

# Archaeological Evaluation at Teston, Maidstone, Kent



**Canterbury Archaeological Trust  
January 1992**

# **Evaluation of Roman remains located on the route of a new sewer at Teston, near Maidstone, Kent in November 1991**

**C.A.T. Reference No. 279**

## **Level III Report**

**January 1992**

### **Introduction**

In early October 1991 during topsoil stripping prior to the emergency renewal of a sewer by Southern Water Services Ltd, approximately 0.5 km. south-east of Teston, near Maidstone (TQ 6988 5316) fragments, of Roman material, mainly tile, building debris and pottery, were uncovered.

These materials indicating the presence of a Roman masonry building were noticed by Robert Earl, Sludge Manager for Southern Water Services (Kent Division), who informed Dr John Williams, the County Archaeological Officer of the discovery.

Following a site inspection by Dr Williams and Mr Earl further investigation was agreed upon and Southern Water Services provided a small grant to facilitate the work. Canterbury Archaeological Trust was appointed to undertake the investigation and this took place over a three day period from the 6th-8th November 1991.

In the event, significant archaeological deposits were proved to exist over a 40 m. length of proposed pipe run, these representing parts of a substantial Roman masonry building. In order to protect and preserve the discovery, Southern Water and their contractor decided to re-route the new service along the existing line of the sewer.

### **Historical background**

A Roman building in the vicinity of the present discovery has been known since 1872. Excavations at that time revealed parts of a hypocausted structure interpreted as a bath suite for a Roman farm-house.

"... The incomplete plan shows the west corner of a building, measuring overall 9.9 x 14.2 m., constructed of ragstone masonry and containing two, possibly three, hypocausted rooms: a *caldarium*, heated by a furnace to its east, with a projecting, buttressed, apsidal plunge-bath; and to the west another heated room, probably the *tepidarium*. Further to the north, was a large

flagged area, probably a *palaestra*. A long wall to the east, beyond the heated rooms, may have contained other rooms of the baths or been part of the dwelling house. The site was certainly occupied during the second century."<sup>1</sup>

Subsequent editions of the Ordnance Survey locate the villa at TQ 6979 5316, c. 100 m. to the west of the present site, where excavations in 1972-3 by the Maidstone Area Archaeological Group failed to locate any trace of a Roman building or any other ancient remains.

## Topography and Geology

The site lies on a gentle south facing slope, c. 400 m. north of the River Medway, and about 200 m. south of the A26 Maidstone to Tonbridge road, at a level of c. 25 m. O.D. The underlying subsoil consists of a yellow Wealden clay with fairly common inclusions of ragstone. Until a few years ago, the field in which the discovery was made was laid down to orchard, and has only recently reverted to arable.

## Method

The primary aim of the investigation was to uncover surviving archaeological deposits along the line of disturbance and to excavate and record levels likely to be destroyed by the new service.

A short length of c. 40 cm. wide trench was machine-excavated at the far west end of the area to immediately determine depth and quality of the stratification. When the surviving stratigraphy was found to be reasonably shallow and relatively complex the machine bucket was replaced by a c. 1.5 m. wide blade, which was used to excavate a wider trench down to archaeologically significant levels. The underlying deposits were then excavated by hand, either over the full width of the trench, or in narrow slots within it; each procedure was determined by the nature of the stratigraphy.

The quality of the archaeological levels revealed during the course of this operation led to a re-routing of the new service and the preservation of the archaeological remains without further damage.



Figure 1; The Excavation

1 A. P. Detsicas *The Cantiaci* (1983), 142

## Description of remains

The archaeological deposits were sealed by c. 20-30 cm. of ploughed topsoil. Much of this material had been mechanically removed along the route of the pipeline, prior to the commencement of the archaeological investigation.

Four wall lines were evident at the level of the underlying subsoil. Three of these were represented by robber trenches. The easternmost wall (23), which was aligned approximately north-south, appeared to be the main outer wall of a structure and survived to 25 cm. above an internal mortar floor or construction horizon (35). This wall was constructed of mortared local ragstone, and was about 40 cm. wide. On its inner side the wall appeared to be rendered with yellow brown mortar 10 cm. thick and faced with a thin skim of painted plaster. This painted wall face was not exposed. Quantities of painted plaster were recovered from adjacent layers.

At the northern edge of the sondage a right angle turn to the wall was evident. This similarly constructed foundation (24) of undetermined width was bonded with Wall 23 and either represented an internal wall or perhaps the northern limit of this particular structure.

