

# The Saxon and Medieval Palaces at Cheddar, Somerset—an Interim Report of Excavations in 1960-62

By PHILIP RAHTZ

*Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology, University of Birmingham*

THE existence of a royal palace at Cheddar was well known, but its location was uncertain. It lies just below the southern escarpment of the Mendip Hills in Somerset, about a mile below the well-known Cheddar Gorge (FIGS. 16-17). The earliest record of the existence of a Saxon site here is in Alfred's will, in which he refers to the 'families' of Cheddar, a term which may apply to the

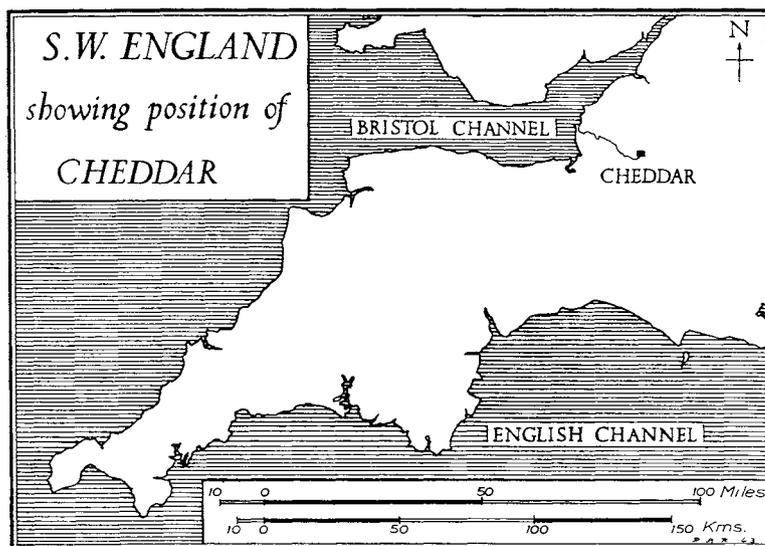


FIG. 16

royal household or to a monastic establishment; the latter is more likely in view of references in the time of Eadgar to Cheddar minster, and to a double house of men and women. The monastery at Cheddar did not lie in the area of the excavations here described; it is more likely to have been near the present parish church of St. Andrew, about 200 yards SE. of the palace, where there is also an important Roman site (FIG. 17). This is the nucleus of early settlement, at the highest navigable point on the river Yeo, and on the gravel-covered Triassic slope above the edge of the alluvial plain.

The most important references to Cheddar palace are those in the middle of the tenth century. There is a well-known story of Eadmund's difficulties with Dunstan at the court of Cheddar, and of his narrow escape from death while hunting the stag above Cheddar Gorge in 941. The Witan met at Cheddar in 941, 956 and 968, in the reigns of Eadmund, Eadwy and Eadgar and on these

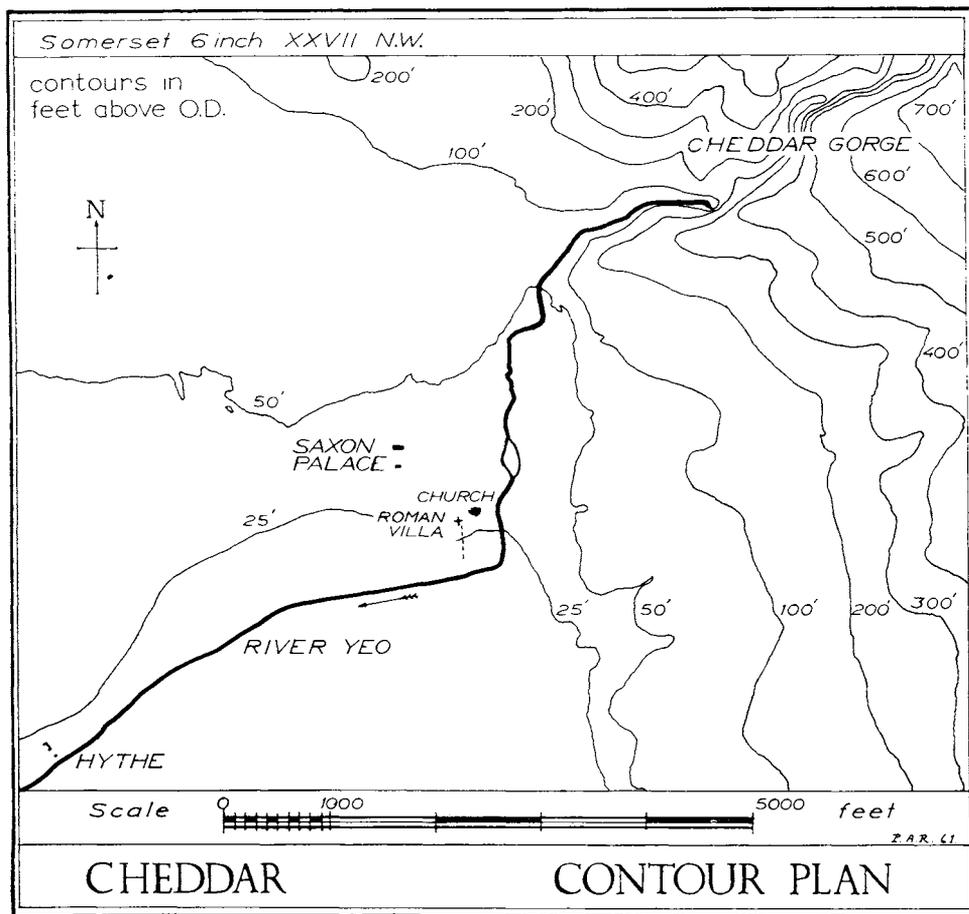


FIG. 17

## CHEDDAR, SOMERSET

Map showing position of Roman and Saxon sites (p. 53 f.)

