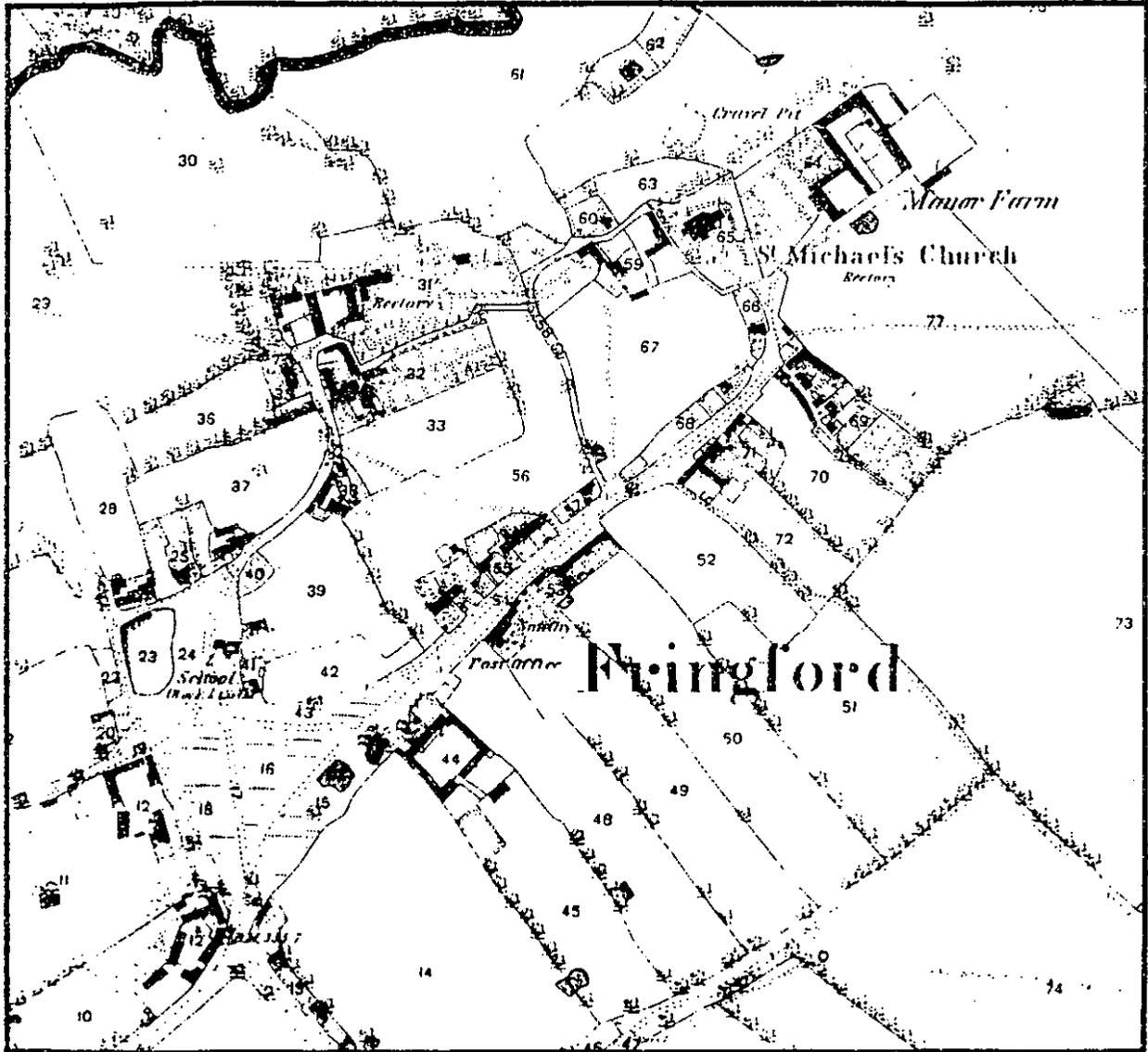


EXCAVATIONS AT CROSSLANDS,
FRINGFORD, OXON

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OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

1993



EXCAVATIONS AT CROSSLANDS, FRINGFORD, OXON

SUMMARY REPORT

Introduction

The OAU undertook excavations at Crosslands, Fringford, north Oxfordshire for two weeks in February 1993. The work was conducted on behalf of Thomas and Co. of Reading in advance of housing development. The site lies in the centre of the modern village, about 200 m SW of St Michael's Church (SP 60452895). Trial trench evaluation in June 1992 located Romano-British ditches and gullies concentrated in the western part of the development site, and several ditches of Medieval date, particularly in the eastern area. In view of these findings, an area of about 1600 sq. m. was stripped in the western part (Area 1) and a smaller area of 120 sq. m. in the eastern part (Area 2).