No other walls survived with fabric intact; a parallel north-south aligned wall line to the east survived only as robbed footings (8). This wall, also probably built of masonry, was represented by a foundation trench with some original fill *in situ*. The footing, of unmortared blocks laid in rough courses, was of comparable dimensions to the main east wall 23 and probably represented a major structural component.

Four metres to the west of this wall, a parallel linear feature (3), which was almost certainly a robber trench, appeared to represent the western limit of structural and stratigraphic remains. This foundation, perhaps for a stylobate or dwarf wall, was less substantial and the lack of floor levels or any extant building deposits between it and wall 8 suggest that this area was outside the main structure and was perhaps covered by a corridor or portico. Alternatively, Wall 3 might indicate the presence of a lean-to structure in this position, possibly a later addition to the complex.

Another wall position was identified in the central area of the trench. This was defined by a vertical-sided robber trench (33, partially excavated) which contained large quantities of building rubble including large tile fragments, mortar and stone rubble, in a matrix of glutinous clay. The width of the robber trench suggests that the wall it removed was of similar dimensions to the outer structural elements, but whether it was an external or internal wall was not clear. This wall line also turned through a right angle similar to wall 23 but was off-set a few metres to the south.

Intact internal levels survived at the far east end of the trench. Here a sequence of deposits which abutted wall 23 and remained undisturbed to c. 1.5 m. west of the wall, may relate to the decline or abandonment of the structure. These layers were not excavated but observed mainly in section by removing later disturbances; the latter had totally destroyed most of the intact Roman levels across about one third of the examined area (see below).

The primary excavated context adjacent to wall 23 was a well preserved and substantial *opus signinum* floor (26) c. 10 cm. thick. This was immediately overlain by a layer of Roman tiles, mainly *tegula* and *imbrex*, some virtually complete, in a loose mortar matrix (25). This mass of horizontal roofing tile was almost certainly an undisturbed roof collapse. The deposit was sealed by a thick level of stony rubble and mortar (22) again either from collapsed superstructure or residue from the robbing process.

No other definitely intact internal levels were observed. However, immediately east of wall (8) various deposits relating to the occupation of the structure and its decline or demolition were examined.

A possible external occupation horizon (10) was sample excavated from wall 8 to a position c. 5.4 m. to the east. This deposit which was directly sealed by topsoil overlay a probable courtyard (16), and consisted of a dark greyish brown loamy clay which yielded considerable quantities of ceramics and other occupation detritus dating from the late second century to the mid third century or later. The courtyard (16) extended east from wall 8 and was made of fairly small ragstone chippings, set in a compact matrix of greyish brown silty clay. Quantities of Roman tile were also present in the matrix particularly to the east. This context remained unexcavated and its furthest eastward extent was not determined.

It is possible however that the courtyard was bounded by context 19. This consisted of a hard mass of compacted lumps of creamy-white mortar which was only observed in plan. The eastern boundary of this deposit was approximately parallel to the wall lines to the west. Within the mortar mass a narrow longitudinal slot c. 40 cm. wide (18) had been formed although whether this was a later cut or the impression from *in situ* timbers, subsequently removed or rotted, was not clear. The feature was vertical-sided in profile and excavated to a depth of 28 cm. but not bottomed. The fill of this slot was fairly uncompacted and very silty (17 and 35) suggesting that it may have served as a drain. The slot was not precisely parallel to the walls of the structure which suggests that it may be a secondary feature. A corpus of late second to third century pot sherds were recovered from the slot fill.

Most of the horizon to the east was only observed in plan. Immediately adjacent to the mass of mortar (19) was a spread of ragstone rubble and Roman tile in a matrix of creamy-white mortar and loam (29). The relation between this deposit and context 19 was not determined. The deposit probably represents detritus from the demolition or collapse of the structure. This level was traced for 4.2 m. to the east of 19, where it appeared to be entirely cut away by a later feature.

All of the other deposits excavated or observed on site probably date to after the occupation of the structure. The earliest were definite robber trenches. The east wall (23) was truncated by a vertical-sided trench c. 20 cm. deep (15) that cut from immediately under the topsoil.

Robber 33 has been described above; however its stratigraphic position was unclear since the deposits were badly disturbed in this area.

Both of the western wall lines were defined by vertical-sided longitudinal features (3 and 7) which were stratigraphically later than all the other deposits in this area. Both were directly sealed by topsoil.

