No. 630

BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
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The excavation of a prehistoric pit alignment and enclosure at Fatholme Farm, Barton-under-Needwood, Staffordshire:

an interim report

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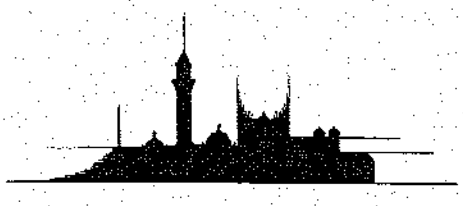

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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by
Gary Coates and Gwilym Hughes

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1.0 Summary

The excavation of a prehistoric pit alignment and part of a prehistoric enclosure was undertaken during early October 1999. The excavation followed an extensive evaluation which included fieldwalking, geophysical survey and trial trenching. Both features are thought to date to the later prehistoric period but a small assemblage of prehistoric pottery includes several items which are dated to the late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age, suggesting an earlier phase of activity.

2.0 Introduction

This report outlines the results of three area excavations at Fatholme Farm, near Barton-under-Needwood, Staffordshire (centered on NGR SK 2050 1780). The work was commissioned by Phoenix Consulting on behalf of Prorail Limited and was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in early October 1999. The area excavations followed extensive evaluation of the site, which included a desk-based assessment (Martin 1998), an aerial photographic assessment (Cox 1998), fieldwalking (Johnson 1999), archaeogeophysical survey (Bartlett 1999) and trial-trenching (Hughes and Coates 1999a), the results of which are summarised below (Section 4). The evaluation was commissioned to allow the curatorial authority to assess the impact of the proposed development on the archaeology of the site and advise the local planning authority. Planning permission was granted for the development in September 1999, without any conditions for further archaeological work. However the archaeological consultants, Phoenix Consulting, and developers, Prorail Ltd, felt that the evaluation had provided sufficient evidence to warrant further excavations and Prorail Ltd kindly provided funds for the excavation of three areas focusing on a prehistoric enclosure and pit alignment.

3.0 Site Location and Geology (Figs. 1 - 3)

The site of the excavation lies approximately 7km southwest of Burton-on-Trent and is bounded on the east by the Birmingham-Derby railway and on the west by the A38 road. A road leading to Walton-on-Trent defines the northern edge of the site. The three excavation areas were located in a field, which had been used for arable agriculture, to the southwest of the disused farm buildings of Fatholme Farm.

The drift geology of the site is river terrace sands and gravels on the west bank of the River Trent. The topsoil is a loose dry brown sandy loam and varies in depth between 0.3 and 0.4m.

4.0 Archaeological Background

Information on past settlement and landuse on the gravel terraces of the River Trent has primarily been obtained from aerial photographic survey notably by Jim Pickering and Rowan Whimster (Whimster 1989). These surveys have demonstrated extensive and intensive human activity on the gravel terraces since at least the Neolithic (Gaffney and Hughes 1993).

A desk-based study was undertaken in 1998 (Martin 1998) which assessed the extent of the known archaeology within and around the development area. It included a walkover survey, an aerial photographic assessment (Cox 1998) and a comprehensive documentary and cartographic survey. Cropmarks identified during the aerial photographic survey suggested the presence of linear and discrete features within the site. The features which were thought to be of potential archaeological interest are marked on Figure 2. These included a pit alignment, linear features (possibly early land boundaries) and part of a possible rectilinear enclosure. Where such features have previously been identified and excavated in the area they have frequently been found to be of prehistoric or Romano-British date (e.g. Smith 1979 and Coates 1999).

A similar desk based assessment has been undertaken of the area immediately to the south of the development area, at Catholme Farm (Richmond 1999). A number of important archaeological sites are present in this area and they provide an important context for the archaeological work at Fatholme. These sites include the remains of three suggested prehistoric monuments which have been scheduled as Ancient Monuments (SAM 215, SAM 216 and SAM 256). The easternmost of these sites (SAM 256) is a circular monument comprising multiple concentric circles of pits. It has been suggested that it represents a ceremonial structure, perhaps a complex series of timber circles, of a type known throughout Britain and dating to the late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age (Gibson 1994). The best known examples of multiple pit circles are found in Wessex and include Woodhenge near to Stonehenge and those in the great henge enclosures of Durrington Walls and Mount Pleasant. A further cropmarked site to the west comprises a circular enclosure with a series of radiating pits (SAM 215). However, an archaeological evaluation to the west of this site in 1992 failed to identify any archaeological features (Jones 1992). A third scheduled site (SAM 216) lies to the northwest and includes at least one ring ditch and a group of linear features. These scheduled sites were associated with a number of cropmarked features including three pit alignments. An evaluation of the area outside the scheduled sites was undertaken at Catholme Farm in September 1999 (Hughes and Coates 1999b).

4.1 The evaluation (Fig. 2)

Few archaeological artefacts were collected during the fieldwalking at Fatholme Farm and the geophysical survey failed to detect potential archaeological features. During September 1999 fourteen trial trenches were excavated (Hughes and Coates 1999a). Because of the poor results of the fieldwalking and geophysical survey, the locations of these trial trenches were largely dictated by the results of the rectified aerial

photographic survey. Archaeological features were identified in five of the trenches (Trenches 7-9, 13 & 14), all located to the west of Fatholme Farm. Pits of a possible pit alignment, with a northwest - southeast orientation, were identified in Trenches 7 and 13. The pits that were sample excavated had a bowl-shaped profile and were about 1m diameter and between 0.3 and 0.5m deep. A curvi-linear ditch was identified in Trench 9, which when sampled produced a sherd of prehistoric pottery. This feature had a U-shaped profile and was 2m wide and 0.5m deep. Other linear features in these trenches appeared to be former field boundaries or post-medieval plough furrows.

