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FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT*

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

Third interim report

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by

Lawrence Barfield and Gwilym Hughes

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**The excavation of a double ring ditch at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury, Salop.
Third interim report**

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Introduction

The following report details the results of the first four 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), three weeks in June 1995, two weeks in June 1996 (Hughes 1997) and three weeks in June 1997. 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 cropmark 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 the first (1994) season work focused on the south-eastern quadrant of the site (Fig. 2, Area C) although sections were also excavated across the northern and western sections of the ring ditches (Trenches A and B). During the second (1995), third (1996) and fourth seasons the work again focused on Area C, now extended to include the central area of the monument (Fig 3).

The results of the excavation, which is still continuing have demonstrated that what at first appeared to be a fairly routine ring ditch site can now be seen to represent a very complex and unique series of events, both ritual and profane, on the site.

Excavation report

The following report describes the main features in what is currently thought to be their approximate chronological sequence.

Circular house: Sealed below the east side of the cairn were traces of a circular structure, approximately half of which had been cut away by the inner ring ditch. The evidence for this structure was best preserved on its south side. Here a line of fine pebbles appeared to

follow an arc along which there were at least three, possibly four, post holes spaced at intervals of between 1.0 and 1.5m. The three definite post holes were marked by clusters of burnt pebbles and charcoal, and were between 0.20 and 0.30m. in diameter. The possible fourth post hole, on the same line and with a similar spacing, was marked by a charcoal patch. One post hole contained a fragment of charcoal from a large timber. After these features had been defined a further narrow, irregular arc, c.0.06m wide, was recognised as a damp mark following rain. This arc followed a parallel alignment inside the line of fine pebbles, in a regular curve joining the post holes.

The northern part of the structure, up to the limit of the excavation, was not so clearly defined, but its continuation was suggested by a diffuse scatter of charcoal and one greater concentration, suggesting the presence of a post hole, again following the same line.

Prior to the recognition of these structural remains the area had always stood out as an anomaly. Here the ground was higher and formed a slightly raised semicircular platform of clay, conforming to the area of the hut, and covered by the cairn. At first considered to be a natural clay deposit, it was later seen to be an artificial deposit as it contained charcoal. The internal area of the house contained various features, including a straight line of pebbles, which cannot as yet be interpreted.

To the south of the structure was a broad gully which deepened to a semicircular hollow following the outer line of the circular platform and structure. Its lower fill contained much charcoal, above which were layers of pebbles from the later cairn.

The original structure can be estimated to have described a circle of between 5 and 6 metres in diameter. We suggest that it represents a hut foundation burnt prior to the construction of the cairn. The curved damp mark is probably the remains of a daub wall. The southern gully appears to have been for drainage and the charcoal it contained may have been from the burning of the hut; this area of the cairn subsoil contained the greatest quantity of charcoal.

There were few finds from the area of the hut but a Bell Beaker sherd from the gully suggests a date for the hut. The general scatter of finds from the sub-cairn deposits in Area C (Fig. 5) may well relate to the occupation of this round house. The few finds suggest that the structure may have been only occupied for a short time. It was then burnt and covered by the cairn. The fact that the ring ditch did not respect the house may indicate that the house was not directly related to the barrow structure, even though the continuity between the house and the subsequent barrow may have been significant.

Central burial pit (F8): This is a roughly square pit with sides 2.80m long and approximately 0.5m deep, with steep to vertical sides. The bulk of the burnt human bone from the site, together with a burnt flint arrowhead and scraps of prehistoric pottery, were recovered from the silty sand fill. A study of the cremated bone does not suggest the presence of more than one individual (M. Brickley, pers comm).

A recent trench (F14) measuring 3.5m by 0.8m and 0.9m deep, cut across the pit aligned NW to SE. This trench went deeper than the original 'burial' pit and extended beyond it to the east. It was filled with loose cairn stones to a depth of 0.4m below the modern surface. The upper part of the trench was consolidated with soil mixed with back fill from the original burial pit and contained cremated bones. Fragments of tile from the fill and a fragment of clay pipe from the top of the trench date this disturbance to the late 17th century. The way in which the trench had been back filled suggests the deliberate deep burial of cobble stones with a covering back fill incorporating the original pit fill to replace ploughsoil. This might indicate that the trench was dug to remove cairn stones from the plough level. An antiquarian excavation, however, cannot be ruled out, and it is possible that clearance of the cairn for agricultural purposes was combined with a search for its contents.

