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GILL MILL HOUSE STANTON HARCOURT OXFORDSHIRE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

NGR SP 3795 0692

Planning Application No. 01/0659

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October 2001

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SUMMARY

In July 2001, Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Gill Mill House, near Stanton Harcourt, Oxfordshire (SP 3795 0692). A roughly east-west aligned limestone wall footing and a potential robber trench on the same alignment were observed. Also recorded during the watching brief were a spread of limestone rubble, a large subcircular feature and a line of potential post-holes. Large quantities of Roman pottery dating from the 1st to 4th centuries were recovered from deposits closely associated with these features, as were a fragment of sculpted oolitic limestone and a number of coins.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Planning permission has been granted to Mr. Robert Montague for the construction of a swimming pool and a tennis court at the property of Gill Mill House, near Stanton Harcourt (Planning Reference: 01/0659). An archaeological watching brief was considered necessary for this site as the proposed development lies within an area of considerable archaeological potential. This is in accordance with PPG 16 and local planning policy (Policies BE16 and 17 of the West Oxfordshire Local Plan).
- 1.2 The site is located at Gill Mill (Fig. 1), south east of Witney, West Oxfordshire (NGR SP 3795 0692). The site lies on alluvium overlying gravel and Gill Mill has been the site of extensive gravel extraction since 1988. It is situated at approximately 73 m OD.

2 Background

- 2.1 Since 1988 the whole of the Gill Mill pit area, which surrounds Gill Mill House, has been the subject of several stages of archaeological evaluation and other work (2.2 2.5). The final paragraph (2.6) gives a brief precis of the evidence for Roman settlement in the vicinity of Gill Mill House (summarised from "Roman Oxfordshire" by Martin Henig and Paul Booth).
- 2.2 In 1988 three parts of the quarry were evaluated. South of the River Windrush and Gill Mill House a previously unidentified Roman road, areas of limestone rubble, gravel surfaces and spreads of pottery were revealed. These indicated the presence of a ribbon

settlement abutting both sides of the Roman road which crosses the Windrush valley at Gill Mill, running NE-SW across the River Windrush floodplain. The pottery recovered from this evaluation dated to the 2nd to 4th centuries. Two blocks of land west of Gill Mill House were also examined. South of the Windrush few significant features were revealed. North of the river, however, enclosure ditches of an Iron Age (c 200-50 BC) farmstead were located, and this site was examined further in 1989-1990.

OAU

- 2.3 This work identified the western limits of the Roman settlement, which consisted of a series of ditches, some of which were waterlogged, that probably defined small fields and paddocks. Nine cremations and three inhumations were also uncovered and an additional area excavation revealed further burials and cremations.
- 2.4 In 1995 fields to the west of the present site were evaluated. This uncovered a pattern of ditches, which probably represent small fields, and paddocks dating to the 1st-2nd centuries and a small amount of occupation dating to the 3rd-4th centuries imposed upon this. Four inhumations were also recorded and these probably represent scattered burials similar to those identified in the 1990 salvage excavation. A system of palaeochannels uncovered to the west consisted mainly of shallow, undated, braided streams, which contained only occasional bone fragments.
- 2.5 In November 1997 the area immediately north-west of Gill Mill House was evaluated. The evaluation revealed a Roman ditched enclosure system originating in the 1st to 2nd century AD with quarrying activity within the enclosures overlain by extensive spreads of late Roman occupation debris. Limestone surfaces were located within former shallow channels in trenches at the southern edge of the site. These were thought to be parts of possible fording points associated with the Roman settlement in an area liable to occasional flooding. A single poorly preserved cremation burial was also found. From 1997 to 1999 gravel extraction operations in these fields were monitored. The watching brief recorded extensive Romano-British activity, comprising field systems, probable trackways, quarrying activity and pit workings, wells and a limestone and pebble surface indicating a former stream crossing. Seven inhumations were also excavated during continuing quarrying operations. Finds were relatively numerous: an exceptional discovery amongst the artefacts from the site was part of a wooden cart wheel.
- 2.6 It would seem from the evidence presented above that a minor road ran roughly southwest to north-east across the floodplain, probably linking with Akeman Street to the north. The settlement was probably of linear form, based upon the road and seems to have been occupied from at least the late 1st century to the 4th century AD. The positioning of the settlement in the valley bottom is unusual although the relatively large number of coins recovered during the 1988 evaluations together with two fragments of sculpture recovered from the vicinity may suggest some ritual or religious significance to the area, perhaps centred on the crossing of the Windrush at this point.

3 Watching Brief Aims

3.1 To record the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of archaeological remains within the entire area affected by development.