The archaeological features identified appeared to relate to the rectangular enclosure and pit alignment previously identified from cropmarks (SMR 1455).

5.0 Objectives

Three areas were opened (Fig. 3) with the following objectives.

Area A - to examine the northwest corner of the putative prehistoric enclosure.
Area B - to examine a section of the north side of the enclosure ditch and to examine an area of the interior.
Area C - to examine a section of the pit alignment and the relationship between the pit alignment and the enclosure ditch.

6.0 Method

The excavation of the overburden in all three areas was undertaken using a Hymac Excavator, fitted with a 1.8m wide, toothless ditching bucket and operated under archaeological supervision. The topsoil was stored separately from any subsoil removed. Where appropriate, the subsoil surface was cleaned by hand to define the extent of any archaeological features. Any significant archaeological deposits were sample excavated by hand and the results recorded on pro-forma record cards supplemented by scale plans, section drawings and photographs. Any artifacts recovered were returned to the Archaeology Unit for processing, conservation and identification. All areas were planned using a Total Station Theodolite. These records comprise the site archive, which, at the time of writing, is stored at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

7.0 The Results

7.1 Area A (Figs 3 and 4) - Dimensions: 20m by 40m

The earliest feature in this area was a curvi-linear ditch (F101/F24) which had a southeast to northwest alignment before gently curving northwards. Including the section excavated during the evaluation, the ditch was sample excavated at four locations (F24, F101.01, F101.02 and F101.03). It varied in width between 1.1m and 1.8m and in depth between 0.4m and 0.5m and had a U-shaped profile. It was filled

with a brown silt-sand deposit (1002, 1003 & 1004) which contained some charcoal flecking. The evidence suggests that the ditch was filled in one episode of silting and there was no evidence for any recuts.

A single fragment of prehistoric pottery (possibly later Neolithic in date) was recovered from the fill (1024) of the evaluation section (F24), and a fragment of fired clay was recovered from F101.01 (1002).

A flat-bottomed, circular post-hole (F105) was located in the northwest corner of Area A, to the east of the ditch (F24). It was 0.6m in diameter and 0.2m deep and was filled with a dark brown sandy silt (1007). No dating evidence was recovered from this feature.

To the southwest of the ditch (F101.02) was a circular pit (F106), which had gently sloping sides and a rounded base (Fig. 8). It was 1.4m in diameter and 0.45m deep. It had been filled with a series of silty-sand deposits, some of which contained fragments of charcoal (1008-1011). These deposits appear to have been deliberately placed in the feature, rather than accumulating through natural silting. Two fragments of probable Early Bronze Age pottery was recovered from one of the fills (1010).

Area A was dissected by two post-medieval features, aligned east – west both of which cut the enclosure ditch. One of these appeared to be a plough furrow (F103) and the other appeared to be a former field boundary (F107).

7.2 Area B (Figs 3 and 5) - Dimensions: 20m by 55m

Two sections of the enclosure ditch were excavated in Area B (F200.01 and F200.02, Fig. 5). These sections had a steep U-shaped profile, with a slightly steeper eastern side. It varied in depth between 0.55 and 0.60m and in width between 1.4m and 1.8m. It had been filled with a grey-brown silt-sand (2002 & 2003), within which small sub-rounded stones were concentrated in the bottom. Two fragments of prehistoric pottery were recovered from the fill of the ditch (F202.02, 2003). One appears to be middle to late Iron Age and the other is either Bronze Age or Iron Age.

The ditch was cut by a plough furrow (F202) and a shallow U-shaped curvi-linear gully (F201). The gully was less than 0.5m deep and had a similar alignment to the plough furrow. It was not possible to determine whether or not the gully was a contemporary sub-division of the prehistoric enclosure or whether it was a post medieval feature associated with the plough furrows.

No archaeological features were identified to the east or the west of the enclosure ditch.

7.3 Area C (Figs. 3 & 6)

The enclosure ditch was sample excavated in two locations (F302.01 and F302.02).

The pit alignment was also identified and sampled in Area C. It was orientated northwest - southeast and consisted of a single row of bowl-shaped pits of which seven were sample excavated (F301, F304, F306 and F308-11). They were often less than 0.5m apart (Fig. 6) and averaged 1m in diameter and between 0.4m and 0.7m deep. Most of the excavated examples had two fills, a lower grey-brown sand-silt and an upper orange-brown silt-sand. These appeared to correspond with two distinct episodes of natural silting. A single sherd of prehistoric pottery (probably later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age in date) was recovered from the upper fill of one of the pits (F308, 3016).

Near to the intersection with the pit alignment the enclosure ditch appeared to branch into two (F302 and F303). A section was excavated through each of the branches (F302.03 and F303.01). The western branch appeared to terminate just to the north of the excavated section. The eastern branch extended beyond the northeastern limit of the excavation. Both branches of the ditch cut pits (F304 and F301) associated with the pit alignment (Fig. 6), indicating that the enclosure ditch is later than the pit alignment. No prehistoric pottery was recovered from the ditch sections excavated in Area C.

Both the ditch and the pit alignment were cut by later plough furrows (F313 and F314).

7.4 Prehistoric pottery interim statement by Ann Woodward

A preliminary scan of the ceramic material has been undertaken and interim dating for most of the pieces can be attempted. However, further work on the fabrics, degree of abrasion etc. is required. There is a total of five plain sherds, only one of them a rim fragment, and one piece of fired clay. Such pieces are very difficult to identify and to date.

