

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING AT  
38 GORDON ROAD, TOPSHAM, EXETER**

**Prepared on behalf of Mr S. Moran**

by  
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**Exeter Archaeology**

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## Summary

*An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Exeter Archaeology at 38 Gordon Road, Topsham, Exeter (SX 9603 8873), from January to July 2007. The work comprised monitoring the machine-excavation of foundation and service trenches for the construction of two new dwellings and garage/workshop.*

*Roman finds have previously been observed throughout the area surrounding the site, including possible structural remains in a trench excavated immediately adjacent to the east. Previous excavations c.500m to the southeast revealed prehistoric activity, parts of the defences of a first-century Roman military base, and graves of a later Roman inhumation cemetery. Investigations in Orchard Way and Peel Close also revealed Roman remains, including a probable 3rd-4th century AD corn drier*

*A number of Roman features, including a well, a ditch and pits filled with domestic waste, were recorded on site. These appeared to form part of the general pattern of Roman civil occupation previously recorded in the vicinity of the site. The pottery assemblage included both local fabrics and imported pottery, such as Samian and Terra nigra.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An archaeological watching brief at 38 Gordon Road, Topsham, Exeter (NGR SX 9603 8873), was undertaken by Exeter Archaeology (EA) from January to July 2007. The work was commissioned by S. Moran and was required under Condition 10 attached to planning consent No. 06/2340/03 (ECC). The work was undertaken following consultation with the Exeter City Council Archaeology Officer (ECCAO).

### 1.1 Site and geology

The site is located on the northwest edge of Topsham, between Exeter Road to the northeast and the River Exe to the southwest. (Fig. 1). It covers an area of c.930 square metres and the current land-use comprises the gardens of the existing house. The ground is generally level within the site at around 10m AOD. The underlying rock consists of Permian Dawlish Sandstone, overlain by Quaternary River Terrace deposits.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.2 Background

Roman finds have previously been observed throughout the area surrounding the site, including possible structural remains in a trench excavated immediately adjacent to the east.<sup>2</sup> In 1997 and 2000 excavations by EA c.500m to the southeast (at the site of the new Topsham School) revealed prehistoric activity, parts of the defences of a first-century Roman military base, and graves of a later Roman inhumation cemetery. Post-medieval features included field boundaries, quarry pits and possible evidence for a small Civil War fort.<sup>3</sup> Previous investigations in Orchard Way and Peel Close also revealed Roman remains, including a probable 3rd-4th century AD corn drier.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. AIMS

The aim of the watching brief was to record any archaeological features or deposits exposed during groundworks for the development, including any new service trenching, and to carry out appropriate analysis and reporting of any results and finds.

## 3. METHOD

Due to the proximity of the site to known remains (see above) an archaeologist was present on site during the excavation of all groundworks and other intrusive works for the redevelopment. This included preliminary site investigations, building foundations and deeper service trenches. Spoil heaps were examined for displaced finds.

Where archaeological deposits were exposed, excavations ceased (in that area) and features were cleaned by hand, excavated and recorded as per EA standard recording procedures (see below) and in accordance with the standards of the Institute of Field Archaeologists. Exposed archaeological deposits were removed by the archaeologist, or under his direct supervision, down to the formation or invert level required for the development.

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<sup>1</sup> Bristow *et al.* 1985, Figs 2 & 3; Soil Survey of Great Britain, map sheet 325 & 339, 1972;

<sup>2</sup> Sage & Allan 2004, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Sage & Allan 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Dyer 1999; EA 1998.

All features and deposits were recorded using the standard EA recording system, comprising context record sheets and individual trench recording forms. Sections and plans for each trench were drawn at 1:10, 1:20 or 1:50 as appropriate. A detailed black and white print and colour digital record was made. Registers were maintained for photographs, drawings and context sheets on *pro forma* record sheets.

#### 4. RESULTS

The locations of the trenches as excavated are shown on Fig. 2. The foundation trenches were generally 0.6m wide, becoming wider in areas of unstable ground, and up to 1.8m deep. The service trenches were up to 0.5m wide and less than 1m deep. Archaeological features were observed throughout the site. All but one of the features contained fragments of Roman pottery. Relevant detailed sections are included on Fig. 3, context descriptions are set out in Appendix 1 and finds listing is presented in Appendix 2.