- 3.2 If exceptional archaeological remains were discovered, for which the resources allocated were insufficient to support a treatment to a satisfactory and proper standard, the OAU would signal to all parties that such an archaeological find had been made.
- 3.3 To make available the results of the investigation.

4 Methodology

- 4.1 Scope of fieldwork
- 4.1.1 The watching brief was undertaken on all areas of ground disturbance, but concentrated mainly on the tennis court area that revealed a number of archaeological features (Fig. 2, Fig. 3).
- 4.2 Recording
- 4.2.1 Archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:100; sections were drawn at 1:20. All excavated features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures lay down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (Wilkinson, 1992).

5 Results

- 5.1 The construction of the new swimming pool involved a small incursion into the alluvium and underlying gravel but the majority of the ground was made up by approximately 1.5 m due to the propensity for flooding in the garden of Gill Mill House. No archaeological features or deposits were observed during this process.
- 5.2 The remainder of the watching brief monitored the stripping of c 0.3m of topsoil for the new tennis court prior to the deposition of hardcore which will underlie the playing surface. The following deposits and features were observed during the site reduction:
- 5.3 General Stratigraphy (Fig. 3)
- 5.3.1 Characterisation of the deposits underlying the topsoil (2) was problematic as only the topsoil was removed and the underlying deposits and/or features were partially obscured by residual topsoil (5 and 11). An alluvial deposit (1), which overlies the natural gravel, was apparent in places and appeared to be cut by a number of potential features.

- 5.4 The 'Pit' (Fig. 3)
- 5.4.1 A large subcircular feature (3), measuring approximately 7.5 m in diameter, was visible in plan to the north of the stripped area. The upper fill (4) consisted of a mid grey clay silt with 25% gravel inclusions. This feature may have been a pit although it was not excavated as no impact was to be made below the level of the 'upper fill'.
- 5.5 The 'Post-Holes' (Fig. 3)
- 5.5.1 A line of possible post-holes was recorded in plan to the south of the site. These features were poorly defined and no dating evidence was recovered from the upper fills. It may also be significant that these 'features' run parallel to structure 6 (see 5.6)
- 5.6 The Wall Footing and 'Robber Trench' (Figs 3 and 4)
- 5.6.1 A substantial amount of stonework was recorded in the north-east corner of the site. This was on an approximately east-west alignment and almost certainly represented a wall footing (6) consisting of roughly coursed, unworked limestone blocks in a matrix of mid grey brown silt with 20% gravel inclusions (12). Structure 6 was approximately 1.05 m wide and extended at least 4.2 m from the eastern limit of the site. Due to the limited impact of the development, only the upper course of stone was cleaned, and it is not certain to what depth the structure survived. A large quantity of mid-late 2nd-century pottery was recovered from deposit 12.
- 5.6.2 A possible north-south return was visible to the south of the wall, although the stone was less concentrated and this may have represented tumble (Fig. 4). Although this did not survive at the impact level beyond 0.75 m from the southern face of structure 6, it is possible that it continued to the south at a lower level.
- 5.6.3 Additionally a block of calcified gravel, which appeared to have been burnt, was observed to the north of structure 6 (Fig. 4).
- 5.6.4 Although the stonework only extended 4.2 m from the eastern limit of the site, a long linear feature (8) extended west on the same alignment for at least 34 m. A slot was excavated across this feature, revealing a profile of a near vertical top edge flaring in slightly to a flat base. This feature was interpreted as a robber trench and was clearly seen cutting the possible pit (3). The fill of this feature consisted of a mid-dark brown clay silt (9), which produced predominantly late 3rd to 4th-century pottery.
- 5.7 Other Stonework (Figs 3 and 5)
- 5.7.1 Two other spreads of stone rubble were observed in plan and may have represented collapsed / robbed walls. As no further impact was to be made, these were roughly cleaned, planned and photographed but not fully characterised:

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5.7.2 To the south of the wall footing (6) were a number of stones which appeared to be on a similar alignment to the exposed wall. Whilst it is possible that this represented another collapsed wall - possibly even a continuation of the north-south 'return' of 6 - it is also feasible that this stone is tumble, originating from the collapse of structure 6.

- 5.7.3 Another roughly linear spread of stonework was observed to the west (10) within a matrix of mid grey clayey silt (13 Fig. 5). This was of no great depth or length and is likely to be a dump of stone rather than representing something structural.
- 5.8 Finds
- 5.8.1 The Pottery by Paul Booth

Introduction

Some 540 sherds of late Iron Age and Roman pottery, weighing 4.891 kg, were recovered from the excavation. About 27% of this material (by sherd count, 32.6% by weight) was unstratified. A further 4 sherds (138 g) of medieval pottery were noted but are not considered further here.

