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**THE SARACEN'S HEAD, THE
GREEN, KINGS NORTON,
BIRMINGHAM**

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
EVALUATION, 2005

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By

M. Duncan

For

Kings Norton Parochial Church Council

For further information please contact:

Alex Jones (Director)
Birmingham Archaeology
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516
E-Mail: bham-arch@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: <http://www.barch.bham.ac.uk/bufau>

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SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation was carried out for Kings Norton Parochial Church Council at The Saracen's Head, The Green, Kings Norton, Birmingham (NGR SP 0498 7876). This was due to proposed works to restore and rebuild parts of the Saracen's Head, a 15th-century timber-framed building with later additions. It is probable that this work will affect below ground archaeological remains, and the evaluation was intended to inform any future design and mitigation strategies. The evaluation consisted of a trench excavated towards the southern side of the courtyard of the Saracen's Head building complex, close to the south wing, a later 19th-century building that is proposed for demolition and replacement. The trench was planned to be 10m long and 2m wide, but the need for fire access the standing structures meant that it was split and foreshortened to 6.6m.

The earliest deposits encountered during the course of the evaluation dated from the medieval period, the earliest feature being a stone packed post-hole towards the western end of the trench from which 13th-century pottery was recovered. This could represent the remains of a medieval structure on the site predating the 15th-century building. A narrow deposit of silt located towards the eastern end of the trench was rich in medieval pottery with several large unabraded sherds that dated from the mid to late 13th century. It is probable that this relates to the remnants of a buried soil or a severely truncated linear feature. However, the large amount of pottery from a small space would certainly indicate medieval occupation in the area.

Sealing the medieval deposits, and present over most of the trench was a cobbled surface which had the appearance of having undergone repeated repair over its lifetime. This was dated to the 15th/16th century and it is probable that it represents the original yard surface associated with the construction of the Saracen's Head in the 15th century. Pottery from the top of the surface dated from the 16th century, possibly into the 17th century indicating the chronological limit of use.

Towards the western end of the trench was a linear cobble feature, possibly a foundation for a building and probably dating from the 17th to early/mid 18th century. However, the date range indicated by the pottery was quite wide (15th to early 19th century) which could be a result of later modifications to the structure that this footing supported. Alternatively, it is possible that these cobbles may have formed part of a heavily truncated surface, surviving only below later footings, now destroyed. A brick-filled foundation trench that dated from the early 19th century cut the cobbled feature; this foundation was distinguished by the use of unusually long bricks (14"). These features conformed to the alignment of a demolished building indicated on a plan of 1911 and situated in the northwest corner of the courtyard. It was apparent that recent service trenches had destroyed significant amounts of the archaeology suggesting that the brickyard surface had been pulled up and relaid in places repeatedly.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned by Kings Norton Parochial Church Council to undertake a programme of trial trenching ahead of the restoration of The Saracen's Head, Kings Norton, Birmingham, which, with the Old Grammar School, was the 2004 winner of the BBC Television 'Restoration' programme (hereafter referred to as the site). The evaluation was prompted by a proposal to demolish the existing south wing and replace it with a new building. It was thought that there was a high probability for the destruction of underground archaeological deposits were this plan to be implemented. This evaluation was considered necessary in order to inform any future mitigation strategy.

This report has been prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluations* (IFA 1994). The work was carried out in tandem with a programme of building recording and is to be considered in association with the pending report (Hislop and Hewitson forthcoming). It conformed to a brief produced by Birmingham City Council (2004) and a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2005) approved by the Local Planning Authority prior to implementation, in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990).

1.2 LOCATION AND GEOLOGY (FIG 1)

The site is located at The Saracen's Head, The Green, Kings Norton, Birmingham, and is centred on NGR SP 0498 7876 (Fig.1). This is in the centre of Kings Norton, to the south of the Church of St. Nicolas and to the west of The Green.

The underlying geology consists of Mercia Mudstone with glacial tills overlying this (Jones and Ratkai 1992), which specifically on this site seem to consist of red sandy clay.

At the time of the evaluation the site composed a courtyard with a grey brick surface incorporating several drainage covers. The buildings of the Saracen's Head, the North Range, the East Range, the Northwest Block and the South Range surround the courtyard (Fig. 2).

2.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

A historical and cartographic survey of the site will be published in due course and will not be repeated in detail here (Hislop and Hewitson forthcoming). However a brief summary of the facts pertinent to this evaluation will be presented here. The Saracen's Head is situated on the northern side of 'The Green' in the historic centre of Kings Norton, and adjoins the churchyard to the south. Kings Norton is certainly of Anglo-Saxon origin and is recorded in the Domesday Book as one of the outlying estates of Bromsgrove. It is suggested that Bromsgrove and King's Norton formed a large estate prior to this, placing the site within the boundary of this larger estate (Jones and Ratkai 1992). The church of St. Nicolas is medieval, probably Norman, in origin with 12th, 13th and 14th century features and a 15th century tower and spire along with extensive 19th century alterations (Pevsner and Wedgwood 1966).

