ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT YARFORD, KINGSTON ST MARY, SOMERSET APRIL – JULY 2003

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NOVEMBER 2003

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Introduction

A programme of archaeological survey and excavation was carried out to the immediate north-west of the hamlet of Yarford (Figures 1 and 2) as part of the Southern Quantock Archaeological Survey (Wilkinson and Thorpe 2000; Turner 2002). The investigations were undertaken by the Department of Archaeology, King Alfred's College and the Archaeology Section of Somerset County Council under the direction of the authors. The purpose of this document is to report the results of the fieldwork and initial post fieldwork analysis. The first sections of the report detail the results of the aerial photographic interpretation and magnetometer survey, while the second part of the document discusses the archaeological evidence from each of the three excavation trenches. The concluding section assesses the importance of the site in a regional and national context, and outlines a programme of further investigations planned for 2004.

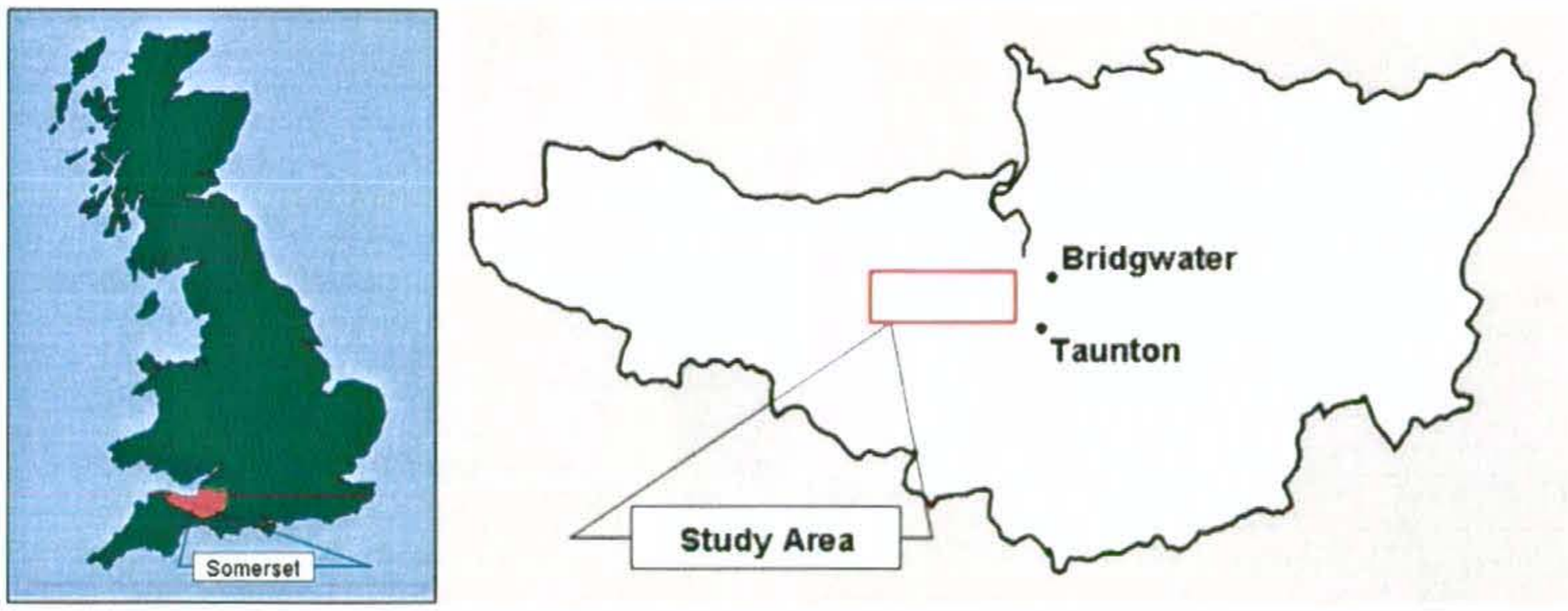

Figure 1. Location of the Southern Quantock Archaeological Survey study area

The Yarford site is located approximately 3km west of the village of Kingston St Mary and comprises the western-most portion of that parish. The site sits on the south-eastern end of a north-south trending spur formed as the result of stream incision on the eastern and western side. The slope along the spur is in a southerly direction and of the order of 5-10%, and the site sits at between 85m OD and 110m OD. The site overlies Morte Slates of Devonian Age, while Otter Sandstone (also of Devonian age) outcrops less than 200m to the south-west and east, and Keuper Marl (Triassic) 200m to the south (British Geological Survey 1984). Soils overlying these strata are generally 0.3-1.0m thick, free draining and slightly acidic