Area A

Evaluation Trench 9, ditch section F29, 1024 - A plain probable neck fragment. Very abraded and possibly refired, the inner surface missing. Occasional large quartz inclusions. *Possibly later Neolithic.*

Pit F106, 1010 (upper fill) - Two plain thick wall sherds with sparse medium to large rock inclusions. Probably from an urn. *Probably Early Bronze Age.*

Ditch F101.01, 1002 - A fragment of fired clay. *Indeterminate.*

Area B

Ditch F200.02, 2003 - Plain thick wall sherd in a laminated sandy fabric. *Bronze Age or Iron Age.*

Ditch F200.02, 2003 - Plain simple rim fragment in a sandy fabric. *Middle to Late Iron Age.*

Area C

Pit F308, 3016 (upper fill) - A plain wall sherd in a laminated fabric containing some possible grog. *Probably later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age.*

8.0 Discussion

Pit alignments similar to the one examined in Area C are normally thought to date to the late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age and are thought to represent prehistoric land boundaries. However, they frequently contain very few artefacts and so can be very difficult to date. The pit alignment excavated at Fatholme is no exception. Only a single sherd of pottery was recovered and this has been provisionally dated to the later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age. It seems likely that this sherd is a residual find and suggests earlier activity in the vicinity.

The enclosure ditch cut at least two of the pits belonging to the pit alignment and is therefore later in date. It is presumably dated by the Iron Age sherd recovered from the section excavated in Area B. However, if this is the case more Iron Age pottery might have been expected. The only other two sherds that were recovered from the ditch were in fact probably Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Again it seems most likely that these early sherds are residual. Evidence for earlier prehistoric activity is also suggested by the pit in Area A (F106) which contained two sherds of pottery which probably derive from an Early Bronze Age urn. This feature and the residual pottery in the later features, gives a tantalising glimpse of an earlier, possibly ritual, phase of activity. Such activity might not be unexpected given the close proximity of the monument complex to the south at Cathlome Farm.

9.0 Acknowledgements

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The project was managed by Gwilym Hughes and monitored by Andrew Richmond of Phoenix Consulting on behalf the sponsors, Prorail Ltd, who kindly made funds available to allow these excavations to take place.

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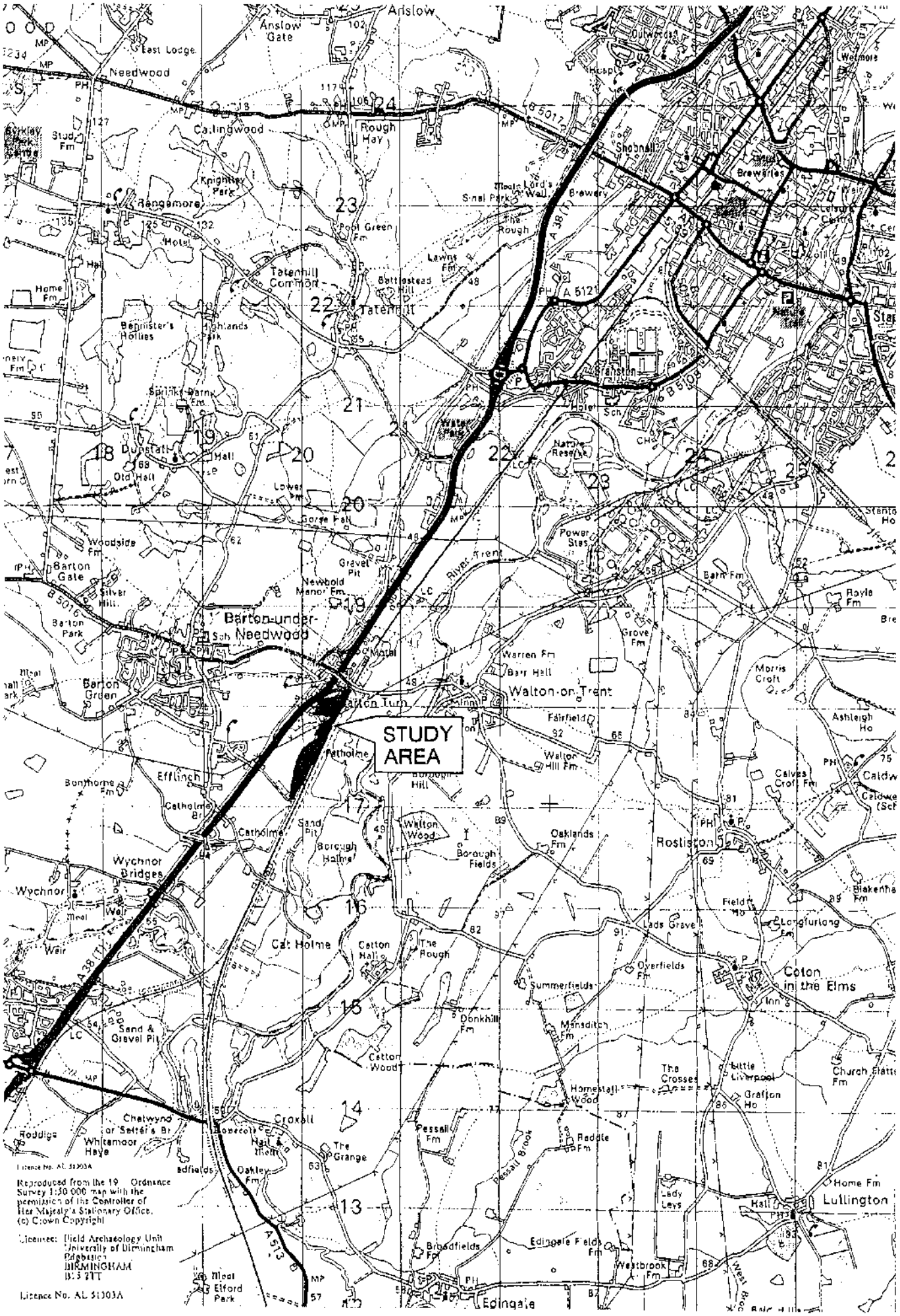
STUDY AREA
Anslow
Anslow Gate
East Lodge
Needwood
Calingwood
Rough Hay
Rangemore
Tatenhill Common
Tatenhill
Dunstall
Barton-under-Needwood
Barton Gate
Barton Green
Barton Turn
Walton-on-Trent
Stapenhill
Branston
Burton upon Trent
Shobnall
Brewhouse
Rolleston
Coton in the Elms
Cat Holme
Wychnor
Wychnor Bridges
Croxall
Edingale
Lullington
Elford
River Trent
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FIG. 1