The pottery was at best in moderate condition. Preservation of surfaces was variable and often relatively poor, and the assemblage as a whole was quite fragmented, with an average sherd weight of only 9 g. These characteristics probably reflect the generally superficial nature of the contexts from which material was recovered.

Methodology

The pottery was recorded using the Oxford Archaeological Unit's Iron Age and Roman pottery recording system, which by applying standardised codes for fabrics and forms allows easy comparison between assemblages from different parts of the region.

Aspects of this are amplified below. Quantification was by sherd count, weight and EVEs (based on the percentage of rim circumferences surviving), with an additional more subjective count of vessels based on individual rim sherds. Details of rim, base, handle, spout and decorative types and other characteristics were recorded as appropriate.

The fabrics are placed in a number of major ware groups, defined on the basis of significant common characteristics. The ware groups are usually combined to constitute two main classes of material, fine and specialist wares on the one hand, and on the other the rest of the coarse wares (cf. Booth 1992). The fine and specialist ware groups (identified by the initial letter of the fabric code) are: samian ware (S), fine wares - colour-coated, lead glazed, mica coated etc - (F), amphorae (A), mortaria (M), white wares - other than mortaria - (W), and white slipped wares (Q). The remaining coarse ware groups are: 'Belgic type'(in the sense of Thompson 1982, 4-5), usually grog-tempered, fabrics (E), 'Romanised' oxidised coarse wares (O), 'Romanised' reduced

coarse wares (R), black-burnished ware (B) and calcareous (particularly shell) tempered wares (C).

Within these classes are hierarchically arranged subgroups, usually defined on the basis of inclusion type, and individual fabrics/wares are then indicated at a third level of precision, both levels of subdivision being expressed by numeric codes. Thus R30 is a general code for sandy reduced coarse wares, while R37 is a specific sandy reduced product from an unknown source broadly within the Witney area. For the bulk of the present assemblage fabric identification was at the intermediate level of precision.

Initial sorting of fabrics was done by eye, with occasional use of a binocular microscope at x20 magnification to assist identification/define the inclusion types of individual sherds. Only summary fabric descriptions are given here. More complete descriptions are contained within the pottery archive.

<u>Fabrics</u>

The following fabrics were present (for quantities see also Table 1).

- S20. South Gaulish samian ware. 15 sherds, 61 g.
- S30. Central Gaulish samian ware. 15 sherds, 62 g.
- F51. Oxford red-brown colour-coated ware. 2 sherds, 33 g.
- F52. Nene Valley colour-coated ware. 1 sherd, 9 g.
- A11. South Spanish amphora fabric. 1 sherd, 12 g.
- M10. ?Gaulish buff mortarium fabric. 2 sherds, 40 g.
- M22. Oxford white mortarium fabric. 4 sherds, 68 g.
- M41. Oxford oxidised red-brown colour-coated mortarium fabric. 3 sherds, 36 g.
- W10. Fine white ware fabrics (includes Oxford products). 1 sherd, 1 g.
- W12. Oxford white ware. 1 sherd, 13 g.
- W20. Sandy white ware fabrics. 1 sherd, 10 g.
- Q10. Fine oxidised white-slipped fabrics. 2 sherds, 5 g.
- Q20. Oxford oxidised white-slipped ware, 1 sherd 20 g.
- E80. Grog-tempered 'Belgic type' fabrics. 8 sherds, 158 g.
- O. General oxidised coarse wares. 29 sherds, 200 g.
- O10. Fine oxidised 'coarse' wares, mostly Oxford products. 28 sherds, 111 g.
- O30. Fine sandy oxidised coarse wares. 6 sherds, 25 g.
- O80. Coarse- (usually grog-) tempered oxidised wares. 5 sherds, 50 g.
- O81. Pink grogged ware. 5 sherds, 191 g.
- R. General reduced coarse wares. 86 sherds, 658 g.
- R10. Fine reduced 'coarse' wares, mostly Oxford products. 9 sherds, 58 g.
- R20. Sandy reduced coarse wares. 1 sherd, 22 g.
- R30. Moderately sandy reduced coarse wares. 102 sherds, 497 g.
- R37. Abundant fine sandy reduced coarse ware. 65 sherds, 600 g.
- R38. As R37 with additional grog. 27 sherds, 315 g.
- R50. Black-surfaced sandy reduced coarse wares. 11 sherds, 142 g.
- R70. Calcareous-tempered reduced coarse wares. 6 sherds, 204 g.

R90. Coarse- (usually grog-) tempered reduced wares. 19 sherds, 519 g.

R94. Coarse grog-tempered reduced fabric. 2 sherds, 43 g.