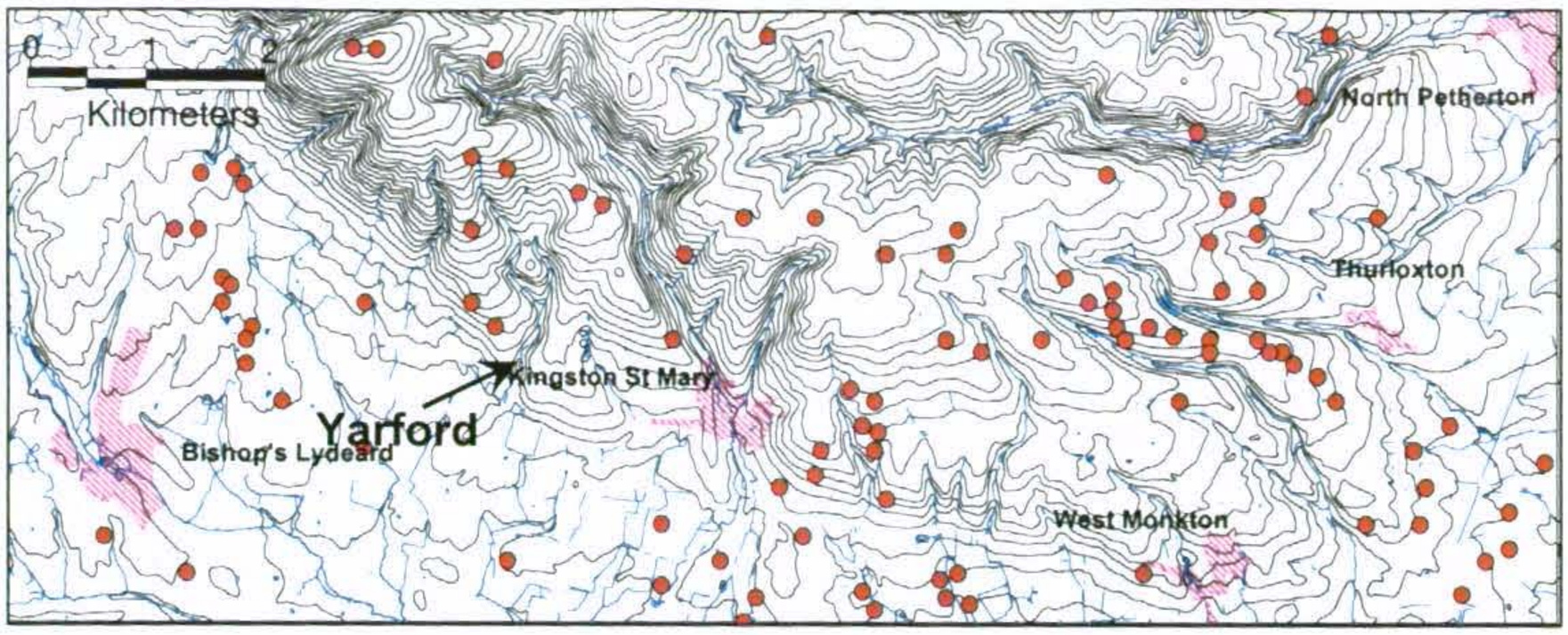

Figure 2. Location of the Yarford site within the Southern Quantock Archaeological Survey study area (coloured circles are cropmarks sites, contours at 5m intervals)

Aerial photography

The site at Yarford was revealed as a series of cropmarks in aerial photographs taken in 1991 for Somerset County Council (by Frances Griffith and Bill Warner of Devon County Council) (Figure 3). The photographs reveal a complex of ditched-features comprising a sub-rectangular 'ladder' of enclosures to the west and a 'D'-shaped, double-ditched enclosure set within a rectangular enclosure system to the east. A possible entrance was noted in the northern-most enclosure of the ladder. A 'funnel'-shaped ditch system occurs to the immediate east of enclosure ladder in the north of the site, while further amorphous enclosures are found to the north of the 'D'-shaped enclosure. Finally two channel-like features cross all the other enclosure systems on a north-west to south east axis.

On the basis of the team's previous experience of working in the Quantock Hills the sub-rectangular ladder of enclosures was provisionally interpreted as a Romano-British field system. There are no local parallels for the 'D'-shaped enclosure, although Romano-British and late Iron Age ditched-features of similar morphology are noted from southern Britain. It was also thought possible that the latter feature could in fact be a fully round or oval shaped enclosure and that its northern portion had been obscured by thicker deposits. In order to test this hypothesis, to elucidate the morphology of the enclosures and to prospect for features too small to appear on the aerial photographs a magnetometry survey was carried out.

Figure 3. An aerial photograph taken of the Yarford site in 1991 (Somerset County Council)

Magnetometry

Magnetometry was chosen as the preferred geophysical techniques over resistivity as:
a. Previous investigations in the Quantocks have demonstrated that despite the high iron contents of the Triassic and Devonian rocks, clear results could be expected
b. Magnetometry can be carried out far more rapidly than resistivity
Accordingly, from 7-10th April 2003 a magnetometer survey of 4ha of the site was carried out (Figure 4) (Turner 2003).

The results demonstrate that the 'D'-shaped enclosure forms the southern portion of a double-ditched, oval-shaped enclosure. It appears to have had its north-eastern 'corner' obscured, an observation that appears to be connected with the 'insertion' of a rectilinear enclosure that is not visible on the aerial photograph. The extreme southern end of the rectilinear enclosure coincides with an area of extremely high magnetic response, an effect that may have been produced by either metal in the soil/subsoil or burning. In the magnetometry results the double-ditch enclosure is clearly within a system of rectangular enclosures, although it is not clear from the geophysics what the sequence of construction was. It is also notable that a series of pit-like features, perhaps forming a circle, are located to the immediate west of the

double-ditched enclosure. Once again it is impossible from the magnetometry evidence to determine how these fit into the construction sequence.

The magnetometry evidence reveals no more information on the sub-rectangular 'ladder' of enclosures than the aerial photograph. Indeed the possible entrance way is less clear on the magnetometry plot than the aerial photograph. On the other hand the 'funnel'-shaped enclosure is clear on the magnetometry plot, a fact which would appear to suggest that the infill of the ditches that comprise it must be very different from that of the surrounding deposits/soil.

There is no trace of the channel-like features in the magnetometry plot suggesting either that these were superficial at the time of the 1991 flight and have since been removed by ploughing, or that they are deeply buried and therefore undetectable with magnetometry.

