

*BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT*

**The excavation of a double ring ditch
at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury**

Second interim report

B.U.F.A.U.



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**The excavation of a double ring ditch
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by

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Introduction

The following report details the results of the first three seasons of excavation of a double ring ditch at Meole Brace (Shropshire SMR number 14) on the southern outskirts of Shrewsbury (Fig. 1: SJ 490 099). The work was undertaken by the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham over a six week period in the summer of 1994 (Hughes 1994), a three week period in June 1995 and a two week period in June 1996. The work forms part of the University training excavation and is part of a broader examination of the Shropshire part of the upper Severn Valley.

The site was originally identified from aerial photographs as two concentric cropmarked ditches. A second ring ditch has been excavated in the field immediately to the north prior to the construction of a retail complex (Hughes and Woodward 1995). This was associated with a cluster of nearby pits containing an important group of Neolithic pottery.

The detailed objectives of the excavation are outlined in the first interim report (Hughes 1995). During this first (1994) season, the work focused on the south-eastern quadrant of the site (Fig. 2, Trench C) although sections were also excavated across the northern and western sections of the ring ditches (Trenches A and B). During the second (1995) and third (1996) seasons the work again focused on Area C although this was extended to include the central area of the monument (Fig 3).

Results

The inner ring ditch (F1): the outer edges of the inner ring ditch were up to 29m in diameter. There was no trace of the ditch in the northern transect suggesting that there may be a causeway at this point. In addition to the section excavated through the western side of the ring ditch (Trench A), a total of five sections (each between 1.5m and 2m wide) were excavated within Trench C. The ditch was up to 2.5m wide and 1m deep and had an inverted bell-shaped profile. The primary fill consisted of rounded stones and a clayey silt. The upper fills were siltier with fewer stones. The only finds were a few fragments of worked flint.

The outer ring ditch (F2): the outer edges of the outer ring ditch were up to 40m in diameter and appears to form a complete circuit. A total of five sections have been fully excavated on its northern, western and south-eastern sides. The ditch was up to 3.5m wide and 1m deep with a similar inverted bell-shaped profile to the inner ring ditch. However, unlike the inner ditch, the fills were stoney throughout, suggesting a more rapid filling of the ditch. This also made it considerably more difficult to define the upper edges of the ditch, made more problematic by the dry conditions encountered during the excavation. The few finds included a fragment of early Bronze Age pottery from the southern side.

The stone cairn (1010): an area of stone cobbling (1010) was recorded within the area defined by the inner ring ditch. In some areas this cobbling extended as far as the inner

edge of the inner ring ditch. However, in general there was a berm of up to 1.5m between the outer limit of the cobbles and the inner edge of the inner ring ditch.

There was no trace of any cobbling in the central area of the monument. Although, it is possible that the cobbles might have been disturbed by ploughing in this area, it seems more likely that they formed a ring cairn defining an open central space. The absence of any trace of the cairn in the northern transect suggests that this ring was not complete and was open to the north (although this could again have been damaged by later disturbance). It seems possible that the cobbles were retained behind some form of revetment before finally collapsing outwards towards the ditch. The only indications of such a revetment were two post pits in Trench A (Fig. 2, F6 and F7). A section excavated through the cairn on the eastern side of the monument suggests that it is not composed of a single dump of cobbles but possibly alternate layers of cobbles (1071 and 1010) and silt (1076). Traces of a dark brown silt and charcoal (1069), underlying the cobbles was also recorded in this excavated section. A single fragment of comb impressed beaker pottery was recovered from the surface of this underlying deposit.

The outer edges of the cobble cairn were sealed by a deposit of sandy silt (1048) which was in turn overlain by a thin band of gravel (1056). The sandy silt was initially thought to be filling a narrow palisade gully surrounding the cobbles (Hughes 1995, 3). However, it now seems more likely that it represents the remnants of a turf stack overlying the earlier cairn. The gravel may represent a capping to the barrow using material excavated from the surrounding ditch. A number of worked flint flakes were recovered from the surface of the gravel capping in the southern area of the site. A band of cobbles was also recorded on the berm formed between the two ring ditches ((1037/1038).