Under the circumstances of the excavation, the objectives in Area 1 were confined firstly to establishing the overall organisation and phasing of the Romano-British site, and secondly to sampling features for artefactual and environmental remains. The excavation in Area 2 was conducted principally with the aim of establishing the sequence and date of property boundaries associated with the Medieval occupation.

The Excavations

In both Areas 1 and 2 the overburden was stripped down to the natural geology which consisted of drift deposits of gravel, silt and sand. The surface of the natural was fairly level, sloping from 106.26 m. OD at the eastern end of Area 2 to 106.85 m. OD at the western end of Area 1. Under the turfline the modern soil consisted of up to 300 mm of worm-sorted reddish or greyish brown sandy loam over a darker grey gravelly sandy loam. This was between 100 and 300 mm deep and sealed all features except the post-medieval ones (Ditches 242 in Area 1, and 228/231 in Area 2). It was probably a later Medieval ploughsoil. A truncated pre-Roman soil appeared in patches at the interface with the natural, but generally there was no surviving stratigraphy. The watertable was within 200 mm of the surface of the gravel during the excavations, but there was no waterlogged material in any of the features.

Area 1 - General (Fig. 2)

The site showed a complex of intercutting ditches and enclosures which represented several phases of activity spanning the 1st to 4th centuries AD. The limits of the occupation were not evident in any direction, but the density of features did appear to be fading out towards the west. Discrete temporal and spatial entities were generally difficult to isolate, and it was not possible to say whether the site contained the main focus of settlement during any of the phases of occupation. The limited nature of the excavation and the small quantity of finds

recovered meant that many details of the occupation remain uncertain. However, a broad picture which spanned the 1st/2nd to the 4th centuries can be presented.

Five or more phases of Romano-British activity were indicated. The earliest elements consisted of a series of enclosures on the northern side of the site extending out of the excavation area. Shallow gully enclosures on the southern side of the site were probably contemporary. Later in the 2nd century the northern ditches went out of use and the main focus of occupation on the site appears to have lain towards the centre, in an area devoid of ditches but containing pits and postholes. In the 3rd-4th centuries a sub-oval enclosure in the central-northern part of the site is the main feature, surrounded by a sub-rectangular pattern of ditches.

Phase 1

The earliest phases on the site consist of a series of broad but comparatively shallow ditches in the northern part of the site. The earliest features were the large curving Ditches 180 and 321. One of these ditches must have replaced the other but it was not possible to say which of the two was the earlier. Ditch 321 yielded 1st-2nd century pottery, and a possible 1st century sherd came from its recut terminal (322). Residual? 1st-2nd century pottery came from 176 where it cut 180.

The fact that ditches 180, 321 and 322 all terminated near the terminal of the major N-S linear ditch 129, suggests that a boundary axis existed along this line, essentially making 180, 321 and 322 part of a D-shaped (or perhaps semi-polygonal) enclosure. Ditch 129 was probably a later phase of this arrangement. An earlier phase was probably represented by Ditch 317 which yielded a ?1st century sherd.

Ditch 325 might have been contemporary with either of the early enclosure ditches, but it had an eastern terminal and is considered likely to have been an addition. 2nd century pottery came from its terminal, and ?residual late 1st century pottery from Ditch 324 where it cut 325.

In the southern part of the site there was little direct dating evidence, but Gully 212 appeared to be stratigraphically early. It might have been the northern part of a sub-rectangular enclosure with an entrance at the eastern corner in an area confused by unphased pits.

Gully 326 might have been contemporary with this feature since it aligns closely with it and with Ditch 325. Possibly contemporaneous features include the early phase of Ditch 327 on the eastern side of the site which yielded 1st-2nd century pottery in the evaluation.

Phase 2

Phase 2 is represented by the latest of the large curving ditches in the northern part of the site (interpreted as being 322, but possibly 180). Ditch 325 might have been contemporary.