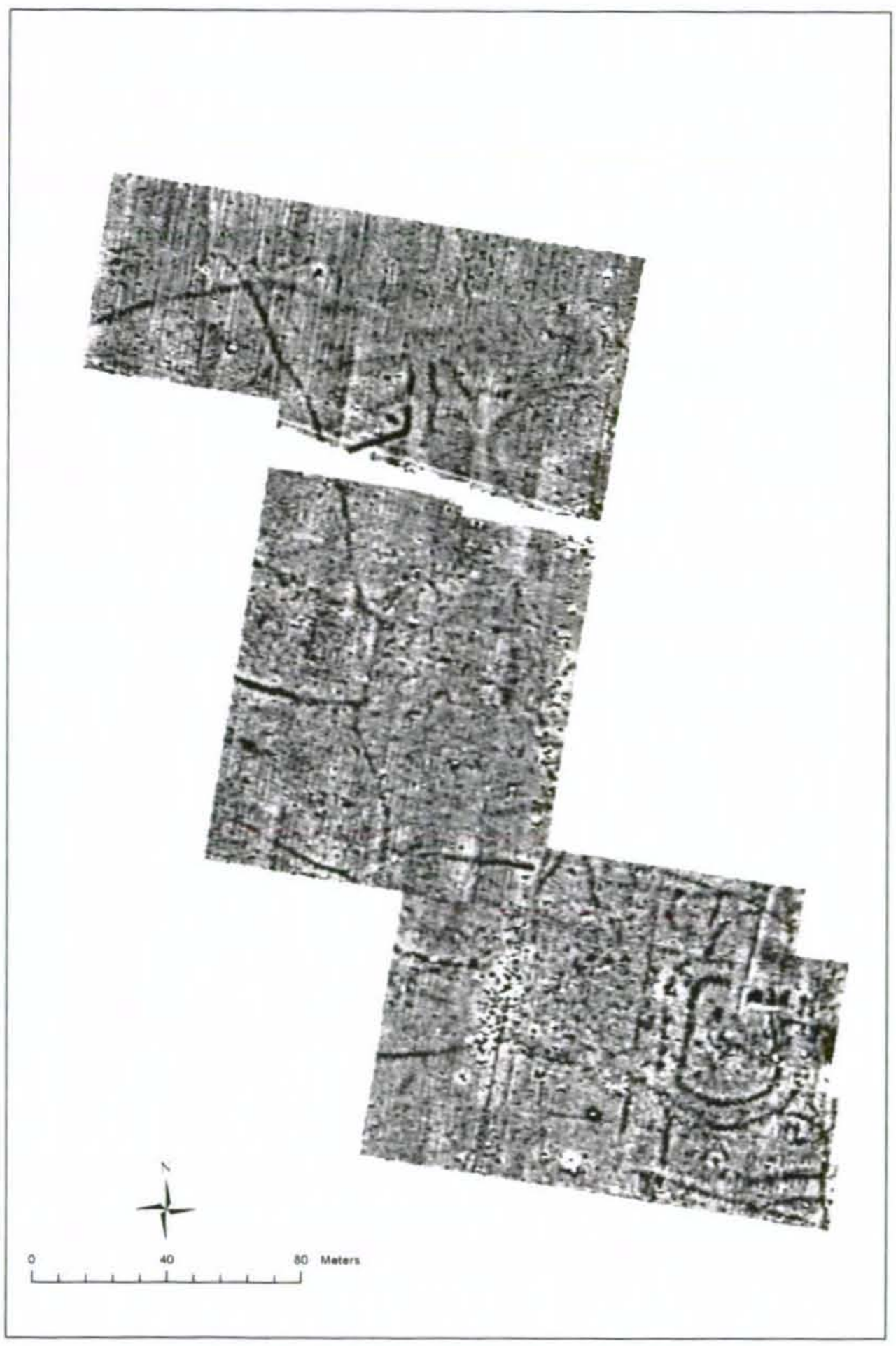

Figure 4. Results of the magnetometry survey at Yarford

Excavation

Excavations were carried out at Yarford between 20th June and 19th July 2003. The trenches were laid out as illustrated in Figure 5. Trench 1 was intended to investigate the double-ditched enclosure, the pit circle to its immediate west and the disturbance to its north-eastern corner, Trench 2 to examine the 'funnel'-shaped enclosure and Trench 3 to assess the constructional sequence of the enclosure ladder to the west of the site. Trenches 2 and 3 were each excavated over a two week period, and Trench 1 for four weeks. The following text discusses the archaeology of the site from the earliest to latest features. For this reason Trench 3 is discussed first, followed by Trench 2, and finally Trench 1.

