

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
Project No. 637.01
June 2000

University Hospital Birmingham NHS Trust

**Metchley Roman Forts
Test-Pitting 2000**

by
Alex Jones

For further information please contact:
Simon Buteux or Iain Ferris (Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516
E-Mail: BUFAU@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: <http://www.bufau.bham.ac.uk>

University Hospital Birmingham NIIS Trust

**Metchley Roman Forts
Test-Pitting 2000**

Contents

- 1.0 Summary
- 2.0 Introduction
- 3.0 Aims and methodology
- 4.0 Results
- 5.0 Discussion
- 6.0 Implications and proposals
- 7.0 Acknowledgements
- 8.0 References

Figures

- 1 Metchley forts: simplified phase plan
- 2 Area 1, Test-pits 1-2, locations (scale 1:500)
- 3 Areas 2-3, Test-pits 3-9, locations (scale 1:500)
- 4 Test-pits 5, 8 and 9, simplified sections
- 5 Metchley forts, areas for preservation in situ and by excavation (preservation by record)

Appendix

Level information

University Hospital Birmingham NHS Trust

Metchley Roman Forts Test-Pitting 2000

1.0: SUMMARY

This report describes the results of test-pitting both within and immediately adjoining Metchley Roman Forts. The test-pitting was undertaken in areas not previously evaluated archaeologically, and was intended primarily to provide details of the depth of overburden overlying the archaeological features, and for this reason investigation of intact features and deposits was excluded from the scope of the work. Three areas were investigated. Area 1 lay immediately to the west of the Phase 1-2 fort. No Roman features were identified here. Area 2 comprised the northeastern angle of the Phase 1-3 forts, and surrounding areas. Test-pitting here was hampered by the depth of modern overburden, and the only identified feature was a road surface internal to the Roman forts. Area 3 included part of the eastern defences, and an adjoining area within the interior of the Phase 1-3 forts, where the base of a rampart, *in situ* Roman deposits and modern disturbances were identified.

2.0: INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of archaeological test-pitting within land to the north and south of Vincent Drive, located within, and immediately adjoining Metchley Roman Forts (forts centred on NGR SP 044838, Fig. 1, Birmingham SMR No 02005), currently forming part of the grounds of the University of Birmingham Medical School. Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit were commissioned to undertake the test-pitting by the University Hospital Birmingham NHS Trust, in advance of a proposed hospital development. The test-pitting was undertaken in accordance with the guidelines contained in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (Department of the Environment, November 1990), and Policy 8.36 of the Birmingham Unitary Development Plan. The test-pitting methodology conforms to a Written Scheme of Investigation (BUFAU 2000) approved by the Planning Archaeologist of Birmingham City Council.

The test-pitting follows a desk-based assessment of the forts and their surrounds (Jones 1999a), and trial-trenching (Jones 1999b and 1999c) which examined other areas within and adjoining the fort complex. Details of the framework of outline proposals for the development of the proposed pedestrian plaza, within the context of the preservation of the archaeology intact and *in situ*, including Areas 1-3 described in this report, together with other parts of the fort complex, have recently been compiled (Jones 1999d). Full details of the excavations at the forts may be found in Jones (forthcoming and in preparation). The assessment and trial-trenching reports contain full details of the archaeological background and results, and will not be repeated here. The test-pitting described in this report was undertaken in areas where larger-scale investigation such as trial-trenching would not be feasible, and followed a programme of test-pitting undertaken in other areas of the fort interior in 1999 (Jones 1999e).

Briefly, Area 1 examined an area adjoining the western side of the Phase 1-2 fort defences, to the north of the identified main western entrance to the forts (Fig. 2). Area 2 examined the northwestern defences of the Phase 1-3 forts (Fig. 3). Area 3 investigated part of the eastern side of the interior of the Phase 1-3 forts, including part of the right side of the *retentura* where barrack-blocks would be anticipated, together with part of the right side of the central range, where administrative buildings would have been sited (Fig. 3). Area 2 also investigated part of the northern *intervallum* space, and Area 3 part of the eastern *intervallum* space. Hearths cut to the rear of the rampart, and a road, the *Via Sagularis*, would be anticipated in both *intervallum* areas.

Area 1 comprises a wooded, steeply-sloping west-facing scarp on the western edge of the Medical School grounds, to the south of the Scheduled Ancient Monument (West Midlands S.A.M No. 1). Area 2 presently forms part of the lawned grounds of the Birmingham University Medical School. Area 3 is a wooded area to the northwest of the University Station.

For simplicity, in the following account it is assumed that the forts' main axis is north-south, although the illustrations remain labelled with true north.

3.0: AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

3.1: Aims

The purpose of the test-pitting was to provide details of the depth of the deposits (overburden) overlying the archaeology, and to assess the state of preservation of archaeological features and deposits within areas where trial-trenching was not possible. In particular it was intended to accurately map the northern and eastern fort defences, to consider the degree of survival of the internal features, and to assess the potential of the area outside the forts' western defences to contain defensive outworks, or evidence of civilian settlement.

