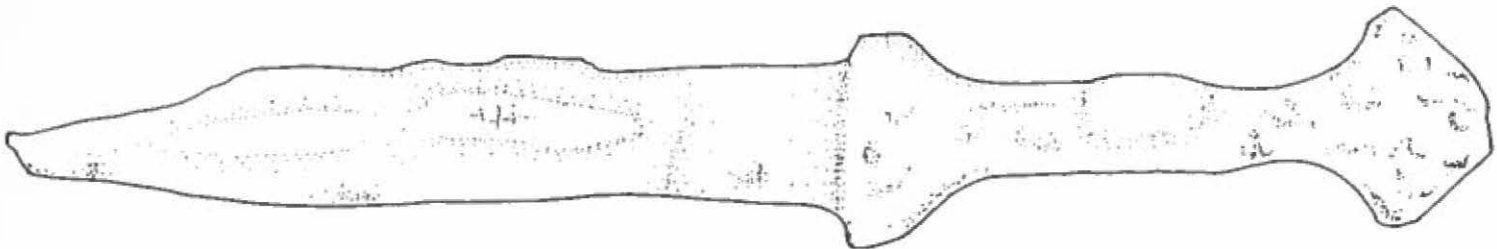
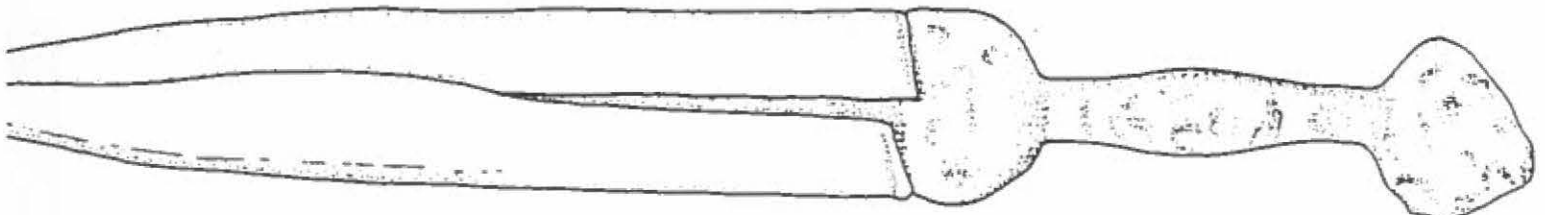
0 10m