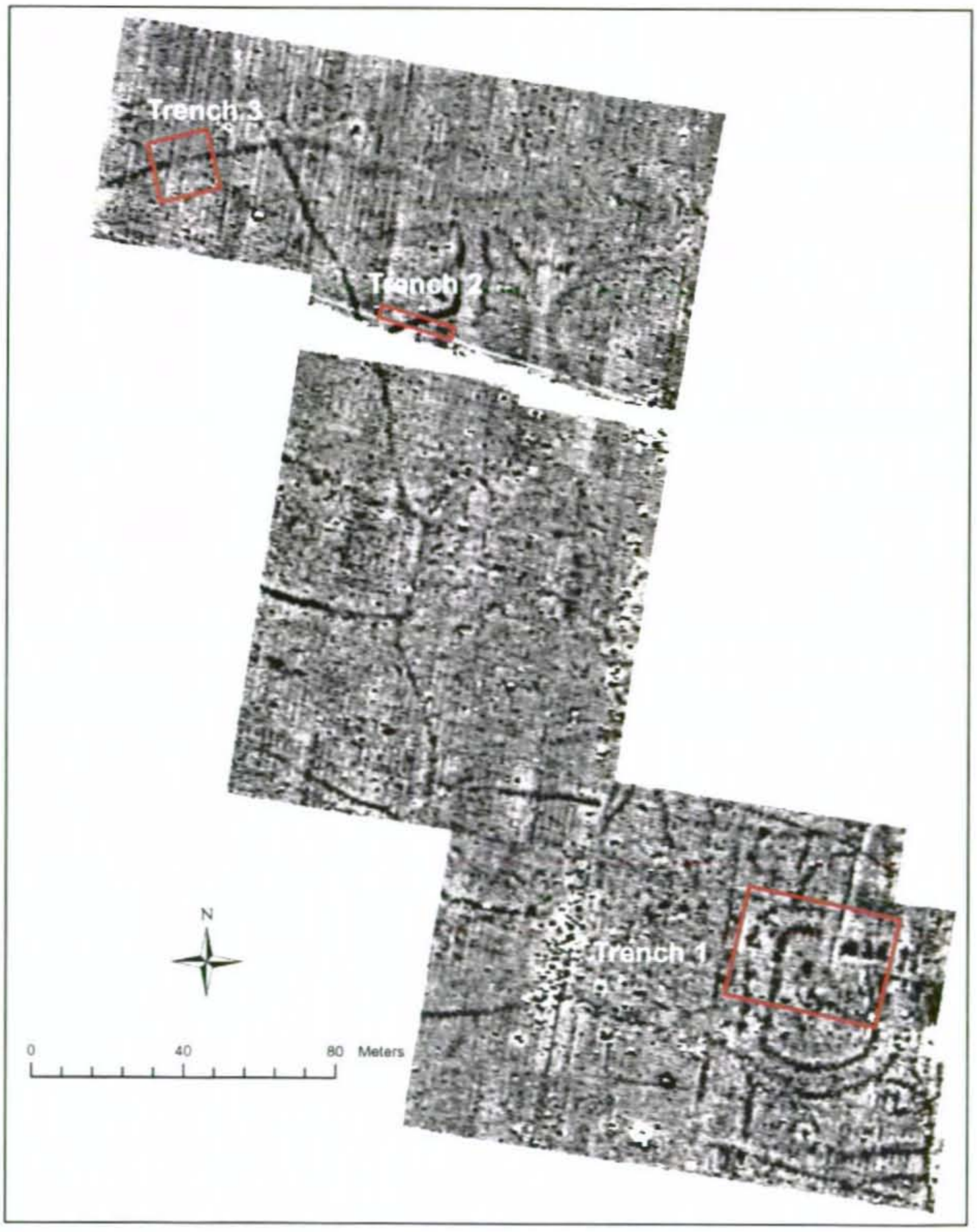

Figure 5. Locations of Trenches 1-3 plotted against the magnetometry results

Trench 3

Morte Slate bedrock was encountered within 0.3m of the ground surface over most of the trench. Plough marks of relatively recent date could be seen cutting 0.1m+ into the bedrock in the north-western and south-eastern corners of the trench demonstrating that this part of the site has recently been eroded. The ditch forming the northernmost 'rung' of the sub-rectangular ladder enclosure was located running approximately east-west across the northern part of the trench. Three sections were cut across the ditch demonstrating that it is between 1.2 and 0.8m deep, although plough erosion of the edges suggests that it was deeper when originally constructed. A single causeway formed from bedrock was found in the centre of the ditch area investigated which had also been damaged by ploughing. No archaeological features were found either inside or outside the enclosure, although the remains of a tree bowl were found c5m to the south of the causeway. A single post hole on the south-eastern corner of the causeway may attest to the presence of a gate which would have provided/prevented passage to the enclosure. The absence of re-cuts in the ditch and the lack of post-holes indicating successive gate structures suggest that this part of the ladder enclosure system was single phase. Dating evidence was provided from a few sherds of undiagnostic prehistoric pottery recovered from the lowest ditch fills. The fabric of these is unlike that of other prehistoric wares recovered from Trenches 1 and 2, perhaps suggesting that the ladder enclosure predates features in either of these trenches. A few (<30) finds of Roman and medieval date were recovered from the soil overlying the ditch deposits. These finds are abraded and have probably become incorporated in the topsoil as a result of manuring.

Trench 2 *(Somerset County Council)*

The same Morte Slate bedrock as outlined for Trench 3 was buried by c 0.4m of ploughsoil in Trench 2. Although plough damage to the bedrock was noted this was not of the same severity as that seen in Trench 3. The approximately east – west trending ditch that formed part of the funnel shaped enclosure was located running across the centre of the trench. A single section excavated across it in the northern edge of the trench demonstrated that it was around 1.5m in depth and that it contained a number of artefact-rich fills. The lowest of these included large pieces of pottery that have been interpreted as Middle Iron Age (Broomhead pers. comm..). The upper part of the secondary ditch fill contained higher concentrations of pottery, dominated by Glastonbury Wares of Late Iron Age date. Included amongst the pottery collected was an almost complete vessel, although all sherds were both large and unabraded. The explanation for the strong signal of the ditch in the magnetometry survey was also revealed in the secondary ditch fill in the form of a red clay found as a single 0.2m layer along the whole investigated ditch segment. The clay appears to have been burnt to a very high temperature (no charcoal was found), while the burning probably took place *in situ*, simply modifying the colour of the existing fine-grained ditch deposits. The cause of the burning is not known, although it is notable that the highest concentrations of Glastonbury Ware is associated with the red clay. The upper (tertiary) ditch fills contain ceramics of Romano-British date, while possible post holes of a similar antiquity are found cut into the Morte Slate to the west of the ditch.

The remains of a hollow way were found in the eastern part of the trench. This was manifested both as a general 0.5m deep depression in the Morte Slate bedrock, but also as a series of ruts produced by repeated passage of carts. The age of the trackway is at present uncertain as no diagnostic finds were found in the fills of the hollow way, which also has no stratigraphic relationship with any other feature.

The quantity and relative size of Middle and Late Iron Age ceramics in the ditch sediments suggest that the ditch lay very close to a settlement. Although no trace of such a settlement is present on the magnetometry plot, features that could have resulted from settlement activity were found to the north-west of the ditch in Trench 2. These comprise a number of post holes and a possible hearth. Unfortunately no artefacts were recovered from these features, and as they have no direct stratigraphic relationship with other features in the trench, it is not possible to date them.