Because of the necessarily limited nature of the test-pit investigations, the results should not be interpreted to illustrate the presence, absence, degree of survival, or the density of any archaeological features present.

3.2: Methodology

Each of the test-pits was excavated under archaeological supervision to expose the subsoil, or the uppermost horizon of archaeological, or possibly archaeological deposits, whichever was first encountered. In Areas 1 and 2 excavation was by JCB excavator; in Area 3 a mini-digger was employed. Each trench was hand-cleaned in plan and section, and the stratigraphy was recorded, even where no features or deposits of archaeological, or possible archaeological interest were identified. The stratigraphy was recorded by means of pre-printed pro-formas for contexts and features, and by drawing and photography. Hand-excavation of archaeological, or possibly archaeological, features and deposits was outside the agreed scope of the fieldwork, with the exception of surface cleaning for better definition.

In all areas, test-pits were located to test areas not previously investigated as widely as possible. Test-pit locations were constrained by the location of live services, and mature trees and bushes, which could not be disturbed. In Test-pits 3 and 6 excavation was halted because of the depth and instability of the overburden, and for this reason the subsoil could not be located.

4.0: RESULTS

4.1: Area 1 (Test-pits 1-2, Fig. 2)

Description

Test-pit 1 was T-shaped in plan, and measured a total of 10m in length and 1.6m in width, its long axis following the forts' alignment. The subsoil was a red-brown sand-gravel (1001), located a depth of 0.52m below the modern surface. The subsoil was truncated by a shallow linear disturbance measuring 2.5m in width and 0.5m in depth (F1). This feature was backfilled with brown clay-silt (1002). Feature F1 and the subsoil were sealed by the modern topsoil (1000) which contained a concentration of ash and clinker in the north of the trench.

Test-pit 2 was L-shaped in plan, measuring a total of 8m in length, and 1.6m in width. The subsoil comprised a red-brown clay-sand (1012), recorded at a depth of 0.65m below the modern surface. It was sealed by a layer of red-brown sand-silt (1013), containing frequent pebbles. Above was a layer of brick and other rubble (1014), sealed by the modern topsoil (1011).

Interpretation

Feature F1 in Test-pit 1 may be interpreted as a ditch running along a post-medieval/modern field boundary, running parallel to the fort defences. This ditch is also recorded in a trial-trench to the south (Trench A5, F501, Jones 1999b). No features, or possible features, of Roman date were identified in Test-pits 1-2, and no finds were collected from either test-pit.

4.2: Area 2 (Test-pits 3-6, Fig. 3)

Description

Test-pit 3 was aligned approximately east-west, and measured 5m by 1.6m. The test-pit was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.9m below the modern surface, but further excavation, to the level of the uppermost horizon of the subsoil, was not possible because of the instability of the modern overburden. The earliest deposit encountered was an orange-red clay (1022), measuring 0.3m in depth. It was sealed by a grey clay (1023), containing a quantity of pebbles. Above were banded deposits of grey-black clay-silt (1024), containing charcoal and pebbles, recorded beneath the modern topsoil (1021), which measured 0.3m in depth.

Test-pit 4 was aligned northeast-southwest, and measured 4m by 1.6m. The subsoil comprised a red-brown clay-sand (1032), recorded at a depth of 0.54m below the modern surface. It was sealed by a layer of brown-red sand-clay (1033), containing charcoal and ash, up to 0.15m in depth. This deposit was overlain by the topsoil (1031), which contained building debris towards the northeastern end of the trench.

Test-pit 5 (Fig. 4) was aligned east-west and measured 5m by 1.6m. The subsoil was an orange-red sand-clay (1042), recorded at a maximum depth of 0.66m below the modern surface. Towards the east of the trench the subsoil was sealed by a pebble surface (F2) set within a matrix of buff-white sand (1043). This surface was sealed by a layer of dark grey silt-soil (1044), which also extended to its west. Both this layer and the surface (F2) were sealed by the topsoil (1041), which measured 0.25m in depth.

Test-pit 6 measured 4m by 1.6m, and was aligned north-south. Excavation ceased at a depth of 1.9m below the modern surface. The subsoil could not be reached because of the depth and instability of the overburden. The earliest deposit excavated comprised a grey-orange clay-silt (1051) containing fragments of wood, possibly railway sleepers. This deposit was sealed by a band of charcoal (1052) overlain by a mixed deposit of brown sand and gravel (1053), measuring 1.3m in depth, and containing building debris. Layer 1053 was sealed by the modern topsoil (1054), which measured 0.3m in depth.