Given the disturbance to the burial pit we cannot be certain that the arrowhead was the only grave good item originally buried with the cremated bone.

Cremation scatters: Several other areas of the site produced scatters of cremated human bone. After the central pit the next most abundant deposit was in a shallow scoop (F9) located 1m to the south of the central pit. Here finely crushed fragments of bone were associated with charcoal and cracked stones. Being close to the central pit this may have been the site of the original cremation pyre. Another diffuse scatter of bone was found to the east of the central pit, although this may have resulted from the disturbance to the central pit during the 17th century.

Traces of a small pit (F10) and smaller clusters of human bone between the berm of the two ditches and indeed beyond the outer ditch may be the result of material being dumped from the pyre rather than additional cremations.

Post holes: Two large post holes containing charcoal were found in Trench C (1093); one within the inner ditch and the other outside the outer ditch. These cannot be dated stratigraphically. We can here also note post holes within the inner ditch in Trench A (Fig. 2, F6 and F7).

The stone cairn (1010): A fairly irregular area of stone cobbles (1010) was preserved, mostly within the area defined by the inner ring ditch. In some areas this cobbling extended as far as the inner edge of the outer ring ditch and appeared partly to have been cut by the inner ditch. Patches of cobbles (1037/1038) were also found on the berm between the two ditches. This suggests that the outer ditch may be of a later date. 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. Where the cobbles spread beyond this line it can perhaps be assumed that they represent a collapse of the original cairn.

There was no trace of any cobbling in the central area of the monument. Although this was originally interpreted as the centre of a ring cairn it is more likely that this is the result of deliberate clearance, given the evidence from the buried cobbles in the 17th

century trench cutting through the central burial pit. The cairn was also absent in the northern transect. The cobbles may have been retained behind some form of revetment before finally collapsing outwards. The only indications of such a revetment were two the post pits in Trench A (Fig. 2, F6 and F7). Alternatively, the revetment may have been of turf since no post holes were found in Trench C.

The cairn was probably originally not very high and may have had a flat platform surface. It was in any case subsequently covered by a barrow mound. A section excavated through the cairn on the eastern side of the monument suggests that here the cairn was not composed of a single dump of cobbles but possibly alternate layers of cobbles (1071 and 1010) and silt (1076). This can perhaps be explained by the need to fill earlier features at this point.

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.

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) have been excavated within Area C and some 11 metres of the ditch totally cleared. 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 appear to form a complete circuit. A total of five sections have been fully excavated on its northern, western and south-eastern sides and a total length of 8.5 metres emptied in Area C. 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 stony 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 sherd of what is probably Beaker coarse ware from the southern side.

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.

Hearth: a small bowl hearth of fired clay had been constructed in the upper fill of the outer ditch. This had a concave profile and consisted of a lower level of charcoal and an upper layer of fired clay. The burnt clay tailed up the side of the ditch where more burnt clay was visible on the outer lip of the ditch. The date of this structure could be located at any time after the Early Bronze Age.

Dating of use and abandonment

The site has produced evidence for Mesolithic activity prior to the main period of prehistoric use of the site. The latter starts with the building of the Beaker round-house while the subsequent cairn and barrow may be of similar date. A furnace was constructed in the outer ditch, probably at a later moment in prehistory. The absence of Roman material from the fill of the ditches, in spite of the proximity of a substantial Roman site suggests that the ditches were filled by Roman times and indeed the single Roman coin was recovered from above the fill of the inner ditch.

The finds

Flaked flint and stone

A total of 82 items of worked flint and at least six pieces of other flaked rocks have come from the first four years of excavation.

The flint raw material used appears to all be secondary pebble flint of small size and of a fairly homogeneous type characteristic of many West Midland prehistoric sites. It probably derives from a specific source (or sources) of boulder clay. It ranges in colour from grey to brown-grey.

Implements include a backed microlithic point, a broken serial flaked arrowhead - probably of transverse type, a barbed and tanged arrowhead, eight circular, thumb-nail scrapers and two other scrapers. Some flakes have deliberately serrated edges. Flakes dominate the debitage, with only a few pieces being of blade like quality. Only one very small bladelet core was found.