Trench 1 *(See foldout plan at end)*

The main focus of the 2003 excavation was in Trench 1 where between 0.5m and 1.2m of recent colluvium and topsoil overlay Morte Slate. The trend is for thicker colluvium/topsoil in the north and eastern part (e.g. Figure 6) and thinner soils/deposits in the southern part of the trench. Indeed it would appear that the colluvium fills a depression that runs along the eastern half of the trench, a feature that may in part be of human construction (see below).

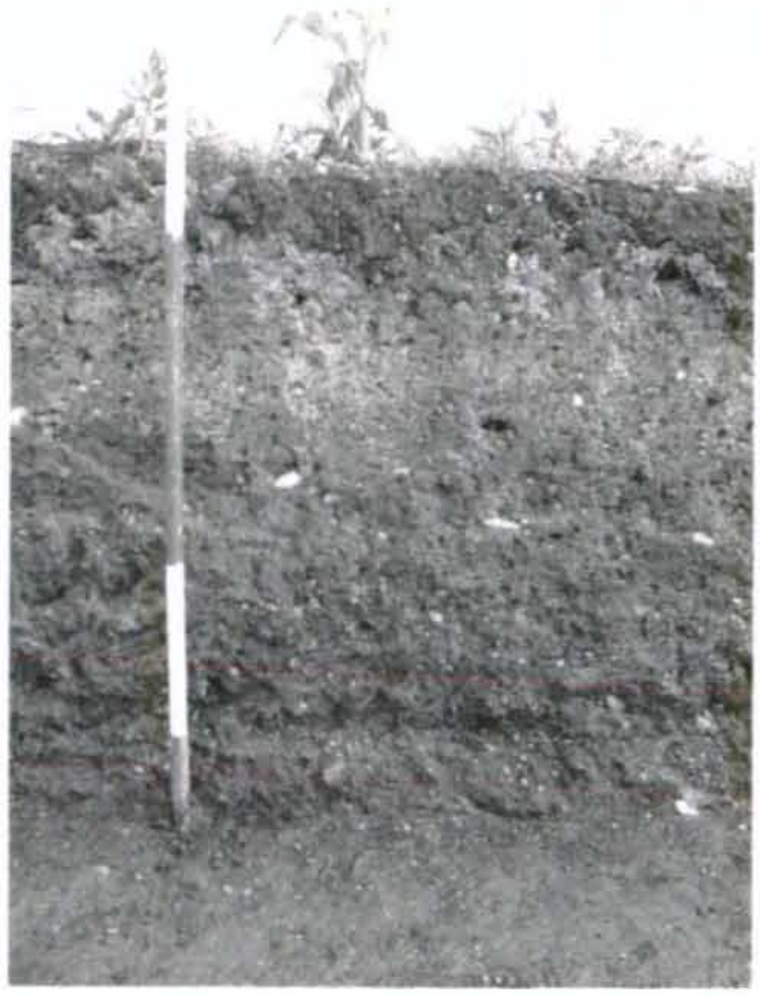

Figure 6. Soil profile/sediment sequence in the north-eastern part of Trench 1. Scale bar divisions in 0.5m intervals

The earliest features in Trench 1 were north-south and east-west orientated ditches, both of which occurred in the north-western trench quadrant (Plan, 1 & 2). These both form part of the rectilinear ditch system noted in the magnetometry plot, and both are cut by the ditches of the oval double-ditched enclosure. Although no artefacts were found in the excavation of sections across the ditches of the rectilinear system, their

relationship to the double-ditched enclosure would suggest that they are Late Iron Age or earlier. Their morphology suggests that they formed part of a field system that did not extend much further westwards than the western edge of Trench 1. Given the late prehistoric date of the rectilinear ditch system it is tempting to correlate it with Iron Age features in Trenches 2 and/or 3.

As has already been stated the ditches of the oval double-ditched enclosure are cut through the rectilinear enclosure system (Plan, 3 & 4). Indeed it is quite likely that both of the oval enclosure ditches re-used some of the cuts from the previous rectilinear system (see Figure 5). Both ditches comprising the oval enclosure are 'V'-shaped in profile, but differ in their depth. The outer ditch is approximately 1.3m deep, but the inner ditch exceeds 2.2m (Figure 7). The 'V'-shaped profile suggests that the ditches were dug for defensive purposes and that they were originally associated with interior banks. Given that a considerable amount of material would have been removed to create the inner ditch and assuming a 45° slope angle, the bank would have continued at least 5m into the interior of the enclosure from the ditch edge. This would have meant that the useable area of the interior was only c. 20m east to east by 30m north to south. The inner and outer ditches are not stratigraphically related, and indeed no feature that could provide a stratigraphic relationship crosses both. However, the fact that the ditches run in parallel around the entire perimeter c. 5m apart suggests that they must be more or less contemporary and probably functioned together as a means of defence (Figure 8). If this is the case it is likely that the bank from the outer ditch would have extended to the edge of the inner ditch, but would not have been as high. Traces of this bank survive in the northern part of the trench where the greater depth of overlying sediment and topsoil has protected it as an irregular area of compacted material.

Figure 7. Sections cut through the outer (left) and inner (right) ditch (Plan, 3 & 4)

Three sections were cut across the outer and two across the inner ditches in the western part of the excavation trenches. Very few artefacts were recovered from the primary or secondary fills, but those that were are entirely of late Iron Age date. One pot sherd from the inner enclosure ditch is particularly notable in that it is of a 'Belgic'-type fine fare. This would suggest that the site was relatively high status during the final Iron Age. Indeed the function of the oval double-ditched enclosure remains uncertain. No evidence of Iron Age occupation was found in the enclosure interior during the 2003 excavations, and no sign of an entrance could be found either. It is likely that the Roman deposits with which the excavation team spent much of the 2003 season dealing, are the reason for both. Roman occupation deposits cover the

majority of the interior of the enclosure (and all of the area that would not have been occupied by the inner bank), while previous experience of working on later prehistoric enclosures on the Quantock hills suggests that entrances are in the east, which is precisely the area where Roman deposits/structures are thickest/most complex.