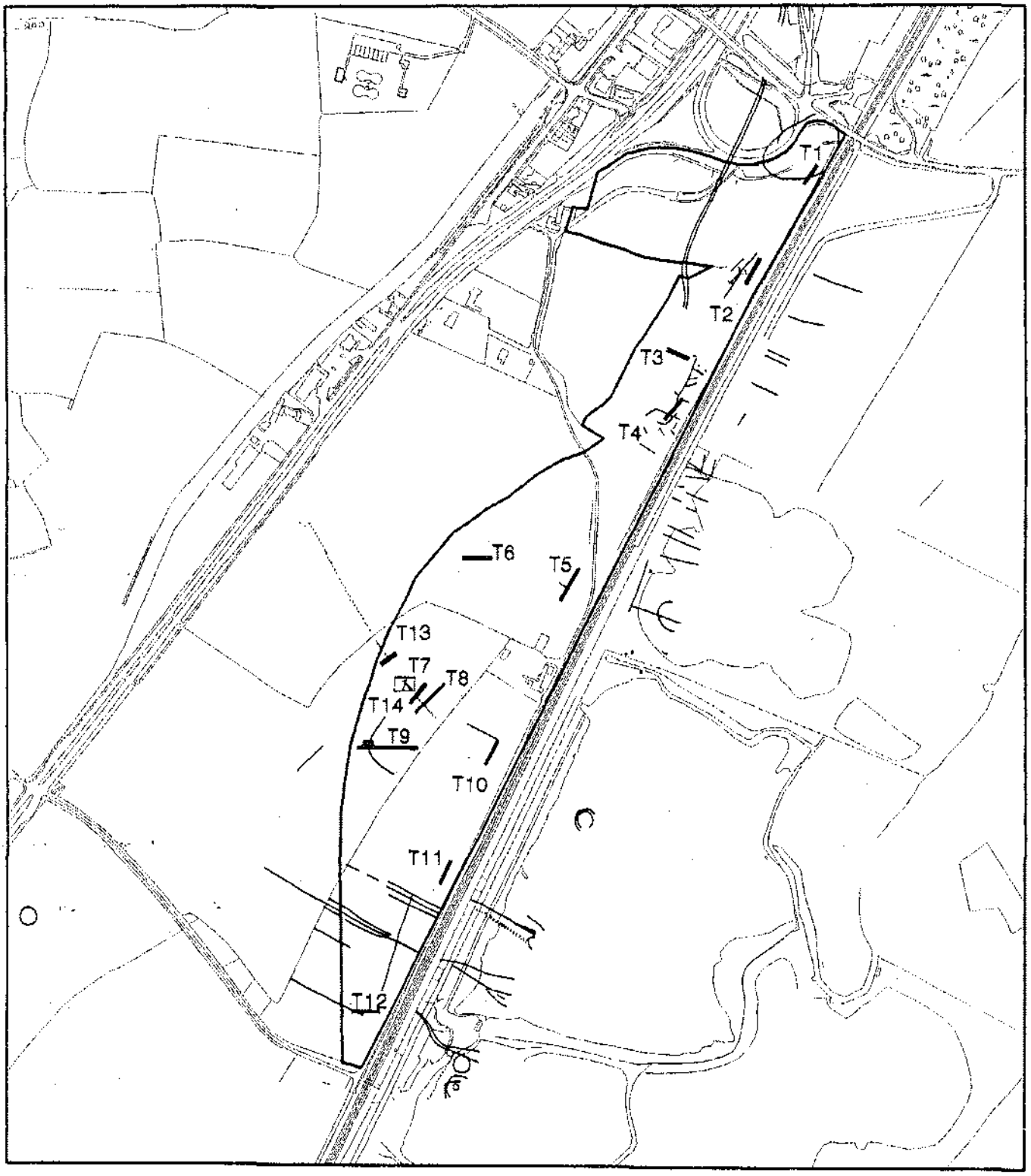
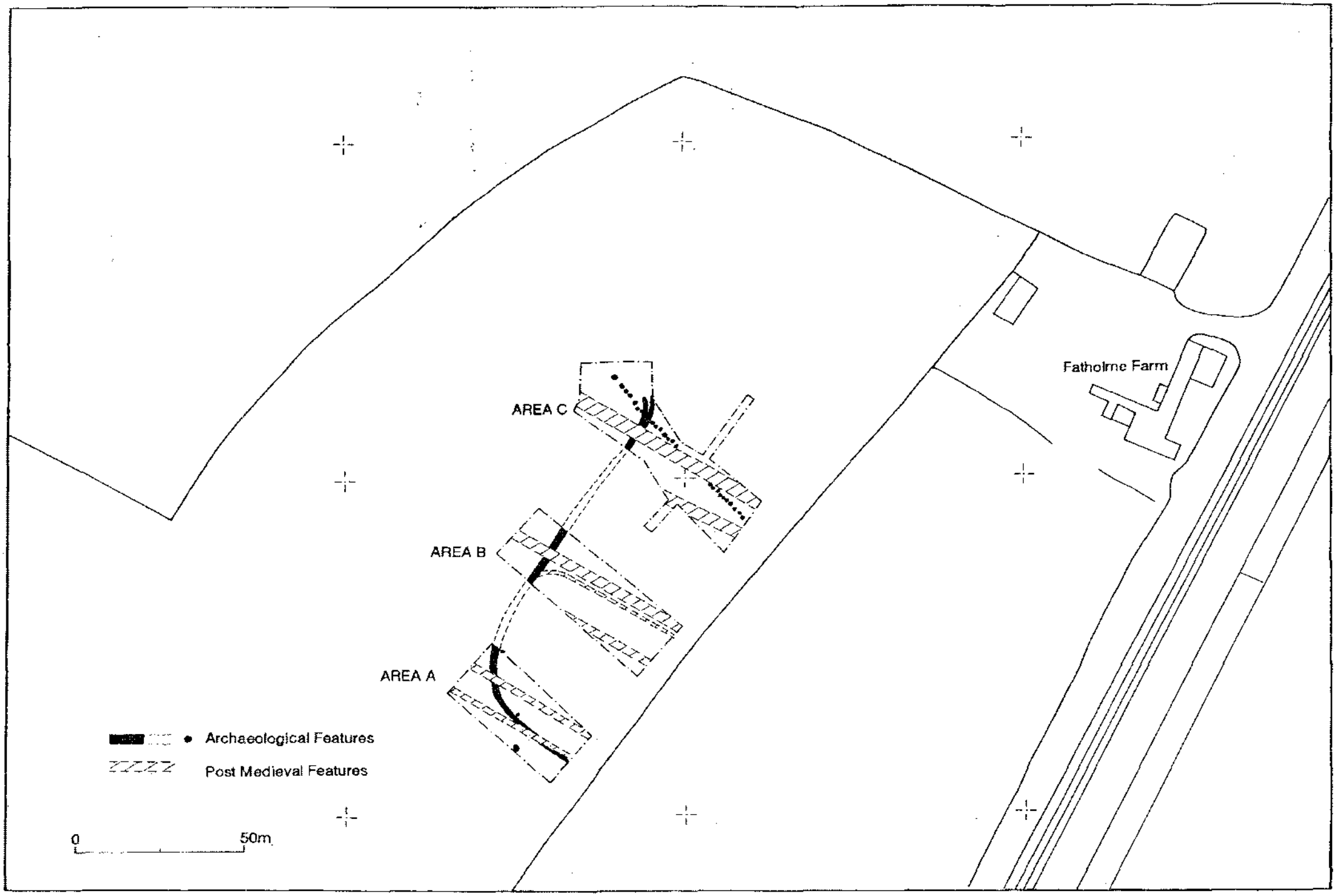