Based on the 6 in. O.S. map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office. Crown Copyright Reserved

occasions the site is described as the *villa celebris*, the *palatio regis*, and the *sedes regalis aet Ceodre*. After the Norman conquest, the palace continued in use; Henry I issued documents at Cheddar in 1121 and 1130 and Henry II visited the site in 1158, John spent £40 on the 'king's houses of Cheddar' in 1209-11, but soon afterwards the palace was given to the dean and chapter of Wells.

A ruined medieval chapel dedicated to St. Columbanus still stands near

Manor Farm. In 1321 an *Inquisition* was set up to determine whether this was a 'royal free chapel', which suggested to C. A. Raleigh Radford the possibility that the royal palace might lie close to the chapel. When the Somerset County Council decided to build a large new school on the site, he recommended to the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate of the Ministry of Public Building and Works that excavation should take place before building began.<sup>1</sup>

The buildings excavated extend over about 2 acres (PL. v; FIG. 18) and all lie N.—S., or E.—W., with remarkably little variation. It is hoped that they will be preserved and outlined in the grounds of the new school, the buildings of which have been re-sited to avoid them.

### CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY OF FEATURES, BY PERIOD

Period 1, before the tenth century: Ditch A, Long Hall, N, S.

Period 2, tenth century: Ditch B, West Hall I, Corn-mill, Chapel I, ?P, T.

Periods 2-3: the East Entrance.

Period 3, eleventh century: Ditch E, West Hall II, Chapel II.

Period 4, twelfth century: West Hall III, East Hall I, U.

Period 5, early thirteenth century: East Hall II.

Period 6, later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: East Hall III, Chapel IIIA, Chapel IIIB, ?South-eastern Building.

### THE DITCHES

Ditches A and B provided the best stratification of the site (FIG. 19) and evidence of the chronology of the pre-conquest buildings. Ditch A was shallow and discontinuous, with large scoops linked by gullies. It was almost totally cleared for the length shown in FIG. 18; further west it was examined by trenching: its fall is westwards and it almost certainly drained into the river Yeo some 300 yds. SW. of the site. It is interpreted as a storm-water drain across the up-slope side of the building area. Above a slight primary silt was a layer of sand, charcoal and domestic debris, which yielded the earliest datable find, a coin of Æthelwulf of c. 845, metal objects, several Roman coins, dozens of Roman sherds, one hand-made gritted Saxon sherd, and thousands of food bones and shell-fish evenly distributed throughout its length. Above this was some slow silting with fewer food bones and a coin of Burgred of c. 870. The layer above this was darker and more friable and is interpreted as accumulation of soil and vegetation over the silted ditch; it yielded a coin of Æthelstan of c. 930, and more food bones with a single hand-made hard black sherd. Over Ditch A was a thin sterile gravel layer, interpreted as the residue of the upcast of Ditch B. If this is so, Ditch B is later than c. 930.

Ditch B had almost vertical sides and was deeper and more regular than A,

<sup>1</sup> A trial week at Christmas 1960 was followed by ten months' work in 1961 and 1962. In this I was assisted by Miss J. Close-Brooks, Mrs. M. Gray, Miss C. Mahany, Miss V. Russell and Mr. M. Swanton, with six men and much mechanical help.