Cremation pits (F8, F9 and F10): two pits were recorded in the central area of the monument within the area defined by the stone cairn. Only one quadrant of the larger of the two (F8) has so far been fully excavated. It is sub-rectangular in plan, up to 3m across and up to 0.6m deep with steep to vertical sides. A considerable quantity of burnt bone has been recovered from the silty sand fill. There is a suggestion that the burnt bone is concentrated in two distinct areas of the excavated quadrant indicating the presence of more than one burial. Fragments of post medieval clay pipe stem are likely to be intrusive, and probably indicate later disturbance. Traces of a third pit (F10) were recorded on the berm between the two ditches on the south side of the monument. This was up to 0.7m across, 0.2m deep and contained a sandy silty fill with fragments of cremated bone but no finds.

The finds

Flint and Stone by L. Barfield

A total of 65 pieces of worked flint and at least five pieces of other flaked rock has come from the first three years of excavation.

The raw material used appears to all be secondary pebble flint of small size from boulder clay or other deposits, with colours ranging from grey to brown grey. Implements include a backed microlithic point, a broken serial flaked arrowhead - probably of transverse type, five circular, thumb-nail scrapers, a broken and reworked discoidal scraper and a retouched flake or scraper. Some flakes have deliberately serrated edges. The debitage is dominated by flakes, with only a few pieces being of blade like quality. Only one very small core was found. This seems to have been for bladelet production.

Of interest were several flakes, at least five and a core, of coarse rock derived from pebbles available on the site and present in the material of the cairn. Some of these were percussion flakes which had been struck directly off the edge of water worn pebbles and it is not possible to say for certain whether they were natural or accidentally produced. One flake however had been struck in series from a prepared platform and the core had several flakes detached from different directions from its surface. The flakes produced were unmodified but all were sharp and hard enough to have been used effectively for cutting purposes.

The collection is certainly chronologically mixed, with the microlith, and probably the core, being of late Mesolithic date. The transverse arrowhead fragment may be late Neolithic and the collection of very fine thumbnail scrapers clearly belong to the Beaker tradition. The microlith is equally certainly a residual piece, the arrowhead may or may be contemporary with the ring ditches while the scrapers are the artefacts most likely to be associated with the cairn/barrow activity. The serial flaked transverse arrowheads are regarded a type especially typical of Yorkshire where they often occur in barrows. The scarcity of cores might suggest that the flint was not being worked on the site. The worked rock without doubt represent the utilisation of alternative rocks in an area in which flint was not easily obtainable. These pieces were difficult to recognise and several may have been missed, especially in the first season of excavation.

The flints show a marked concentration around the berm inside the inner ditch, which suggests that they may in part relate to the soil, or turf stack, of the mound construction. This would account for the Mesolithic piece. A distinct cluster was recovered from the gravel (1056) overlaying the turf stack (1048). However, we should also note that flint was absent from the area surrounding the barrow. A concentration of flint from around the perimeter of barrows has been noted elsewhere in the Midlands as at Lockington

Heat cracked stones - In the north area of the cairn in the southeast quadrant several apparently heat cracked pebbles were recovered. These were of a rock which shatters differently from heated siltstone pebbles associated with some of the cremations. It can be suggested that these are burnt stones relating to later Middle Bronze Age activity associated with cooking or sauna bathing.

Pottery - Four sherds of prehistoric pottery have so far been recovered. The only notable piece is a fragment of Beaker pottery, red surfaced ware with chevron decoration executed with comb impressions. This came from the area of burning below the cairn (1069). A sherd of thicker buff surfaced ware with light finger drag impression, from the lower fill of the outer ditch, is most probably '*rusticated*' Beaker coarse ware. Since rusticated ware is not usually found as grave goods this may indicate Beaker 'domestic' or non burial activity in the vicinity of the site. The design on the Beaker sherd is too restricted to enable comparison with any of the main Beaker styles, apart from saying it is not of the typologically early All Over Ornament variety. The Beaker finds - five thumb-nail scrapers and two sherds would seem to point to a Beaker date for the main activities on the site.