R95. Savernake reduced coarse ware. 1 sherd, 31 g.

B10. Black-burnished type wares. 25 sherds, 364 g.

B11. Dorset black-burnished ware (BB1). 53 sherds, 548 g.

C10. General calcareous-tempered wares. 2 sherds, 21 g.

Table 1: quantities of pottery by fabric

	Stratified		Unstratified		Totals			
Fabric	Nosh	Weight	Nosh	Weight	Nosh	%Nosh	Weight	%Weight
S20	10	52	5	9	15	2.8	61	1.2
S30	9	31	6	31	15	2.8	62	1.3
F51	1	2	L	31	2 _	0.4	33	0.7
F52			1	9	1	0.2	9	0.2
All			1	12	1	0.2	12	0.2
M			1	4	1	0.2	4	0.1
M10	2	40			2	0.4	40	0.8
M22	2	37	2	31	4	0.7	68	1.4
M41	1	3	2	33	3	0.6	36	0.7
W10	1	1			1	0.2	1	+
W12	1	13			1	0.2	13	0.3
W20	1	10			1	0.2	10	0.2
Q10	1	3	1	2	2	0.4	5	0.1
Q20	1	20			1	0.2	20	0.4
Fine and spe	ecialist wares subt	otal		50	9.3	374	7.6	
E80	8	158			8	1.5	158	3.2
0			29	200	29	5.4	200	4.1
O10	28	111			28	5.2	111	2.3
O30	6	25			6	1.1	25	0.5
O80	5	50			5	0.9	50	1.0
O81	2	70	3	61	5	0.9	131	2.7
O Oxidised v	ed ware subtotal				73	13.5	517	10.6
R			86	658	86	15.9	658	13.5
R10	9	58			9	1.7	58	1.2
R20	1	22			1	0.2	22	0.4
R30	102	497			102	18.9	497	10.2
R37	65	600			65	12.0	600	12.3
R38	26	305	1	10	27	5.0	315	6.4
R50	11	142			11	2.0	142	2.9
R70	5	22	1	2	6	1.1	24	0.5
R90	9	321	10	198	19	3.5	519	10.6
R94	2	43	<u></u>		2	0.4	43	0.9
R95	1	31		1	1	0.2	31	0.6
	vare subtotal		.,		329	60.9	2909	59.5
B10	21	300	4	64	25	4.6	364	7.4
B11	33	328	20	220	53	9.8	548	11.2
	nished ware subto	tal	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·		78	14.4	912	18.6
C10	<u> </u>		2	21	2	0.4	21	0.4
TOTAL	364	3295	176	1596	540		4891	<u> </u>

The range of fabrics present on the site is characteristic of the region. It is notable that typical late Iron Age to early Roman wares (the E ware group) are poorly represented. The relative absence of the most distinctive late Roman fabrics such as Oxford colour-coated ware is also apparent. The assemblage is therefore dominated by Oxford and by more local reduced coarse wares - such as fabric R37, perhaps produced in the Witney area but at an unknown site. Oxidised wares are a regular component of the assemblage, but were outnumbered by black-burnished ware. There was some uncertainty about the fabric of some black-burnished ware sherds. Not all were attributable with confidence to the standard Dorset source, the uncertain sherd s being recorded as B10 rather than B11. Together, however, this material was a significant component of the assemblage.

'Fine and specialist' wares were dominated in terms of sherd count by samian ware, but many samian sherds were very small and together totalled only 2.5% of the assemblage by weight, less than half their representation by sherd count. No other fine and specialist ware fabric was individually significant.

Vessel types

The range of vessel types, like that of fabrics, was characteristic of the region and is presented in relation to fabric type in Table 2. The assemblage was dominated by jars, the majority of which were in reduced coarse ware fabrics, although a significant number of black-burnished ware 'cooking pot type' jars was also present. Class D vessels are those in which insufficient of the profile survives for confident attribution of sherds to jar or bowl types is possible. It is likely, however, that the great majority of sherds so recorded were from jars. A large proportion of the bowls, and particularly of the dishes, present on the site, were in black-burnished ware.