Of particular interest were at least six flakes and a core, of igneous and metamorphic rocks derived from pebbles available around the site and also 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. Two of the pieces have been examined by Dr R. Ixer of Birmingham University and identified as dolerite and metasilstone respectively (Barfield forthcoming).

The collection is certainly chronologically mixed, with the microlith, and probably the core, being of late Mesolithic date and thus residual to the structural remains. The majority of items, however, such as the collection of very fine thumbnail scrapers and the barbed and tanged arrowhead, clearly belong to the Bell Beaker tradition and are to be associated with the main events on the site. Serial flaked transverse arrowheads are regarded a type especially typical of Yorkshire in the Late Neolithic, where they often occur in barrows, but they can also be Beaker in date. The scarcity of cores might suggest that the flint was not being worked on the site.

The worked rock without doubt represents the utilisation of alternative materials in an area in which flint of any size was not easily obtainable. The pieces were difficult to recognise and several may have been missed, especially in the first season of excavation.

Most of the flints come from pre-cairn layers and can now be seen as related to the round-house. The barbed and tanged arrowhead, which was heavily burnt and came from the central burial pit, was certainly part of the original funeral assemblage burnt in the cremation pyre. Some flints, which cluster along the berm within the inner ditch, may relate to the supposed turf stack revetment and thus be finds brought in to the site. This would account for the Mesolithic pieces. A distinct cluster was recovered from the gravel (1056) overlaying the turf stack (1048).

Although the association between flint and barrow sites is common we would suggest that this material differs from the concentrations of flint from barrows such as Lockington, Leics, where the flint, in contrast to Meole Brace, mostly post-dated the barrow.

Heat cracked stones

In the northern area of the cairn, 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

Several sherds of prehistoric pottery have been recovered so far mostly from pre-cairn levels. The only notable piece is a fragment of Beaker pottery of red surfaced ware with chevron decoration executed with comb impressions. This came from the surface of a gully associated with the round-house (1069) and thus suggests a date for this structure. 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 in grave assemblages 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, eight thumb-nail scrapers and two sherds, would seem to point to a Beaker date for the main activities on the site.

Coin

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.

Clay Pipe

Fragments of the bowl and stem of a clay pipe came from the fill of trench (F14) cutting the central pit. This has been identified by P. Davey. The bowl is stamped with what is thought to be a representation of a tobacco plant and the letters RS for Richard Sir, who was working in Broseley between about 1670 and 1700.

Human Bone (M. Brickley)

A total weight of 1740g. of cremated bone has so far been recovered. Most of this comes from the central burial pit. Smaller quantities were collected from the other features associated with cremation deposits mentioned above. No more than a single individual can be recognised.

Environmental Evidence

Only cremated bone survived the acidic conditions of this gravel site. Some of the charcoal collected from the burnt deposits associated with the house and sub-cairn levels has been examined by Rowena Gale. These show a variety of woods used for either fuel or construction, including oak, hazel, elm, ash, perhaps lime and wood of the *prunus* and *pomoideae* families.

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. 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 sites can be quite complex and often exhibit considerable chronological and structural variety.

It is clear that the southern ring ditch at Meole Brace is no exception and we have now documented a very elaborate sequence of both pre barrow and cairn/barrow activity which can provisionally be summarised in the following seven main stages:

1. The earliest human presence on the site is documented by residual Mesolithic material
2. The first structural features comprised the round house with associated gully and Bell Beaker pottery and flint. This structure was presumably domestic and relates to the pre-funerary use of the site. A ritual function for the house cannot, however, be excluded. This phase could not have lasted long, given the scarcity of settlement debris.
3. The round house was burnt and, given the state of preservation, this event happened shortly before the construction of the cairn. The burning was thus perhaps deliberate and can be seen as an event which symbolised the transition of the site from a domestic to a ritual function. This interpretation, however, rests on the assumption that the sequence of house to barrow is not just coincidental.
4. The burial activity. This involved a possible cremation pyre, the pyre dumps and the digging and filling of the central pit with soil and cremated bone and a fire damaged arrowhead. The length of time clapsing between the burning of the house and the burial activity was probably fairly short, and a clear relationship between the two events can be suggested.
5. The cobble cairn. This phase may have been of some duration since the cairn appears to have been in a dilapidated state by the time the inner ditch was dug.
6. The digging of the two ditches may have happened in sequence with the outer ditch being dug first and filled prior to the digging of the inner ditch. Alternatively, the two ditches may be contemporary. The upcast from the inner ditch at least was certainly used for the construction of a barrow mound over the cobble cairn. The digging of the inner ditch at a later stage might be interpreted as an attempt to revive and redefine a dilapidated monument with a ditch and barrow.
7. The filling of the ditches appears to have been relatively rapid. In fact the outer ditch may have been deliberately filled. A small furnace or hearth was constructed in the upper fill of this ditch at an unknown date and the ditches were completely levelled by Roman times.
8. The cutting of a trench across the central burial pit probably in the later years of the 17th century. Whether this had primarily an antiquarian or agricultural objective (or both) remains uncertain but the juxtaposition of the trench and the central burial pit does not seem to be coincidental.

The objectives of the 1998 season of excavation will be to investigate further the Beaker round house and its associated outlying features. Part of the northeastern quadrant will

also be investigated in order to examine a wider area of the cairn and the pre-barrow deposits. 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.

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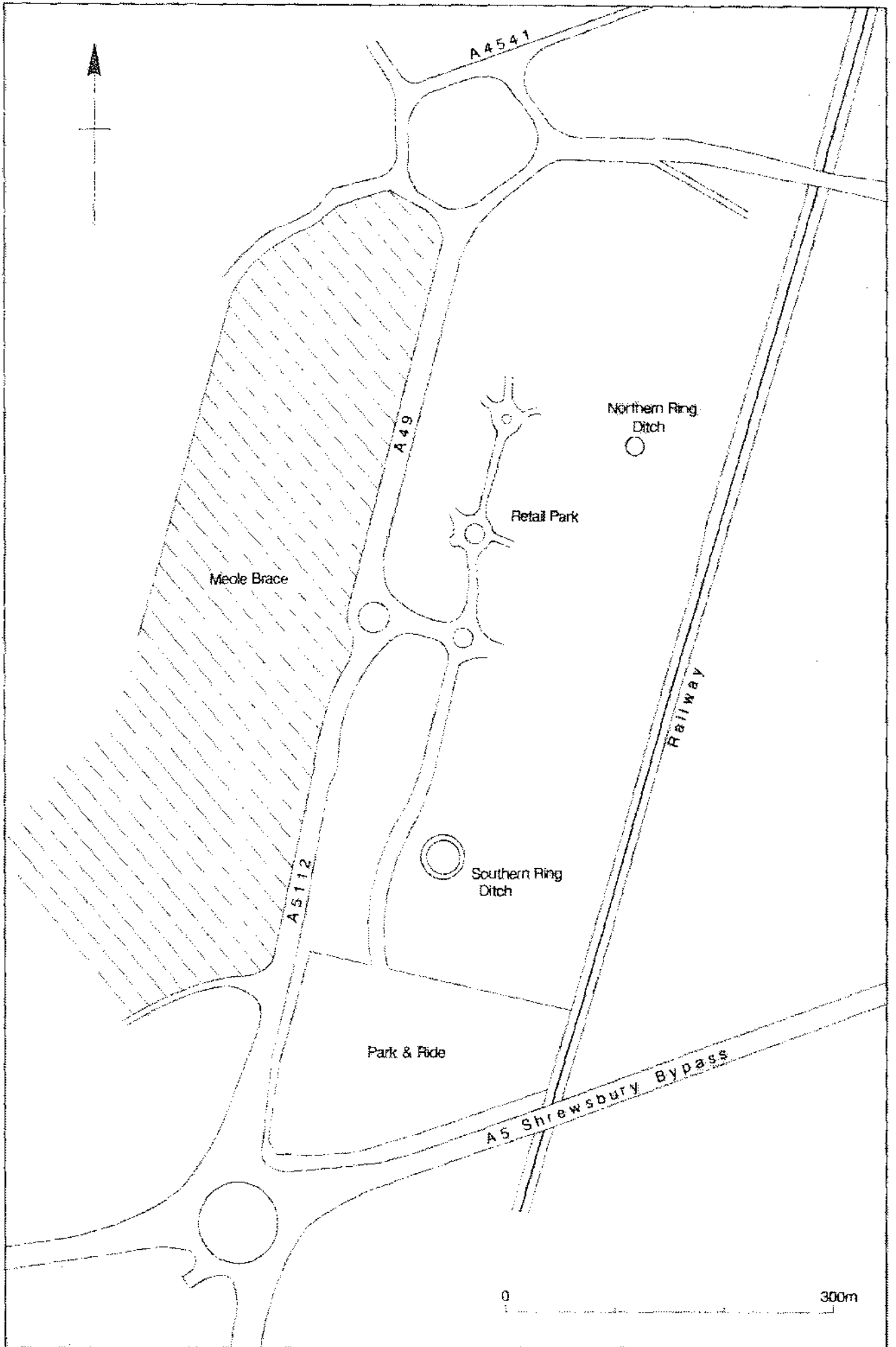