Cremated bone: three concentrations of burnt bone have been recovered associated with the three small pits described above (F8-F10). The largest quantity was recovered from the central pit (F8).

Other finds: A *denarius* of Caracalla was found during a metal detector survey across the site. It probably relates to the Roman settlement in the southern area of the field (Hughes 1994). Other finds post-dating the ring ditches include a worn and perforated coin or token, probably of medieval date, and an antler or bone point which could be prehistoric or more recent in date.

Fragments of the bowl and stem of a clay pipe came from the fill of the central pit. The bowl was stamped with a phoenix (?) and the latter RS. This is not directly paralleled in current publication but could be from Broseley dating to around 1700 (information from H. Buglass).

Discussion

Ring ditches form one of the most numerous categories of cropmarked feature in the Shropshire part of the upper Severn Valley (Whimster 1989; Watson 1991). Such features have generally been considered to be ditches which formerly surrounded the barrow mounds of Early Bronze Age funerary monuments. However, the recent excavations of the northern ring ditch at Meole Brace (Hughes and Woodward 1995) and ring ditches at Bromfield (Hughes *et al* 1995) suggest that such interpretations may be over simplistic and that such features can exhibit considerable chronological and structural variety.

It is clear that the southern ring ditch at Meole Brace is no exception. The earliest activity appears to be represented by the dark silty areas with charcoal underlying the cobble spread (1010) and associated with beaker pottery. This area of burning is

possibly associated with a funerary pyre. It is intended that this phase of activity will be further investigated during the summer of 1997. The cobble spread itself appears to have a fairly complex structure of alternate stone and silt layers. It seems possible that this may have originally formed a ring cairn (possibly open to the north) and revetted by wooden posts or a palisade. Again it is hoped that this will be clarified during the 1997 season of excavation. This cairn surrounded a central area which appears to have been used for the deposition of cremated bone in small pits (F8 and F9). The concentration of the cremated bone into at least two distinct areas within the fill of the larger of these pits (F9) suggests the deposition of more than one cremation. The full excavation of this feature might reveal further concentrations of bone suggesting additional cremation deposits. The construction of the barrow mound represents a subsequent phase of activity. Although the majority of the mound appears to have been removed by later ploughing, surviving traces around the edge of the cobble spread suggest that the core was constructed of stacked turfs (1048) which was then capped with gravel probably deriving from the surrounding ditch or ditches (1056).

The order in which the ditches were dug is not clear. They may have been contemporary. However, the differences in the fillings and the fact that they are not quite concentric suggests that they may have been dug at different times. It is tempting to suggest that the cobble cairn was initially surrounded by the outer ring ditch (F2) prior to the construction of the barrow. The rubble fill of the outer ditch suggests that it was rapidly backfilled. By contrast the upper part of the inner ditch appears to have silted-up more gradually, suggesting that it was open for longer. In several places this inner ditch also appears to cut the outer edges of the cobble spread, perhaps after the stone cairn had collapsed. It seems possible that the cobbles on the berm between the two ditches (1037/1038) represent the outer edge of this collapse cut away by the inner ditch. Consequently, it seems likely that the inner ditch surrounded the subsequent turf barrow and may have provided the barrow capping.

The following sequence is tentatively suggested:

Phase 1 - Pre-barrow activity dating to the beaker period

Phase 2 - Construction of the ring cairn and the outer ring ditch surrounding an area containing pits with cremation deposits. The few fragments of pottery and flint from the fill of the outer ring ditch and the cobble spread suggest an Early Bronze Age date.

Phase 3 - Following the collapse of the ring cairn a turf barrow is constructed over the area of the cremation deposits. The outer ring ditch is backfilled and a smaller, inner ring ditch is excavated around the barrow. The gravel upcast from the ditch forms a capping to the barrow. The few fragments of flint from the fill of the inner ring ditch and from the gravel capping also suggest an Early Bronze Age date.

The objective of a further season of excavation in the summer of 1997 will be to complete the excavation the cobble spread and the pre-barrow deposits in Trench C. Hopefully, it will be possible to further characterise the structure of the stone cairn and the underlying activity associated with the beaker pottery. In addition the excavation of the pits containing the cremation deposits in the central area will be completed.