A generally uniform sequence of topsoil above subsoil overlying natural deposits was encountered in all of the trenches. Most features were sealed beneath the layer of subsoil (105 & 115) Natural ground was exposed across the site, at a depth of 0.75m below ground level

Feature 101 was initially observed in the southeastern part of the site but was found to extend across the full width of the trenching. It was aligned approximately NE-SW and measured 0.7m wide by 0.6m deep, with steep sides and concave base. Fill 102 comprised horizontally pitched pebbles within a reddish brown matrix. Four sherds of Roman pottery were found within the lower part of 102. Though the edges of 101 and 102 were diffuse it was clearly later in date than pit 103 and well 109.

Adjacent to the northwest edge of 101 was large oval feature 103, which measured 1.55m wide and 0.4m deep, with moderately sloping sides and concave base. 103 was only visible in the northeast side of the trench which suggests that it was probably the remains of a pit. Fill 104 comprised dark grey sandy silt with rare pebbles and fragments of charcoal. The lower part of 104 contained sparse oyster shells and sherds of Roman pottery.

Feature 106 was a small pit seen in the base of the trench, located 1m north of 103. 106 measured 0.3m wide by 0.2m deep, and contained grey silt 107 and redeposited natural sand 111. No dateable finds were recovered from 106 but its stratigraphic position suggests that it was contemporary with Roman pit 103.

Feature 109 was a sub-circular feature with near-vertical sides, located in the southern part of the trenches, measuring 1.5m in diameter and 2.8m deep. The edges of 109 were very regular despite the unstable nature of the surrounding natural gravels, which may suggest that it was formerly lined. Fill 110 comprised well-sorted, dark grey silty sand with sparse pebbles. Due to the instability of the natural ground the bulk of 110 was excavated by machine, under close supervision. Fragments of Roman pottery and tile were recovered from the bucket of the machine and spoil heap. The north edge of 109 was overlain by wall foundations 101.

Feature 112 was located in the northwest corner of the trenches, extending the full width of the trench and measuring 4.75m wide and up to 1.1m deep. The northeast side of 112 was steep whereas the southwest side was much wider and shallower. Feature 112 was not observed in trenches to the northwest or southeast, suggesting that it represented the remains of a large pit rather than a ditch or terrace. Fill 113 was comprised of numerous lenses and dumps of material, including frequent large sherds of Roman pottery that had broken insitu. Twenty-nine sherds of pottery were retrieved from the excavations and there were substantial quantities visible within the trench section. Fill 113 appeared to be derived from repeated episodes of disposal of domestic waste.

Feature 116 was located in the southeast part of the site, aligned NW-SE with a U-shaped profile, measuring 0.75m wide by 0.25m deep. Fill 117 comprised dark brown silty sandy clay with occasional pebbles and one sherd of Roman pottery. Ditch 116 was not exposed in foundation trenches to the north or west.

Feature 119 was a small sub-circular posthole, measuring 0.54m wide and 0.26m deep. Fill 120 was dark brown silty sand with occasional pebbles and one sherd of Roman pottery.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The trenching has established the presence of relatively undisturbed archaeological remains across the site. Almost all of the features could be securely dated to the Roman period, with finds from mid 1<sup>st</sup>-century to 4<sup>th</sup>-century AD. The pottery assemblage included both local fabrics and imported pottery, such as Samian and Terra nigra. These remains appeared to form part of the general pattern of Roman civil occupation previously recorded in the vicinity of the site.<sup>5</sup>

Feature 101 was the most extensive structural feature and probably represented the remains of a wall-foundation. Unlike all of the other features 101 was visible directly beneath the topsoil. Although all of the pottery from fill 102 was Roman it may have been residual, possibly derived from subsoil 105.