FIG.2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AREA B
AREA A
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Post Medieval Features
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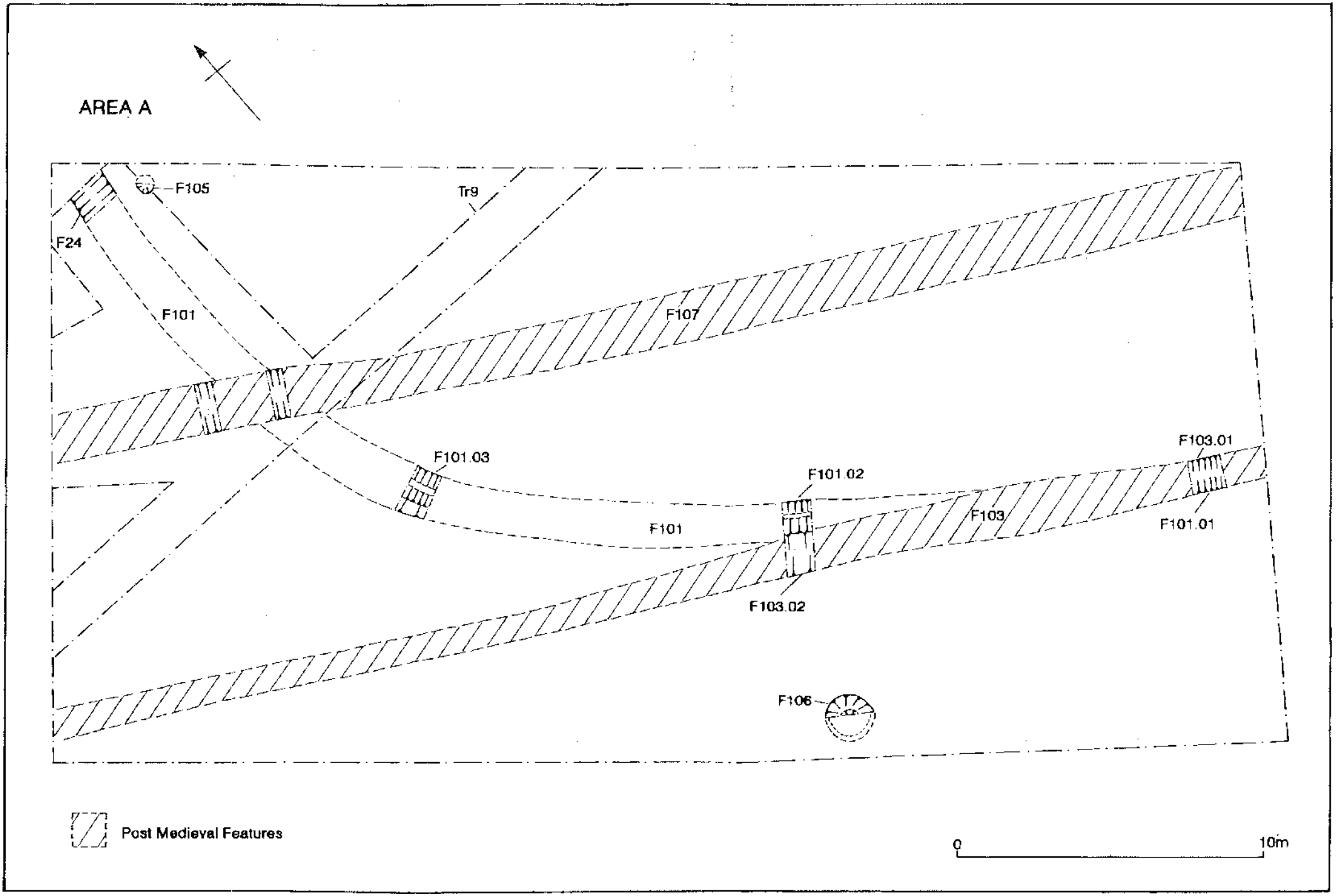
Fig.3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F107
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F106