Hopefully, the completion of this work will make a further contribution to the ever increasing body of information on late Neolithic and early Bronze Age funerary practices and associated ritual activity in the west Midlands.

Acknowledgements

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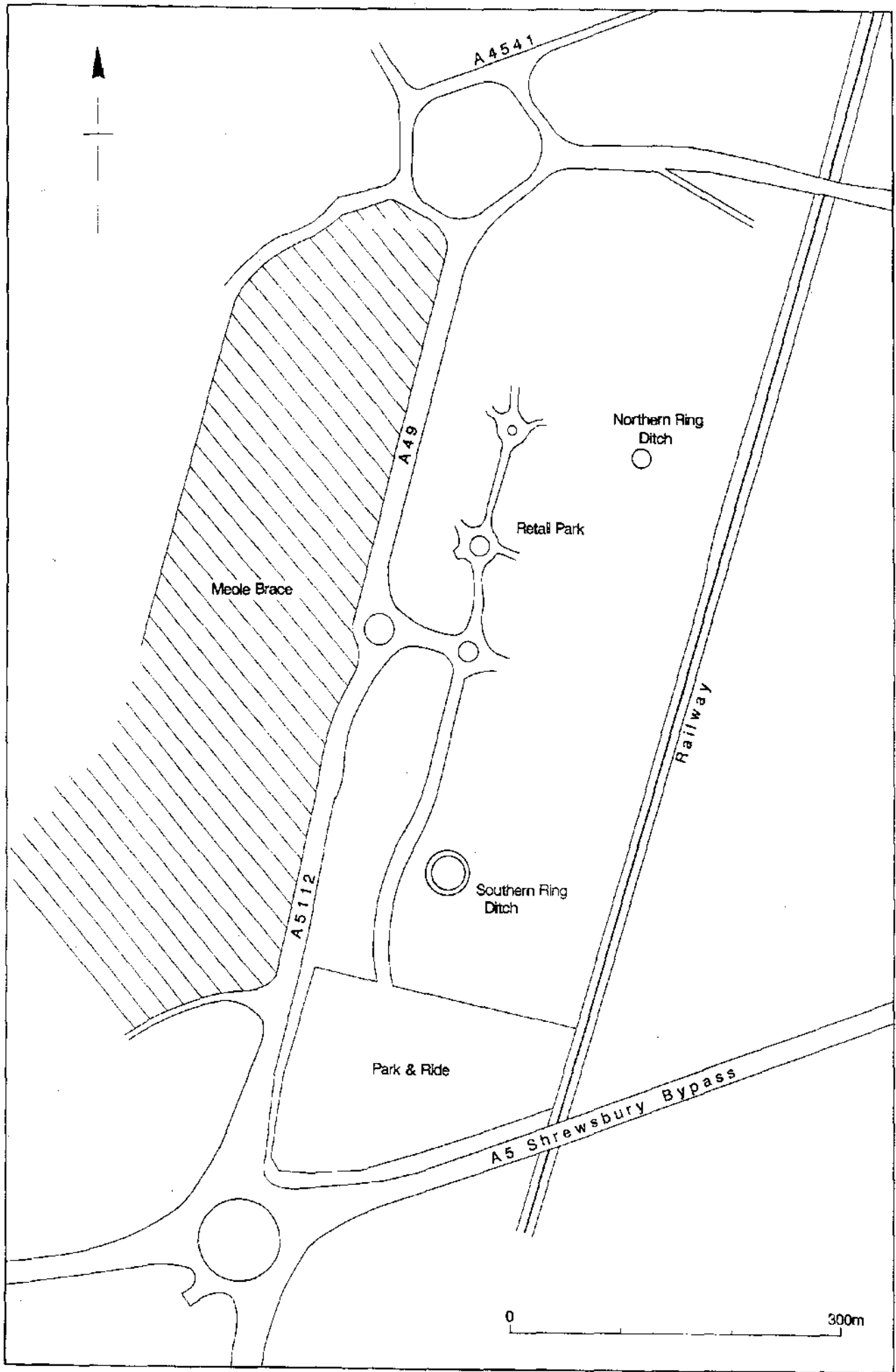