Well 109 and possible pit 112 were the largest Roman features on site and the finds suggested that they were contemporary. Well 109 contained fragments of tile and pottery and is the only well recorded in the surrounding area. Although the exact nature of feature 112 was unclear it had been infilled with repeated dumps of domestic waste. Similar material to fill 113 was previously excavated in Retreat Field and interpreted as a midden deposit.<sup>6</sup> Smaller pit 103 also appeared to have been infilled with domestic waste. Ditch 116 was located south of the main concentration of features and had infilled gradually by natural weathering of surrounding material. It may have represented the remains of a former boundary feature but was not exposed in trenches to the north or west.

The features recorded on site appear to have been on the periphery of possible settlement activity.<sup>7</sup> This was corroborated by the absence of archaeological remains

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<sup>5</sup> Sage & Allan 2004, 34 Table 5.

<sup>6</sup> Sage & Allan 2004, 35 Table 5.9.

<sup>7</sup> Sage & Allan 2004, 3, Table 5.10.

exposed at the adjacent property (No. 21 Gordon Road) during a site visit made by EA on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2007.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned by Mr S. Moran. The fieldwork was undertaken by Jo Best, Alex Farnell and Peter Swindin. The finds were identified by John Allan and Jenny Wheeler. The illustrations for this report were prepared by Tony Ives.

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APPENDIX 1: CONTEXT DESCRIPTIONS

Context	Depth (b.g.s)	Description	Interpretation
100	0m - 0.25m	Dark brown silty sandy loam: humic garden soil	Topsoil
<b>101</b>	0.25-0.85m	Linear feature with steep sides and concave base	Wall footings: Roman?
102	0.25-0.85m	Dark reddish brown sandy silt with frequent sub-rounded pebbles	Footings material: fill of 101
<b>103</b>	0.65-1m+	Oval feature with moderately sloping sides and concave base.	Possible pit: Roman
104	0.65-1m+	Very dark grey sandy silt with oyster shell, pebbles and charcoal.	Fill of 103
105	0.25-0.7m	Dark reddish brown sandy silt loam with sparse pebbles.	Subsoil layer. Same as 115.
<b>106</b>	0.7-0.9m	Sub-circular feature with steep sides and concave base.	Possible small pit: undated
107	0.85-0.9m	Dark grey silt with very rare sand and charcoal.	Fill of 106.
108	0.7m+	Yellowish red sand with variable amounts of pebbles. Lower horizon of weak red sandstone observed in well 109.	Natural
<b>109</b>	0.7-3.5m	Sub-circular feature with near vertical sides: nr cylindrical.	Roman well
110	0.7-3.5m	Dark grey-yellowish red silty sand with sparse pebbles.	Infill of 109
111	0.7-0.85m	Yellowish red sand with common sub-round pebbles.	Fill of 106
<b>112</b>	0.7-1.1m	Large feature partially exposed in trench. NE side was steep; SW side was shallower. Concave base	Roman feature: possible rubbish pit or terrace cut
113	0.7-1.1m	Mid brown to dark grey sandy silt with rare pebbles, oyster shell, fragments of slate and charcoal	Infill of 112
114	0-0.25m	Concrete layer	Modern surface
115	0.25-0.7m	Dark brown sandy clay with rare fragments of charcoal and slate	Subsoil layer. Same as 105.
<b>116</b>	0.75-1m	Linear feature with moderately steep sides and concave base.	Roman ditch
117	0.75-1m	Dark brown silty sandy clay with occasional pebbles and rare fragments of slate.	Fill of 116
118	0.5-0.7m	Reddish brown sandy clay with common pebbles.	Natural
<b>119</b>	0.55-0.75m	Sub-circular feature with moderately sloping sides and concave base.	Roman posthole
120	0.55-0.75m	Dark brown silty sand with occasional pebbles.	Fill of 119