Fig. 1: Location

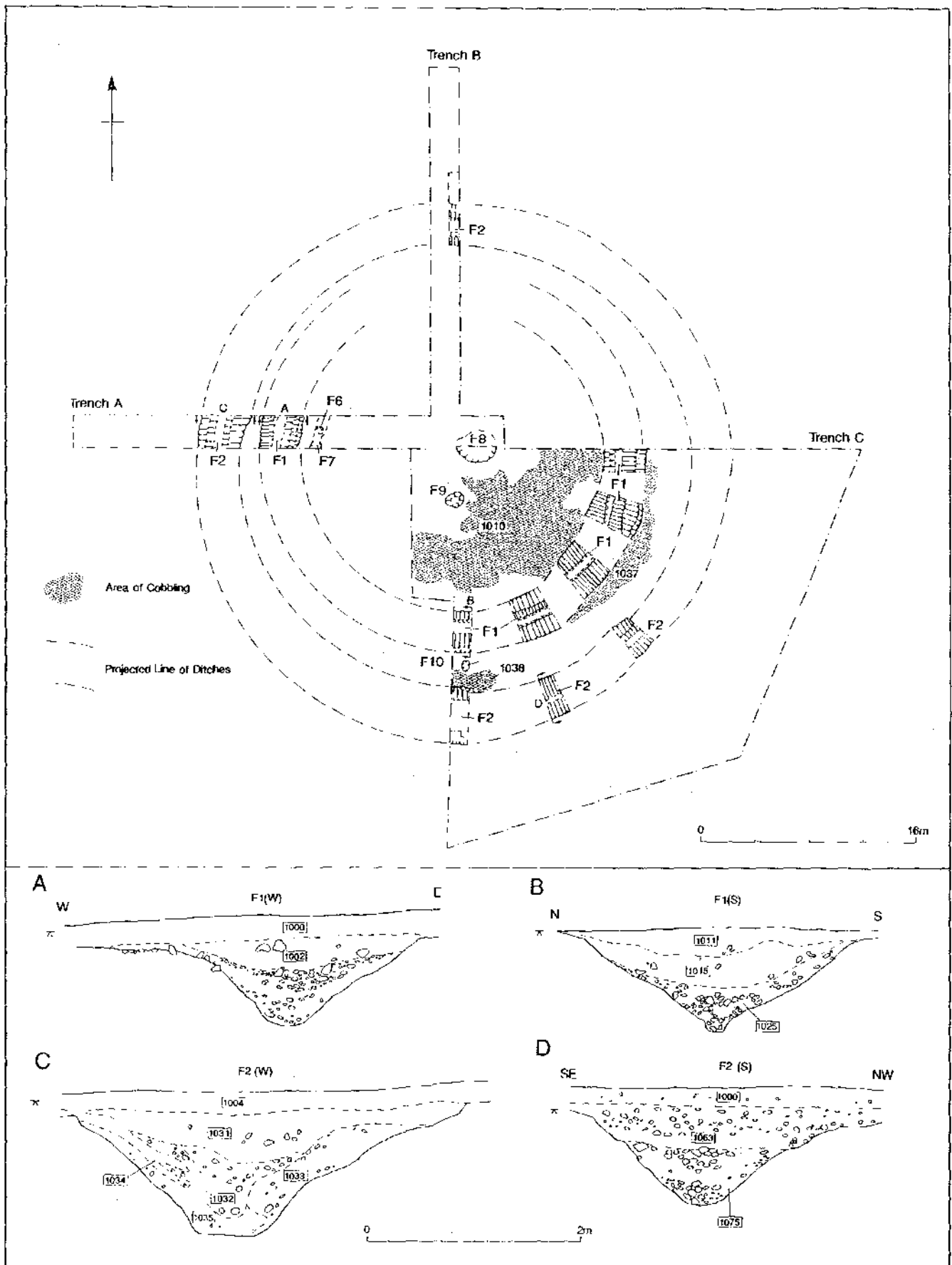


Fig. 2: Plan and sections of excavation