In the southern area, early pottery came from Gully 285. While this feature has no definite associations, it seems likely to have formed the terminal of Gully 161, which is stratigraphically quite early, and yielded 2nd century pottery in the evaluation. This gully is on an unusual NNE-SSW alignment and not obviously contemporary with any of the other features, with the possible exception of Ditch 328 in the extreme SE corner. It might be seen as a reorganisation of Gully 326, and could be contemporary with 180 or 322.

Phase 3

In the third phase, the enclosure in the northern part of the site was replaced by the rectilinear east-west ditch 318, which yielded a possible 2nd century sherd. Its western terminal was lost within a complex of intercutting features, but it seems to have been respected by the north-south feature Ditch 129, which was laid out after Gully 161 went out of use. Ditch 129 yielded early Roman pottery. It is likely that one of the 3 phases of Ditch 327 was in contemporary use.

It is also possible that Gully 149 or an early phase of Ditch 148 came into use during this period. The evaluation produced 2nd century pottery from this feature at the extreme western end.

Occupation in the central part of the site was certainly present in the 2nd century and probably focused in this area at that time. Pit 248 yielded a good assemblage of 2nd century pottery. However, occupation here might not have been confined to this phase.

Phase 4

After Ditch 318 went out of use, and before the ovoid enclosure (170) was laid out, Ditch 323 was dug in the northern area of the site following a NW-SE alignment. No enclosures appear to have been associated with this phase (late 2nd - 3rd centuries?) but several ditches, including 148, 306 and 185, might have been contemporary. It also seems probable that 174 (which cut 129), and 319 and 162 (which are at right angles to this alignment), were also current.

Phase 5

The ultimate Romano-British phase, of the 3rd-4th centuries, included the ovoid enclosure 170 in the northern part of the site, an associated L-shaped gully (130) towards the south, and probably the later phases of the ditches 306, 148, 327 and 185. 306 had late Roman pottery on its surface and 148 produced late pottery in the evaluation. It is likely that 162 was contemporary with the initial phase of the ovoid enclosure since it is aligned so closely with 176 - a palisade gully which bisected the enclosure. Gully 319 was probably also contemporary and yielded a 4th century coin. 324 and 307 are also stratigraphically late and might belong to this phase of occupation. 307 actually produced no dating evidence. 324 was confusing in that it yielded 1st-2nd century pottery (redeposited

from 325?) and Medieval pottery (intrusive from 128?). Two 4th century coins from Ditch 128, at its intersection with 324 are considered likely to have been residual.

Medieval period

By the 11th-12th centuries and perhaps as early as the 10th, activity had resumed on the site in the form of enclosure ditches. These were not associated with any occupation within the excavated area but the quantity of pottery recovered from the excavations and evaluation suggests settlement nearby. A major NW-SE ditch (128) probably belonged to an early phase, to be replaced by 111 further to the east. The use of this later ditch as an extant boundary appears to have continued into the 19th century (Ditch 242). Gullies 138, 320 and 126, running ENE-WSW, presented problems of dating since they yielded no finds and had a rather indistinct relationship with 319. However, they clearly cut Ditch 306 (which probably continued in use until the 4th century), and given that Gully 295 to the east yielded 11th-12th century pottery from the surface, it seems that these gullies were a series of early Medieval features. 126 and 320 are considered likely to be contemporary with Ditch 128 (and perhaps also 107), while 138 appears to respect 111 and would therefore be later.

Parallel to 111/242, and towards the eastern side of the site, Ditches 291 and 293 were a similar sequence of early Medieval and post-Medieval ditches.

Area 2

Excavations in Area 2 revealed a series of ditches of the Romano-British, Medieval and late post-Medieval periods. The earliest features were probably the complex of intercutting gullies at the NE end of the trench (154, 150, 219, & 221). Ditch 154 yielded 2nd century pottery. Ditch 150 appeared to be turning SW and was probably the same as the Romano-British ditch found running the length of the evaluation trench (Feature 5/1). A large pit (316), which produced 2nd century pottery, suggests that the Romano-British occupation extended this far east, and that the ditches were not simply peripheral field boundaries. Ditch 223 also appeared to be Romano-British and 3rd-4th century pottery was recovered.

Ditch 228 contained 12th century pottery, but its upper fills contained pottery datable to up to the 19th century. In this respect it was similar to Ditches 111/242 in Area 1. Ditches 235 and 237 at the SW end of the trench appeared to be curving slightly. They yielded 13th-14th century glazed sherds, which was unusual for this site.