A series of intercutting pits was located immediately inside the inner ditch in the western part of the trench (Plan, 5). These pits have no stratigraphic relationship with the ditch beyond the fact that both features are cut by an undated linear feature. Given that the pits are located in an area that must have been occupied by the inner defensive bank they cannot be contemporary with the Late Iron Age use of the enclosure. They must therefore either pre-date this phase or are otherwise associated with activity in the early Roman period.

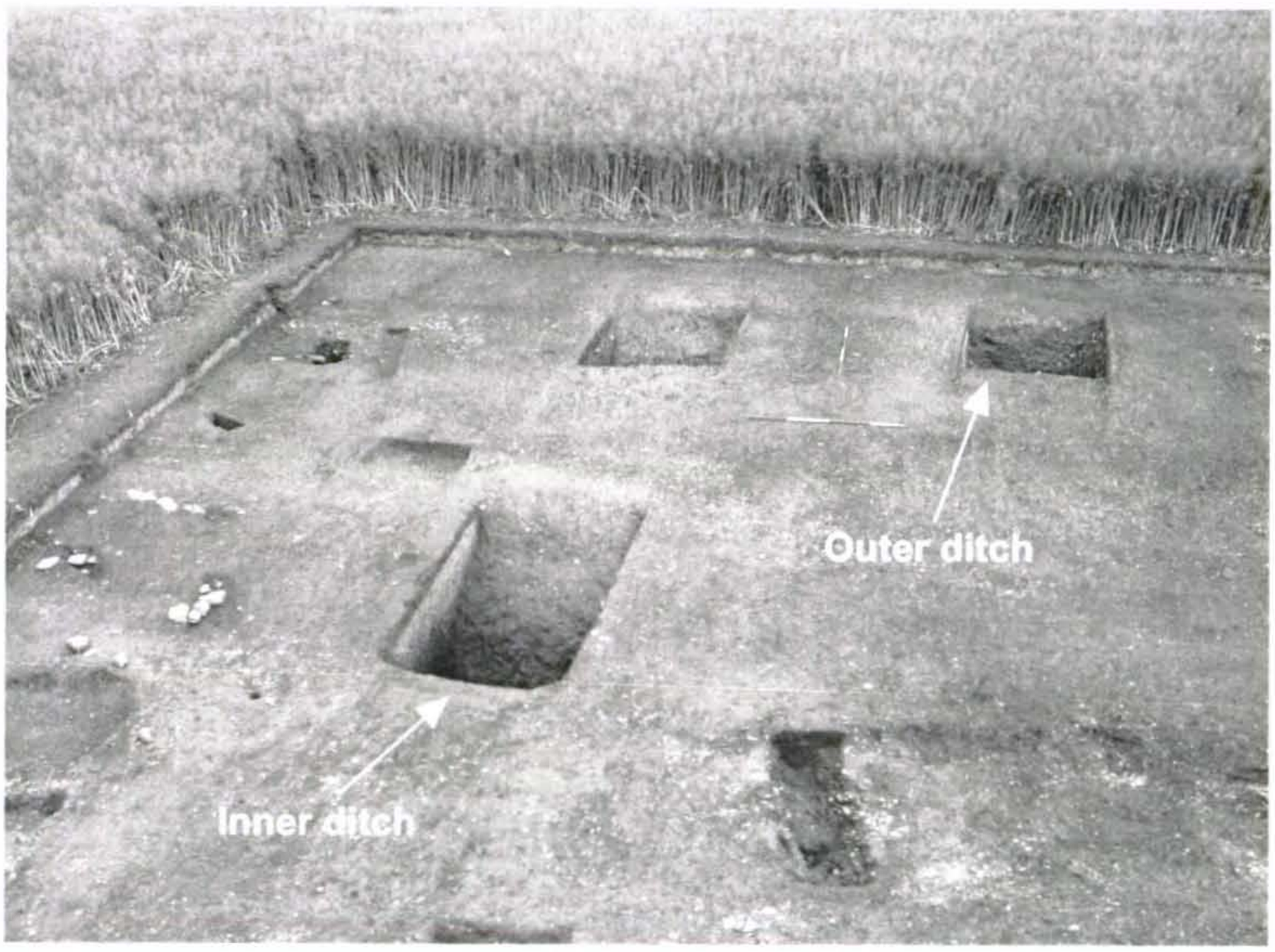

Figure 8. The south-west quadrant of Trench 1 at the end of the 2003 excavation showing the inner and outer enclosure ditches. North is to the right of the photograph.

The early Roman period was marked by two major changes. The ditches of the enclosure were filled almost level to the surface, either at the end of the Iron Age or, more likely, in the early period after the Roman conquest. Dating, however, is not precise at present, until the results of further analysis of the pottery assemblage are available. The fill of the inner ditch was probably the bank, since the position for the internal bank was subsequently occupied by structures.

The second change was the construction of flimsy rectangular buildings around the periphery of the enclosure. The best evidence came from the southern part of Trench 1, just to the east of the inner ditch (Plan, 6). The walling was of dry-stone construction, and should be interpreted as the stone foundations for a wooden superstructure.

Dating for this phase of building is imprecise because of a lack of associated finds, but can be linked to pottery from a robbed wall on the same alignment, to the north of the structure just described, which is of early Roman date (Plan, 7). It should be noted that the overall alignment of these structures is the same as the later villa discussed below, and therefore possibly represents the same complex at an earlier stage of development.

The next significant development occurred in the 3rd century, with the building of a small villa along the northern edge of the enclosure (Plan, 8). The walls of the building in fact ran over the filled inner ditch, and a specialized construction technique was used to stabilize the foundations. This consisted of a 'gapped-tooth' arrangement of projecting flat stones, which had the effect of widening the foundations where they might have been liable to subside into the ditch-fill (Plan, 9). To judge from the horizontal alignment of the foundation courses, this technique was successful and no sinkage occurred.

