

BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

A SURVEY OF
LILLESHALL ABBEY, SHROPSHIRE

by

Iain Ferris

B.U.F.A.U.



A SURVEY OF
LILLESHALL ABBEY, SHROPSHIRE

by

Iain Ferris

A Survey of Lilleshall Abbey, Shropshire

'Nature has now made it her own. Time has worn off all traces of the rule: it has blunted the sharp edges of the chissel; and broken the regularity of opposing parts.'

William Gilpin (Gilpin 1782, 33)

Introduction

The remains of Lilleshall Abbey (SJ 738142), approximately two miles to the north-west of Telford in north-eastern Shropshire, would well comply with Gilpin's conception of the picturesque monastic ruin; a mysteriously insistent presence in an otherwise rural landscape.

The broad history of the abbey and a description of the monument has been given by Rigold (Rigold 1969) and will not be repeated in the present account. More recently an extensive photogrammetric survey has been carried out at Lilleshall and this has acted as an aid to the repair and consolidation programme that has been underway at the site for a number of years. In the summer of 1987 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was contracted by the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission to undertake the first phase of an interpretative survey which will eventually consider in detail all or most of those areas of stone walling as yet unconsolidated.

The 1987 survey was concerned exclusively with the abbey church, more especially the long north wall of the nave (both internal and external faces) the patchy remains of the north transept, and the internal face of the north wall of the quire (its external face being unapproachable for detailed study).

Methodology

It is important to describe briefly the methodology adopted for the 1987 survey, not only because it will need to be followed in whole or in part during the next phase of recording, but also because it, perhaps, affects the research aims of the project.

Though its coverage was uneven, the already completed photogrammetric survey was taken as basis for the work. The brief did not require stone-by-stone drawings of those areas omitted from the photogrammetric tracings but rather, the highlighting there of constructional detail and the identification of individual incidents of building work. After the examination of the wall faces, drawings were made (using the old survey as a tracing base at a scale of 1:50), which highlighted Structural Elements (SE; numbered in continuous sequence from SE 1000), that is, each discernible building activity be it a major constructional phase or a brick layer's or mason's rise, and Architectural Elements (AE; numbered in sequence from AE1), that is, doors, windows, etc. For each numbered element a pro-forma recording sheet was completed; these forms have been used for the recording of stone and brickwork at a number of buildings (Halesowen Abbey, Warwickshire; The White Hart Inn, Walsall, Staffordshire; and Langley Gatehouse, Shropshire) and have been found useful in standardising the approach towards a non-interpretative archive and in easing reference in text to particular features or particular parts of a build. Their use should also allow for comparison between constructional techniques in one part of a building or complex and another, and between one building and another.

Where it had not been possible for the photogrammetric surveyors to cover certain areas due to problems of access, the record was supplemented by measured drawings in the 1987 survey, this involving the planning of the new staircase AE34 and the drawing, in elevation, of arched window AE40 where unencumbered by props.

Analysis

The plan of the abbey church, with the exception of the not-wholly-understandable chapels leading off the transepts and off the quire, consists of an aisleless nave, the same width (c.9.5 metres) as the quire; the total length from western inner wall face of nave to eastern inner wall of quire, including the crossing, is c.69 metres; the transepts, plus the crossing, are c.31 metres in length (minimum) and c.8.5 metres wide.

The first stretch of walling to be examined in detail was the north wall of the nave, up to the crossing (Figures 1 & 2), though this cannot be wholly understood without reference to the largely consolidated, south wall of the nave. Internally (Figure 2), long stretches of the north wall have been stripped of facing stones to expose there the wall coring (SE1000), the appearance of the core varying from one area to another, perhaps suggesting gang infilling rather than the continuous, horizontal raising of wall and core together. The core is composed mainly of irregular and unshaped blocks of red and green sandstone, smaller sandstone fragments (3-4 centimetres in diameter), and numerous small pebbles and cobbles up to 10 centimetres, all in a matrix of soft, pinky-buff mortar. It is difficult to detect any logical pattern to the stripping of facing stones though the denuded areas on the inside and the outside of the wall face roughly correspond. The wall still stands to a height of 6-7 metres, the upper part having presumably collapsed, been robbed, or both. Where some facing blocks survive (SE1019), it can be seen that the upper build is a single entity, being obviously contemporary with the stringcoursing SE1024 and the corbels. The robbers evidently desired only well-faced stones, since their activities left in situ the lowest stones of the wall build (SE1029), these being generally large, rough, unfaced and unfinished purple-red sandstone blocks in a single construction; a straight joint visible midway along this stretch of wall perhaps is indicative of gang construction since the style and type of build is identical to either side of the joint. SE1029 does not continue beyond the doorway (AE27) in the west, nor, in the east, beyond the largely reconstructed arch AE17. On the external face (Figure 1) the situation is different. At the wall base survive one or two courses of well-cut and faced sandstone blocks (SE1056), the lower one angled and set on top of a chamfered foundation course (SE1055). The whole

build is neat and economical with little spacing being employed between blocks. This distinct basal build can be traced from wall AE49, in the east, westwards along the whole length of the nave, round the base of the stair turret AE38 with its double-chamfered corner stones (SE1058), and around the outer face of the west wall of the nave. This therefore demonstrates quite clearly that the whole of this stretch of wall is of a single period and, indeed, the eastern termination of build SE1029 on the internal face (Fig. 2) corresponds with the termination to the east of SE1055/1056 on the external face (Fig. 1)

The stair tower (Figures 7 and 8) survives to a height of approximately 8.30 metres and is roughly 3.70 metres square in plan, projecting out northwards 2.5 metres beyond the line of the north wall of the nave. It is entered from inside the nave through a doorway (AE27) framed by an arch (SE1047) that is now largely destroyed. A chamfered stone in situ at the base of the build on the west side of the opening suggests that the jambs certainly, and the arch possibly, were chamfered. The interior of the stairwell is dark and must formerly have been lit by a rushlight though no trace of a bracket attachment can easily be seen on the wall face. A long, angled passage leads to the staircase, the surface of this passageway being formed by an uneven spread of sandstone rubble set in hard mortar; the trowel cleaning of this area preparatory to its planning unearthed a number of decorated glazed floor tiles that may have been originally set here as part of a floor or, more likely, were in soil derived from elsewhere in the abbey complex dumped here to level the area sometime after the removal of the original surfacing. The staircase itself, constructed entirely in stone, is a spiral newel stair (AE34), the newel itself being similar in size and shape to the columns in the external columnal cluster to the west of the doorway. The stair is difficult to negotiate, being lit at the second turn by a single slit window (AE39), itself angled and internally splaying. Difficult to explain is a marked curving cut or groove made in the stonework above this window, and only present on the external wall face. Though doubtless made on the stones once in situ, it is not consistent with a cowl shutter having once been in place here. Anticipation of arrival is soured by the unexpected truncation of the staircase; Rigold has suggested that it led into a tower over the west end of the nave, citing the presence of the two substantial clasping buttresses

to either side of the arched doorway in the western front and the two sets of opposed clustered columns, inside, that would have carried an arch. The columns on the north wall (AE29) are missing their capitals though it can be assumed that they were similar if not actually identical to those, decorated with fringed ovolos, on the south wall) .

The proposed tower would have been vaulted at first-floor level, and, indeed, vaulting at the same height would have run the whole length of the nave up to the crossing. A moulded, scrolled stringcourse (SE1024), surviving patchily c.5 metres up the inner face of the north nave wall (Figure 2) is topped by corbels from which spring the ribs of the vaulting. The stringcourse is truncated to the east by the disturbance (SE1028) associated with the reconstruction of the arch AE17. Three corbels (AE21, AE26, AE30) survive on the north wall, while pairs exist for all three and for a fourth, now destroyed, in the south wall. While the basic form and style of the corbels and springers are identical, the presence or absence of decoration, or the form of decoration, varies from one to another. The decoration on AE21, the best preserved, consists of three splayed leaves at the very base of the corbel itself. The full arrangement and spacing of the vaulting springers can be reconstructed for the north wall with reference to those surviving in the south wall, even though here too the series can be demonstrated to be incomplete. In the angle formed by the north and west walls of the nave are the remains of a feature (A42) that probably represents the base of a springer. To the east, on either side of the clustered columns (AE29), are again portions of such arrangements (AE31 to the west, AE30 to the east); further east a more convincing survival is seen with its plain corbel base (AE26). There must have been another corbel between AE30 and AE26, at approximately 6.20 metres from each; similarly, to the east, between AE26 and AE21 another corbel would have existed, this one being missing on the south wall also. It seems likely that SE1026/SE1027 forms the end of the vaulting over the nave. An engraving by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck, dated 1731 (reproduced in Rigold 1969, 5), shows a view down the nave from the west and vaulting in situ over part of the quire can clearly be seen though by this time the vault over the nave had been destroyed.