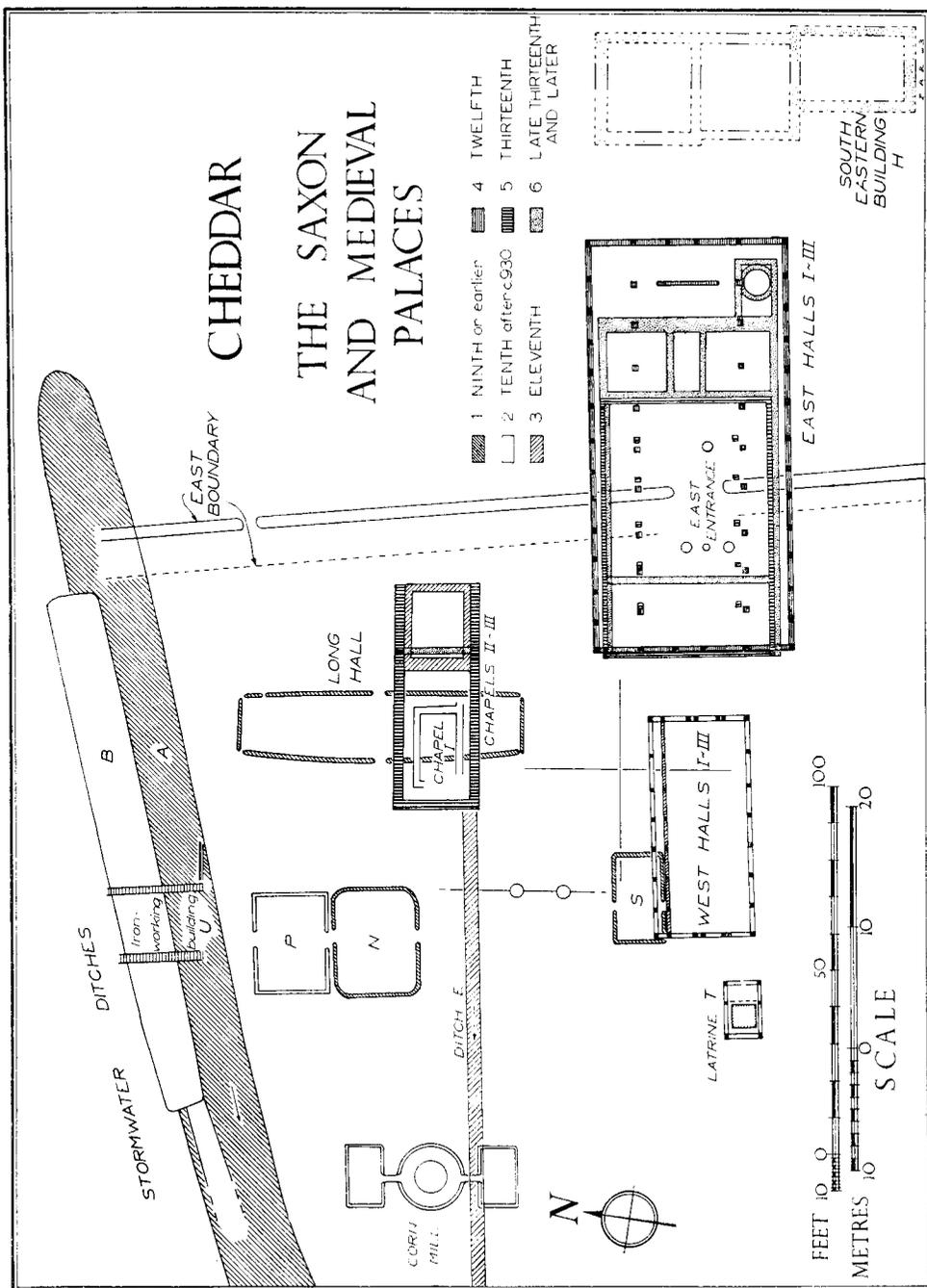


FIG. 18 (pp. 55 ff.)

with a flat base and squared-off ends; there was a shallow overflow at the west end; it is similarly interpreted as a catchment for storm-water. There was a slight primary silt of gravel weathered from the sides, and above this a layer 2 ft. thick of fine slow homogeneous almost sterile silt, with barely a dozen bones in the total length excavated. This was capped by a thick gravelly layer, interpreted as the pushed-back upcast used to level off the ditch. This contained near its base a coin of Æthelred II of *c.* 994, associated with many large sherds of grooved and hard-gritted wheel-made pottery. Thus Ditch B was levelled in the late tenth to eleventh century or later, probably in period 3.

## THE BUILDINGS AND OTHER FEATURES

### *Period 1, before the tenth century.*

The Long Hall (FIG. 20) is tentatively and tenuously associated with Ditch A on the basis of their relationship in plan and a single sherd of hand-made gritted ware in one of its probable interior post-holes. The hall was 78 ft. long externally and 20 ft. wide in the middle, narrower towards the ends. Its construction was of closely-spaced posts, *c.* 9 in. square, set in a trench which was continuous except at the entrances; these are in the middle of the long sides, with a minor one towards the north end of the east side. Inside each entrance was a post-hole which may indicate an internal porch, or support for a staircase. The main posts were inserted close to the outer edges of the trenches, and inner, shallower, inward-sloping posts could be distinguished in places towards the inner edges of the side-wall trenches and opposite to the main posts; the inner trench edges were also sloping. The sloping inner posts have been interpreted variously as internal supporting struts for the roof or supports for a first floor. Inside the hall, south of the main entrances, was a spread of burnt clay which might represent a hearth or oven; it contained one hard black hand-made sherd and a coin of Constantine I.

Minor building S (25 ft. by 14 ft.) was of slighter post-in-trench construction with opposite entrances. It was stratigraphically earlier than the West Hall, and may be of period 1; a coin of Burgred, *c.* 870, was found close by.

The most important minor building was N (30 ft. by 24 ft.: PL. VIII B; FIG. 21) with a perimeter of large separate post-holes. It probably had opposite entrances in the longer sides, and possibly one in the south end of the west side also; there were many internal post- and stake-holes, perhaps indicating internal structures such as looms or benches. This building yielded a few hand-made gritted sherds, and a few food bones. It may be of period 1, but might be earlier than the Long Hall because of its constructional details.