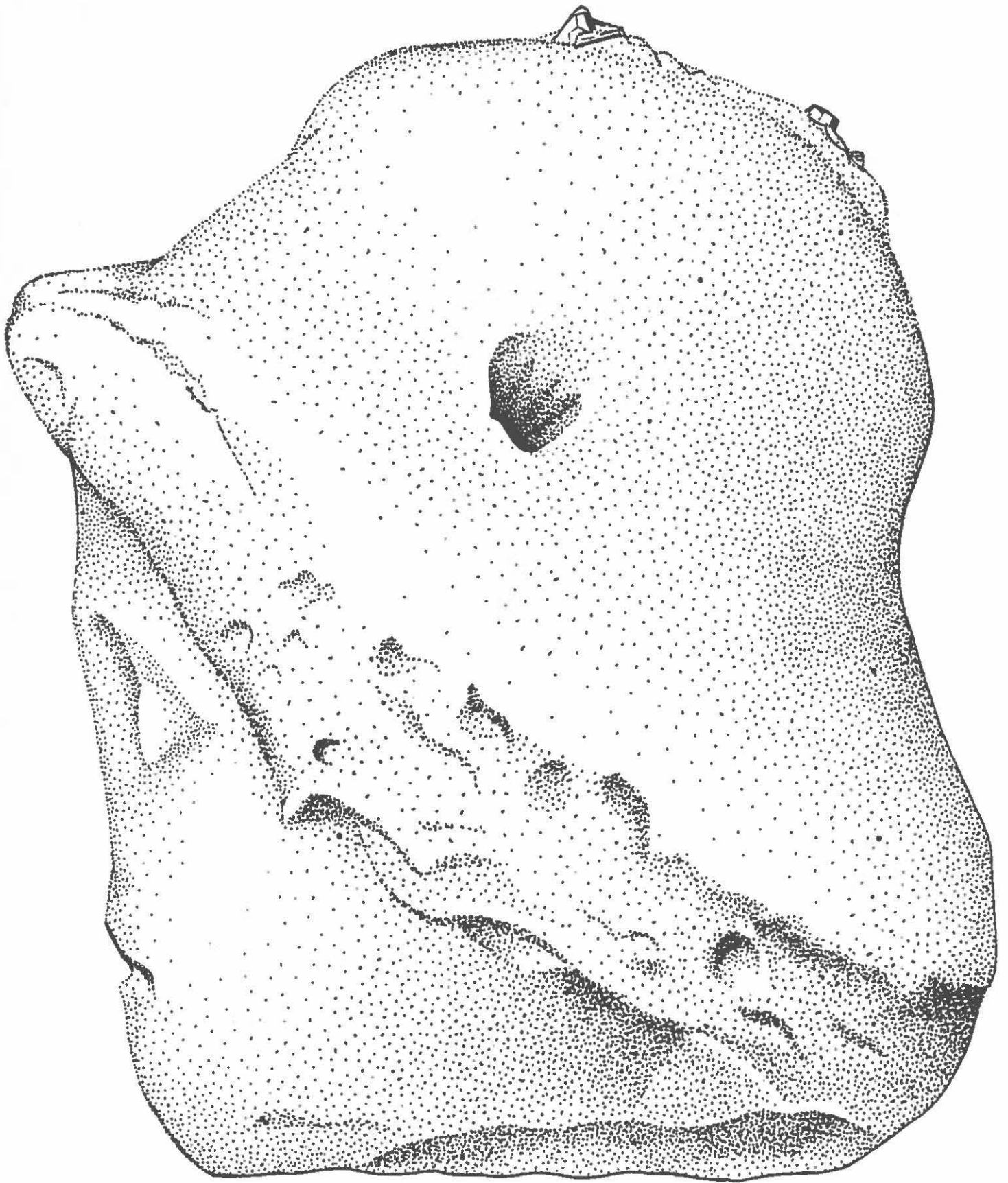
A horizontal scale bar with a vertical tick at the 0 mark and another at the 10m mark.