Figure 9. The western edge of the villa, where the walls ran over the filled inner ditch.

The layout of the villa was initially three (or perhaps four) rooms placed in line east-west, linked by a corridor on the south side. There was no evidence for projecting wings, but it should be noted that at this stage the plan is not yet established in full. The easternmost room was approximately 4.50 m by 4.50 m square, and contained a polychrome decorative mosaic (Plan, 10). Only a small sample are of the mosaic was uncovered in 2003, but enough to indicate that it was of geometric type with a combination of rectangular and circular panels in guilloche.

Figure 10. Revealing the mosaic floor in the easternmost room (Plan, 10).

The central motif was outside the sampled area, but likely to be c. 3 m in diameter. Preservation of the mosaic was good, and it was laid on a carefully prepared cement surface. There were also indications that it had been in use for some time, since the easternmost part exposed had signs of burning, and more particularly, there were bare patches where tesserae had been removed or worn away, and not replaced. Very few loose tesserae were found, suggesting that in its later stages, the mosaic was allowed to become worn, perhaps due to a change of use for the room (see below). A polychrome plaster fresco, also damaged in places through wear, survived *in situ* along the base of the west, north and east walls of the room to a height of c. 25 cm.

The floor for the corridor along the south of the villa was also located, and consisted of a cement surface similar to that for the room with the mosaic (Plan, 11). It is probable that the corridor, too, had a tessellated floor. The other rooms of the villa are yet to be excavated to their floor levels.

It is likely that the overall layout and floors were part of a single structural phase of the late 3rd or early 4th century. Subsequently, additions were made on the north side (Plan, 12), in order to add a partial corridor along that side of the building, and some rooms on the north-east corner. This second phase of building is undated at present, because this area was exposed to wall-top level, but not excavated further.

The archaeological layers over the mosaic floor indicate that debris was allowed to accumulate over the floor, probably in the mid/late 4th century. This included burnt material and, interestingly, several pieces of red deer antler, which may indicate a change in use for the room, perhaps to a workshop for the processing of animal products.

The upper fill of the room was largely made up of wall rubble, which had come into position during the late 4th or early 5th century. Roof slates were few in number, probably because they had slipped off the roof towards the north, where a large deposit of slates was exposed but not excavated, immediately outside the villa.

Associated with the late Roman villa was the uppermost fill of the ditches of the Iron Age enclosure. Large quantities of building material, pottery and other items, including a pewter flagon handle, were found along the length of the inner ditch, from some pits between the ditches and to a lesser extent from the outer ditch. This can be interpreted as general rubbish deposition rather than a deliberate attempt to infill the ditches. The building material in the rubbish deposits may come from the early Roman buildings, or result from the alterations made during the phase 2 addition to the villa.

Amongst the material of the upper fill of the outer ditch was a find of particular interest, as it appears to represent a deliberate act of deposition. It consisted of a complete pot and lid containing a late Roman pennanular brooch (Plan, 13). The find had no bone with it, despite being superficially similar to grave goods for a burial, so it seems preferable to suggest that this is the product of some other form of ritual activity.

Figure 11. Complete pot and lid containing the brooch.

Conclusions

The investigations carried out at Yarford in 2003 have demonstrated the existence of a complex of archaeological features previously only seen as cropmarks. Although continuity of occupation cannot be conclusively demonstrated, it would appear that activity on the Yarford site spans the Middle Iron Age to Late Roman period. Particularly significant findings resulting from the fieldwork carried out in 2003 are as follows:

- The 'ladder' of enclosures in the western part of the study area dates to the later prehistoric period. The northern-most ditch and associated ?gate structure are of a single phase. The absence of features inside the enclosure – either in Trench 3 or on the magnetometry plot – suggests that it was used for animal husbandry.
- A Middle and Late Iron Age settlement exists immediately to the north of Trench 2. The absence of geophysical 'signatures' in this area suggest that the settlement was unenclosed, while it would appear to have been relatively low status judging from the locally produced copies of Glastonbury Ware pottery. A burning event in a ditch to the south of the settlement marks the end of Iron Age activity.
- The enclosure in Trench 1 is a well-defended Late Iron Age settlement (later than that in Trench 2), of small size, i.e. a single farmstead, but of relatively high status. Enclosures of this type are rare in Somerset, and this is the only one known from the Quantocks.
- The Trench 1 enclosure was converted into a semi-Romanized farm in the early Roman period. The Late Iron Age ditches were infilled and small single-room rectangular buildings were constructed around the courtyard formed by the old enclosure. A good parallel for this sequence is at Whitton, South Glamorgan, where a well-documented similar sequence has been excavated (Jarrett and Wrathmell 1981).
- The late Roman period saw a significant advance in the Romanized nature of the site, with the construction of a villa. It was well-appointed, if fairly small, and at least one room had decorated walls and a mosaic floor. This is the most westerly villa known in Somerset, and appears to have been an isolated example of a villa in the Quantocks. Most of the villas in south and west Somerset focus on Ilchester, c. 30 km to the east (Leech and Leach 1982, 64; cf. Leach 2001, 84ff.), but Yarford may have had communication links along the Vale of Taunton Deane to the Roman settlement (and former military fort) at Wiveliscombe. To the west of Yarford, the fertile valley and hills beyond (the Brendons and Exmoor) were apparently devoid of villa settlement. This was perhaps a cultural boundary, expressed in settlement types to the west that did not adopt the trappings of a Roman lifestyle.
- The main period of the villa was the late 3rd and early 4th centuries. By the late 4th century the building had changed its use, with workshops apparently replacing domestic usage. It was in a state of collapse by the early 5th century, but the presence of Valentinianic coins suggests economic activity continued until the very end of the Roman period.