Table 2: Quantification of major vessel classes by fabric (quantification by rim count)

	VESSEL TYPE										
Fabric	Jar (C)	Jar/ Bowl (D)	Beaker (E)	Cup (F)	Bowl (H)	Bowl/ Dish (I)	Dish (J)	Mortarium (K)	Lid (L)	Other	TOTAL
S20		1		1 (33)		1	1 (18)				
S30					2 (44)		1 (23)				
F52					.T.					1 (MI)	
M22					L.,			2			
W12	1										
E80		1									l
0	1	1									<u> </u>
O10	2		1								
O30			1	<u> </u>							
O81	1 store										<u> </u>
R	3	8				3			<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
R10	1	1									<u> </u>
R20	1										
R30	3	1 4			<u></u>	2				1 (Z)	
R37	9	7				1			3		
R38	5								<u> </u>	1 (Z)	
R90	1 store										
B10					2		6				
BII	6				3	2	6		<u> </u>		
TOTAL	34	22	2	1	7	9	14	2	3	3	97

Specific samian ware forms, where known, are given in Table 2 in parentheses. Form 18/31 was also tentatively identified from body sherds. There was only a single tiny fragment of decorated samian ware. A single example of Young (1977) type M17 was the only Oxfordshire mortarium represented by a rim, but a fragment of type C100 was also present in fabric M41. Of the types classified as 'other' only one, a Castor box lid in Nene valley colour-coated ware (fabric F52), was identifiable.

Discussion: context, chronology and status

The pottery derived from a limited number of contexts, none of which was well-sealed, and also included a substantial unstratified component. These factors resulted in a

relatively fragmented assemblage, which may have contained a significant amount of redeposited material. The overall date range of the assemblage was probably from the later 1st century AD to the early 4th century, but the majority of the pottery was assignable to the 2nd-3rd centuries. The principal chronological indicators, as already mentioned, are the relative absence of both very early and very late Roman material. Apart from a few sherds of fabric E80, South Gaulish samian ware (S20) is one of the few indicators of 1st century activity. It may be noted that none of the forms attributed to this source is particularly early, and overall there is no convincing evidence for pre-Flavian activity on the site. Some of the reduced coarse wares could have been of later 1st century date, but these are not readily distinguished from 2nd century types.

At the later end of the chronological range there was equally little evidence for 4th century activity and the absence of typical late Roman Oxford products, and particularly the colour-coated fabric F51, is striking. It may be noted that while two of the five coins from the site were of early 4th century date there was only one later piece. Even allowing for the small number of coins this pattern of loss would not be normal had the site been occupied through to the end of the Roman period. The ceramic evidence includes a few pieces, which are dated as late as late 3rd-early 4th century, but none of which need have been later. The concentration of the majority of the assemblage in the middle Roman period is underlined by the occurrence of relatively high levels of black-burnished ware. These fabrics do not normally appear in the region before c AD 120, and many of the black-burnished ware vessel types present can be assigned to the second half of the 2nd century and the first half of the 3rd, although some were later.

The pottery sheds relatively little light on the character and function of this part of the Roman settlement of Gill Mill. The unremarkable nature of the range both of fabrics and forms suggests that this was potentially an area of typical domestic activity, but the assemblage is not large enough for this to be concluded confidently. The assemblage also provides little indication of site status - principally because it spans the period at which fine and specialist ware representation, which can be used as an indicator of status, would be expected to change. The fine and specialist ware sherd total, at 9.3%, is above that established for early Roman rural settlements in the region, but well below that for the late Roman nucleated settlements. It is likely that this representation hints at the above-average status of the Gill Mill settlement in the 2nd century and later, but this is not clear from the present material.

5.8.2 The Coins by Paul Booth

SF1. AE3. DNCRISPU SNOBCAES. BEATA TRANQUILLITAS (VOT/IS/XX). ?Lyons, but reading of mintmark (? ·PLG) is uncertain. AD 321-3.

SF2. Sestertius. Portrait reminiscent of Faustina II, but the (very fragmentary) remains of the obverse legend do not appear to be consistent with this. Reverse completely unidentifiable. Relatively unworn when lost but now in poor condition. Needs cleaning and stabilising. Roughly mid 2nd century.

SF3. AE3. CONSTANT INUSAUG. BEATA TRANQUILLITAS (VO/TIS/XX). Mintmark PTR[(right hand end damaged). Trier. RIC VII 316 (AD 321) or 341 (AD 322).

SF4, Barbarous radiate. c. AD 260-295.

SF5.AE3. DN VALENTINI ANUSPFAUG. SECURITAS REIPUBLICAE. Mintmark illegible. AD 364-378.

5.8.3 Other Finds

In addition to the coins and pottery recovered during the watching brief a number of other finds were retrieved. These included a fragment of oolitic limestone that appeared to have been worked and a lead weight, together with numerous fragments of limestone that probably originated from the structures recorded during the groundwork. Two possible roof tiles were also recovered along with a quantity of nails.

A relatively small amount of animal bone was also recovered although not in sufficient quantities to draw any definitive conclusions.

5.9 Environmental Results

5.9.1 Although full consideration was given to various sampling strategies, due to the absence of any suitable deposits and the tight constraints of the excavation, no environmental soil samples were taken.