Fig. 1: Location

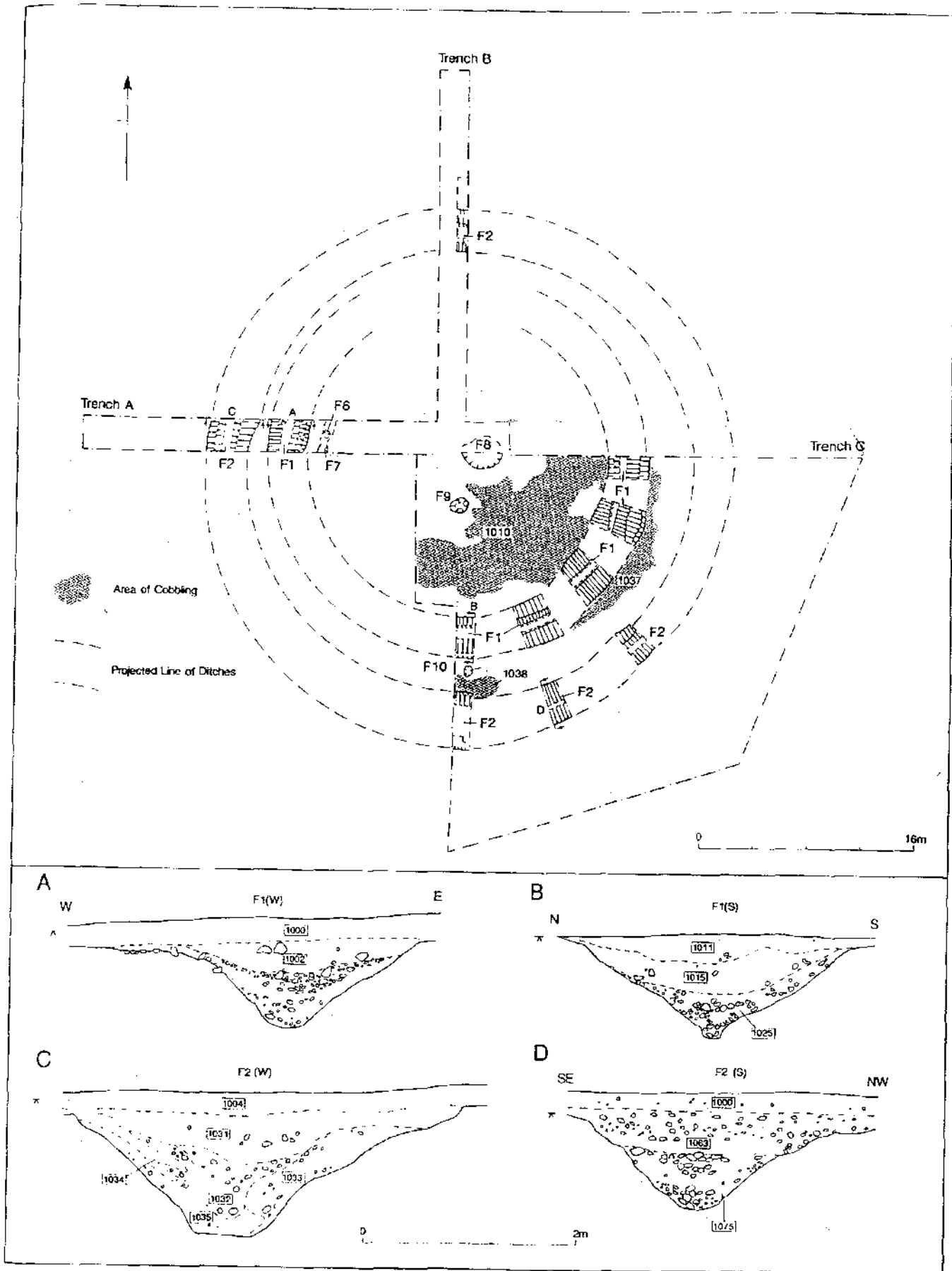


Fig. 2: Plan and sections of excavation