A final feature, presumably contemporary with all that has been described above, is at the east end of the nave and is a low recess (SE1031) cut 350-400 millimetres back into the inner wall face and floored by a large stone slab (SE1031). This may represent a locker or cupboard.

Now must be considered the complicated area of walling at the east end of the nave, pierced by two arches (AE40, AE17). From an examination of the style of building, the stone employed, and the mortar, it is possible to say that the arch, AE17, and a substantial area of infilling around it (SE1028), represent relatively recent, vigorous rebuilding with little attention to stylistic compromise. On the Buck engraving the very top of an arch can be seen in this same position but its head is pointed like that of AE40 above. In the sides of the entranceway through AE17 and on the inner main face to the east of the present arch it is possible to see the lower parts of columns and their bases, partially protruding, enclosed within the later remodelling; this doubtless represents part of an elaborate original entranceway here. Indeed, in plan there is little difference between this early arrangement and that surviving for a doorway opposite in the south nave wall and giving access to and from the cloister; however, this doorway, the east processional door, is elaborately decorated with Romanesque carving and certainly no such detailed work need be expected on the door at present under consideration. The Buck illustration implies that a pointed-head arch was here and this may, considering the groundplan, have replaced an earlier, round-headed, Romanesque feature. On the external elevation there is no trace of columns, though once again a large area of disturbance (SE1043) around the arch is easily noted. A remnant of an earlier arch survives (SE1062) in addition to a chamfered rebate (SE1044) associated with it and a fragment of the original build (SE1042, SE1040). A major break in construction is noticeable here, despite the extensive alterations, and a straight joint separating builds SE1044, SE1042, SE1041 and SE1040 in the east from builds SE1051, SE1045 and SE1046 in the west marks this point. At the corresponding point on the inner face of the wall is the line at which the robbing of SE1019 has stopped, a break in build SE1029, and the positioning of north-south running cross-wall AE45. All this must be more than coincidence. Returning to the external face, it is worth noting that the chamfered stringcourse SE1045 has a stop at the angle formed with truncated

wall AE49 and would thus suggest the two to be contemporary. A damaged capital (SE1052) is built into the wall just above the stringcourse.

The upper of the two arches, for a window, at this end of the nave is again complicated. The blocking seen internally at the base (SE1022) is certainly later than the Buck engraving while the full arrangement of columns, chamfers and rebates could not be recorded due to the presence here of a Piranesian framework of supports and braces, hinting at torture and execution, but here serving only to support the arch against the detrimental effects of mining subsidence. Both sides of the arch (AE40) were drawn in detail (Figures 5 and 6) as far as the circumstances would allow. The outer face is very badly damaged with only the inner arch (SE1034) and its flanking pillars etc. (SE1035; SE1036) surviving, the arch having a pointed head as seen on the Buck engraving. Part of the flanking build survives also (SE1037) but the outer framing is largely destroyed and denuded of facing stones (SE1038) However, the general size of its external appearance can still be gauged. On the inner face most of the original stone is still in place; stonework (SE1020), columns (SE1021) and arch fabric (SE1060) are constructed of well cut stone. There is some question as to whether this opening is the earliest in this position, and the messy infilling between the arch fabric and the vaulting rib (SE1023) to the west perhaps suggests that it is, in fact, an insertion or replacement.

Rigold's suggestion that this was the only window in the northern nave wall (Rigold 1969, 4) is interesting but nowhere else along the length of the wall does the stonework survive to the height of the base of the build of AE40 so in constructional terms this is not proven. The same situation exists for the southern wall of the nave, though the Buck engraving shows at least two windows to have been here. The writer has not had the opportunity to search for and consider illustrations and drawings of the abbey; perhaps these may throw further light on the question of the presence or absence of further windows in this wall of the nave.

Attention must now be turned to the quire (Figure 3). The walling here is relatively easy to understand and is at once strikingly different from most of that in the nave, barring the fact that it has been largely repointed as

part of the consolidation programme. The quire is separated from the nave (or, at least, those two areas that have been called for convenience nave and quire on the model of the photogrammetric survey) by a crossing c.8 metres wide. The clustered piers at either side of the crossing are impressive, and, as can be seen most notably in the south quire wall, they would have carried arches across the transepts. The quire build (SE1004) is of regular red sandstone blocks, well laid and separated from a similar build with occasional thin bonding courses (SE1002) by a chamfered, projecting stringcourse (SE1008). At first floor level are four identical windows (AE1, AE2, AE3, AE4) with round-headed arches, now blocked or partially blocked. A number of open putlog holes (a corresponding number visible on the south wall also) possibly mark the position of timber poles for framing the arch during construction. The arrangement of windows, with two arches at the east end at ground floor level (AE5, AE6), is identical to that on the south wall of the quire. Decorated corbels for the springing of vaulting (AE9, AE10, AE11, AE12) are more pronounced and in a different style to those seen in the nave, the Buck engraving of 1731 showing part of the vaulting still surviving and the walls at the east end of the church standing almost to the same height as they now do.

The windows, stringcourse, corbels, and main build (SE1004, SE1002) are consistent and contemporary with each other. Two rather ragged features pierce SE1004 and these must be thought of as being later in date. A doorway (AE7) with a pointed-arched head (SE1018) is now blocked, the blocking (SE1014) being set back from the main wall face and suggestive of a later reuse as a cupboard or storage alcove. Next to the door, to the east, is a somewhat ragged and jagged hole in the wall (AE 8), again reused. Opposite, in the south wall is a similar feature surviving in toto, this being a tomb recess with low decorated flanking pillars and an elaborate arched frame. In the north wall the surviving elements include some edging stones (SE1011), a slab base (SE1010), floor make-up (SE1012) and one pillar support (SE1061) only. A small drain outlet(?) (AE14) is partially visible at ground level further to the east.

Of the north transept little survives, the destruction being thought by Rigold to be the result of a civil war action (Rigold 1969, 14), but stubs of both the east and west walls do still stand. Most of the facing stones

of the east wall (Figure 4) have been removed but where patches survive they can be seen to be similar to the main build of the quire. The outline shape of an arched doorway survives (AE16) with the bases of elaborate clustered piers surviving to either side of the arch (AE13, AE15). The bottom of the doorway has been blocked (SE1018). Only one side of this wall was drawn during the survey, the other side being recorded photographically, but the undrawn face does suggest that the arch has been inserted - the extent of the disturbance around the arch being considerable - to give access into a newly-created room (a chapel?) whose east wall can be seen to be butted up against the outer face of the north wall of the quire, and into which further access was given by the creation of doorway AE7. The date of this chapel is as yet uncertain.

The west wall of the north transept is also pierced by an arch, now partially blocked.

Decorated and Moulded Stones

Drawings or photographs were made of all decorated and moulded stones, and their position recorded on the relevant elevations. Measured drawings of mouldings were made where feasible and if weathering had not affected the profile (Figure 11).

Mason's Marks

A number of mason's marks were recorded (Figure 10), all on stonework considered to be in situ rather than reset in a later build. These marks were drawn and photographed. Their significance will be considered once the marks from the whole abbey complex have been logged and any correlation between marks and style/date/type of build can then be made. The marks are numbered in continuous sequence from M1.

Conclusion

After detailed examination of only two stretches of walling it is difficult to contemplate a Yeatsian 'hammering of thoughts into unity' concerning the history of the whole structure of the abbey church at Lilleshall. Recording of further walls, a full study of past work at the site, of documents, accounts of excavation, drawings, and paintings will doubtless allow a re-evaluation to be confidently attempted.

Rigold distinguished between the style of the quire and of the nave, the former assigned a 12th-century date and the latter a 13th-century one. He sees the building of the nave as not only fulfilling 'the original plan' but also, despite its date, harking back to the Romanesque style. The alteration of the great east window he assigns to the 14th century, contemporary with the building activity in the west of the abbey range.