6 Discussion And Interpretation

- 6.1 Despite the limited impact of the new swimming pool and tennis court, a substantial amount of pottery and other finds dating from the 1st to the 4th century AD was recovered from the features and deposits observed during the watching brief.
- 6.2 Whilst drawing any definitive conclusions as to the nature of the archaeological features observed is problematic, certain tentative suggestions can be made.
- 6.3 Assuming that the settlement pattern to the east of the axial road through the Roman settlement is similar to that recorded to the west, the development site lies within the projected extent of the eastern half of the settlement. The dating evidence recovered is similar to that from the western half of the settlement and it seems likely that the features observed during the watching brief are associated with the roadside settlement centred on the crossing of the River Windrush in the vicinity of Gill Mill House. Although very poorly preserved and not easily interpreted, it is worth noting that the possible foundations (structure 6 in particular) represent the first evidence for Roman stone-based buildings recorded from Gill Mill.

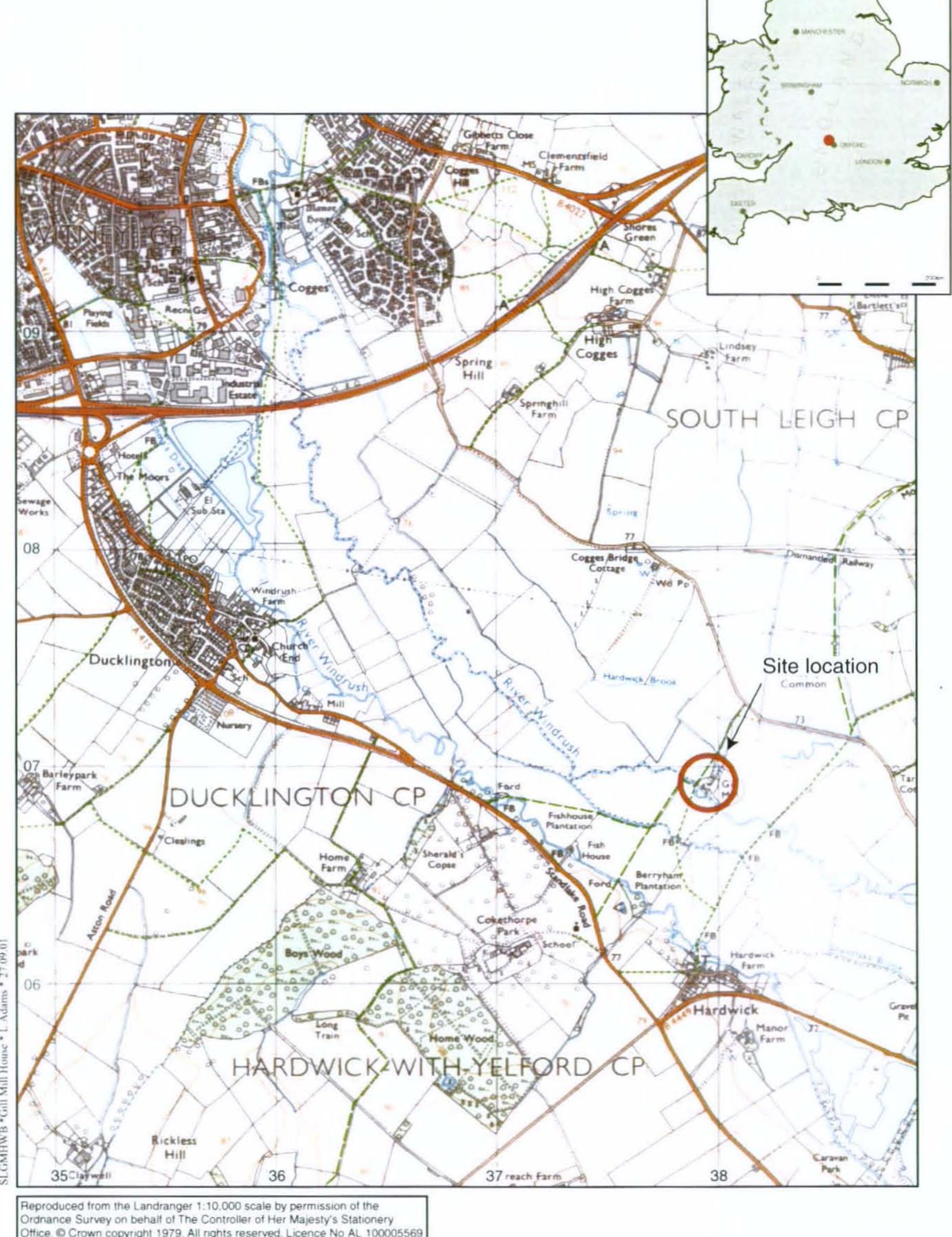
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6.4 The large quantities and expansive date range of the finds attests to the continuous settlement of the area from the 1st to the 4th centuries and the coins and small fragment of worked oolitic limestone may strengthen the argument for a religious or ritual site in the area. There is also a fragment of sculpted limestone built into the wall of the barn at Gill Mill House, which, although its origins are uncertain, is likely to have come from the immediate vicinity.