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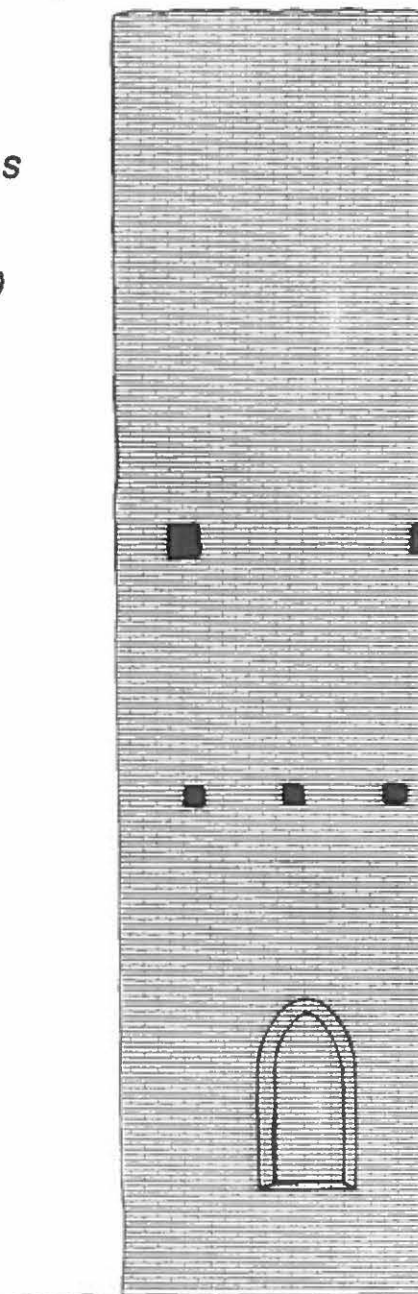
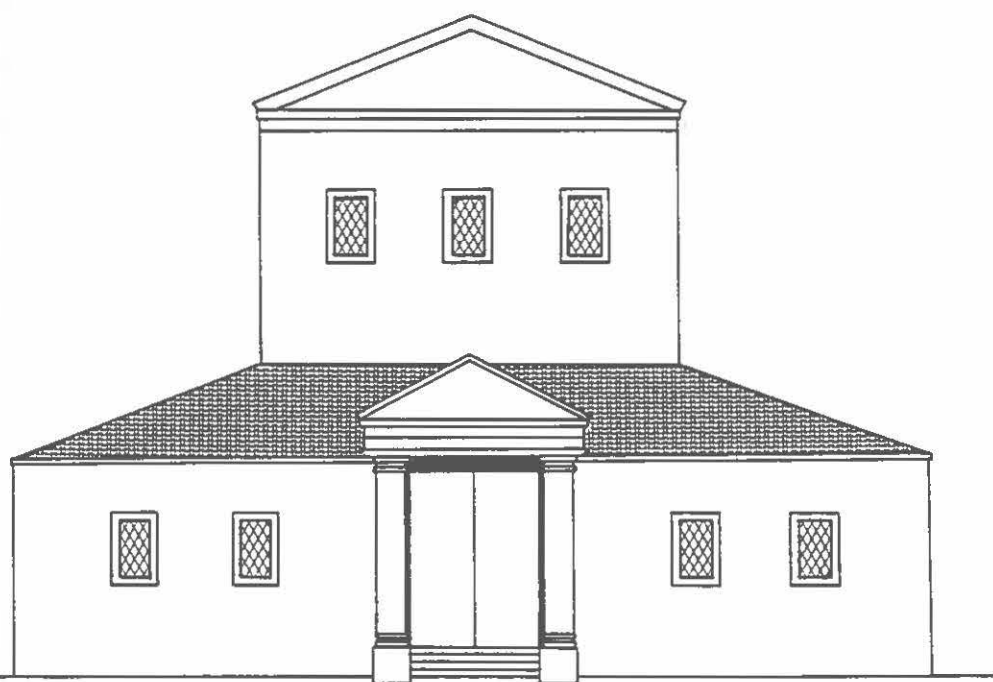