There is no doubt that the plan of the whole complex has evolved over a considerable period of time but whether to a holoptic grand design or to an ever changing plot cannot be said. The construction may have been more piecemeal than Rigold suggests for there appear to be two major breaks in building (best seen on Figure 1) in the north wall of the nave and it remains to be seen whether this can be confirmed elsewhere in the complex; certainly the main builds do appear to be Romanesque and Early English.

The archive produced in this phase of work forms a specific archaeological account of a single site. In future phases it will be of use in formulating strategies for consolidation work in tandem with the existing photogrammetric records. While justifiable in itself, perhaps questions of a less specific and more general nature should also be asked: how does building at Lilleshall, in terms of strategy, plan, style, and date, relate to that at other local Augustinian houses such as Whiteladies Priory and Haughmond Abbey, to Augustinian houses on a wider front, and to local foundations of other orders?

Survey Staff

The survey was carried out in autumn 1987 under the supervision of Jon Sterenberg. Staff were Jo Cutting, Laurence Jones, Steve Litherland, Iain McCraith, James Manning-Press, and Laurence Way. Graham Norrie, photographer of the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, Birmingham University, as usual helped the project run smoothly with his preparatory photographic work ahead of the survey. Additional drawing work was undertaken by Trevor Pearson. The text was typed by Ann Humphries and edited by Elizabeth Hooper and Ann Ellison.

References

- GILPIN, W. 1782. Observations on the River Wye and Several Parts of South Wales. London.
- RIGOLD, S.E. 1969. Lilleshall Abbey, Shropshire. Reprinted 1986 by English Heritage.

I.M. Ferris
4.2.1988

-oOo-

List of Figures

These are inked-in field drawings from the archive,
not publication drawings

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| Figure 1 | The Nave. North wall, north (external) face |
| Figure 2 | The Nave. North wall, south (internal) face |
| Figure 3 | The Quire. North wall, south (internal) face |
| Figure 4 | North Transept. East wall, west (internal) face |
| Figure 5 | Detail of Arch AE40 and corbel AE21 |
| Figure 6 | Detail of arch AE40 (north face) |
| Figure 7 | Plan of stairwell AE34 |
| Figure 8 | Elevation of faced stonework SE1059 |
| Figure 9 | Side of Arch AE17. Detail of column clusters |
| Figure 10 | Masons Marks |
| Figure 11 | Mouldings. |

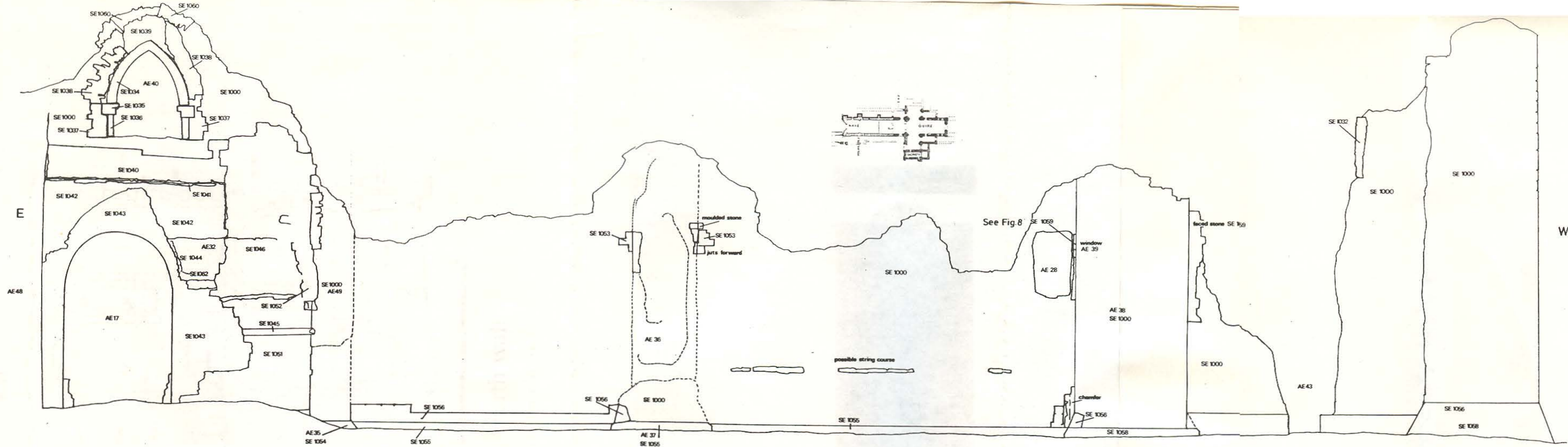


FIGURE 1 The Nave. North wall, north (external) face.

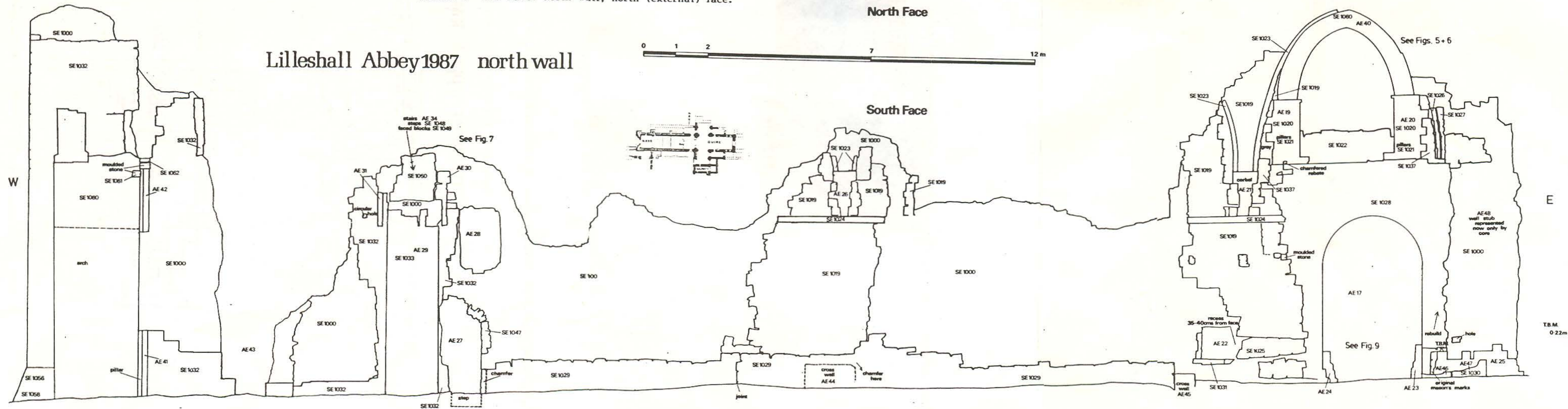


FIGURE 2 The Nave. North wall, south (internal) face.