APPENDIX 2: FINDS LISTING

*Weights given in grams, to nearest 2g.*

Context	Spot date	Material	Q'ty	Weight	Date	Comments
<b>Unstrat</b>		<b>Roman pottery</b>	1 sherd 1 vessel	10	Roman	Amphora, unidentified bodysherd, scrap.
			1 sherd 1 vessel	66	L1-3C	Exeter gritty grey ware, cooking pot base.
		<b>Post-Medieval pottery</b>	1 sherd 1 vessel	28	15-16C	Cologne stoneware, bottle bodysherd
<b>102</b>		<b>Roman pottery</b>	1 sherd 1 vessel	106	Roman	Amphora, unidentified, pale buff fabric, fine with clay pellets, quartz and sparse mica.
			3 sherds 1 vessel	88	Claudian-3C	Amphora, ?Dressel 20, bodysherds
<b>104</b>	<b>2C?</b>	<b>Shell</b>	2 frags	8	-	Oyster shell.
		<b>Roman pottery</b>	1 sherd 1 vessel	16	Claudian-3C	Amphora, Dressel 20 bodysherd
			1 sherd 1 vessel	56	c. AD 60-4C	Flagon, Exeter fabric 435, flared rim.
			1 sherd 1 vessel	4	M1-L2.	Flagon, Exeter fabric 451, bodysherd.
			6 sherds 1 vessel	370	?	Mortarium, cream fabric, red clay inclusions, chert or quartz trituration grits in internal surface and rim.
			1 sherd 1 vessel	8	?	Unidentified, fine ware. Orange-buff fabric with red clay inclusions, self-coloured slip. Burnished? Bodysherd.
			14 sherds 1 vessel	140	?2-3C	Fortress Ware B?, high shouldered cooking pot.
<b>105</b>		<b>Roman tile</b>	1 frag	60	Roman	Tegula, flange fragment, unclassified fabric.
		<b>Roman pottery</b>	2 sherds 1 vessel	82	Claudian-3C	Amphora, Dressel 20 body sherds
			6 sherds 1 vessel	100	Roman	Flagon, hard sandy fabric with red clay pellets, bodysherd.
			1 sherd 1 vessel	34	c. AD 60-4C	Flagon, Exeter fabric 435, bodysherd
<b>110</b>	<b>L1-2C</b>	<b>Metal</b>	1	6	Roman	Fe nail, complete
		<b>Roman tile</b>	1 frag	152	Roman	Box tile with single line scoring. Unclassified fabric.
			3	2354	Roman	Tegulae, one large fragment with flange and lower cutaway. Two fragments with two-line arc. Unclassified fabric.
			1 frag	48	Roman	Unclassified, ?tegula, partial peg hole. Unclassified fabric.
		<b>Roman pottery</b>	1 sherd 1 vessel	24	L1-2C	Flagon, ?fabric 435, bodysherd
			4 sherds 3 vessels	88	L1-2C?	SW black burnished wares, one bowl or flanged dish rim, plain; two jar rims with sooting; one plain bodysherd.

APPENDIX 2: FINDS LISTING

Context	Spot date	Material	Q'ty	Weight	Date	Comments
113	L1C	Roman pottery	7 sherds 1 vessel	1178 36 6	Claudian-3C	Amphora, Dressel 20 bodysherds
			1 sherd 1 vessel	228	Roman	Amphora, unidentified, red-pink fabric with buff surface, fine, slightly micaceous fabric.
			1 sherd 1 vessel	>2	Roman	Amphora, unidentified cream-buff fabric with red clay inclusions. Body sherds.
			1 sherd 1 vessel	14	Roman	Flagon, fabric 435?, bodysherd
			5 sherds 1 vessel	116		Flagon, unidentified fabric, handle and body sherds.
			1 sherd 1 vessel	54	c. AD 43-68	Terra nigra, platter
			3 sherds 2 vessels	46	1C	Samian ware. One decorated bowl sherd, type 37?. One platter, ?type 18, one ?type 27 cup scrap.
			1 sherd 1 vessel	2	1-E2C?	Unidentified fine ware, grey-buff micaceous fabric, burnished, shallow platter rim.
			6 sherds 1 vessel	60	L1C?	Exeter fortress ware B?, bowl bodysherds
			1 sherd 1 vessel	4	L1-3C	South West Black Burnished ware, bodysherd scrap, lattice decoration.
			1 sherd 1 vessel	10	L1-L2C	Exeter Micaceous grey ware, plain beaker bodysherd
			1 sherd 1 vessel	>2	Roman	Unidentified scrap, ?flagon
117		Roman pottery	1 sherd 1 vessel	4	1-E3C	Flagon, unidentified fabric
120		Roman pottery	1 sherd 1 vessel	32	1-E3C	Flagon, unidentified fabric