Fig. 3: Detailed plan of Trench C

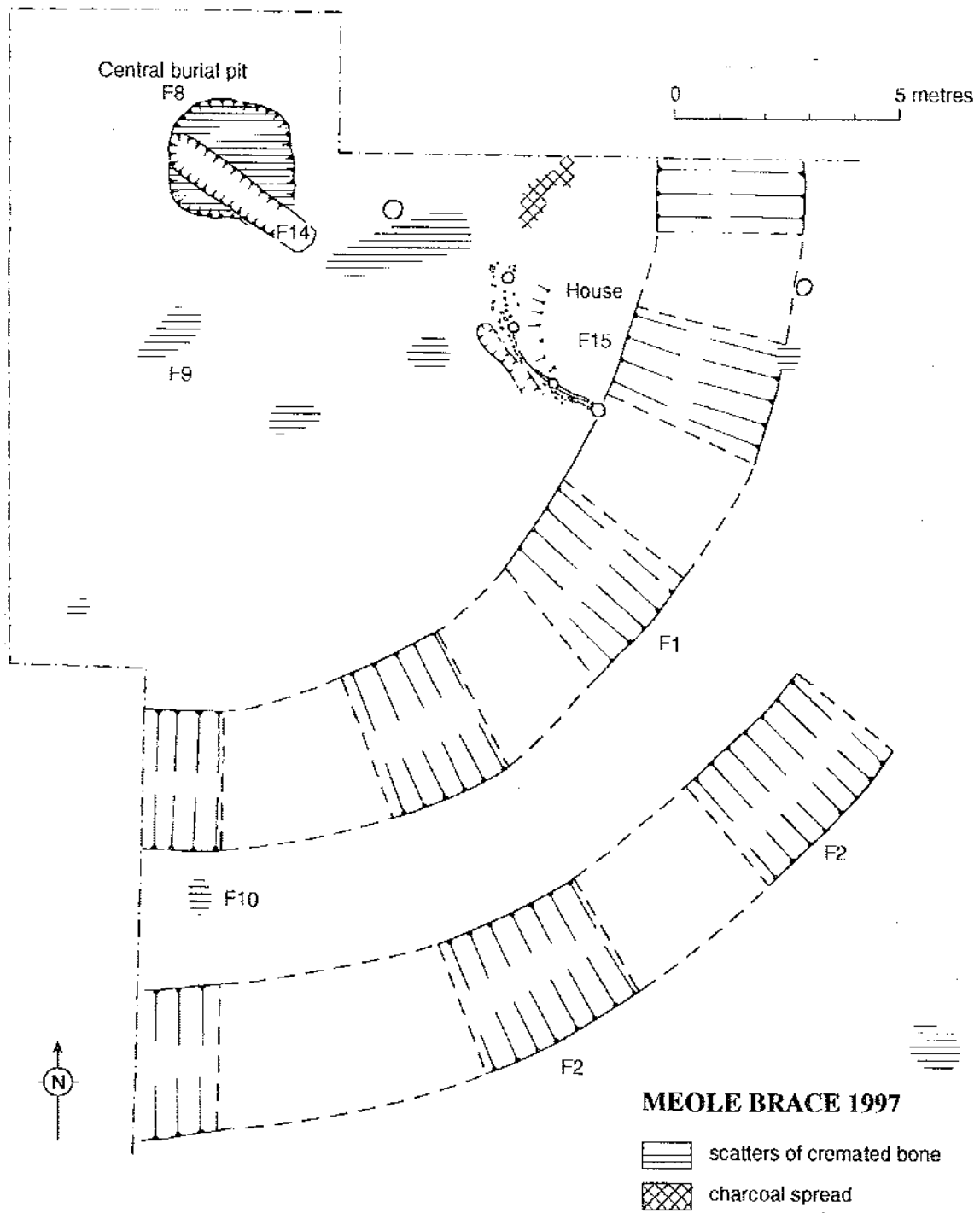


Fig. 4: Plan of