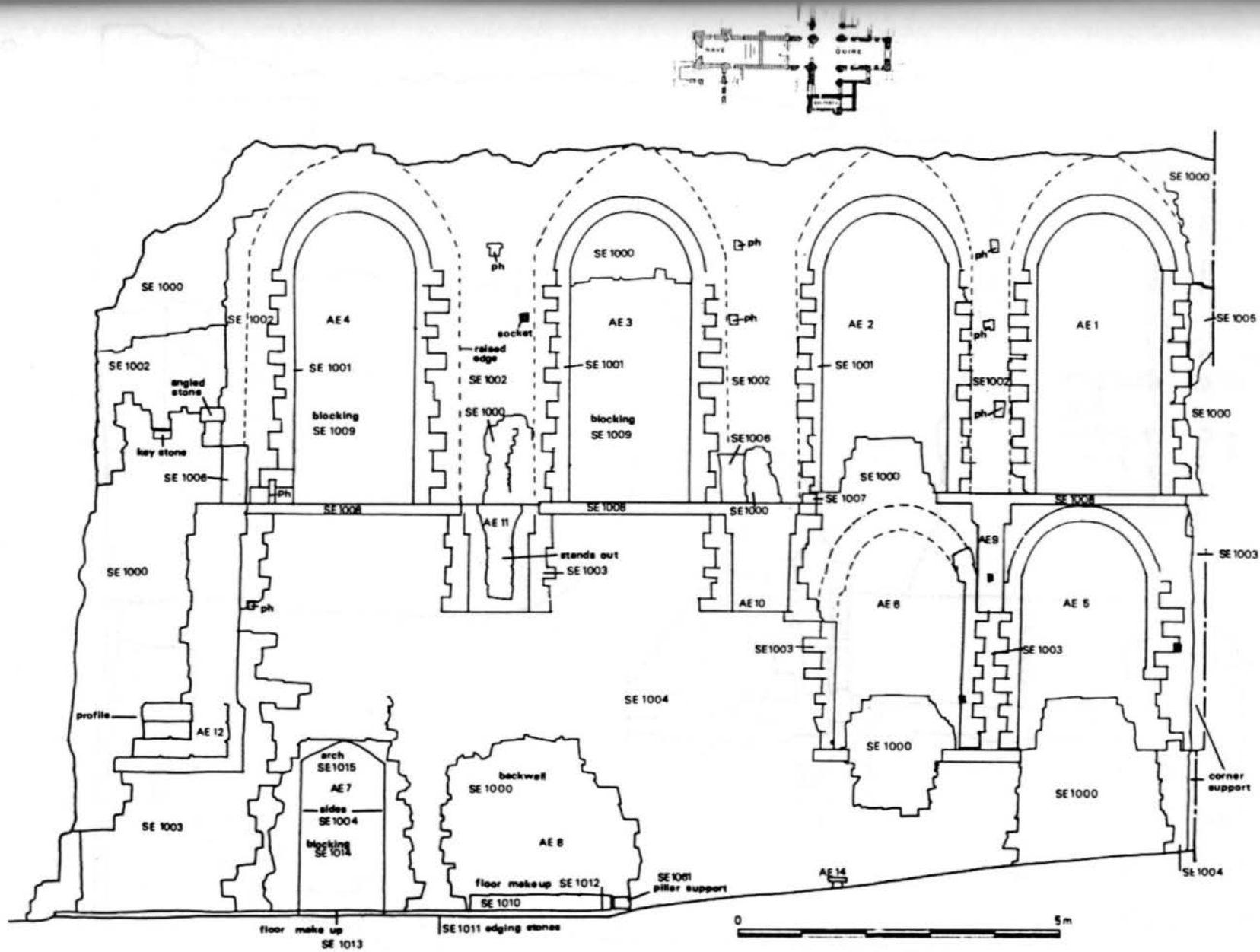
Lilleshall Abbey 1987 north wall

North Face

South Face



T.B.M. 0.22m



Lilleshall Abbey 1987 north wall

FIGURE 3 The Quire. North wall, south (internal) face.

LILLESHALL ABBEY 1987

EAST WALL West Face

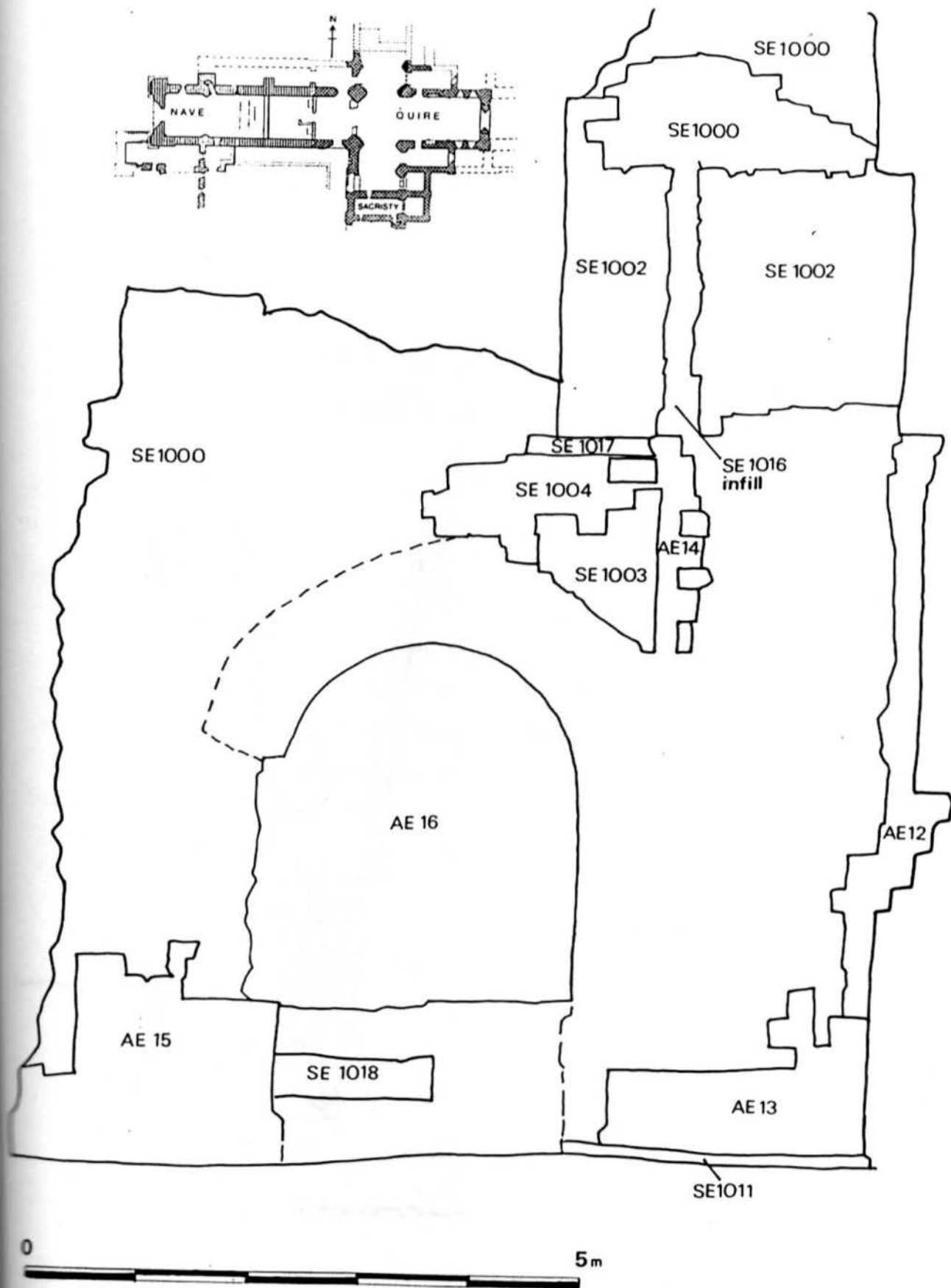


FIGURE 4 North Transept. East wall, west (internal) face.