Interpretation

Layers 1022 and 1023 in Test-pit 3 may represent lower ditch fills, along the northern defences of the Phase 1 fort. The angle of slope of these deposits suggests Test-pit 3 lay towards the inside of the ditch, although it was not possible to identify part of the ditch profile within the limited area investigated. Feature F2 in Test-pit 5 may be interpreted as the northern edge of the northern *via sagularis*, or internal road of the Phase 3 fort, located just to the west of the northeastern corner of the fort defences. Test-pit 6 sampled a considerable depth of modern overburden within an area which had been terraced-up during the construction of the Medical School. The lower deposits (1051-2) identified within this test-pit may have been dumped along the line of the outermost defensive ditch of the Phase 1-2 fort, although no trace of the ditch profile could be found within the limited area investigated. No archaeological, or possible archaeological features were identified in Test-pit 4, and no finds were recovered from Test-pits 3-6.

4.3: Area 3 (Test-pits 7-9, Fig. 3)

Description

Test-pit 7 was aligned northwest-southeast, and measured 4m by 1m. The subsoil (1062) comprised a red-brown sand-gravel, recorded at a depth of 0.87m below the modern surface. The subsoil was cut by a disturbance (F3) aligned at a right-angle to the trench, backfilled with grey-brown clay silt (1063). The full depth of the disturbance was not identified because of the instability of its fills. Layer 1063 was sealed by the modern topsoil (1061), which measured approximately 0.3m in depth.

Test-pit 8 (Fig. 4) measured 3m by 1m. The earliest deposit encountered, at a depth of 0.57m below the modern surface, was a brown silt-sand (1074) containing charcoal and pebbles, and with traces of iron panning. This deposit was sealed by a layer of grey-brown silt-clay (1072). Layer 1072 was cut by a service trench (F4) backfilled with orange-red clay (1073). Feature F4 and layer 1073 were sealed by the modern topsoil (1071), which measured 0.25m in depth. The subsoil was not identified in this intervention.

Test-pit 9 (Fig. 4) measured 1m by 2m. The earliest deposit encountered was the uppermost layer of a deposit of yellow-brown clay-silt (1081, F5), which was recorded at a depth of 0.35m below the modern surface. The natural subsoil was not located in this test-pit. Layer 1081 was sealed by a deposit of red-brown sand-clay (1082), flecked with charcoal, recorded below the modern topsoil (1083), which measured 0.15m in depth.

Interpretation

The location and alignment of disturbance F4 in Test-pit 7 suggests that it was a disturbance associated with the construction of University Station to the south. Layer 1074 in Test-pit 8 may represent an *in-situ* occupation deposit within the eastern fort interior, and for this reason was not excavated. The fill of service trench F4 was composed of redeposited natural. Feature F4 in Test-pit 9 may be interpreted as the base of the eastern rampart of the Phase 3 fort, with which it coincides roughly in mapped position.

No finds were recovered from Test-pits 7-9, with the exception of a sherd of heavily abraded samian from layer 1073. No features, or possible features of Roman, or possible Roman, date were identified in Test-pit 7.

5.0: DISCUSSION

5.1: Area 1

No features, or possible features, of Roman date were identified in this area. The identified post-medieval field-boundary (F1) respected the line of the forts' western defences.

5.2: Area 2

It is possible that the great depth of material within Test-pits 3 and 6 represents not only landscaping but also building rubble dumped into the remaining hollow of the fort ditches. A similar sequence of rubble upper ditch fills was recorded in the innermost eastern ditch of the Phase 1-2 fort (Jones 1999f) to the south of Vincent Drive. Test-pit 3 may have been located towards the inside face of the innermost of the two ditches along the northern defences, in which case the fort defences may in fact lie slightly to the south of their mapped position. Test-pit 4 may have been located in the berm between the outer face of the eastern Phase 1-2 fort rampart and the western edge of the innermost ditch. Test-pit 6 may have sampled part of the uppermost, recent fills of the outermost defensive ditch of the Phase 1-2 fort.

Assuming that surface F2 in Test-pit 5 forms part of the northern *via sagularis* of the Phase 3 fort, it is possible that the mapped alignment of the Phase 3 fort may need to be slightly revised to the north.

5.3: Area 3

In-situ deposit 1074 in Test-pit 8 represents a build-up of occupation material, possibly just inside the inner edge of the eastern *intervallum* road. The road itself may be located slightly to the east of its mapped location. Equally, the base of the eastern Phase 3 rampart (F5) was recorded slightly to the west of its mapped location.

6.0: IMPLICATIONS AND PROPOSALS

Because of the necessarily limited nature of the test-pit investigations, the results should not be interpreted to illustrate the presence, absence, degree of survival, or the density of any archaeological features present.

6.1: Area 1

Although no features or deposits were identified, the archaeological potential of this area should not be written-off. Further fort defences, outer annexe defences, or even other evidence of Roman activity outside the fort defences may be found outside the limited areas investigated.

The western defences and interior of the forts have been identified as areas for the preservation of archaeological deposits intact and *in situ*. In addition, view-cones (from the northwestern corner of the fort), and lines of sight (along the line of the western fort defences and also immediately adjoining this side of the fort), should be maintained uninterrupted by development. The remainder of Area 1 (more than 15m outside the outermost fort ditch) may be defined as an area for preservation by record (excavation, recording and publication of results in advance of development). It is strongly recommended that the proposed new access road to the west of the forts follows their alignment, providing visual emphasis to the military alignment as an accessible landscape feature.