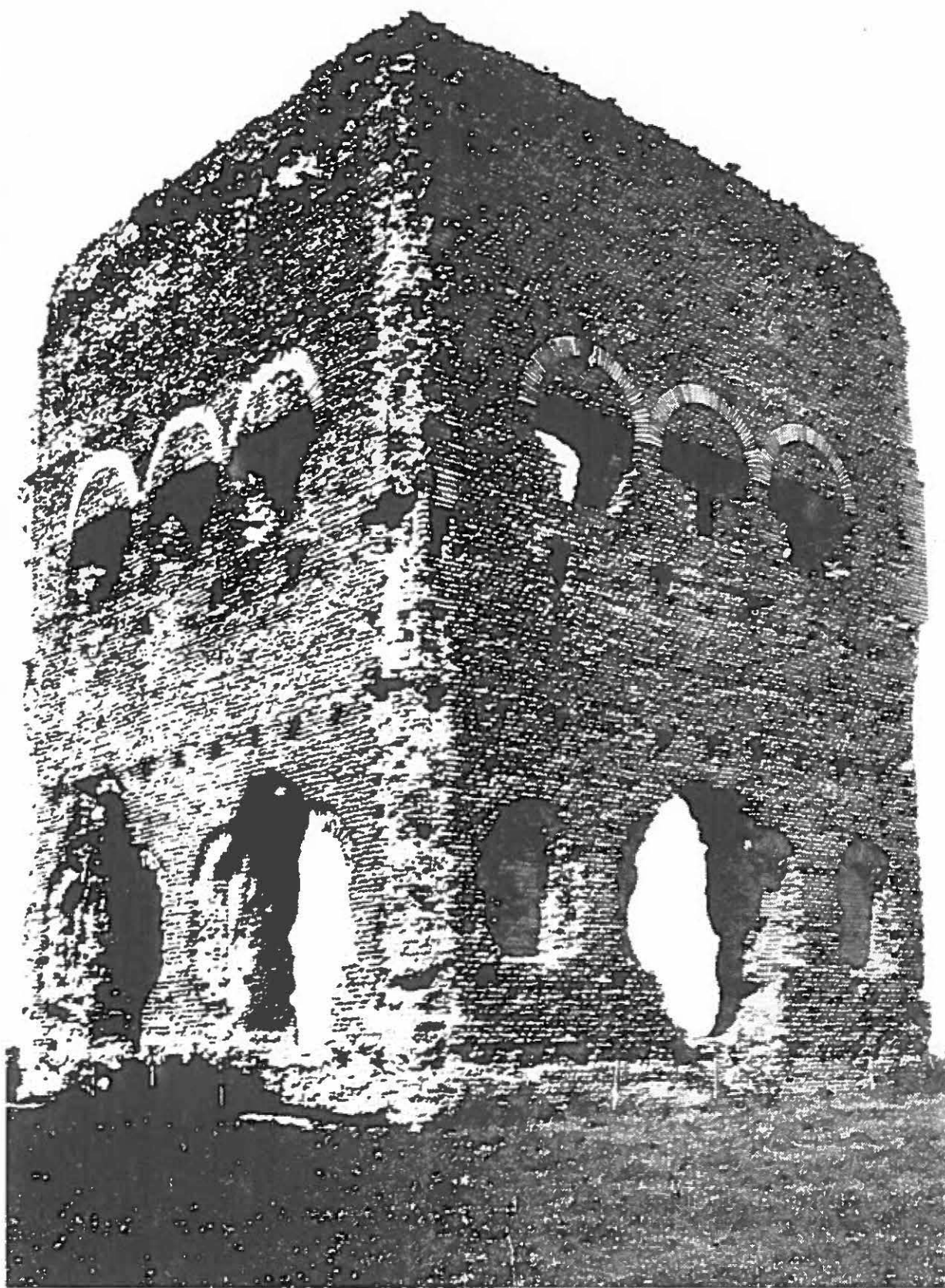
0 5 cm

HARLOW
TEMPLE OF MINERVA
PHASE 1, FLAVIAN

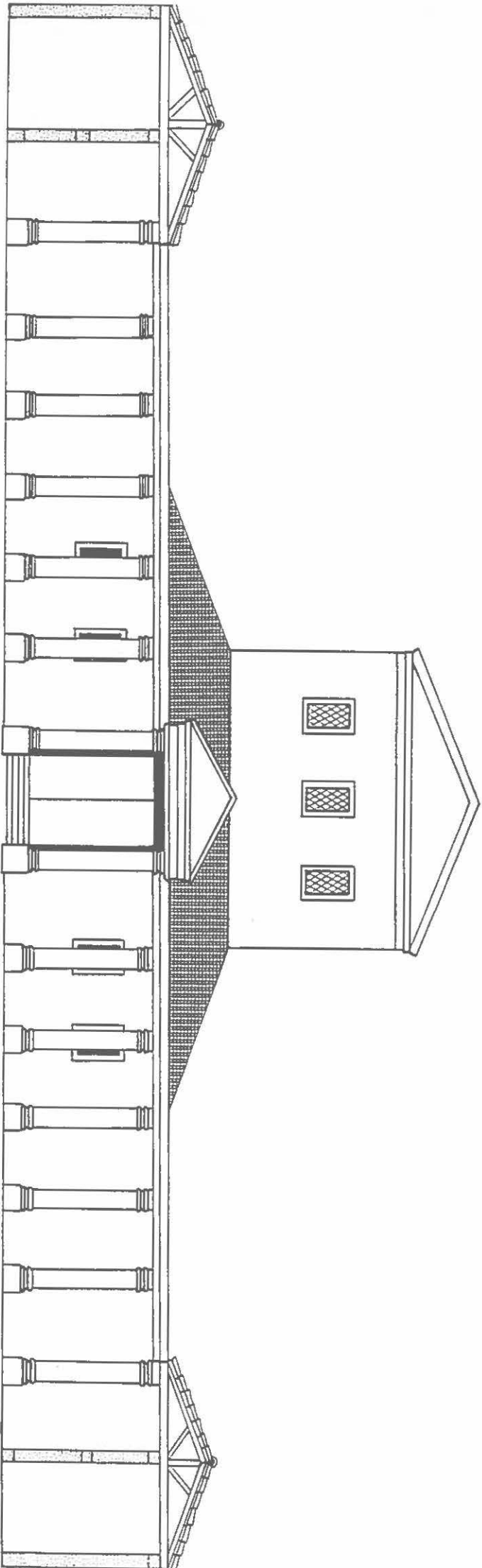
AUTUN
TEMPLE OF JANUS
CELLA
(to the same scale)