### *Period 2, tenth century.*

Ditch B is dated after *c.* 930, and appears to be part of the first major reorganization of the site, perhaps before the Witan met at Cheddar; if this is so, reconstruction would have been in 941 or earlier, and thus possibly in the reign of Eadmund or more probably Æthelstan. Chapel I (22? ft. by 14 ft.) is later than the Long Hall and is assigned to period 2 because a coin of Eadmund of *c.* 945 was

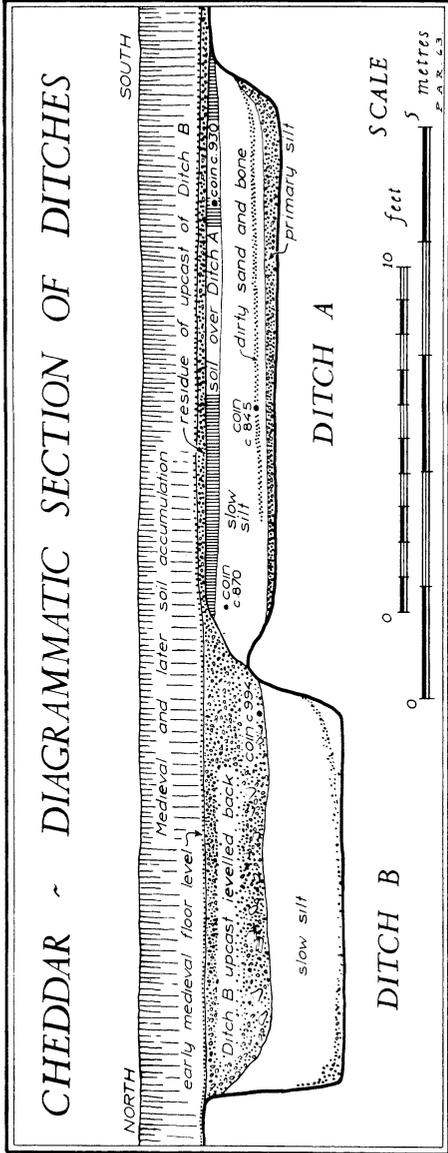


FIG. 19 (pp. 55 ff.)

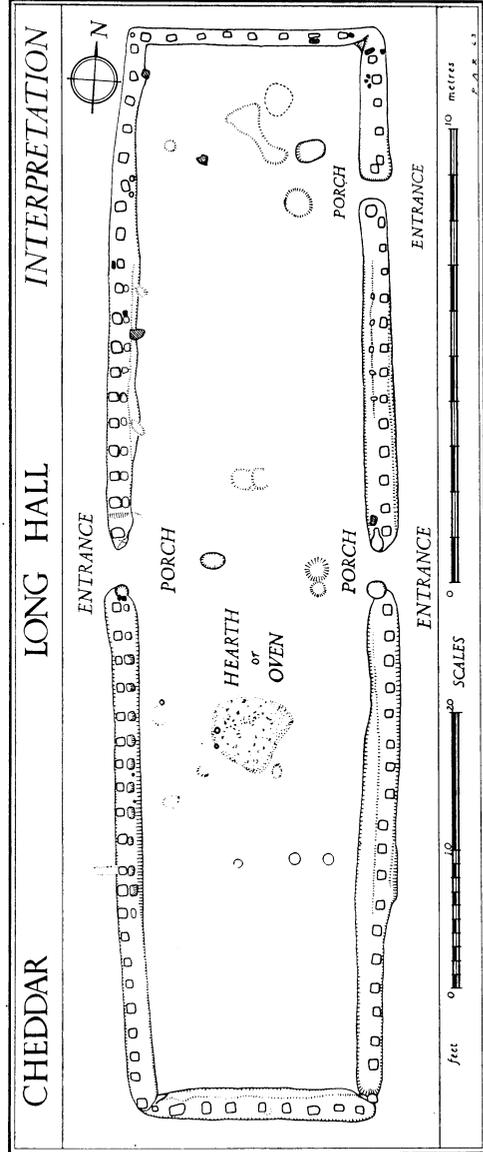


FIG. 20 (p. 57)

found close to the east wall. It is so interpreted because it was enclosed by later chapels. All that remained were the rough limestone boulder footings of most of the north, south and east walls, and a complex of post-holes, stake-holes and timber slots E. of the east wall (PL. VI, B; FIG. 18). Among these were black pitted sherds. The Long Hall was apparently replaced by West Hall I (FIG. 22). It was 60 ft. by 28 to 30 ft. externally, with major posts up to 2 ft. square in post-pits 3 ft. deep