6.2: Area 2

Test-pit 5 demonstrates that *in situ* Roman deposits (*intervallum* road) survive in a good state of preservation. The extensive modern dumping, creating artificial terraces, and infilling of the remaining hollows within the fort ditches will have provided considerable protection from modern disturbance. The results also suggest that the presently-mapped location of the northern fort defences may require some adjustment.

The results of test-pitting confirm that within Area 2 the fort defences and interior should be preserved intact and *in situ*. In addition, view-cones (from the northeastern corner of the fort), and lines of sight (along the line of the western fort defences and also immediately adjoining this side of the fort), should be maintained uninterrupted by development. As suspected, considerable variation

in the depth of overburden was recorded. This will need careful consideration during the design of the horizontal alignment of the plaza. Those parts of the area disturbed by the Elan Aqueduct and a modern service tunnel are, of course, excluded from the requirement for preservation intact and *in situ*.

6.3: Area 3

Most of the area investigated in Test-pit 7 was affected by a modern disturbance (F3), and the absence of identifiable Roman features is not surprising. The depth of overburden in this intervention (0.87m) suggests that Roman features and deposits in adjacent areas could be well-preserved. This is suggested by the results from Test-pits 8-9, where well-preserved Roman features and deposits were identified, although a service trench (F4) was also identified. The eastern Phase 1-3 fort rampart was noted as being particularly well-preserved in previous investigations (St. Joseph and Shotton 1937). The importance of the rampart material for the preservation of underlying deposits, particularly the fragmentary remains of the important Phase 2B store depot, are noted elsewhere (Jones forthcoming, Jones 1999a).

Archaeological deposits relating to the fort interior and defences within the majority of Area 3 should be preserved intact and *in situ*. Exceptionally, two areas may be excluded from this requirement:

- 1) The land immediately to the east of Vincent Drive Roundabout. Here the archaeological deposits will have been disturbed by the cutting of service-trenches, although as demonstrated by Test-pit 8, islands of good archaeological survival have escaped this disturbance.**
- 2) The land immediately to the northwest of University Station, disturbed during its construction.**

Within these two areas the archaeology should be preserved by record (excavation, recording and publication in advance of development).

7.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was sponsored by University Hospital NHS Trust. We thank Alf Towers of the Trust for his assistance, and the University of Birmingham for permission to excavate on their land. The fieldwork was undertaken by Alex Jones, Kirsty Nichol, Josh Williams and Roy Krackowicz. The illustrations were prepared by Nigel Dodds from originals by Liz Hooper. The fieldwork was monitored by Dr. Michael Hodder for Birmingham City Council and the report was edited by Simon Buteux.

8.0: REFERENCES

BUFAU 2000. *Written Scheme of Investigation. Metchley Roman Forts, Further Archaeological Evaluation*. Unpublished.

Jones, A. E. 1999a. *University Hospital NHS Trust. Archaeological Assessment 1999*. BUFAU Report No. 617.04.

Jones, A. E. 1999b. *University Hospital NHS Trust. Archaeological Evaluation 1999. Areas A and B.* BUFAU Report No. 617.02.

Jones, A. E. 1999c. *University Hospital NHS Trust. Archaeological Evaluation. Area C.* BUFAU Report No. 617.03.

Jones, A. E. 1999d. *University Hospital NHS Trust. Metchley Roman Forts. The Plaza Framework 2000.* BUFAU Report No. 637.

Jones, A. E. 1999e. *University Hospital NHS Trust. Area B Test-Pitting 1999.* BUFAU Report No. 617.05.

Jones, A. E. 1999f. *University of Birmingham, Metchley Roman Forts. Further Archaeological Evaluations 1999.* BUFAU Report No. 641.

Jones, A. E. forthcoming. Roman Birmingham 1. Metchley Roman Forts, excavations 1963-4, 1967-9 and 1997. *Transactions of the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society.*

Jones, A. E. in preparation. Roman Birmingham 2. Metchley Roman Forts Excavations 1998-9. *Transactions of the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society.*

St. Joseph, J. K and Shotton, F. W. 1937. The Roman Camps at Metchley, Birmingham. *Transactions of the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society*, LVIII, 68-83.