Conclusions

The excavations revealed a long-lived and complex sequence of occupation in this area from the late 1st/2nd centuries until the 4th century. A series of low status settlements are indicated,

but their overall extent could not be estimated from the recorded area. The site is an important addition to the body of evidence for Roman settlement in the region which includes sites on Fringford Hill and Glebe Farm, and a villa at Fringford Lodge (VCH Oxon vi, 125-134). The early Medieval element to the site consisted of field boundaries which appear to be close to the alignments of the major late-Roman ditches. This suggests an intensification of occupation from perhaps the 10th century, and raises interesting questions about the Dark Age transition. There is clear indication of the survival of the early Medieval field boundaries into the 19th century (although they do not appear on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey). Later Medieval and earlier post-Medieval material, however, was sparse.

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The Pottery from Fringford

The excavations of 1993 produced 183 sherds (149 Roman, 29 medieval and 5 post-medieval). The previous evaluation had recovered a further 235 sherds (131 Roman, 83 medieval and 21 post-medieval), but whereas less than half of the Roman material in the latter group was stratified in approximately contemporary contexts (and an even lower proportion of the medieval material was securely stratified) the excavation proper had much higher representations of sherds which were likely to date the deposits from which they derived.

The material was examined in a very cursory fashion. The Roman pottery from the evaluation was only noted at the level of major ware group (as defined in the OAU Roman pottery recording system), apart from distinctive (usually fine ware) fabrics. The material from the 1993 excavation was divided into the principal subgroups of the major ware classes, but not in any further detail. Again, distinctive fabrics were noted. Vessel types were also noted at a very broad level of definition. The medieval and post-medieval material was treated in an even more summary manner.

Roman

The Roman assemblage (280 sherds from both evaluation and excavation) was dominated by oxidised and reduced coarse wares, which together amounted to 74.3% of the sherds. Most of these were probably relatively local products, but in this area between Alchester and Towcester it is difficult to distinguish products of the Oxfordshire industry (Young 1977) from those of possibly more local centres responsible, for example, for oxidised beakers with rouletted and other decoration which are not really within the Oxfordshire repertoire. The majority of the oxidised wares, however, was composed of sherds certainly and possibly in the pink grogged ware tradition (Booth and Green 1989; the certain pink grogged ware sherds amounted to c 10% of all the Roman sherds, and were a much higher proportion of the weight). The reduced wares are more difficult to assign to source, but many of them were probably Oxfordshire products. Fine reduced wares were most common amongst the 1993 material (the reduced wares from the evaluation were not divided by fabric). Other coarse ware groups represented on the site were black-burnished, shell-tempered (including both early and late-Roman products) and a few late Iron Age/early Roman 'Belgic type' wares, mainly in grog-tempered fabrics. These last came almost entirely from the 1993 excavation, but overall they only amounted to 6.8% of the sherds.

A heterogeneous collection of 'fine and specialist' wares totalled 8.2% of the assemblage. This included samian ware (2 tiny fragments), Oxfordshire and Nene Valley colour-coated wares (6 and 1 sherd respectively), 3 Oxfordshire mortarium sherds (1 white and 2 red colour-coated) and 10 white ware and 1 white-slipped oxidised ware sherds also probably of Oxfordshire origin (all but 1 from the evaluation trenches).

The number of vessels represented by rims in such a small assemblage is inevitably limited, but the range was reasonably

comprehensive. An Oxfordshire colour-coated flagon, jars (11, mostly reduced, but including 'cooking pots' in black-burnished and shell-tempered wares and large jars in pink grogged ware), a beaker (Young R34, with ?R36' and cf O21 occurring as body sherds only), a bowl (R44, plus forms ?C47 and C51 as body sherds), dishes in black-burnished ware (2) and grog tempered ware and a type C100 mortarium occurred.

Close dating was not possible for most of the excavated groups. Only two, from 249 (36 sherds, dated c mid-2nd century) and 123 (only 19 sherds, but including large pieces from at least 3 different pink-grogged jars, dated late 3rd-4th century) were of any size, and the latter of these contained an intrusive medieval sherd. In the 1993 excavation 85 sherds were from 16 contexts dated to the late 1st-2nd centuries (or possibly also later, in the case of undiagnostic reduced body sherds) and 41 from 6 contexts assigned to the later 3rd-4th centuries. There was probably only one group (from 314) for which a 1st century rather than a later date seems almost certain.