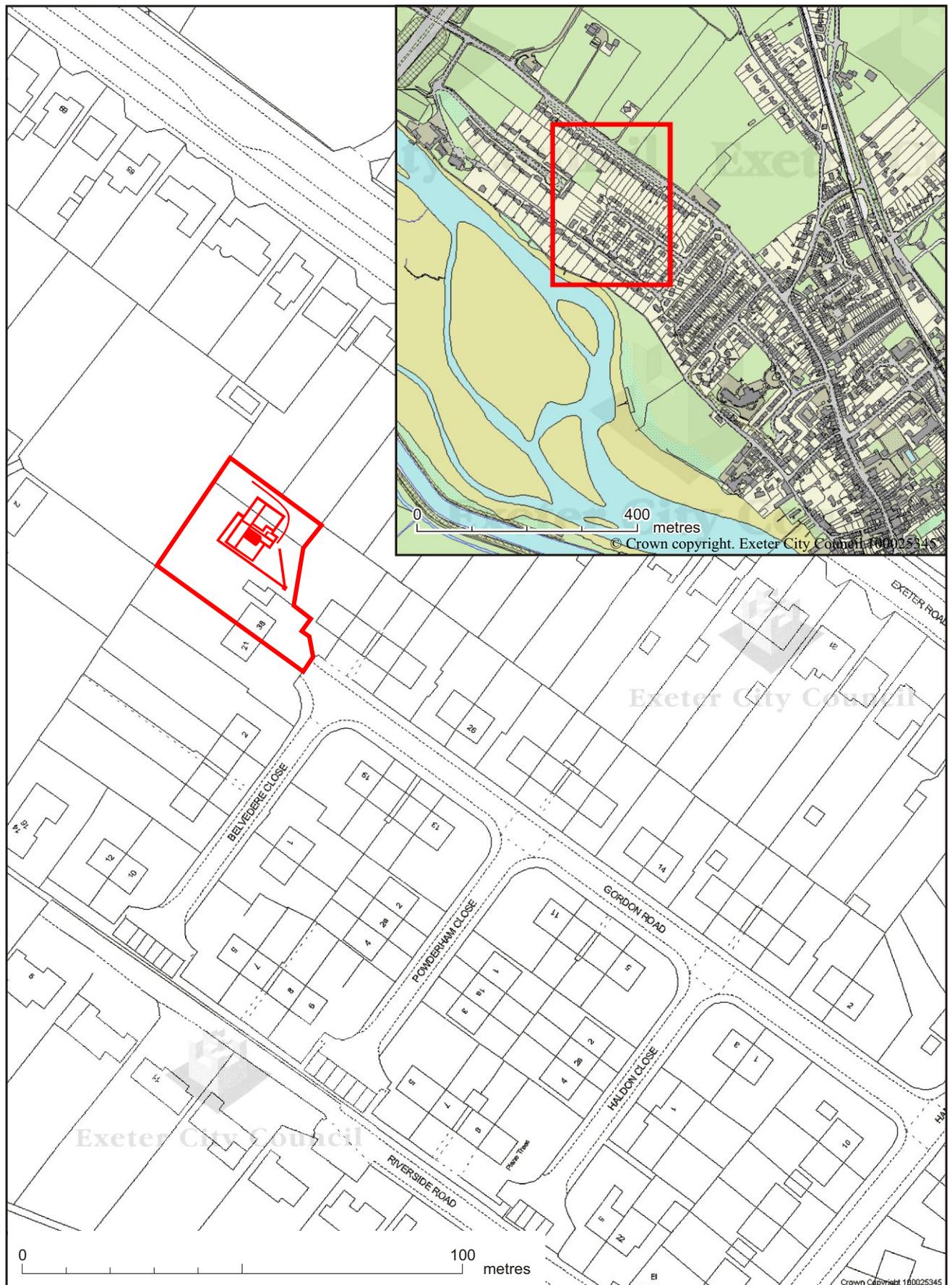


Fig. 1 Location of site. Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey mapping with the permission of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. ©Crown copyright. Exeter City Council 100025345.