APPENDIX: Level information

Heights are given in metres AOD.

indicates that subsoil was not reached

Maximum depth of overburden in brackets

<i>Test-pit</i>	<i>Modern surface</i>	<i>Base of subsoil/ #</i>
1	146.10 (0.52)	145.62
2	146.63	146.18
3	144.24	#
4	143.57 (0.54)	143.03
5	145.77 (0.66)	145.11
6	147.13	#
7	144.52 (0.57)	143.95
8	144.77 (0.51)	144.26
9	144.73 (0.35)	144.38#

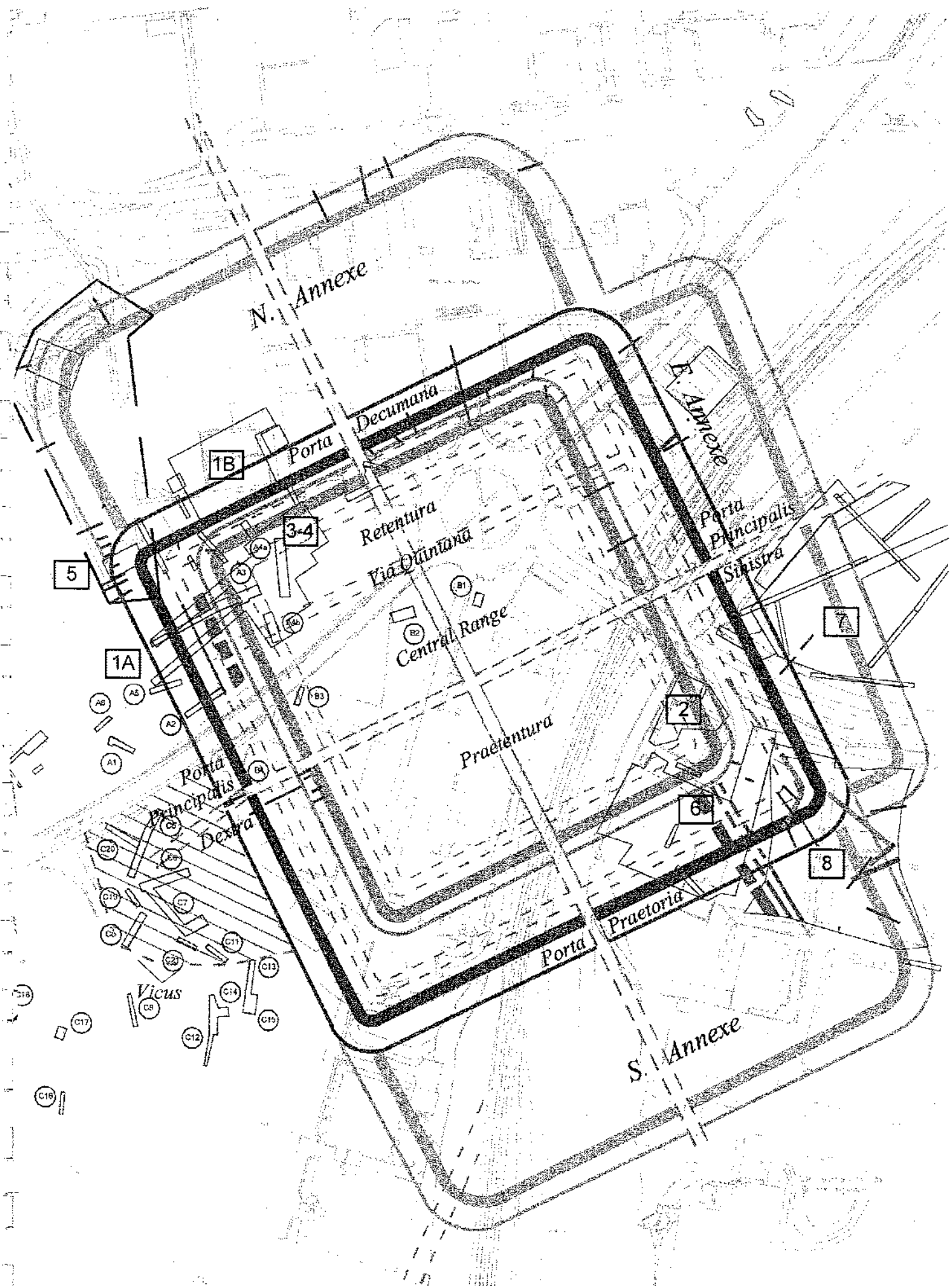


Fig. 1

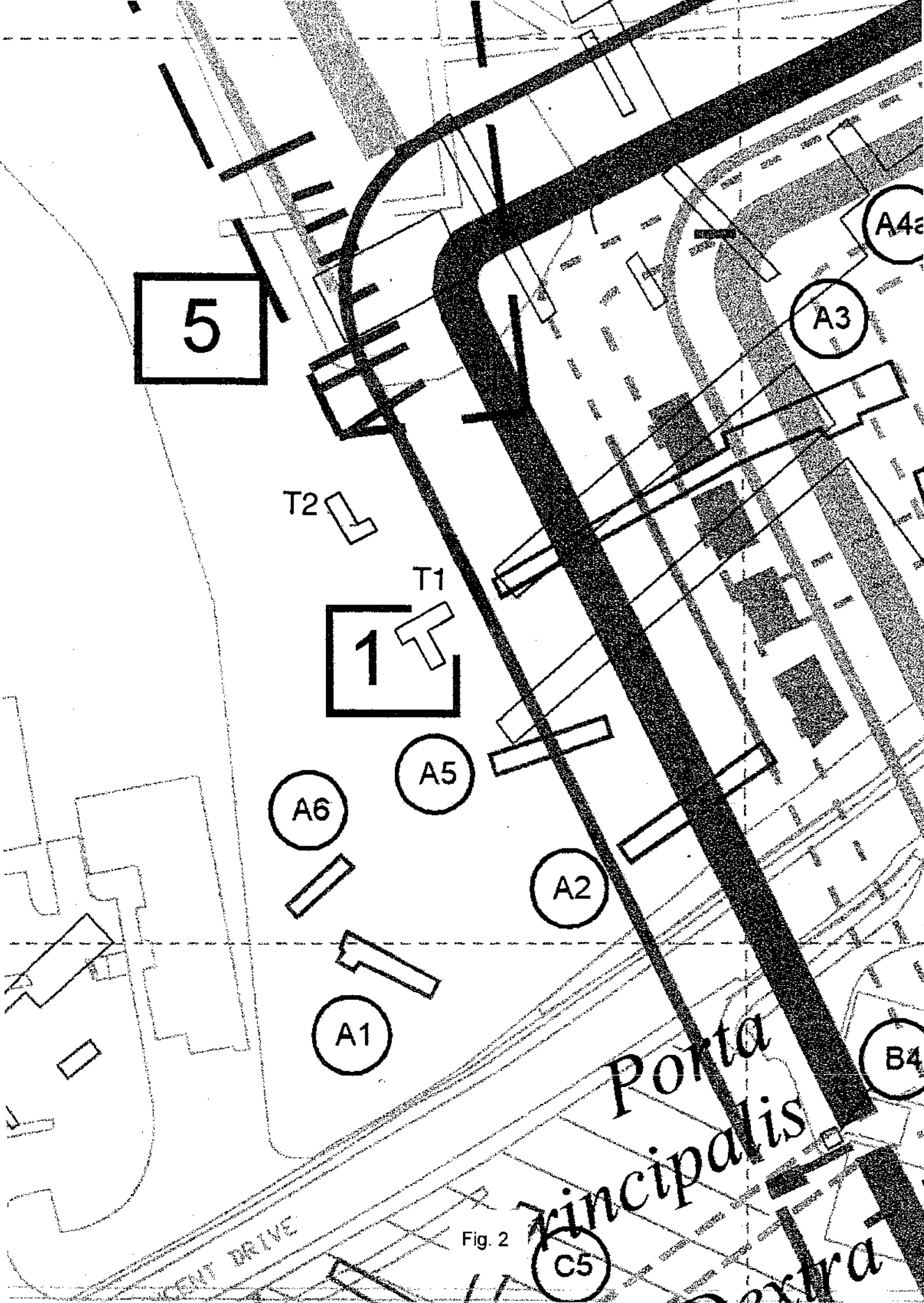