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50



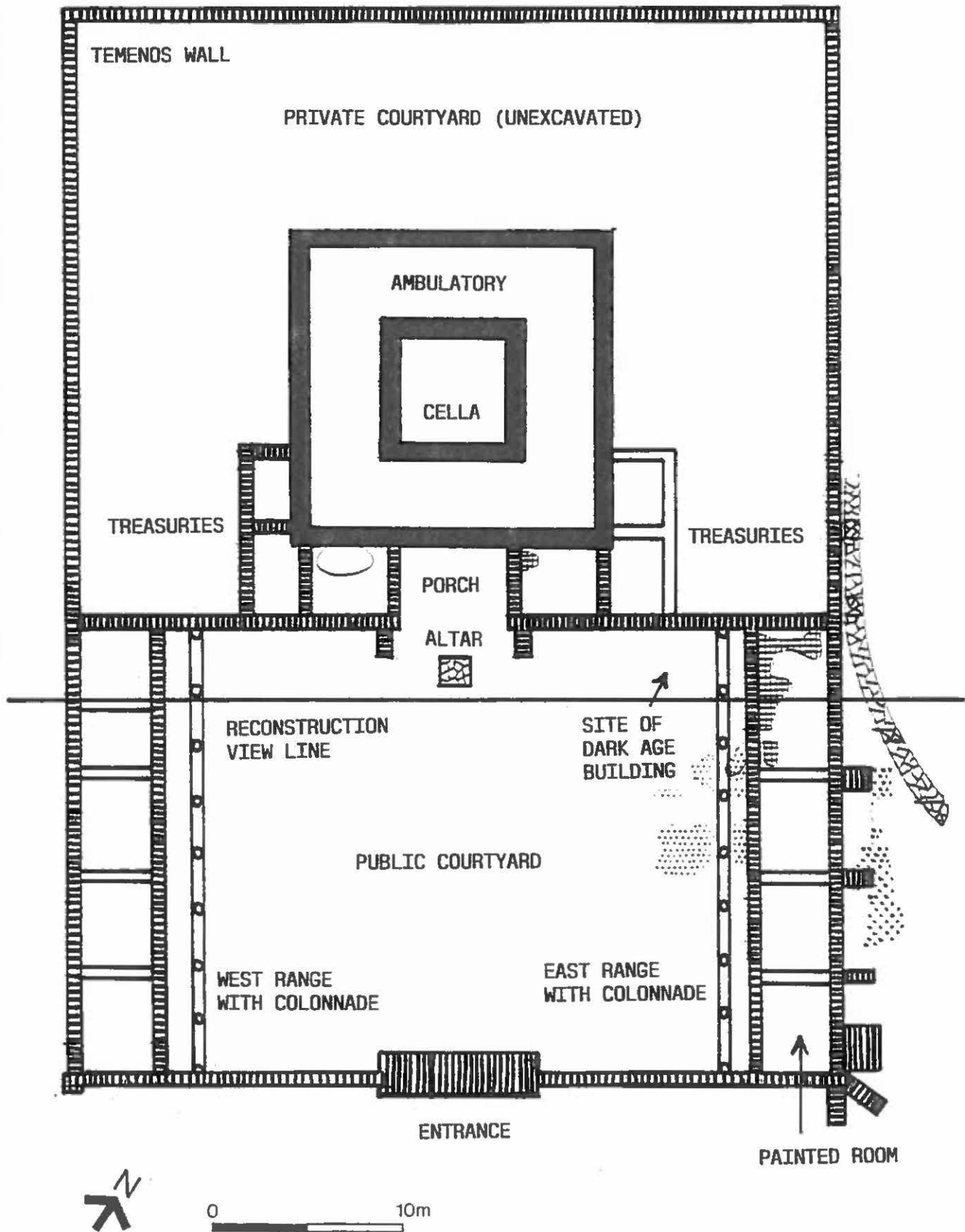
HARLOW
TEMPLE OF MINERVA
PHASE 2, HADRIANIC



TEMPLE OF MINERVA, HARLOW

PHASE 1, FLAVIAN c.A.D.80
PHASE III, SEVERAN c.A.D.200

SUGGESTED ADDITIONS RESULTING FROM EXCAVATION AND RESEARCH 1985-1989



FARLOW
TEMPLE OF MINERVA
PHASE 3, SEVERAN