Overall the Roman material indicates a low-moderate status site occupied from the ?later 1st century well into the 4th century. It had the relatively modest range of trading contacts normal for such a site. The earlier assemblages are dominated by relatively locally produced wares, supplemented by black-burnished ware and a little samian. The later Roman components; Oxfordshire and Nene Valley fine wares, shell-tempered wares probably from the east midlands, pink-grogged ware (already present in the 2nd century but of increased importance now) and black-burnished ware, are all to be expected in this area.

Medieval

The large majority of the 112 medieval sherds were from the 1992 evaluation. In total almost 44% were probably usefully stratified. The range of fabrics included ?organic, calcareous and sand tempering agents. Only 7 glazed sherds were noted (only 1 in the 1993 excavation), of which 2 were from the Brill/Boarstall kilns. The only vessels represented by rims were cooking pots, but the glazed sherds and two handle fragments indicate the presence of jugs. The most noteworthy piece was a St Neots type rim sherd probably of 10th-11th century date. Some 3-4 further sherds may have been in this fabric. The overall character of the assemblage suggests a concentration in the 10th-12th centuries. Although later material is present it appears to be less common, even amongst the unstratified sherds from the evaluation trenches.

Post-medieval

The post-medieval material consists largely of brown glazed earthenwares, the majority probably of 18th-19th century date. There were no modern (ie 20th century) sherds. The stratified post-medieval sherds were mainly from ditches which appeared to perpetuate the line of earlier features. The apparent absence of later medieval and early post-medieval material makes it unclear whether these alignments were continuously maintained from the medieval period through to the 19th century.

References

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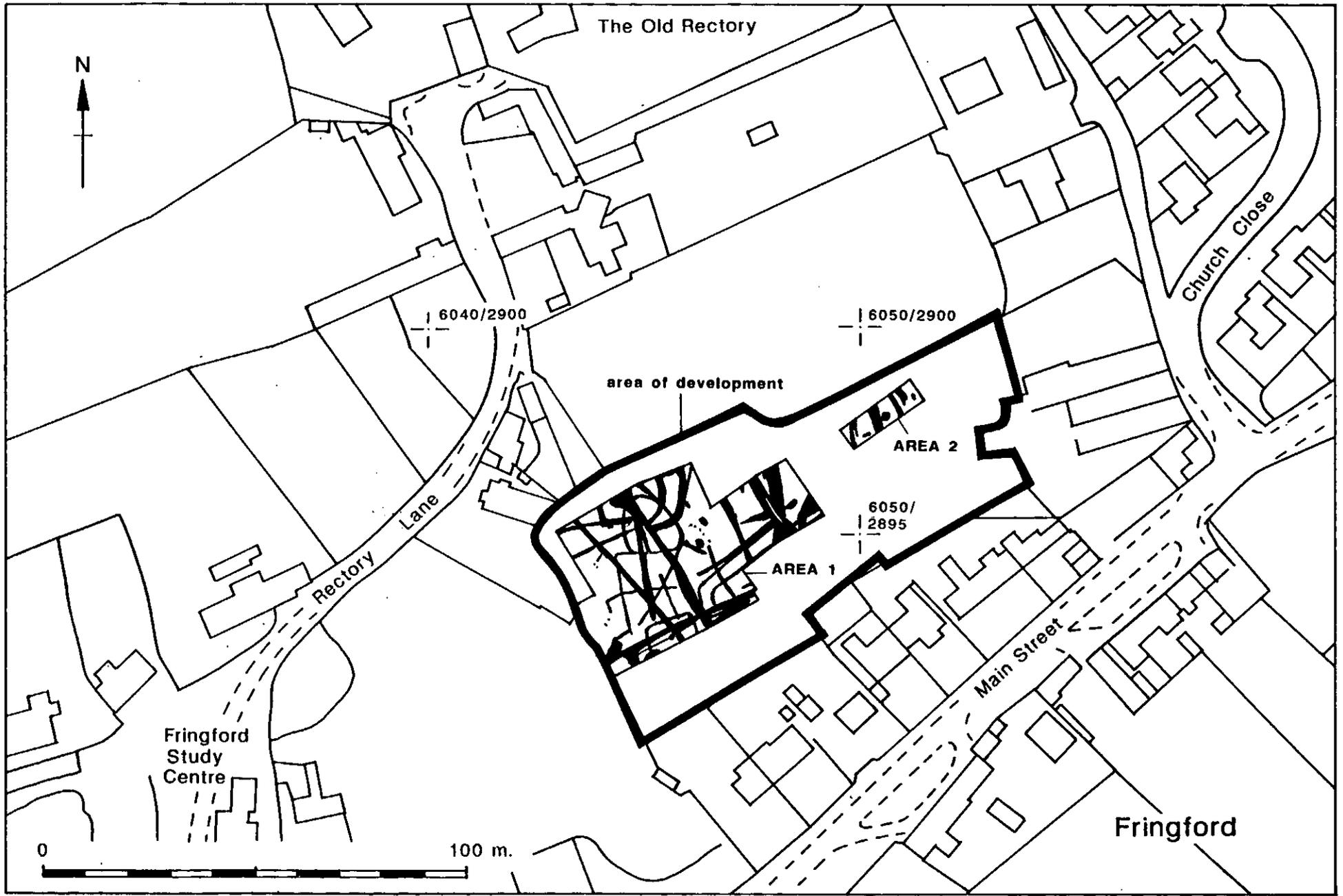