Various other disturbances were noted. At the east end a wide longitudinal feature possibly with a V-shaped profile, cut through the Roman levels. To the west a large proportion of the Roman levels had been removed by an extensive disturbance (28). This apparently longitudinal feature of unknown width, was mainly aligned north-west - south-east and mostly remained unexcavated. A small sondage through the dark loamy fill of this context at its western end (not taken to the base of the feature) yielded modern material including fragments of coke, medieval roofing tile and window glass. However it is very likely that this context consisted of more than one feature. To the east for example, disturbances noted in section contained different fills, mainly clay with building rubble from the Roman structure and were differently aligned. It is quite possible that these disturbances may have formed part of the 1872 excavations but this was not proven.

## The Finds

A mass of Roman building material was found on the site, of which only a small percentage was collected. The building was constructed of local ragstone, and the many pieces of roof tile, including fragments of *imbrex* and *tegula* indicate it had a tiled roof. Pieces of flue tile, scored with a comb to assist keying-in mortar and plaster, indicate the building was heated, probably with a hypocaust; a single piece of *bessalis* brick may have originally been part of a *pilae* stack supporting a floor. The building had plastered internal walls; fragments of painted wall plaster suggest a panelled decoration in red and white, possibly with a central motif.

Little of the site was formally excavated, and most of the finds recovered derive from layers relating to the destruction of the building or activities post dating this. The most common type of artefact recovered was pottery; some 218 sherds were found, weighing just over 3 kg.

One of the earliest layers excavated was an occupation deposit (10) which had built up on a courtyard surface. This produced pottery dating from the late second century to the middle of the third century, including a few tiny sherds of amphorae, roofing tile, shell and animal bone. Also possibly relating to the use of the building was the fill (17) of a small drain (18), which contained sherds also dating to the late second to mid third century, as well as fragments of painted wall plaster, roof and flue tile, and fragments of animal bone. Much of the pottery from these layers consisted of small, worn fragments, which may have come from vessels broken long before they came to rest. The presence of fragments of painted wall plaster and flue and roof tile may indicate that these deposits post-date the disuse of at least part of the building.

The rest of the finds come from post-destruction layers, notably the fills of the robber trenches dug to retrieve building material for re-use. These fills, (layers 2, 6 and 14) produced pottery dating from the second to fourth centuries, together with a few pieces of painted wall plaster, tile and daub.

The general impression from the finds is that the site was occupied throughout the second and third centuries, and perhaps into the fourth century, though the small number of sherds (about

10%) of fourth century date may indicate less intensive activity after about AD 300. No finds post dating the fourth century were found, and nearly all of the pottery consisted of small, abraded sherds, with an average weight of about 19g.

## Summary and Conclusion

The surviving levels indicate that the site of a Roman villa, probably a fairly large and complex building has been located. *In situ* walls, floors, courtyards and robbed wall lines of the structure were discerned along a length of c. 40 m. The incomplete excavation of a narrow slot through the archaeological levels of this major structure however, mitigates against any understanding of the complex as a whole. Whether this structure formed part of the building located in 1872 was not established, but this seems fairly likely. The corpus of finds recovered during the course of the investigation indicates that occupation at the site spans the period from the late first to the early fourth centuries.

The longitudinal position of the structure has been closely determined. Its extent northwards and southwards can only be conjectured, although the topography of the surrounding area may indicate the limits. The deposits excavated indicate that the building was terraced into the hillside. A dip in the contours of the field to the north and east may therefore indicate a residual change in level of the underlying deposits and suggest an outer limit to the archaeological remains. If this is so, it is unlikely that anything other than deeper archaeological features survive outside of this area, due to subsequent truncation; for example, no archaeological features were observed in the c. 30 m. of trench, excavated to natural subsoil levels, east of the Roman building remains.

To the south a still extant "terrace" may indicate the extent of the structure, although this sudden drop in level may be due to recent landscaping relating to an agricultural track or field boundary. If the contouring evident in the field does indicate the size of the complex, then a structure perhaps 40 m. x 70 m. in extent is suggested.