6.5 Although these interpretations are somewhat tenuous, it is clear from the evidence recovered that the area around Gill Mill House formed part of an extensive settlement of some longevity which is still being revealed by the ongoing quarrying in the area.

References.

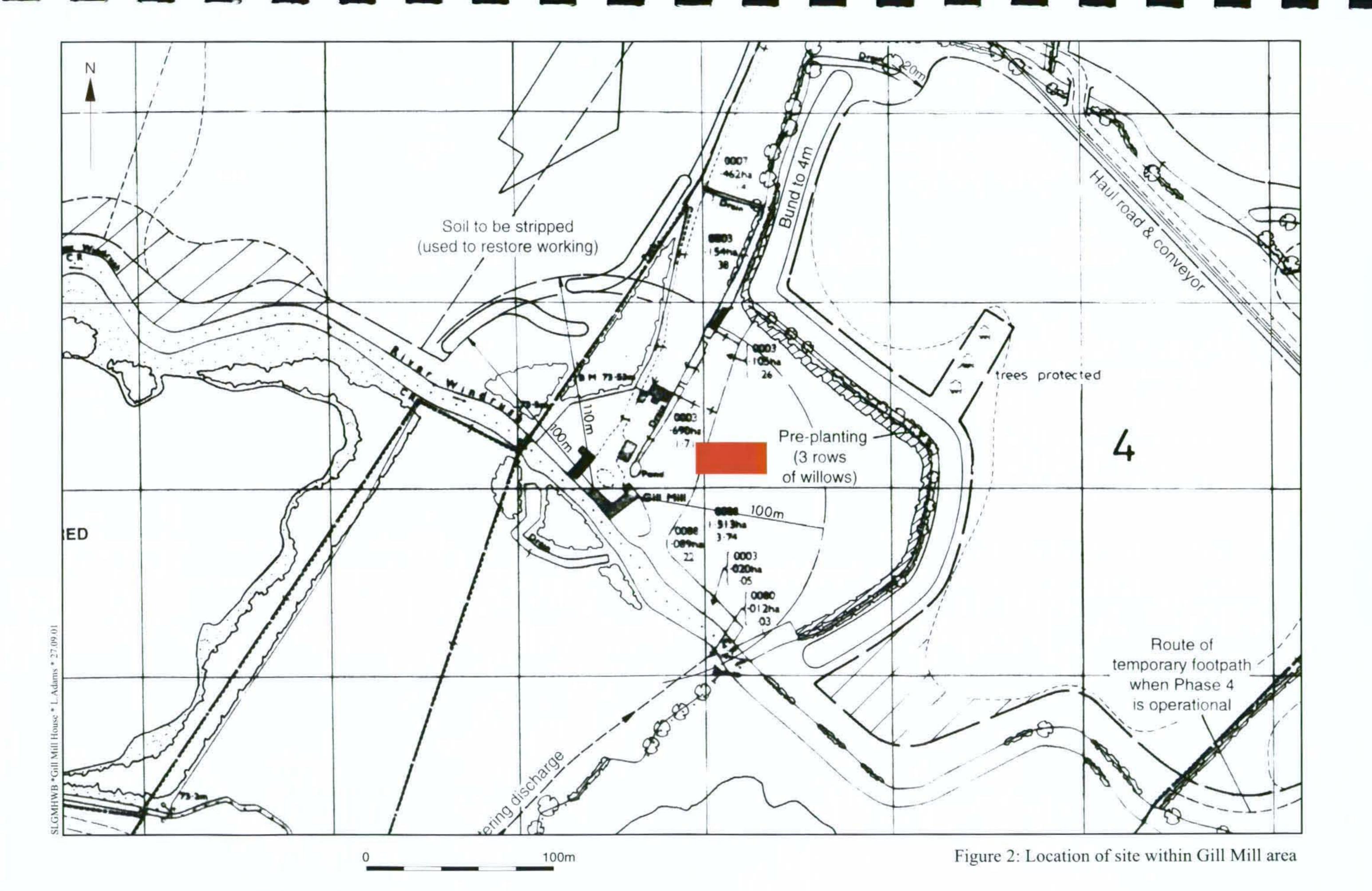
Wilkinson, D (ed.) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).