Post Medieval Features
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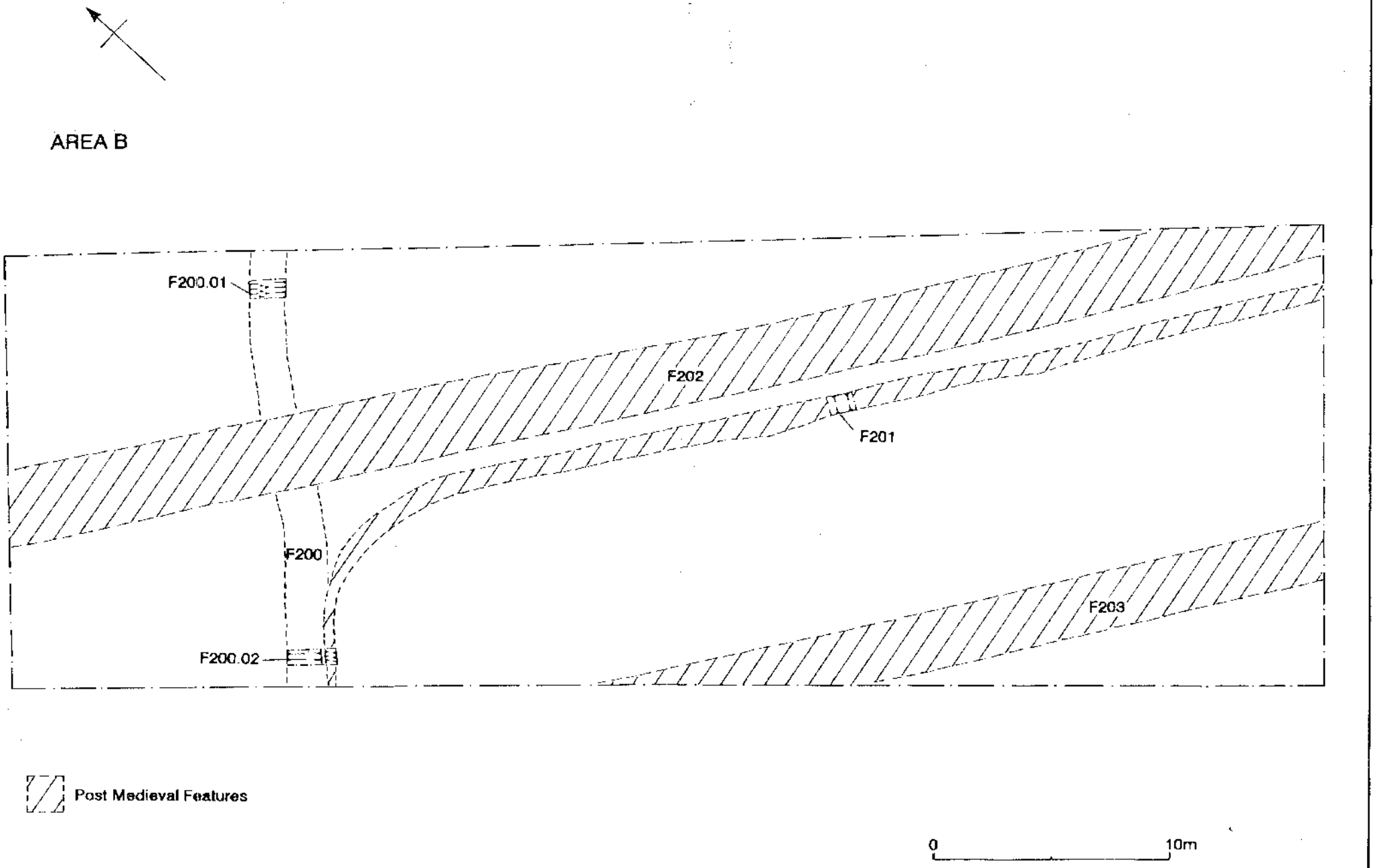
Fig.4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F202
F201
F200
F203
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Post Medieval Features
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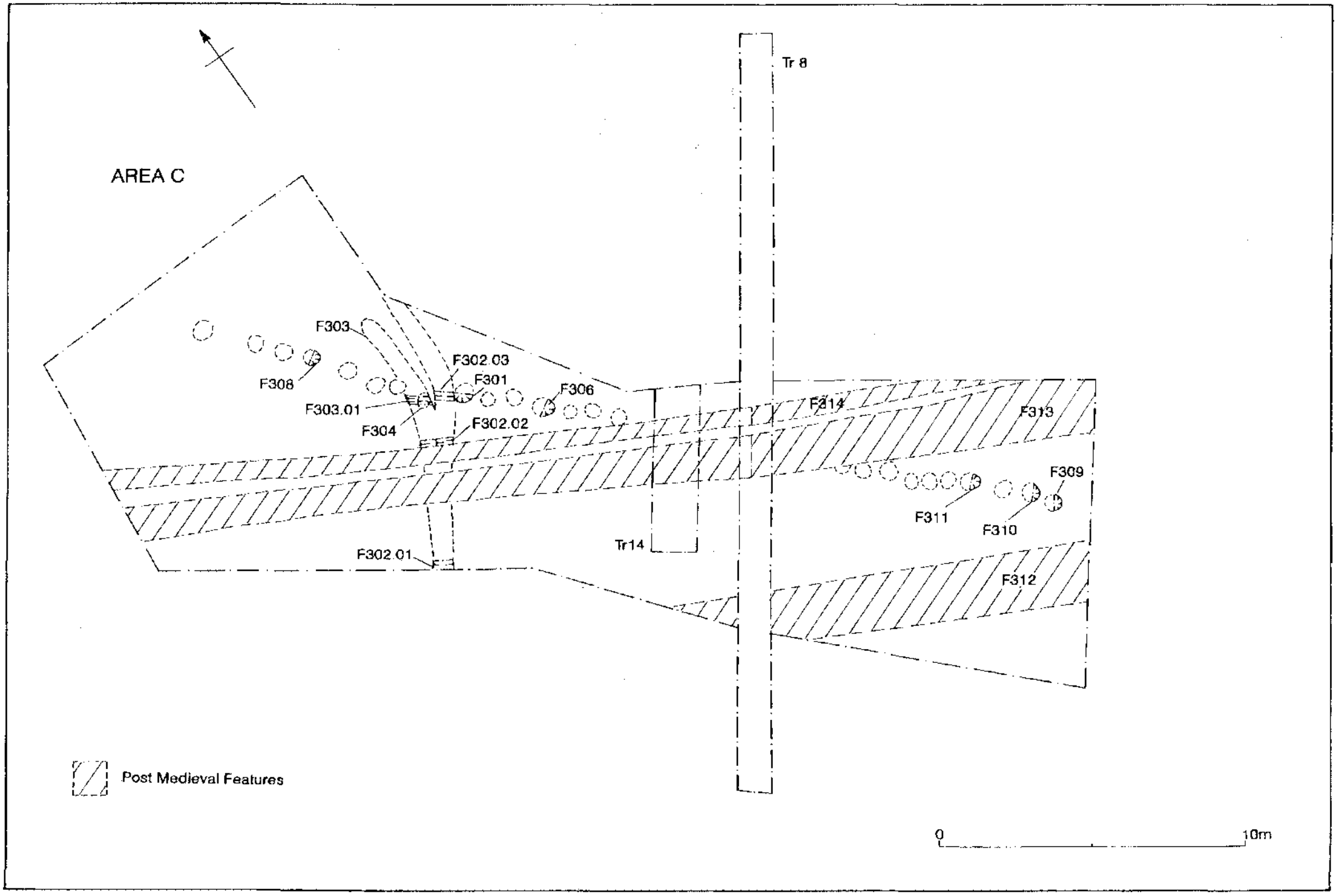
10m