The remains discovered in 1872, appear to comprise an attached bath-house complex.<sup>1</sup> These structures are often, if not always, located at the north-west or south-west corner of a villa building. The position of these remains relative to the recent discoveries therefore is probably to the north. Although the recent discovery can be interpreted as a single structure it is more likely that both discoveries are parts of a complex of interlinked ranges forming a villa.<sup>2</sup>

The stratified sequence was relatively thin, with only 20-25 cm. of topsoil covering intact floor levels, truncated and robbed walls and demolition deposits. Demolition deposits indicating roof and wall collapse were uniformly cut by robber trenches and other perhaps more recent features. Plough disturbance to the intact Roman horizons was evident together with extensive

1 This original site report has not yet been studied.

2 E. Greenfield *Journal of Roman Studies* li (1961), fig. 22.

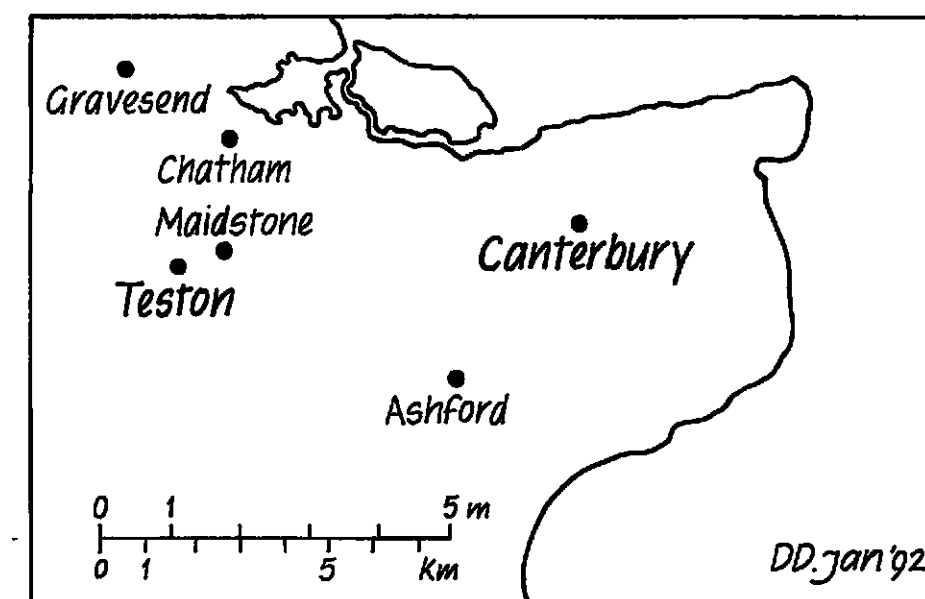
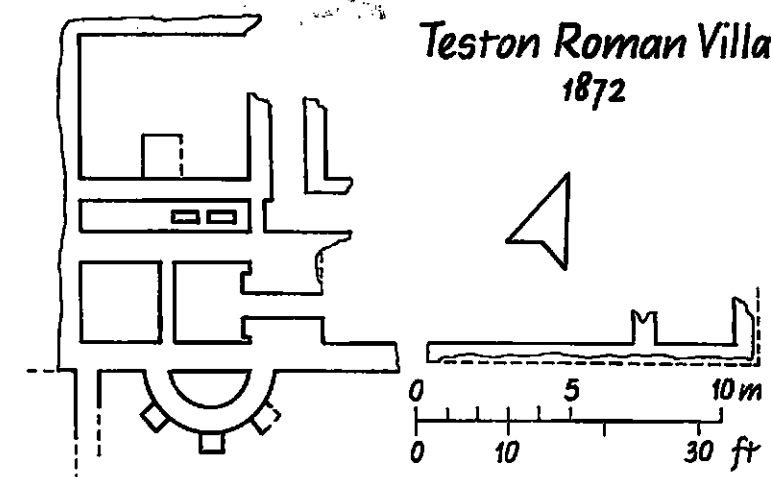
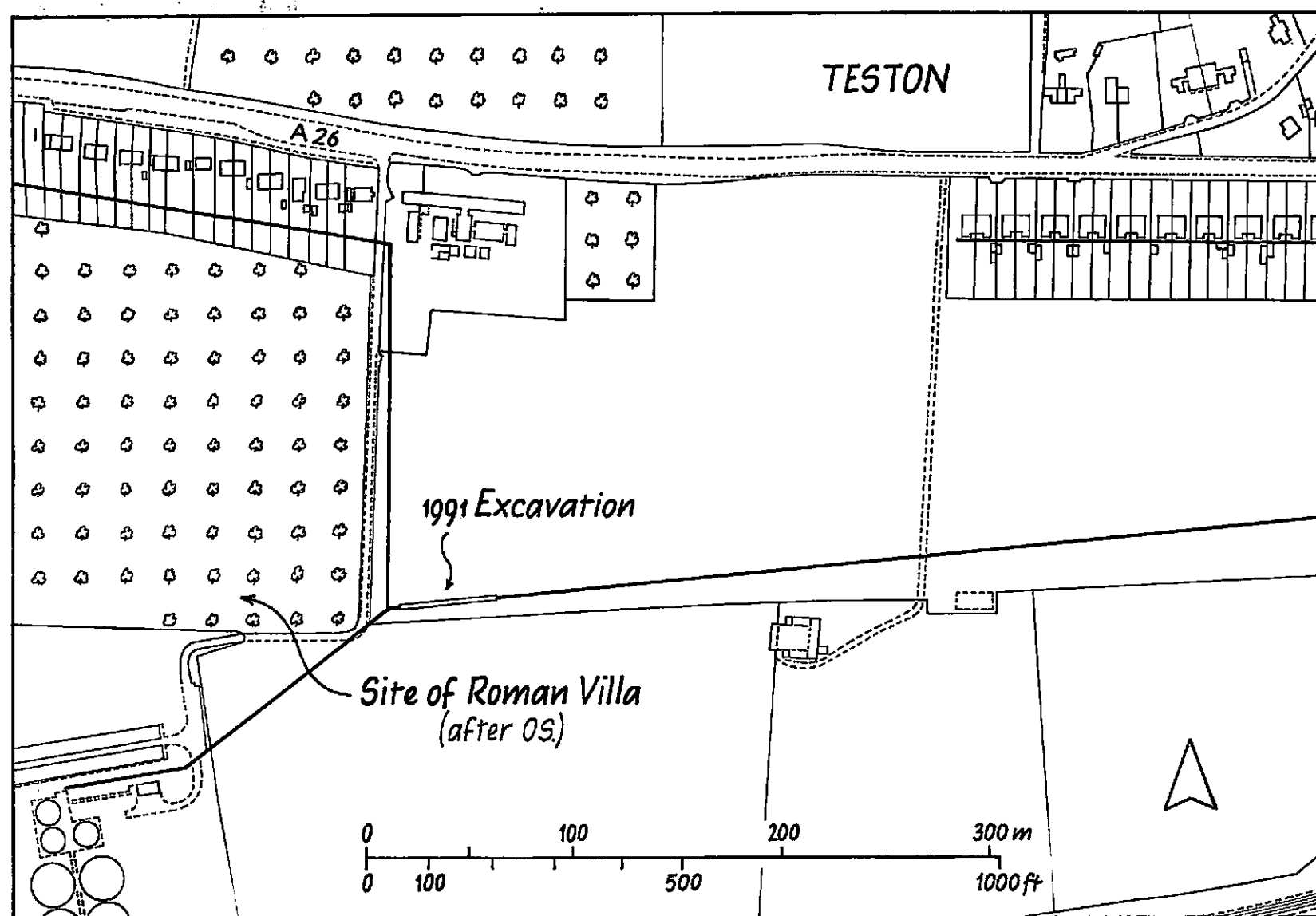
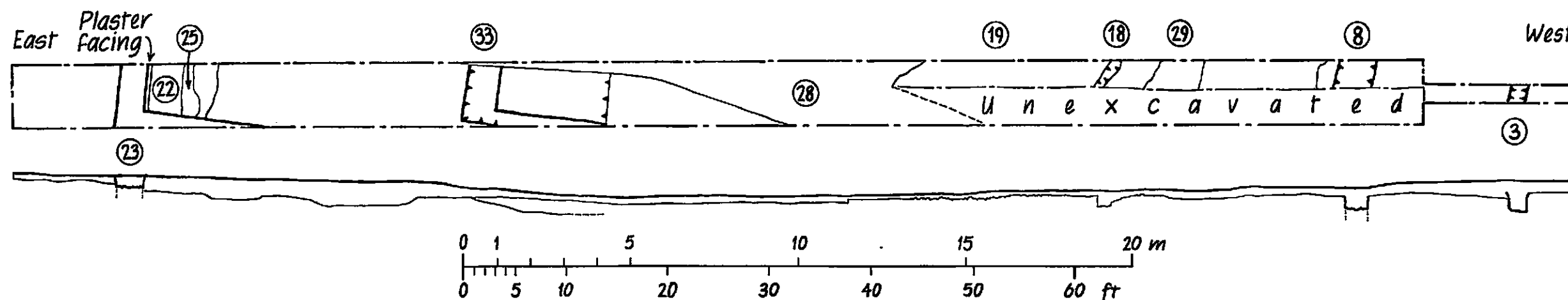
spreads of Roman building materials in topsoil in the immediate vicinity; this undoubtedly caused following change of use of the land from orchard to arable in recent times. It should perhaps be stated that a rapid erosion of the site by ploughing and possibly sub-soiling is very likely to occur in the next few years.

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