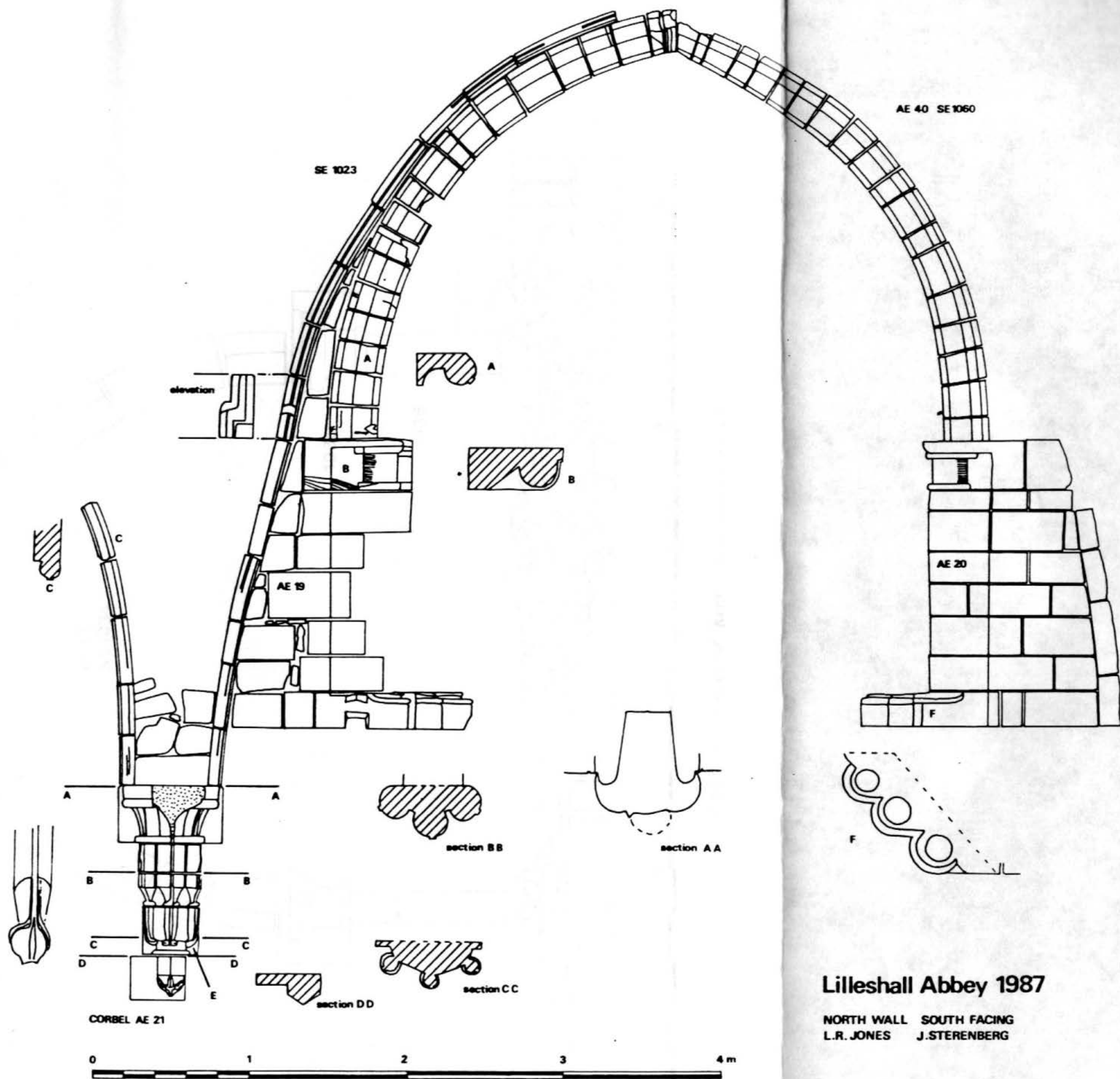


FIGURE 5 Detail of Arch AE40 and corbel AE21.

Lilleshall Abbey, 1987.

North wall, north face.

I.M

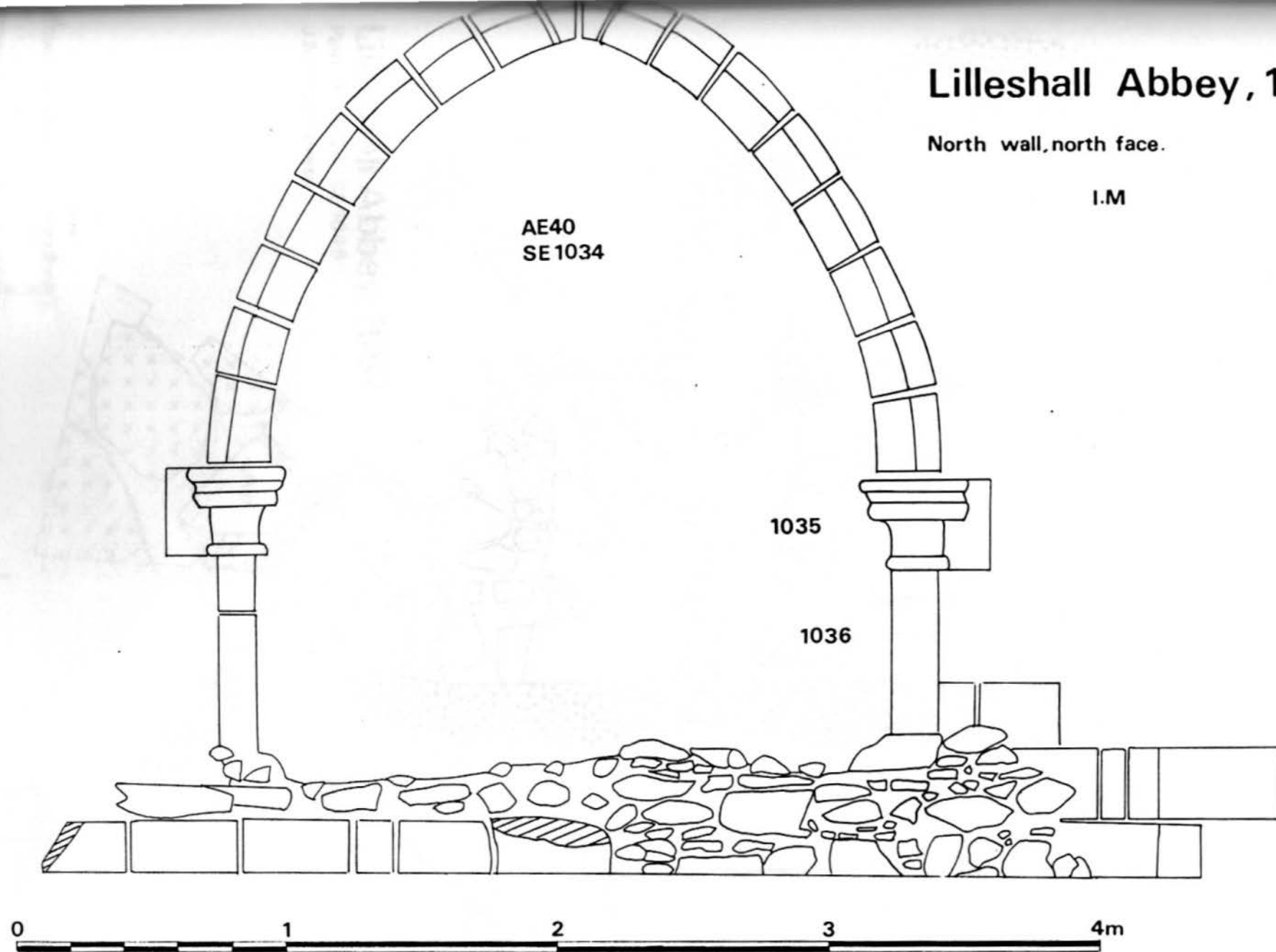
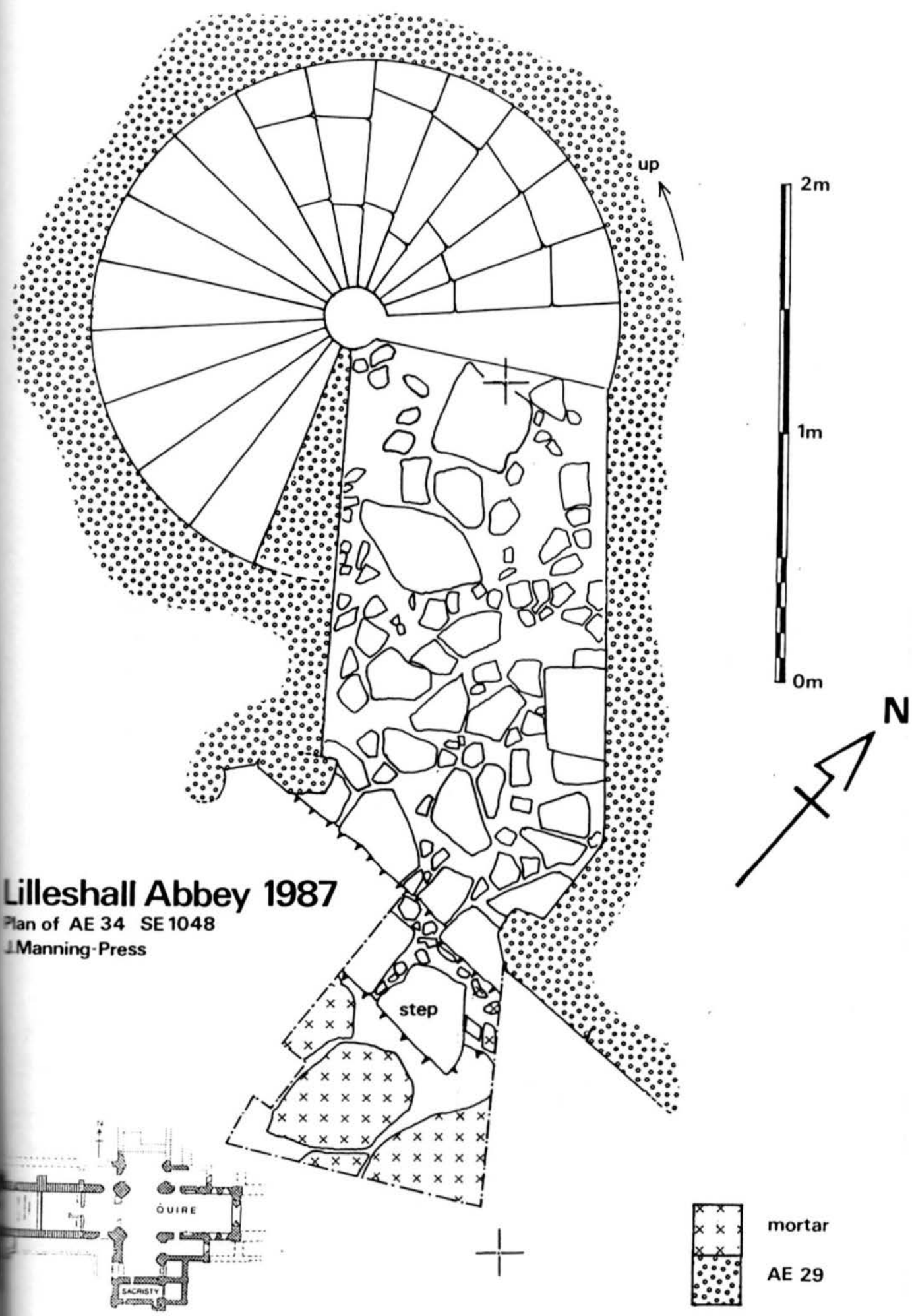