Fig.5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Tr14
F302.01
F312
Post Medieval Features
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Fig.6

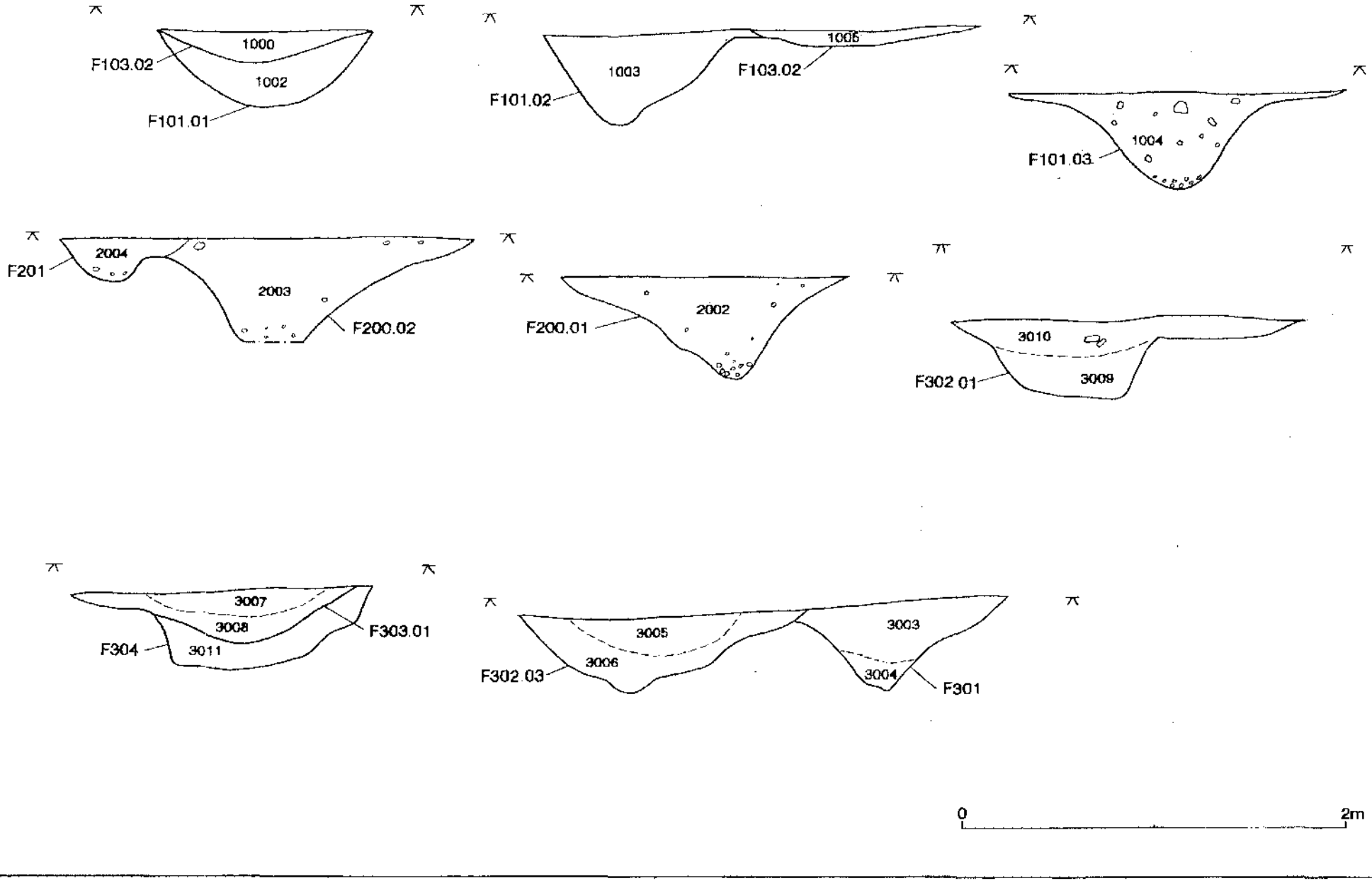
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Fig.7