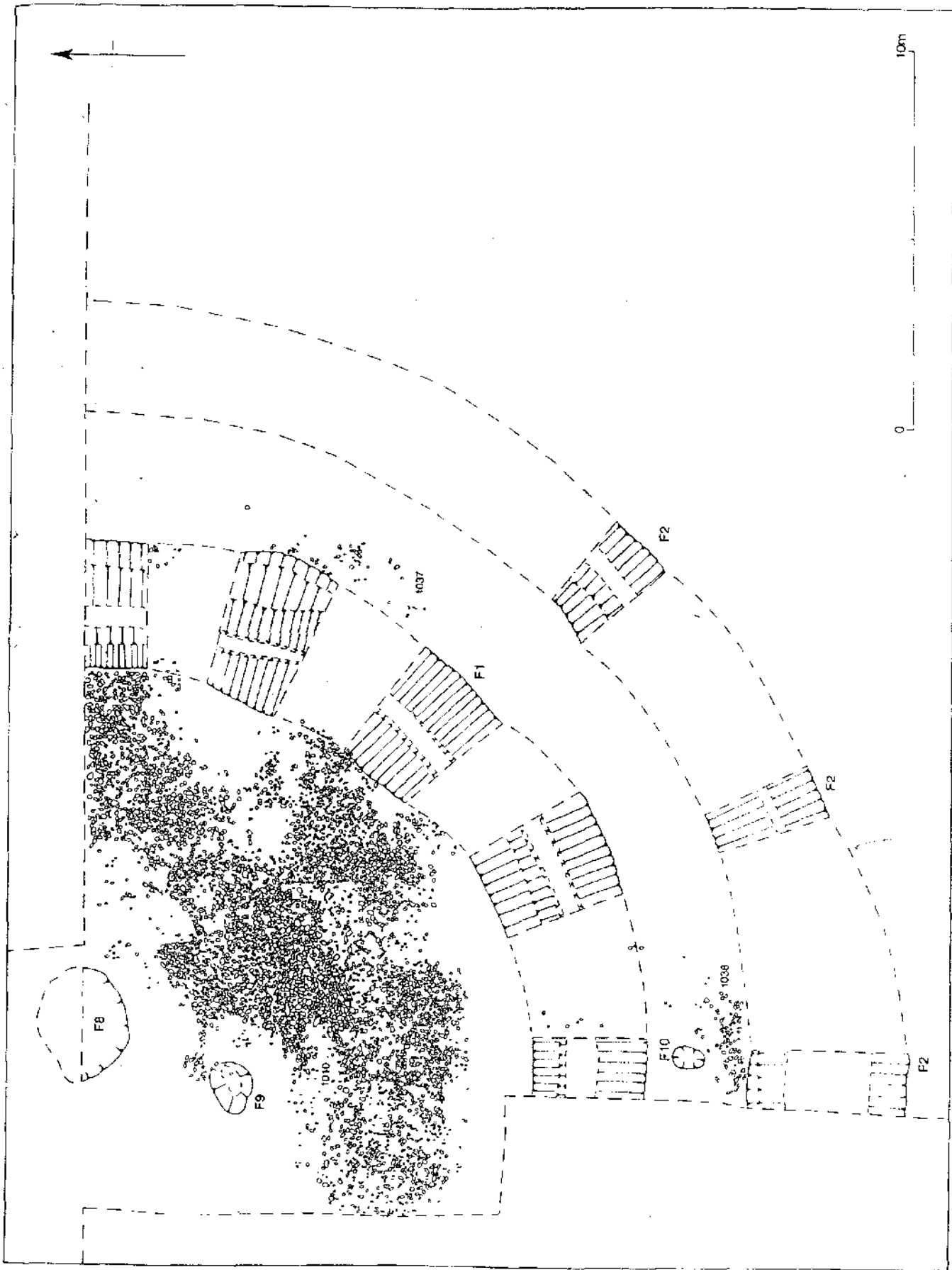


Fig. 3 : Detailed plan of Trench C