FIGURE 6 Detail of Arch AE40 (north face).



Lilleshall Abbey 1987
 Plan of AE 34 SE 1048
 J. Manning-Press

FIGURE 7 Plan of Stairwell AE34.

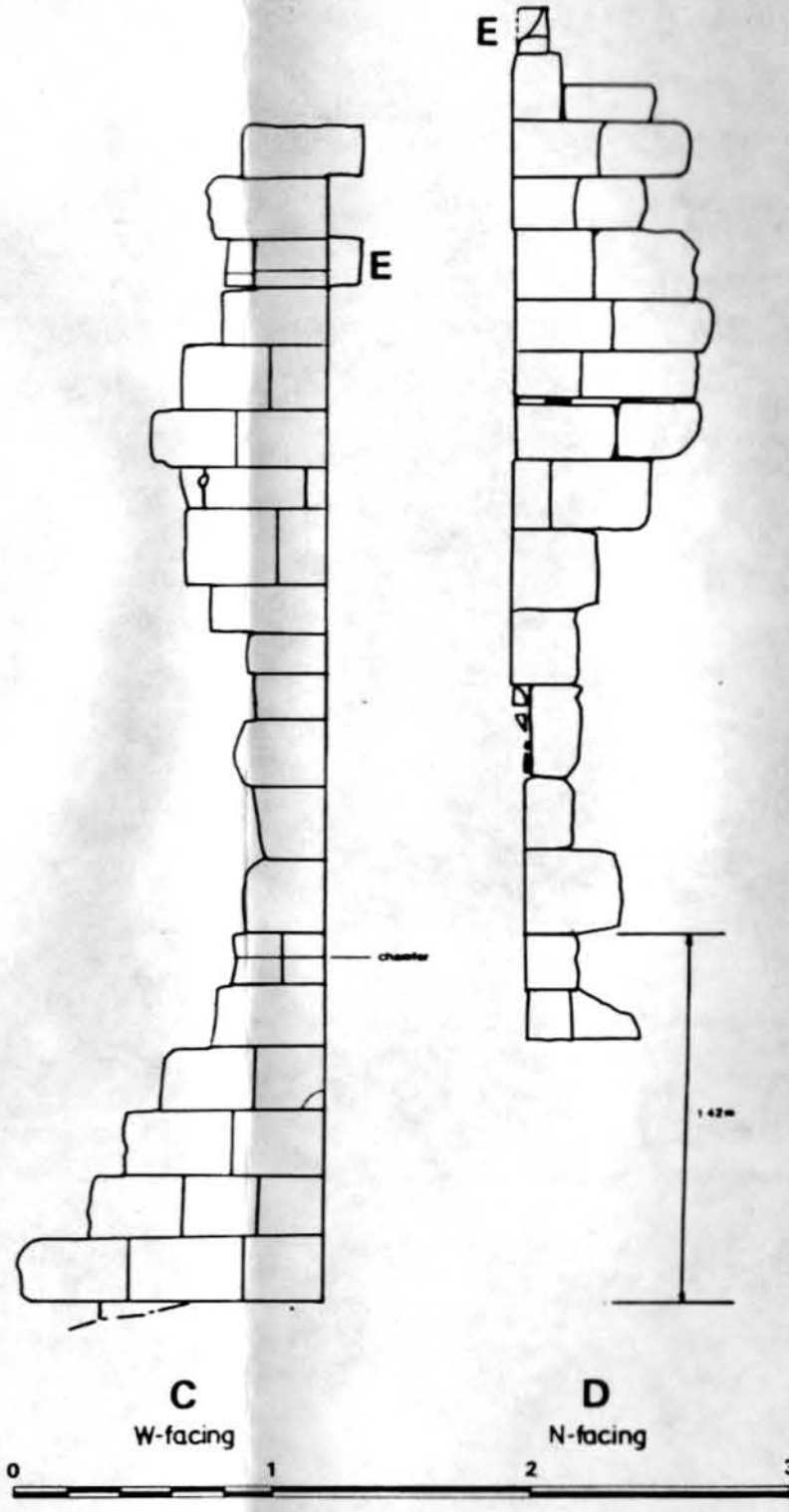