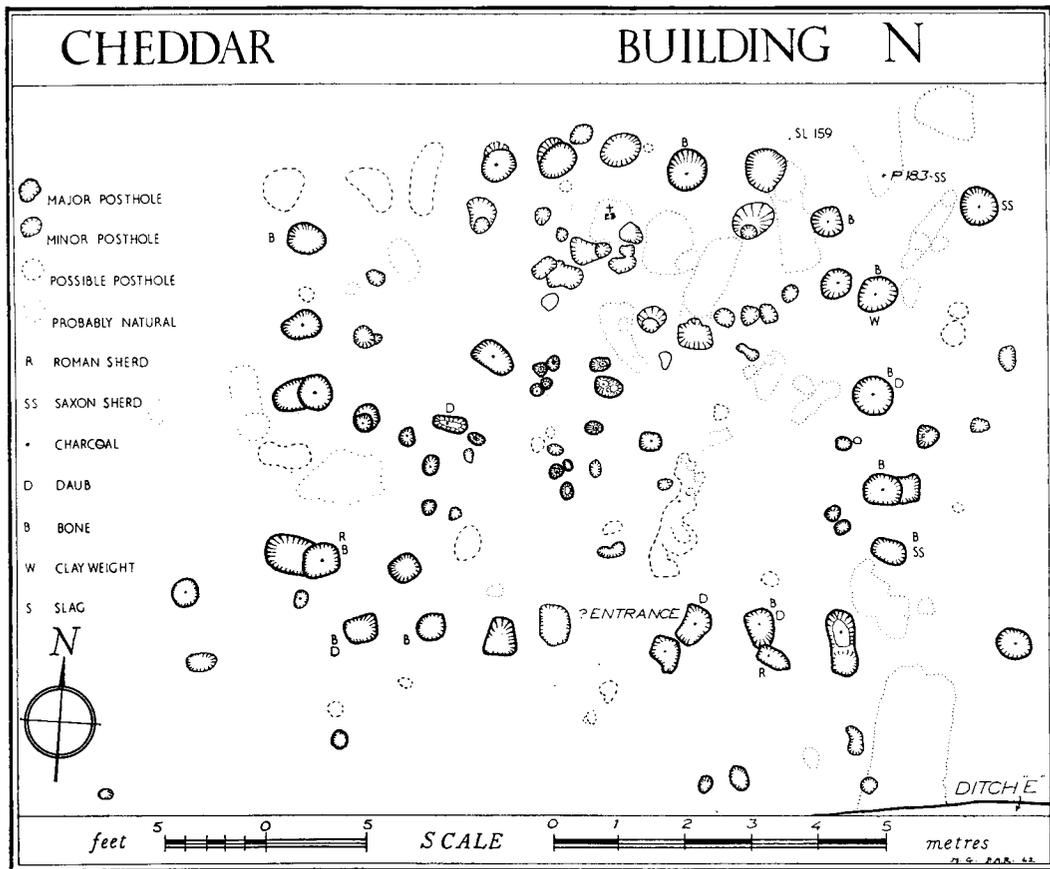


FIG. 21 (p. 57)

and 8 ft. apart, probably linked by ground timbers supporting plank walling. West Hall I is represented in FIG. 22 by the northernmost row of post-pits and by the earliest of the three phases of each of the other post-holes. There was no direct dating evidence, but wheel-made grooved and hard gritted sherds were associated with the succeeding phase of this building assigned to period 3.

SW. of the West Hall was a small building T (16 ft. by 10 ft.) which was probably the latrine (FIGS. 18, 22); six minor post-holes enclosed a rectangular area, on the west side of which was a pit 3 ft. deep; this presumed cess-pit probably went out of use before or during period 3.

# CHEDDAR

# WEST HALLS I-III

-  PROBABLE POST SOCKETS WEST HALL I
-  PROBABLE POST SOCKETS WEST HALL II
-  PROBABLE POST SOCKETS WEST HALL III
-  CERTAIN POST SOCKETS
-  ROBBERING HOLES WEST HALL I
-  POSTHOLES WEST HALL II

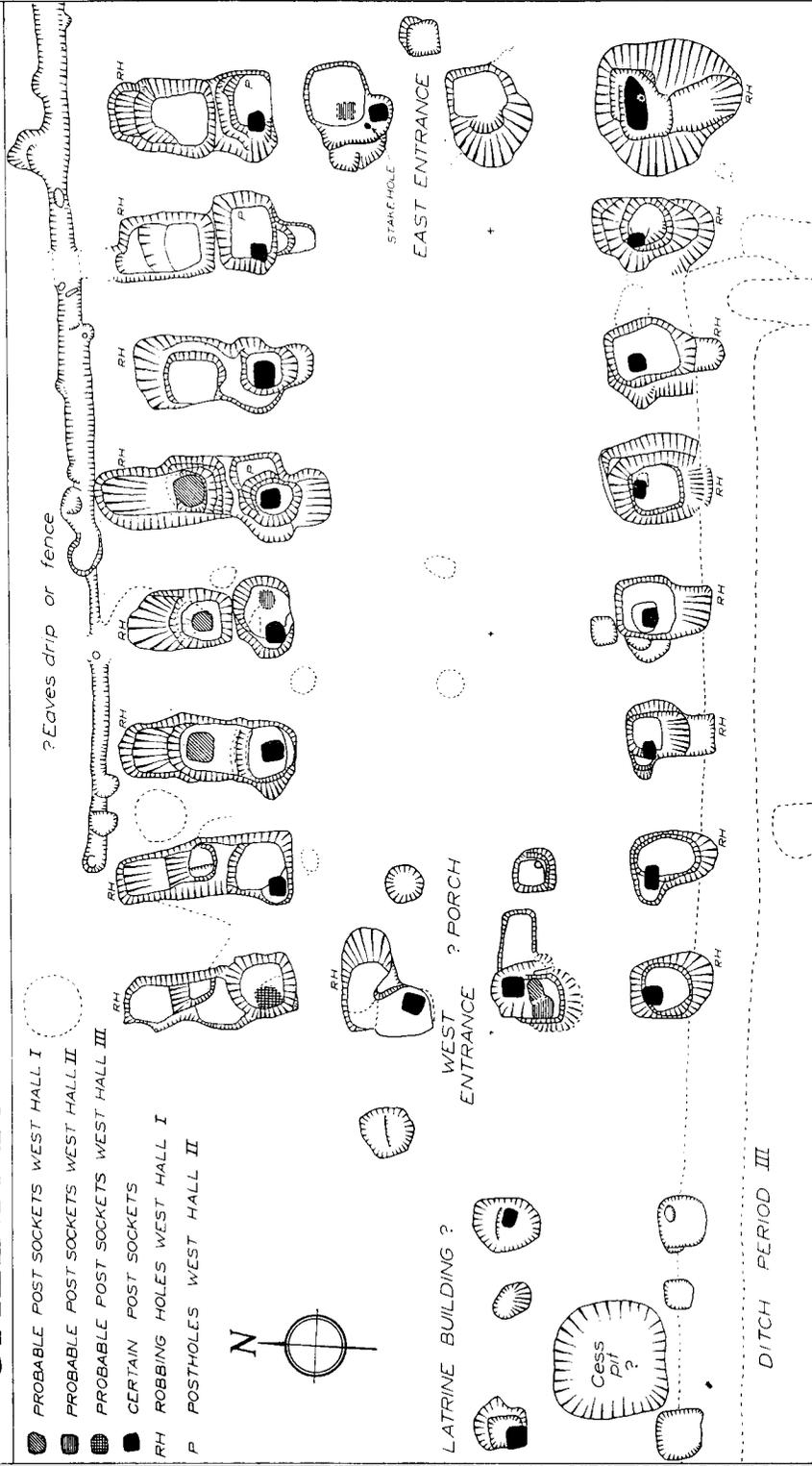
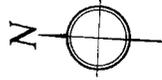