In summary the Yarford site appears to be very unusual for south-west England in demonstrating continuity of high status occupation across the Iron Age to Roman 'divide'. The villa is also important in that it is the most westerly feature of this type in Somerset – and separated from all other known villas by at least 20 km.

Aims for 2004

Further investigation is planned for 2004 in the area of Trench 1. This fieldwork would aim:

- To establish the function, chronology and relationship to other features of the intercutting pits to the immediate north of the earliest Roman structure
- To find the entrance to the Iron Age enclosure and clarify the sequence leading to the infilling of the ditches and subsequent changes in the early Roman period.
- To elucidate the plan, sequence and dating of the Roman villa.
- To determine the extent of the villa beyond the trench margins by use of magnetometry and resistivity
- To establish the artistic and cultural significance of the mosaics and interior decoration.
- To clarify the early Roman features and their relationship to the late Roman building.
- To examine further the ritual deposition in pits on the west side of the ditched enclosure.
- To provide a palaeoenvironmental context for Middle Iron Age to Roman activity through the study of sediments accumulating in the stream valley to the east.

These aims would be achieved by full excavation in the area of the late Roman building and its immediate surroundings. The entrance to the Iron Age enclosure probably lies under the Roman building or just to the south-east of it, and this would be included in the area to be excavated. A separate trench would be needed to examine the possible ritual activity. Further geophysical prospection would be carried out which would extend the magnetometry plot to the modern field boundaries. A resistivity survey of the villa and its immediate surroundings would also be carried out.

The mosaic(s) would be recorded to the standards expected for the current corpus of RB mosaics, but it is very likely that the mosaic will be reburied rather than lifted.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thanks the Trustees of Tetton Estate and Mr and Mrs P. House for granting permission to undertake fieldwork on the Yarford House, Mr Peter Skinner of Humberts for helping to arrange permissions, and Mr and Mrs House for the considerable logistical help they provided during the course of the June-July 2003 excavations.

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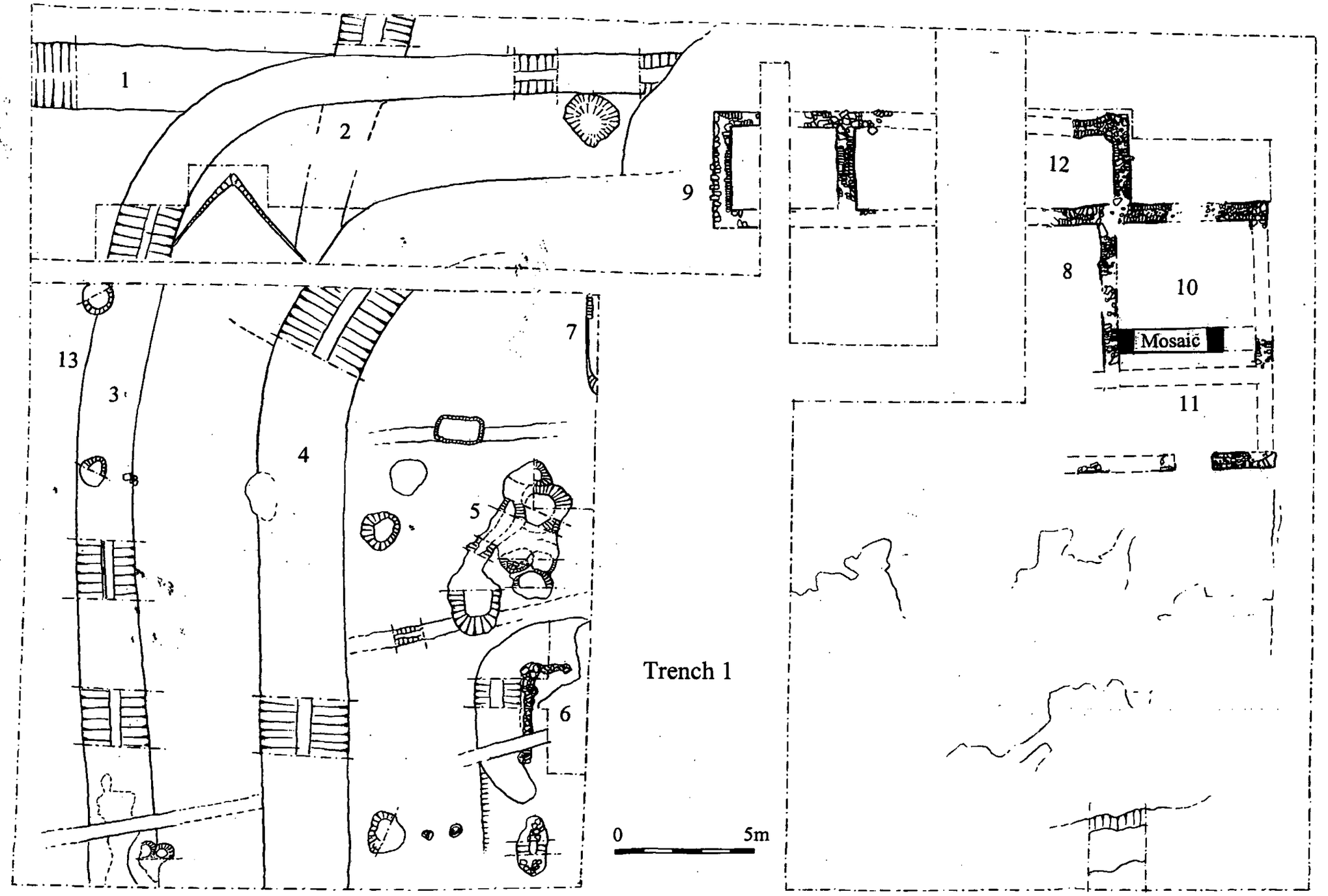
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Mosaic
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Trench 1
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