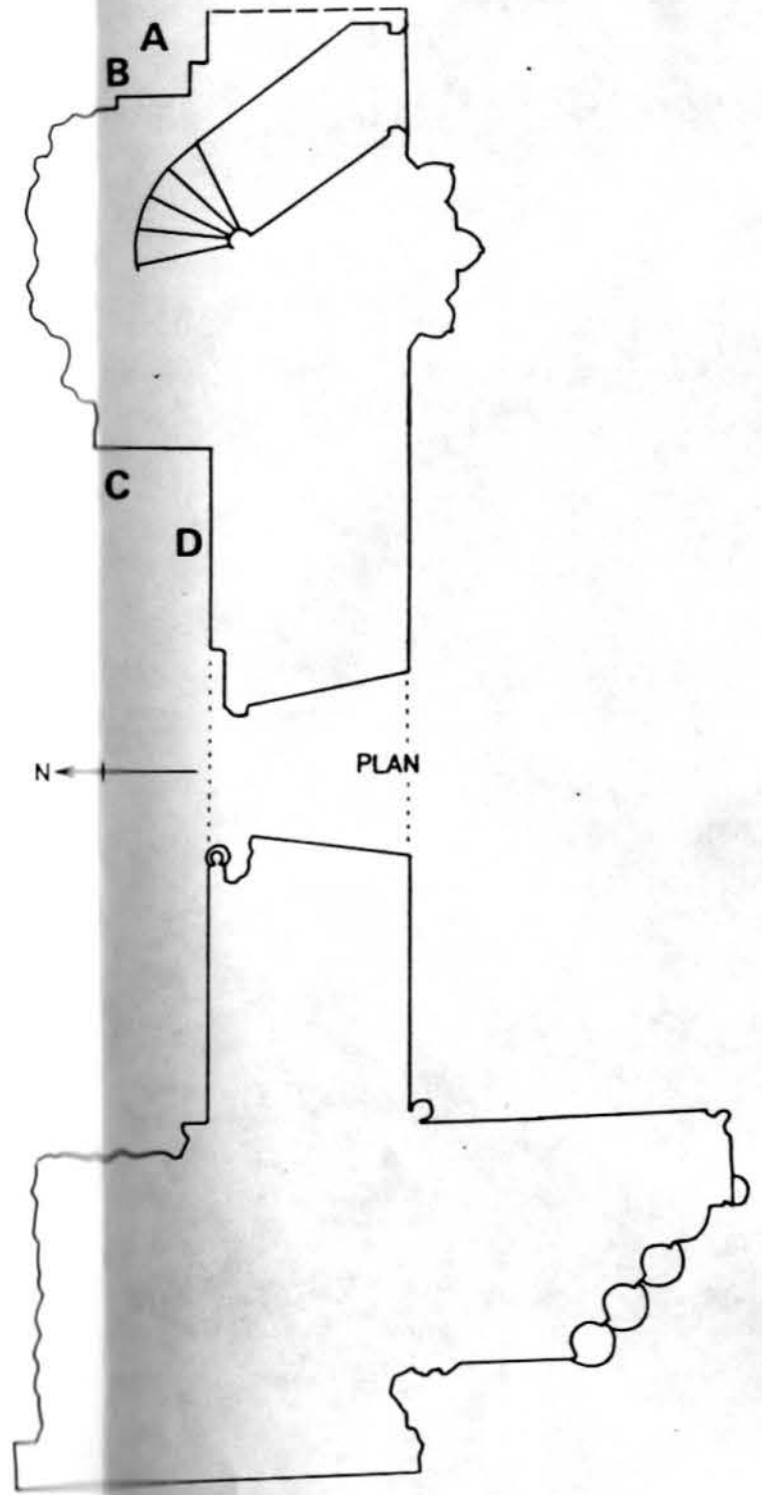
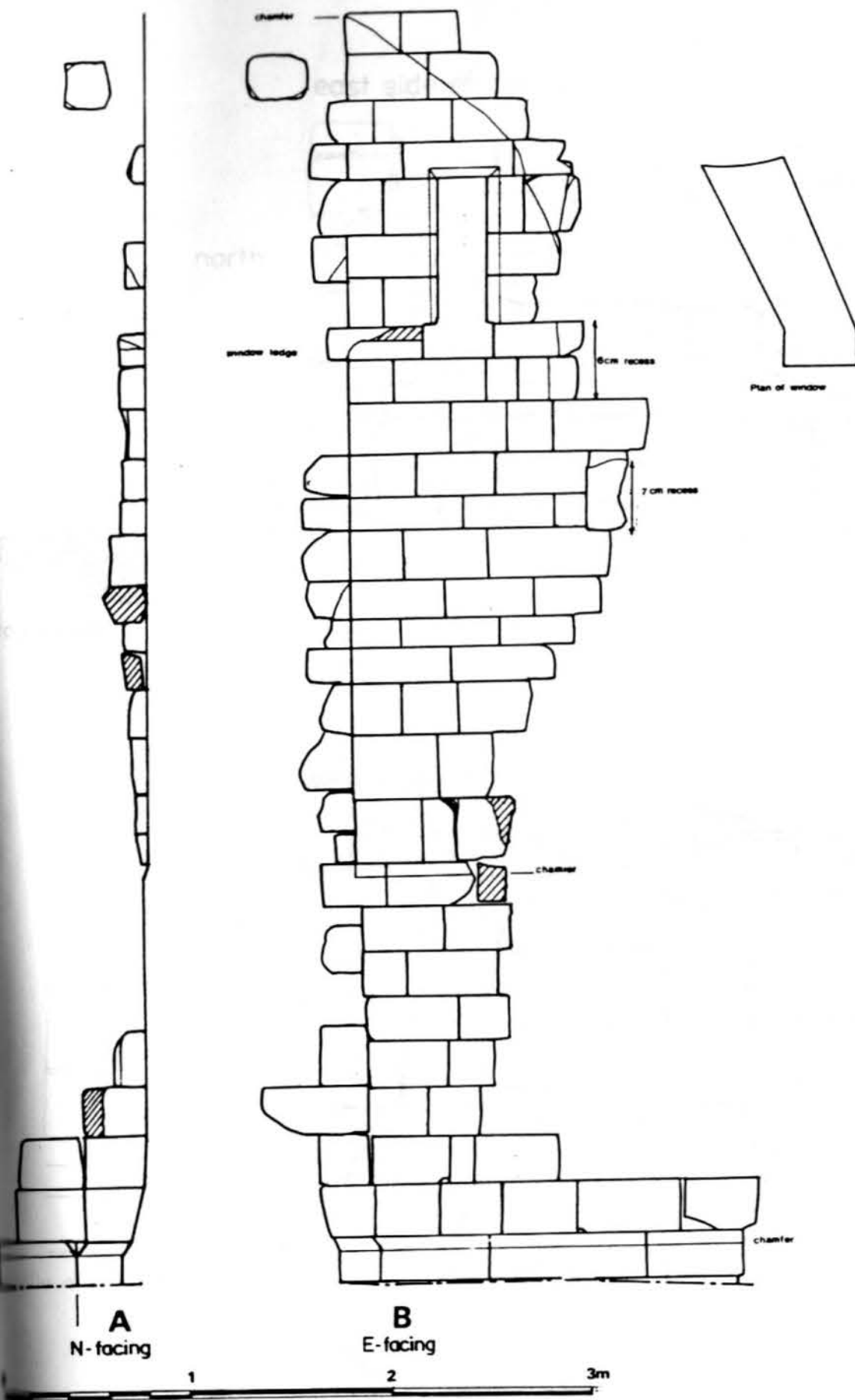
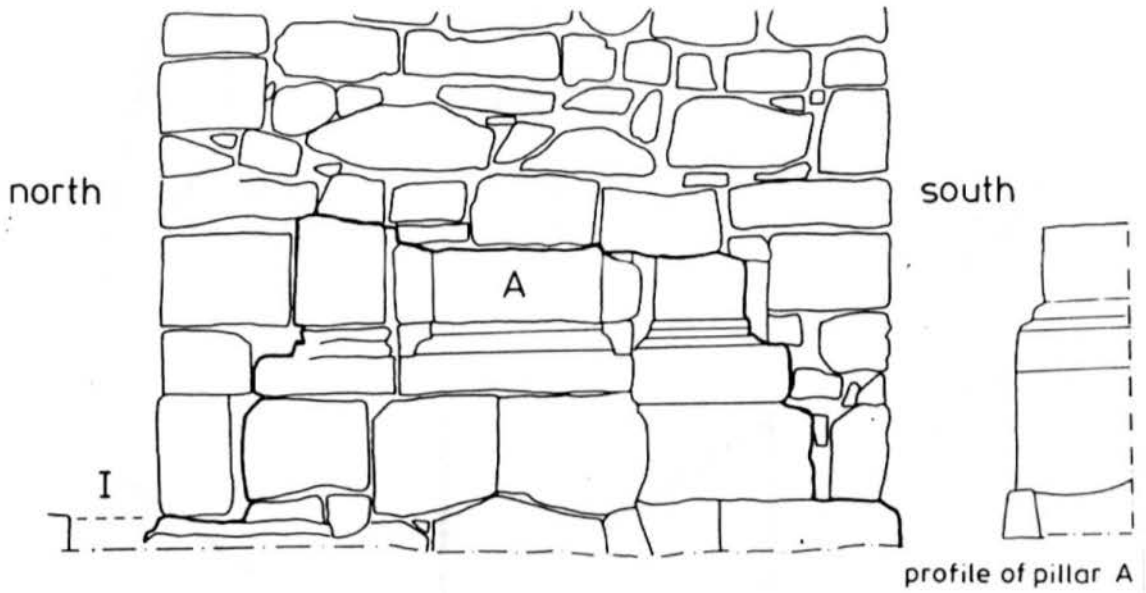


FIGURE 8 Elevations of faced stonework SE1059.