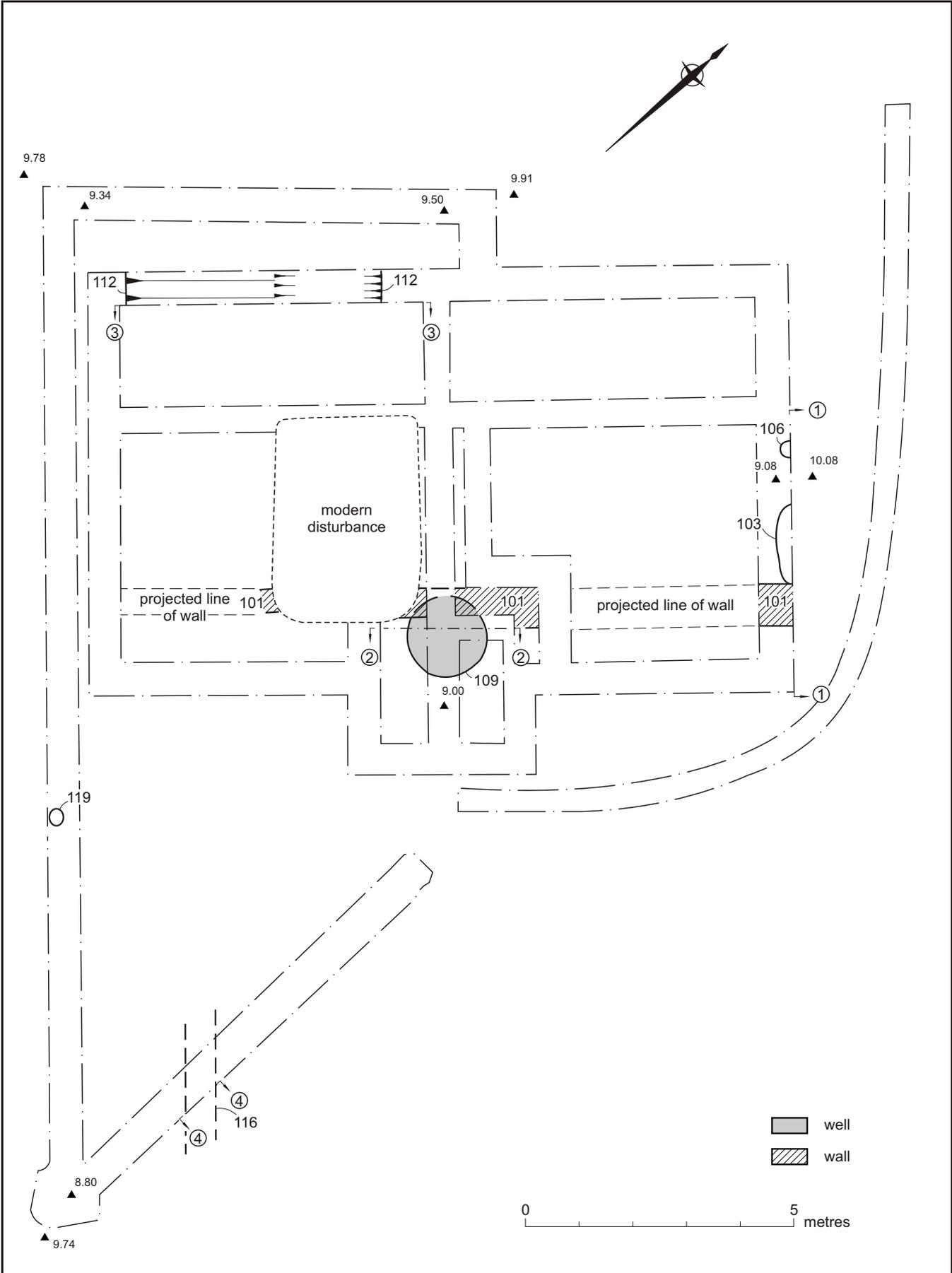


Fig. 2 Plan of foundation trenches and archaeological features.