sub-cairn round house

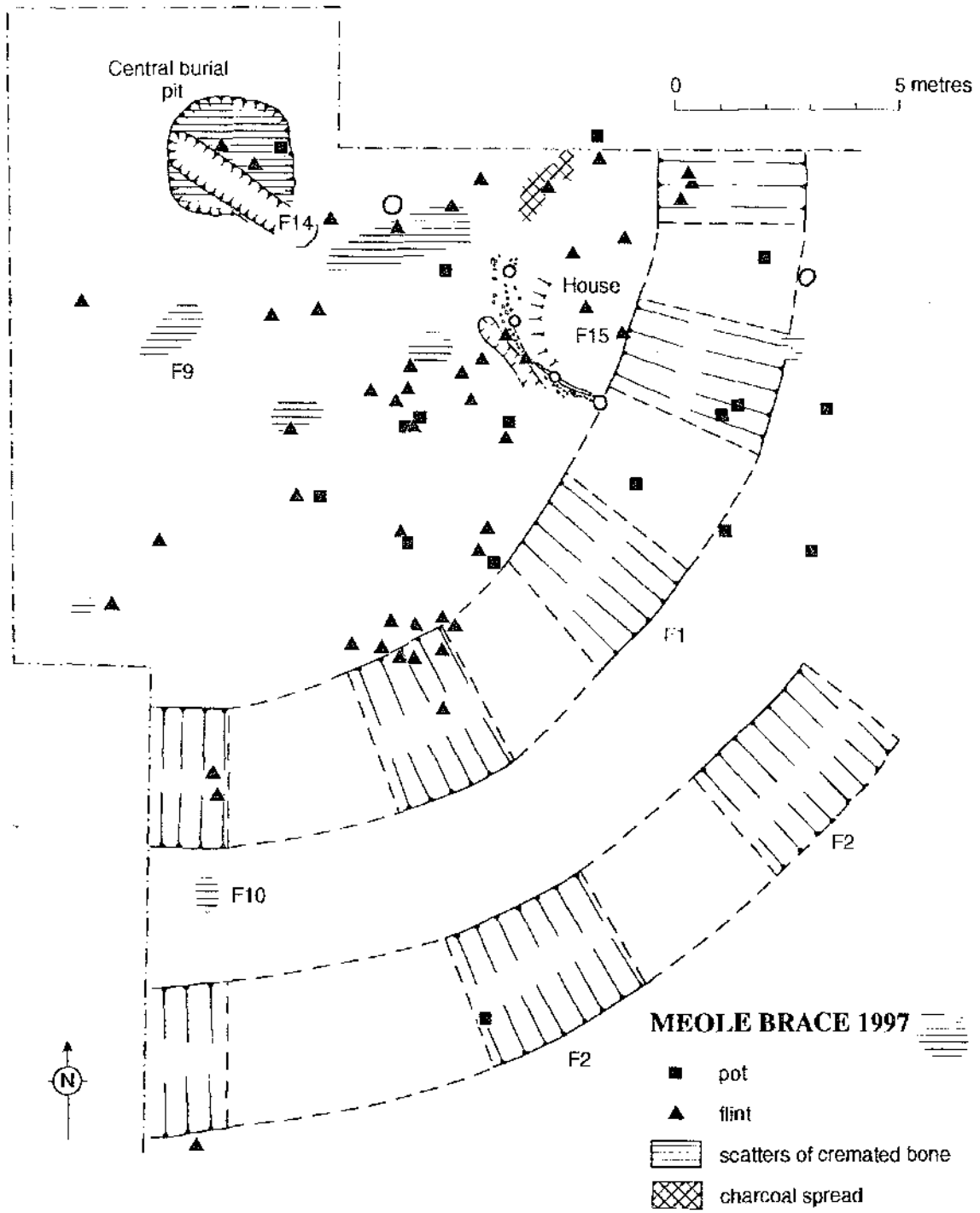


Fig 5: Distribution of principal finds