figure 1

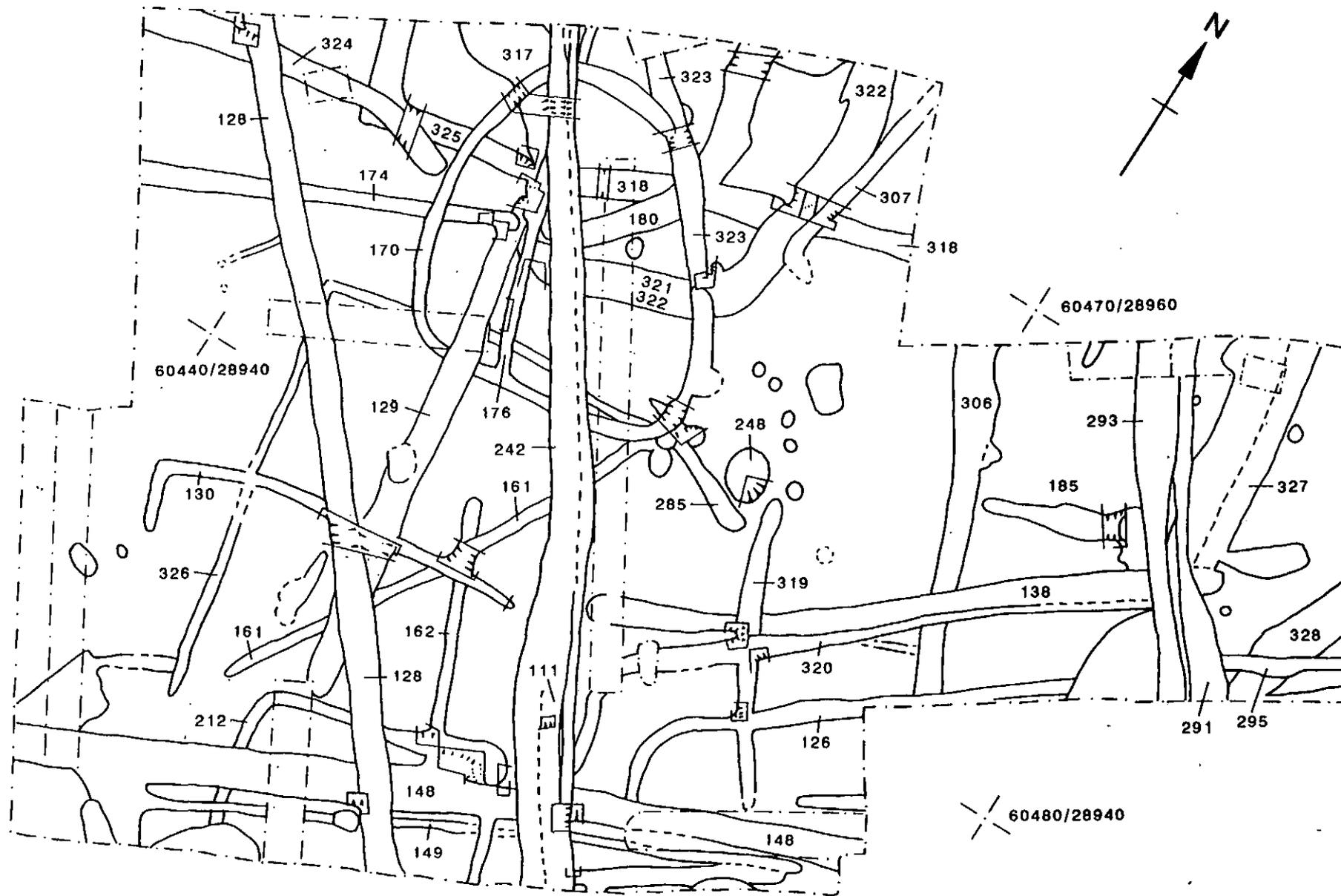


figure 2