FIG. 22 (pp. 57 ft.)

Building P (PL. VII, A; FIG. 23) was clearly a replacement for building N; it was stratigraphically later than N and was of similar size (27 ft. by 21 ft.), shape, and orientation. It is assigned to period 2 because its position in relation to Ditch B was similar to that between N and Ditch A. This is a tenuous link, and it may well belong to period 1, though secondary to N. Its construction of 6-in.-square posts in continuous trenches and opposite entrances is certainly

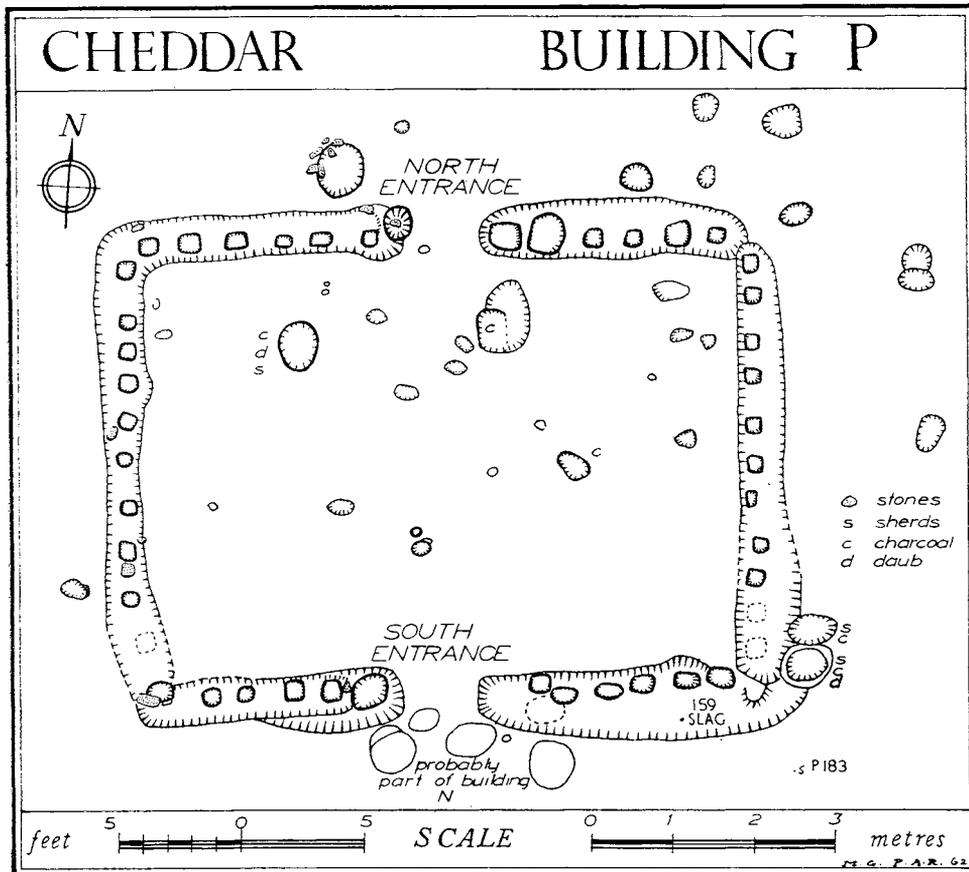


FIG. 23 (p. 61)

similar to that of the Long Hall, but it may be that the major construction method of period 1 became the minor method of period 2.