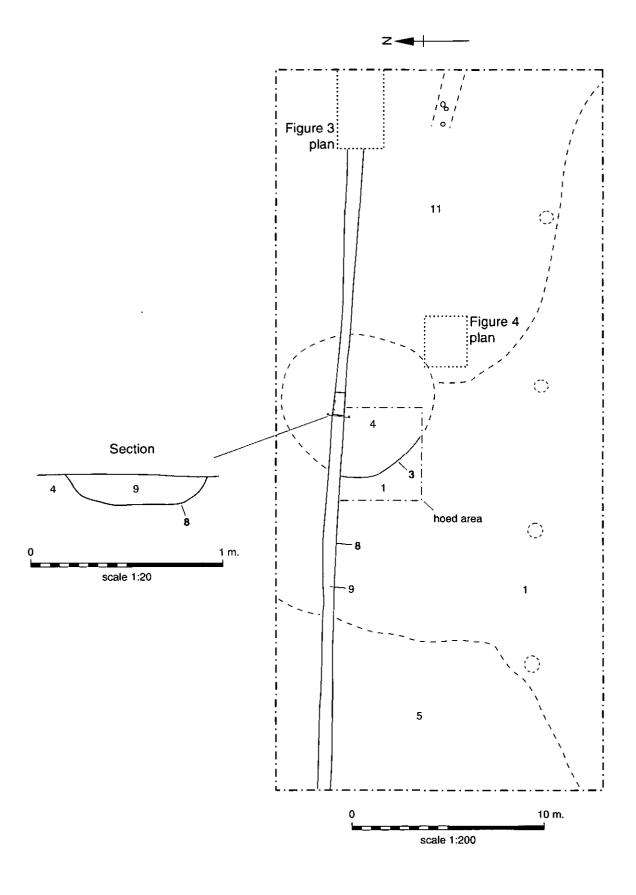


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Figure 1: Site location plan

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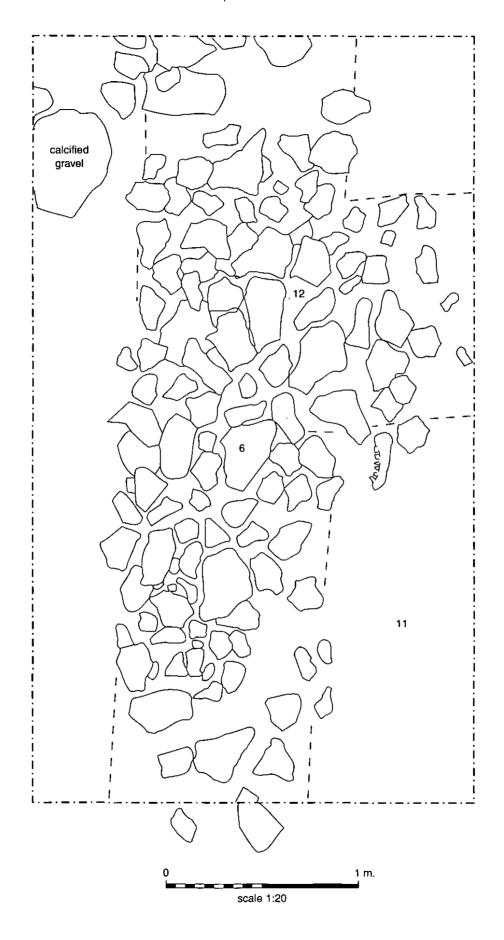


Figure 4: Plan of wall footing 6



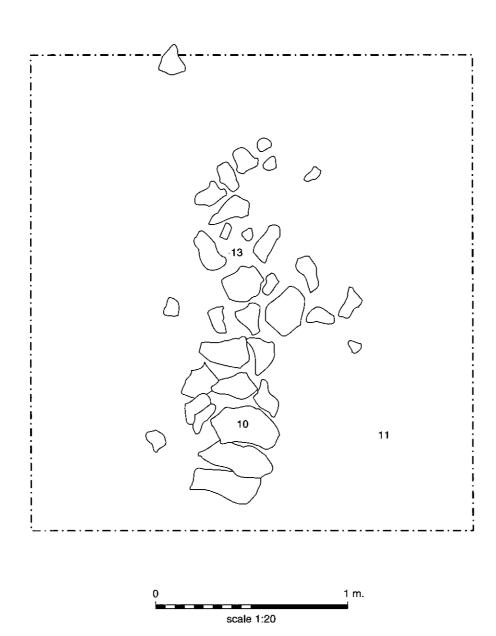


Figure 5: Plan of 'stonework' 10



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