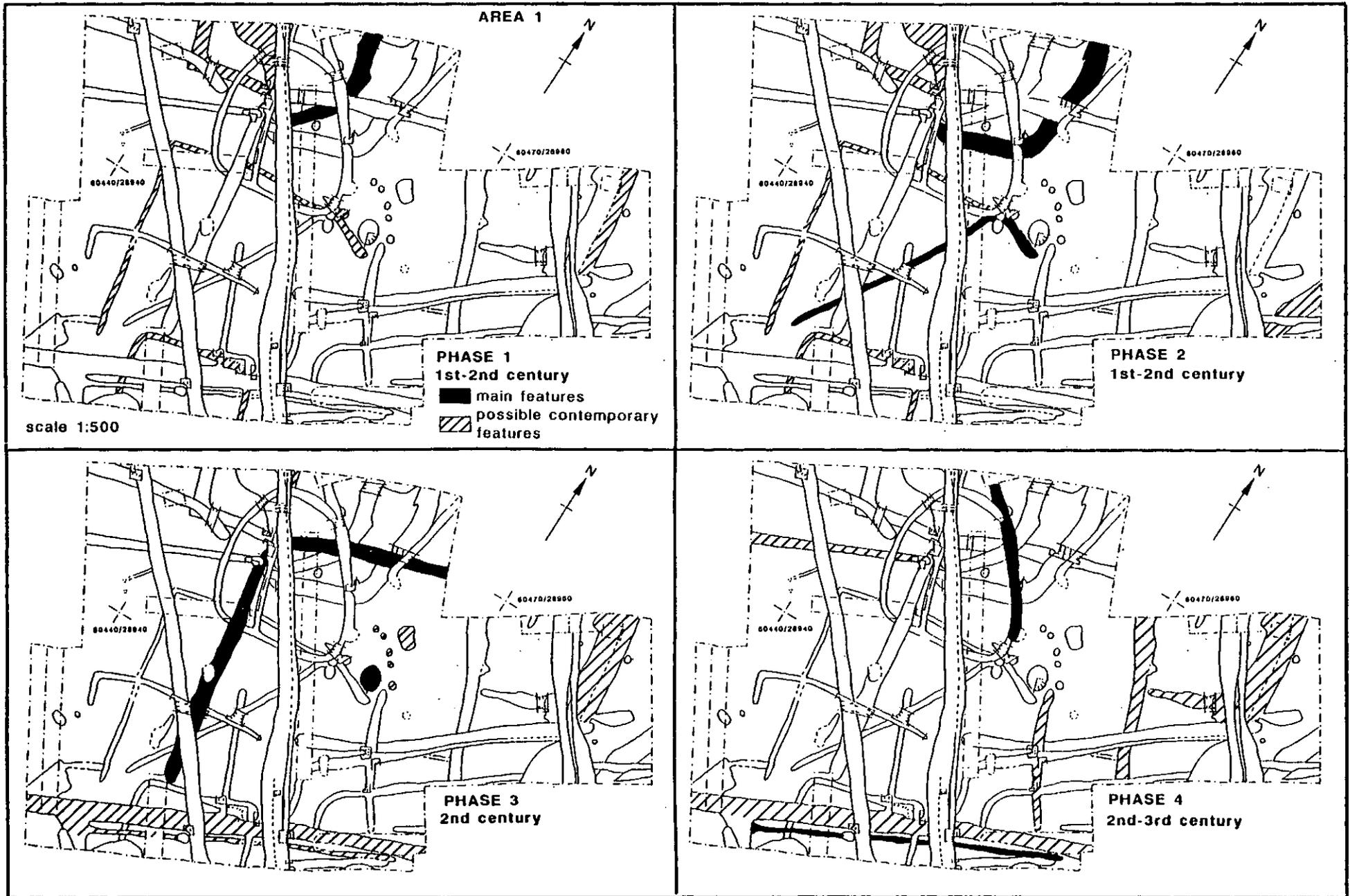


figure 3

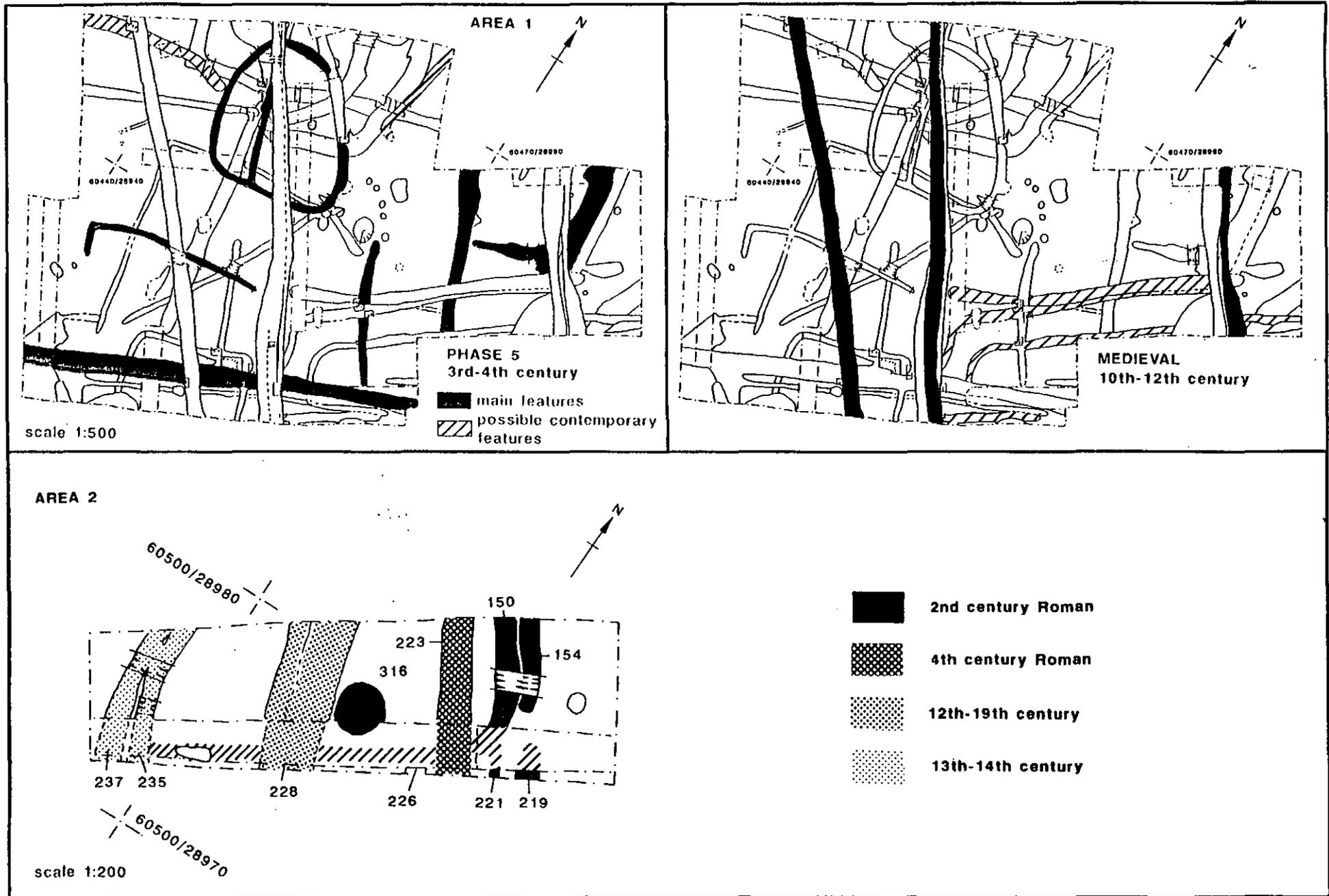


figure 4



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