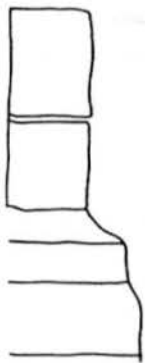
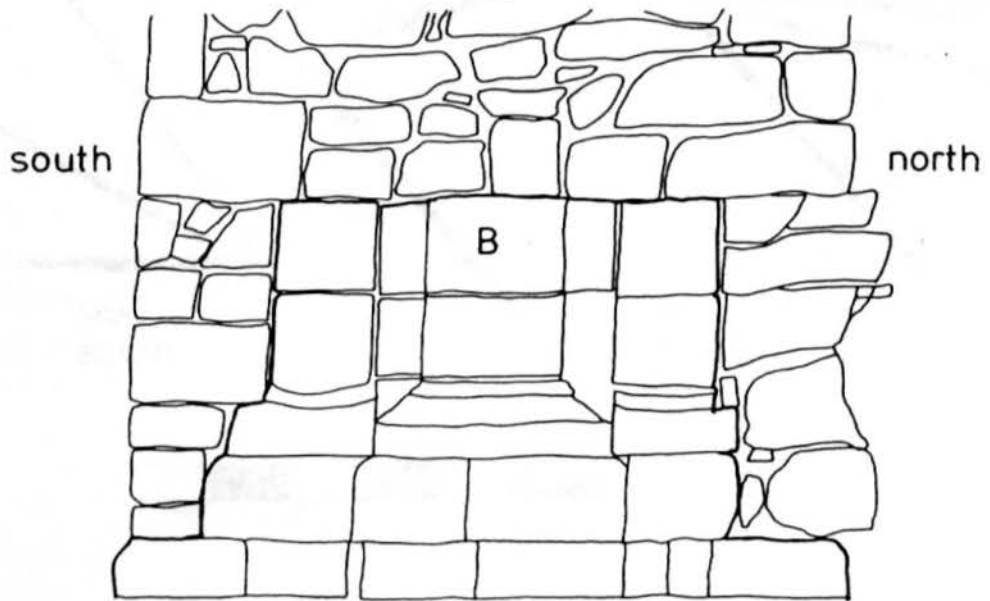
Lilleshall Abbey 1987

east side of archway AE 17



top view of I

west side of archway AE 17



profile of pillar B



FIGURE 9 Sides of Arch AE17. Details of column clusters.

Lilleshall Abbey 1987

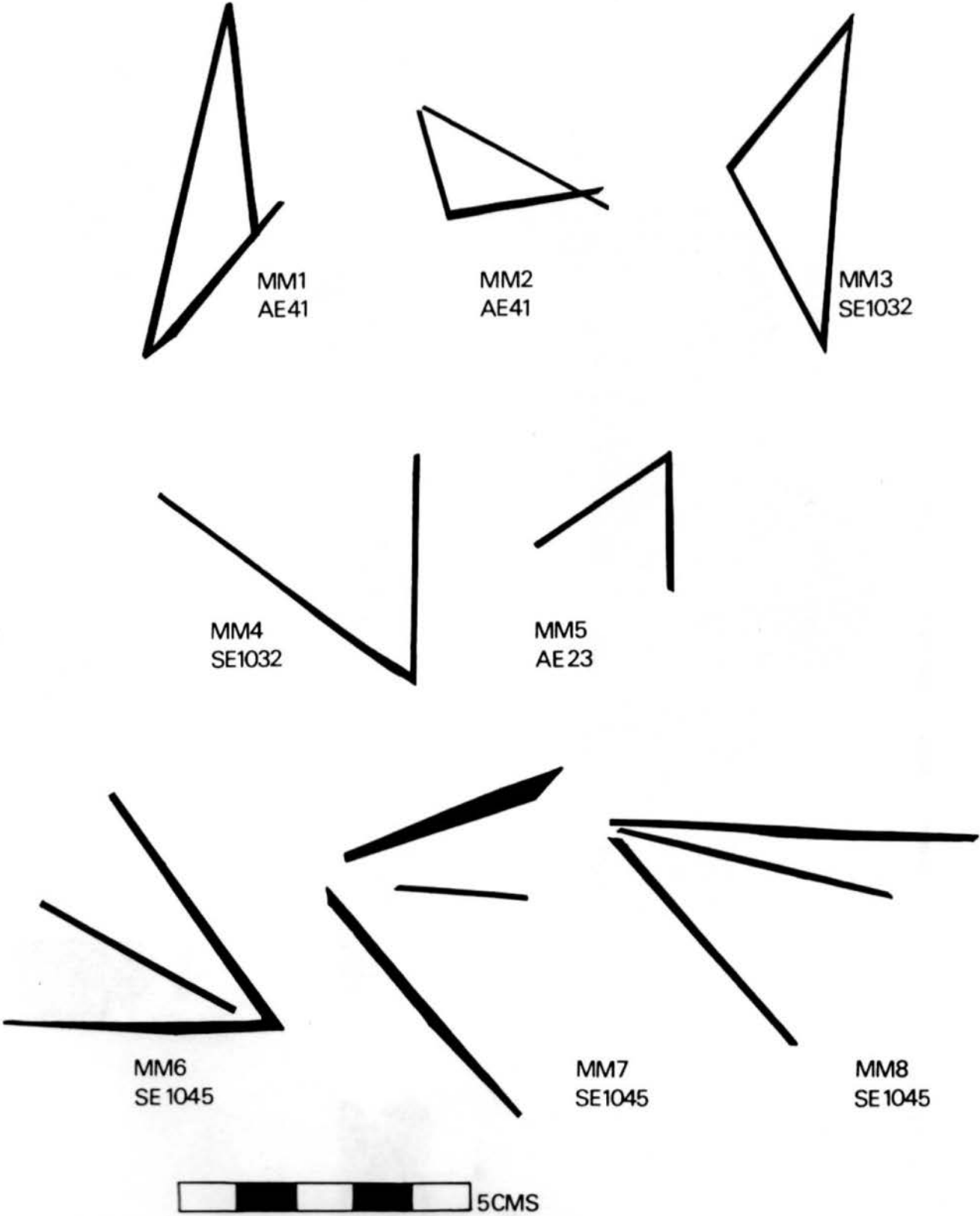
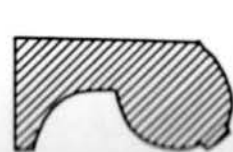


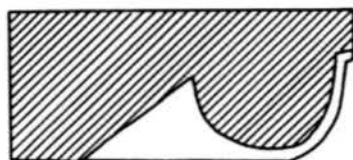
FIGURE 10 Masons' Marks.



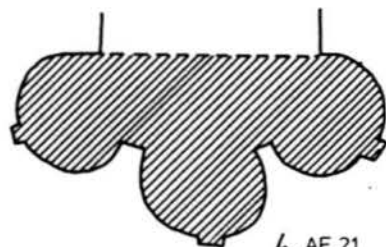
1 AE 40 SE1060



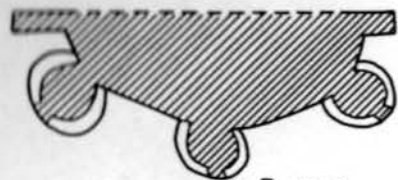
2 SE 1023



3 SE 1021



4 AE 21



5 AE 21



6 AE 21



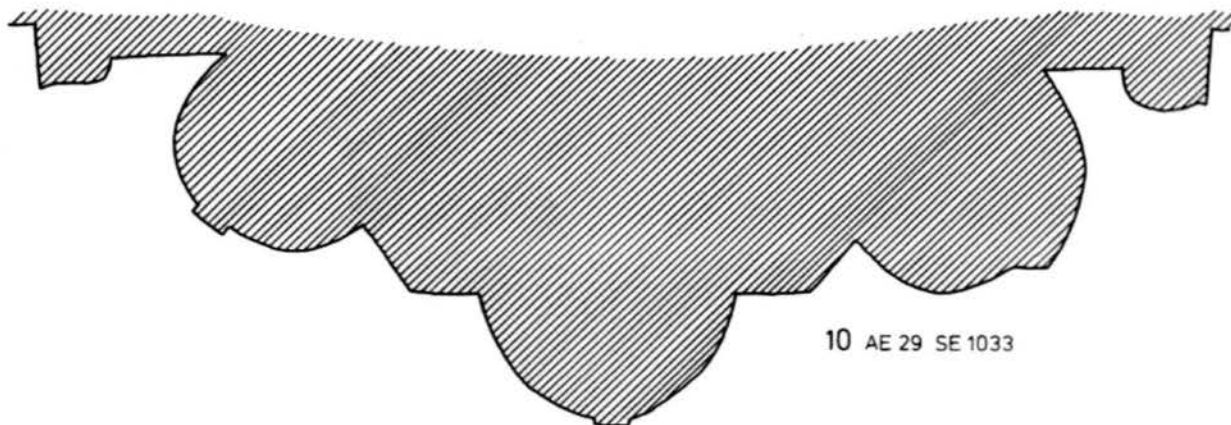
7 AE 20 SE 1021



8 AE 41



9 SE 1024



10 AE 29 SE 1033

FIGURE 11 Mouldings.