The Corn-mill (PL. VII, B; FIG. 24) is included in period 2 because of its direct stratigraphical antecedence to Ditch E of period 3. The central part consisted of a platform 9 ft. across defined by an annular flat-based gully, 18 ft. in diameter, with closely-spaced stake-holes inside its inner and outer edges. It is linked by sunken entrances (that on the S. destroyed by Ditch E) to north and

south with rectangular sunken areas, 18 ft. by 11 ft., which are also defined by stake-holes inside their perimeters. At the east end of the southern area was a small area of burnt stone and earth, probably the remains of an oven-base. The tripartite structure is interpreted as a grain-store,

an animal- or man-power track around a mill-platform, and a bakery. The stake-holes would be for wattle-and-daub walls, except those around the inner circle of the mill, which would be for a wattle fence defining the inner edge of the track and perhaps supporting a flour-trough or the edges of the mill-structure. Interpretation as a corn-mill may well be confounded by further research.

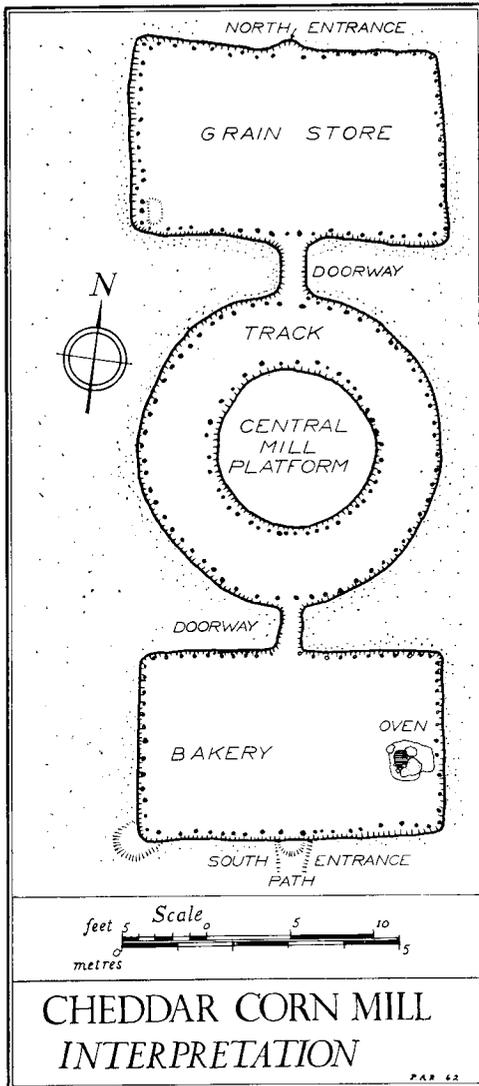


FIG. 24 (p. 61 f.)

in diameter and 3 ft. deep was in a slightly larger and more irregularly-cut pit. Around its top were numerous carefully-laid packing-stones and it contained a single hand-made hard black sherd. This is interpreted as the socket for a timber marking the entrance, either a flagstaff, or a carved pole.

*Periods 2-3, the east entrance.*

The east boundary and entrance (FIG. 18) may be of period 2 or period 3. A N.-S. V-shaped ditch about 3 ft. deep was pierced by two gaps, a minor one NE. of the chapel, and a main one E. of the West Hall; W. of it was a much smaller discontinuous gully which may have held a fence, but was badly destroyed by modern features. The ditch was stratigraphically later than Ditch A, and either contemporary with or later than Ditch B. It was earlier than the East Hall, and contained only a few sherds of the eleventh or twelfth century and a stone lamp of uncertain date. Inside the main gap was an area of disturbed gravel and three post-holes, the two outer being larger than the inner one; this is interpreted as a double gate, possibly connected to the 'fence'. Outside the gap and slightly to the south side was a very well-constructed post-hole. A cylindrical socket 21 in.

*Period 3, eleventh century.*

Ditches A and B may have been levelled in the eleventh century. Chapel II (FIG. 18) consisted apparently of a nave and a narrower chancel. The nave was built around Chapel I; its foundations, except the east one, are under those of Chapel III, and were seen only in a few places. The east wall, which was also the nave-chancel wall, survived as a heavy foundation crossing the present chapel under later floors; it presumably carried the piers of the chancel arch. The chancel foundations survived in one place, and the line of the rest was preserved by the outline of a robbing trench.

Chapel II is attributed to this period because of a coin of Æthelred II found in a robbed wall-trench in a position which suggested that it had been dropped during the building, since this part was not robbed until the fourteenth century; and by the evidence of a pitted sherd slightly harder than those found with the coin of Eadmund and another hard gritted sherd similar to that found with the Æthelred coin in Ditch B, both of which were sealed below the foundation between the nave and chancel.

West Hall II (FIG. 22) was of similar plan to West Hall I, but slightly narrower (60 ft. by 24 ft.). The north wall was replaced by a new one farther south. The other post-holes were replaced, but almost in the same positions.

Ditch E (FIG. 18) was apparently to drain the chapel area westwards. It was of V-profile, 6 ft. deep, and is provisionally ascribed to period 3 because it was almost completely silted up by the early thirteenth century; a large group of sherds of this date was found in the top of its silt. It is possible, however, that Ditch E belongs to period 4.