Archaeological evidence from various sites around The Green indicates medieval activity from the 12th century onwards centred on The Green and suggesting a market place focus (Birmingham City Council 2004).

The buildings standing on the site at present include the North Range, the East Wing, Northwest Block and the South Range (Fig. 2). These structures, which comprise the existing Saracen's Head, have been subjected to dendrochronological analysis (Tyers 2003). This suggests a date of winter 1491/2 for the North Range a range of 1485-1507 for the East Range and of 1476-1512 for the Northwest Block (Tyers 2003). The South Wing, the demolition and replacement of which has been proposed, dates from 1888.

3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The principle aim of the evaluation was to determine the character, state of preservation and the potential significance of any buried remains.

More specific aims were to:

- Evaluate the survival of the remains of domestic activity and industrial processes from the medieval period onwards, in the form of structures and/or residues.
- Provide evidence of what preceded the 15th-century buildings.
- Assess the likely survival of remains of past environmental conditions.
- Identify the potential of the site to contribute to an understanding of the historic development of this part of Birmingham.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

A single split trench was excavated towards the southern site of the courtyard of the building. This was where the proposed restoration and new development could potentially have the greatest impact to below ground archaeological deposits. Originally planned to be 20m² (10m x 2m), the area of excavation was reduced to 13.2m² in order to accommodate the need for adequate fire access to and from the building (Fig. 2).

The present brick surface was removed by hand and any overburden below this was removed using a 360° tracked mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket, under direct archaeological supervision, down to the top of the uppermost archaeological horizon. Subsequent cleaning and excavation was by hand.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Features were planned at a scale of 1:20, and sections were drawn through all cut features and significant vertical stratigraphy. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* context and feature cards. Written records and scale plans were supplemented by photographs.

Recovered finds were cleaned, marked. Treatment of all finds conformed to guidance contained within *A strategy for the care and investigation of finds* published by English Heritage.

The full site archive includes all artefactual and/or ecofactual remains recovered from the site. The site archive will be prepared according to guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of *The Management of Archaeology Projects* (English Heritage, 1991), the *Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage* (UKIC, 1990) and *Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological Collections* (Museum and Art Galleries Commission, 1992). Finds and the paper archive will be deposited with the Birmingham City Council approved archive store subject to permission from the landowner.

5.0 RESULTS

5.1 INTRODUCTION (Fig. 2)

The single trench planned for the evaluation was split into two halves and shortened at the western end due to the need for emergency fire access. The trench was also shortened at the eastern end due to the proximity of a standing structure.

5.2 SUBSOIL (NATURAL 1000)

The natural subsoil (1000) consisted of compact red clay was reached at a height of 155m AOD, 0.4m below the present ground surface.

5.3 SUMMARY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES AND DEPOSITS (Fig. 3)

Archaeological deposits were found in the trench. The principle dated features and deposits were:

- Medieval
- Late Medieval
- Post-medieval

5.3 MEDIEVAL

The earliest archaeological activity identified in the course of the evaluation consisted of a single posthole (1005). This was located at the western end of the trench and was circular in plan with a diameter of 0.5m with a steep sided U-shaped profile 0.5m deep. The fill of this (1003) consisted of large cobbles concentrated towards the edges within a compact, wet clay matrix. The finds retrieved from the fill of this consisted of tile, animal bone and some sherds of medieval pottery dating from the 13th century (Ratkai Pers comm).

Towards the eastern end of the trench was a layer (1012) of brown silt and clay. This deposit seemed to be confined to an area 0.6m wide, and had a depth of 0.1m. A total of 57 sherds of medieval pottery were retrieved from this deposit. This pottery dated from the 13th century with some sherds of cooking pot possibly dating from 1200-1250 (Ratkai Pers Comm).

5.4 LATE MEDIEVAL

Overlying this deposit was a cobbled surface consisting of a narrow layer (1011 and 1004) of rounded cobbles with various pieces of broken tile and sandstone throughout the matrix. It was

apparent that this layer had, in the main, been pressed directly into the top of the natural subsoil, several sherds of pottery and tile were retrieved from this interface (1013). The pottery retrieved from these deposits (1011 and 1013) had a date range of 15th-16th century. The top of the surface was cleaned by hand (1014) and pottery dating from the 16th or possibly the 17th century was collected. At the western end of the trench a layer 0.1m deep (1009) of silt rich in cobbles and broken roof tiles sealed the cobbled surface. Pottery from this dated from the 16th century (Ratkai Pers Comm).

5.5 POST-MEDIEVAL

It is evident that towards the western end of the trench the cobbled surface either stopped or had been truncated by later activity. Sealing or cutting this was a feature (1026) full of large cobbles (1008). This was 0.8m wide and 0.15m deep and was aligned north-south across the trench. The pottery from this feature had a very mixed date range with the earliest pottery dating from the 15th-16th century, the majority dating from the 17th to the early/mid 18th century and a single sherd of pot dating from the early 19th century (Ratkai Pers Comm).