Fig. 2

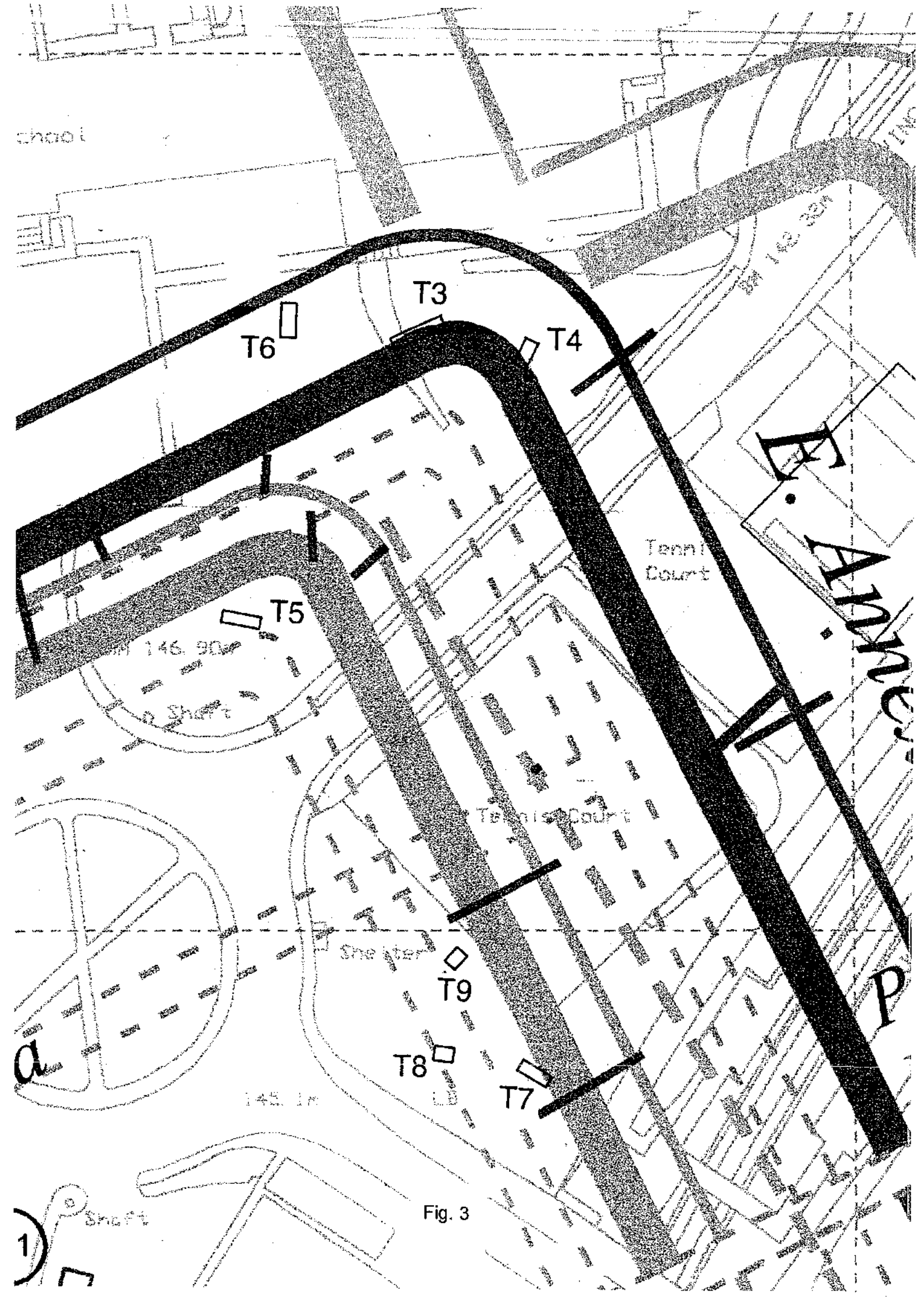


Fig. 3

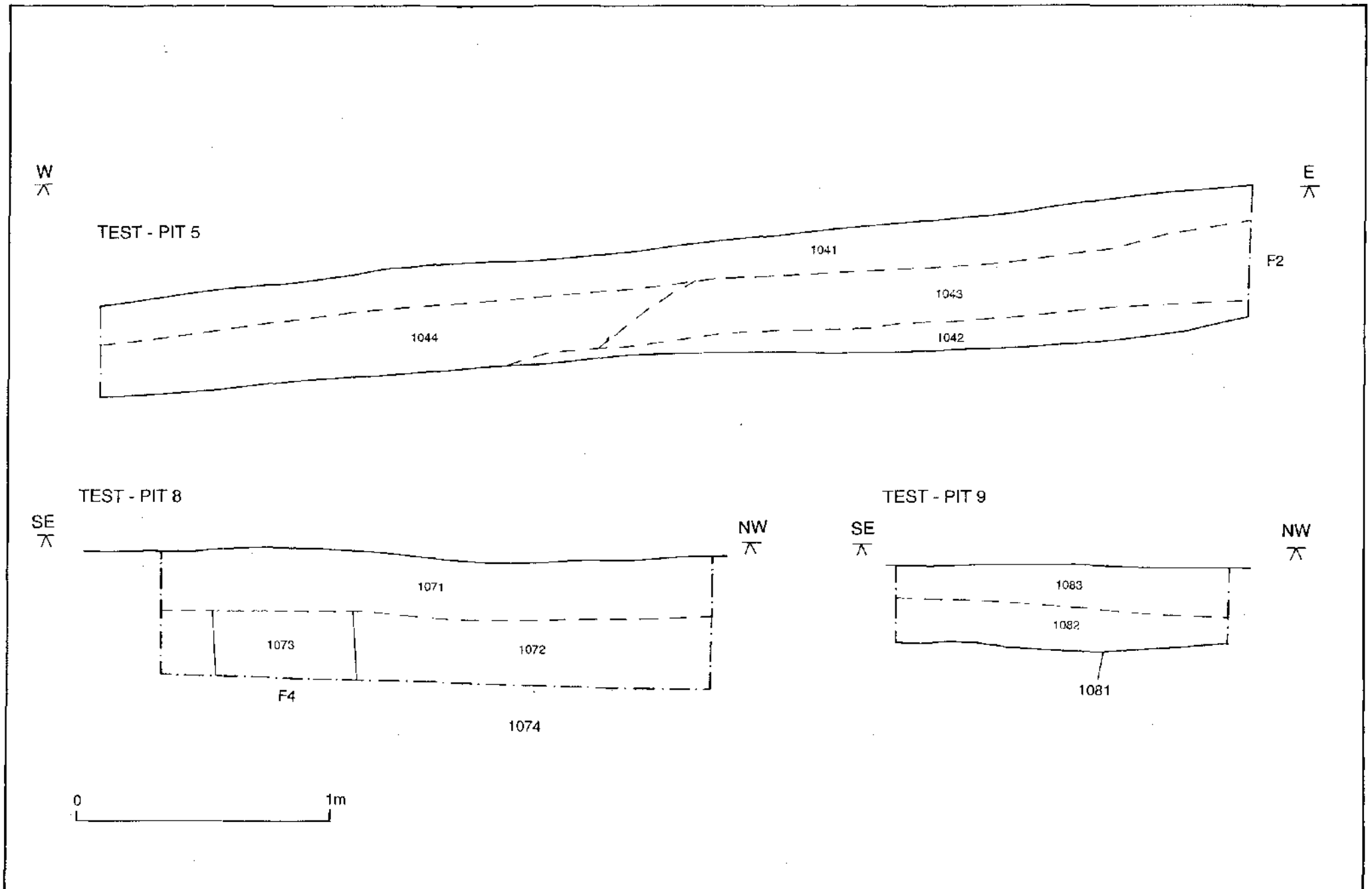


Fig. 4

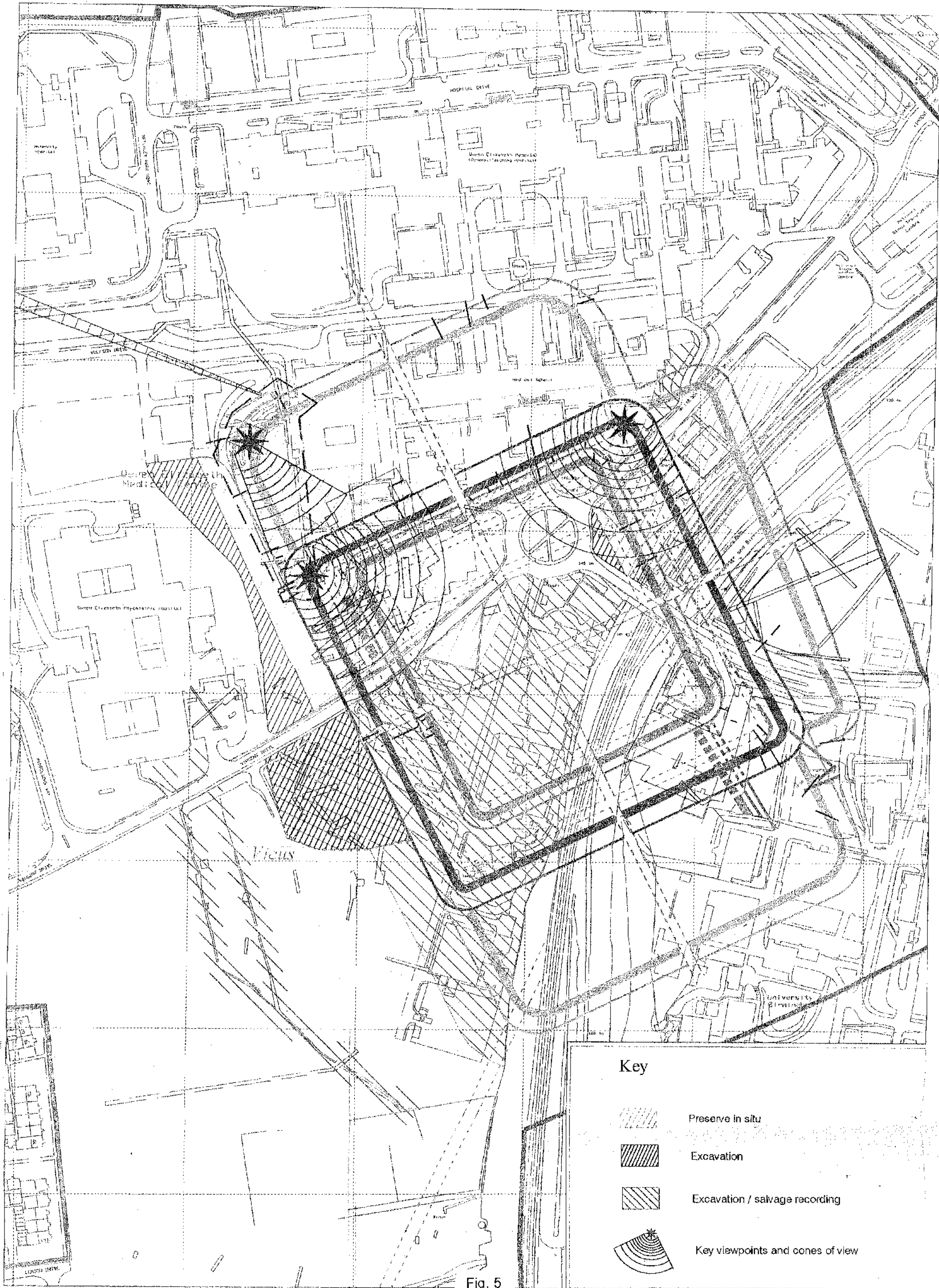


Fig. 5