# Sections

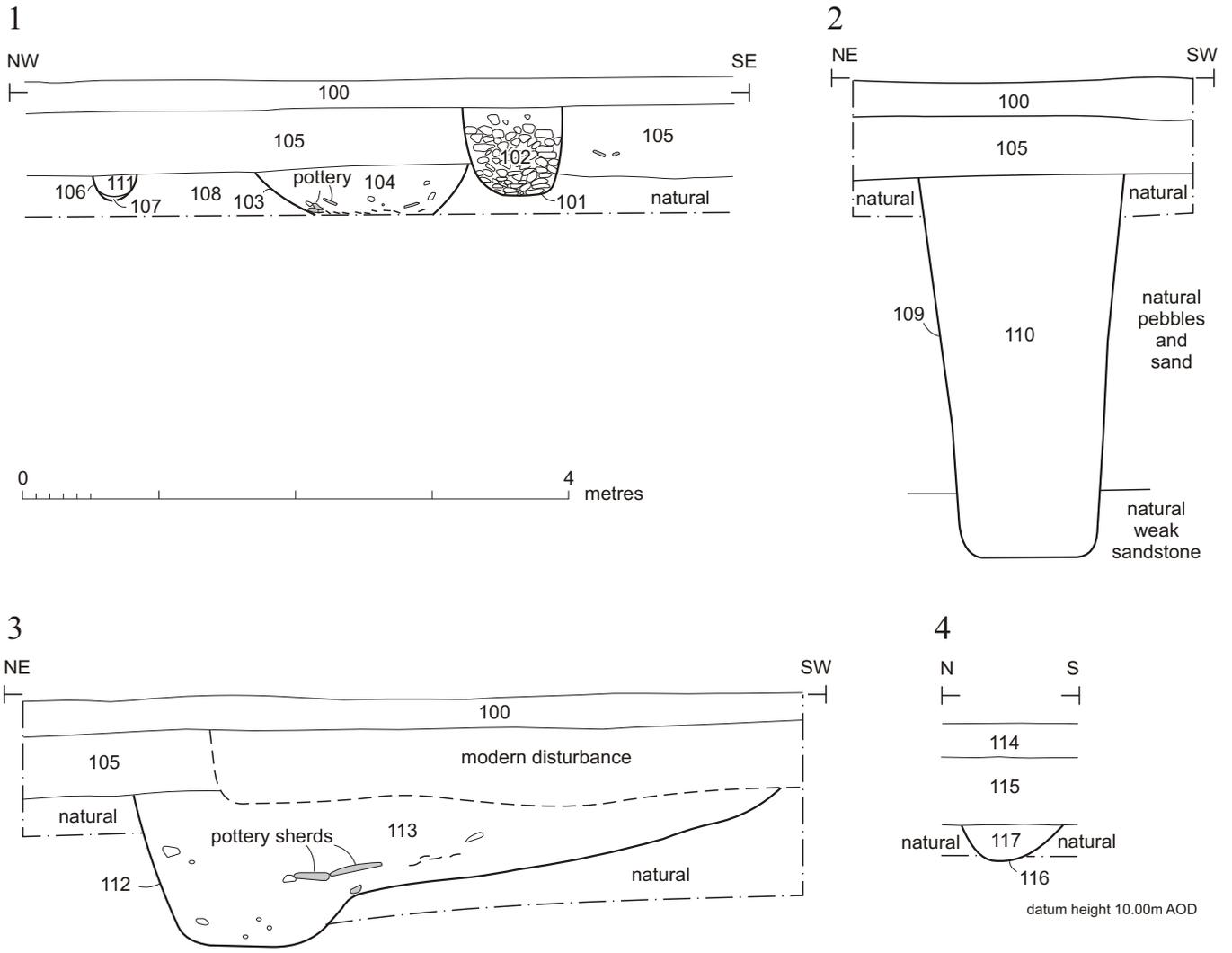


Fig. 3 Sections of Roman features.