*Period 4, twelfth century.*

The period-4 buildings may be related to the visits to Cheddar by Henry I in the first half of the twelfth century. West Hall III (FIG. 22) was on the same plan as West Hall II with new post-holes, clearly rectangular, averaging 10 in. by 8 in. These were dated by some sherds of a rough-glazed tubular-spouted pitcher found in their packing. Those of the south wall were exactly in line with the post-holes of the south arcade of East Hall I, and this suggests that the two buildings were contemporary.

East Hall I (PL. VIII, A; FIG. 25) was an aisled hall, 110 ft. by 54 ft. The outer walls were represented by large post-holes at intervals of 8 ft., replaced in some cases three times, and linked by ground-timbers. The hall was of ten bays, the divisions of which bore no relationship to those of the parts of the outer wall. The arcade posts were apparently roughly-squared timbers of over 15 in. diameter; they were set in round pits, some 4 ft. wide and up to 6 ft. deep from the present surface; the rammed gravel round the post-holes contained a few twelfth-century sherds. Two coins of Henry II were found in the floor level of this building. Across the east end, at the first bay division, was a large timber-slot; this may have held the foundations of an internal or external gallery.

Another building probably of period 4 was Building U (FIG. 18). It lay over Ditches A and B, which may have been finally levelled at this time, and consisted



of two parallel N.—S. stone footings with timber-slots and post-holes; there were a few twelfth-century sherds in the same level, and evidence of considerable iron-smelting activity inside the building. The stone footings were partly over Ditch B and were deepened over its silt to ensure stability.

*Period 5, early thirteenth century.*

In the West Hall area there was no dating evidence later than the twelfth century, and it seems likely that the West Hall went out of use during or at the end of period 4. The only new building belonging to period 5 was East Hall II (FIG. 25). This was a six-bay aisled hall, 71 ft. by 48 ft. The new outer walls had stone footings, later robbed, possibly with a timber superstructure. The new arcade posts were of similar size, but were set in new square pits, some of which overlapped the earlier round pits.

East Hall II was dismantled and its arcade posts removed by digging robbing holes, which were filled with domestic debris, including a large group of pottery of the first half of the thirteenth century; this dating for the end of the building suggests that it may well have been that erected by John in 1209-11, and dismantled after the site had passed into episcopal hands.

*Period 6, later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.*

Chapel IIIA (PL. VI, A; FIG. 18) is dated thirteenth century by the style of the extant upper window of the west wall. It may be as early as the time of John, but is probably later. It was of similar length to Chapel II, but of uniform width, the nave/chancel wall or arch being abolished. A circular bell-casting pit, 4 ft. deep, was dug in the former nave. The base of the bell-mould, of clay and fibrous material, which was still in position, showed that the bell had been 21 in. in diameter at the rim; the pit was filled with gravel, broken fragments of the mould, bell-metal slag, and thirteenth-century sherds. A lime-kiln lay outside the north-west corner of the chapel; it had a stoking-pit, a circular kiln, and flue, and was 4 ft. deep. Chapel IIIB belongs to the fourteenth century, probably *c.* 1330 to judge by the style of the east window. In this rebuilding the chapel was shortened by the demolition of the east end and a new east wall inserted just E. of the nave/chancel wall of Chapel II. The present west doorway also belongs to Chapel IIIB.

East Hall III (FIG. 25) was an aisleless hall, 66 ft. by 42 ft. internally, with stone walls, which absorbed and replaced the outer wall of East Hall II. An additional tripartite block and garderobe, with stone-lined cess-pit, was added at the east end. The interior of the hall was cobbled, sealing off the earlier arcade post-holes. This floor thus sealed the pottery in the arcade post-holes of East Hall II, and places East Hall III in the thirteenth century or later. An approximate terminal date for it is given by the presence of sherds of the late thirteenth or fourteenth century in the final blocking of the cess-pit.

The South-eastern Building (FIG. 18) was examined only by trenching. Its exact plan is uncertain, but the narrow stone foundations appear to represent a building of three main divisions, in the southernmost of which was a large hearth or oven-base. Sherds from this building are mostly thirteenth century.

*Later medieval and post-medieval.*

The chapel continued in use to the early years of this century. In the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries diagonal buttresses were added, and in the seventeenth century it became a dwelling house. In 1840 a drawing shows it with chimneys at either end; in about 1905 the roof was removed, and the building has since become ruinous. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were cottages on the site of the East Hall. Manor Farm, N. of the excavated area, is of the fifteenth century and in the excavated area there were many outbuildings associated with the later phases of this farm.

## THE FINDS

A full account of the finds will be included in the final report. Those of the earlier (Saxon) periods were particularly interesting and included eight coins—Æthelwulf, Burgred (2), Æthelstan, Eadmund (a rare Bath halfpenny), Æthelred II (2) and Cnut; three decorated strap-ends of the ninth century; a pair of tweezers with animal-head ornament; a tenth-century disc-brooch; iron keys, horseshoes and tools; two scraps of glass, stone lamps, querns, and hones; many crucible fragments and pieces of slag associated with tenth-century bronze-working; and bone tools, handles and pins.

The Saxon pottery sequence is sparse until *c.* 950. The hand-made gritted and hard black sherds are tentatively ascribed to the ninth and tenth centuries, the pitted black to the later tenth century, the wheel-made grooved and hard gritted to the late tenth or early eleventh centuries, and the more prolific hard sandy wares to the later eleventh and twelfth centuries.