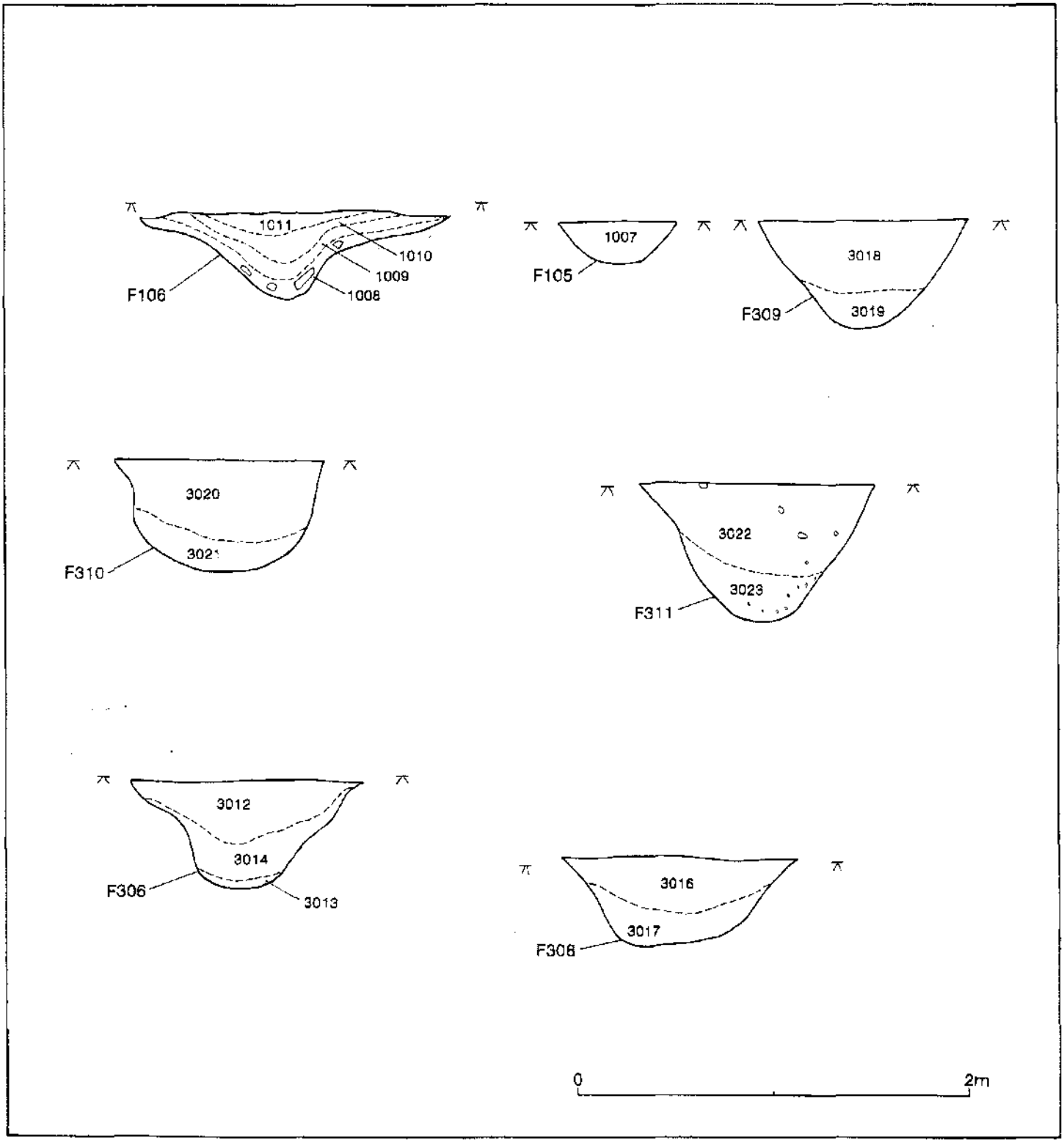
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Fig.8