Cutting this at the southern end was a brick-built footing (1028). This was located at the extreme southwestern corner of the trench and as a result was not fully exposed. It consisted of a cut (1028) at least 1.52m long and 0.3m wide (the full extent was not uncovered within the bounds of this excavation). This feature had a U-shaped profile 0.2m deep and was filled with hard fired red bricks and mortar (1002). The bricks, which measured 0.36(14") x 0.13m(5") x 0.065m(2.5") probably date from the early 19th century (Hislop Pers Comm).

All of the archaeological deposits present in the trench were heavily truncated by 19th- and 20th-century service trenches, mainly used for drainage, and still in use, so none was fully excavated. Beyond these later post-medieval intrusions very little late pottery was encountered within the deposits. Sealing the trench was a layer of levelling clinker 1015 and 1027) over which was a brick surface (1001).

6.0 THE FINDS

| Context Number | Tile: ceramic | Medieval Pot | Post-Medieval Pot | Clay Pipe | Iron Nails | Animal Bone (g) |
|----------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|-----------------|
| 1003 | 5 | 3 | | | | 190 |
| 1008 | 2 | 1 | 17 | 3 | 5 | 103 |
| 1009 | 8 | 29 | 3 | | 2 | 641 |
| 1011 | | 9 | | | | |
| 1012 | 1 | 57 | | | 1 | 29 |
| 1013 | | 7 | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|-------------|----|---|---|--|--|--|
| 1014 | | 2 | 2 | | | |
| U/S | 12 | 6 | 9 | | | |

Summary Finds Table

7.0 DISCUSSION

Although there is clear evidence for medieval occupation it seems likely that subsequent activity may have truncated the early deposits. The layer 1012 probably represents a part of the medieval topsoil surviving in a small pocket, although it is also possible that this is the remnant of a linear ditch. The pottery from this deposit had some surprisingly large unabraded sherds (Ratkai Pers Comm) indicating that there has been little remodelling of the deposits that do survive on the site.

The posthole survived to a relatively substantial depth and it is possible that this could relate to some sort of structure on the site predating the Saracen's Head. The presence of roof tile within the fill of this feature (1003) would suggest that standing structures were present within the vicinity during construction. Further evidence of this cannot be ascertained within the narrow confines of this evaluation.

It is probable that nothing from the site predates the 13th century (Ratkai Pers Comm). This is of interest in relation to the medieval development of Kings Norton. The proximity of the church, which contains 12th-century fabric suggests that earlier medieval deposits could be present on the site. Evidence for this phase in the development of Kings Norton could be present beyond the scope of the excavation, or destroyed by later activity and it is probable that the proposed development of this site could impact on crucial evidence for the earliest development of The Green as a medieval market place and its relationship with the Bromsgrove Estate and medieval Birmingham.

It seems probable that the cobbled surface relates from the earliest construction of the buildings still standing on the site and that it was in continuous use probably until the 17th century. Pottery from the earliest construction pressed into the natural (1013) dates from the 15th-16th century, a date that is compatible with the dendrochronological dates obtained for the timber-framed structures. It is probable that when, during the 17th century, use of this surface discontinued, it was in a poor state of repair being heavily eroded in places, especially towards the centre of the courtyard. The area was levelled with a layer of clinker/cinders (1015, 1027) prior to the instatement of a brick surface (1001) that is in use at the present, this is 19th century and probably laid down at the same time as the construction of the South Range (c1888). It is evident that any surface which may have existed between these two phases has been subsequently destroyed, or at least in the area of the trench. The only evidence surviving from the intervening post-medieval period (later 17th century-early 19th century) are the wall footings.

The plan of 1911 for the new WCs and urinal located in the northwestern corner of the courtyard (now demolished) indicate the existence of an older building, apparently removed at this time, in the position of the brick footing wall (1028) and the cobbled linear feature (1026). It is probable that these features represent the footings of this former building, although the possibility should also be considered that the cobbled feature is actually a portion of a later cobbled surface, which has

survived by being protected by being beneath the wall of a building since destroyed. The fact that these footing features are not contemporary would demonstrate, as identified in studies of the standing structures that the evolution of the building is relatively complex with various stages of modification to the overall plan. However the dating material obtained directly from the features can contribute to a deeper understanding of the various phases of building beyond the upstanding structure.

8.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned by The Kings Norton Parochial Council. Thanks are due to Chris Bowen and Gerry Moorcroft for their co-operation and assistance throughout the project, and also to Dr Michael Hodder, who monitored the project on behalf of Birmingham City Council. Work on site was undertaken by Mark Charles and Mary Duncan, Stephanie Rátkai assessed the pottery, Mary Duncan produced the written report, which was illustrated by Nigel Dodds and Bryony Ryder and edited by Dr Malcolm Hislop who also managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology.

9.0 REFERENCES

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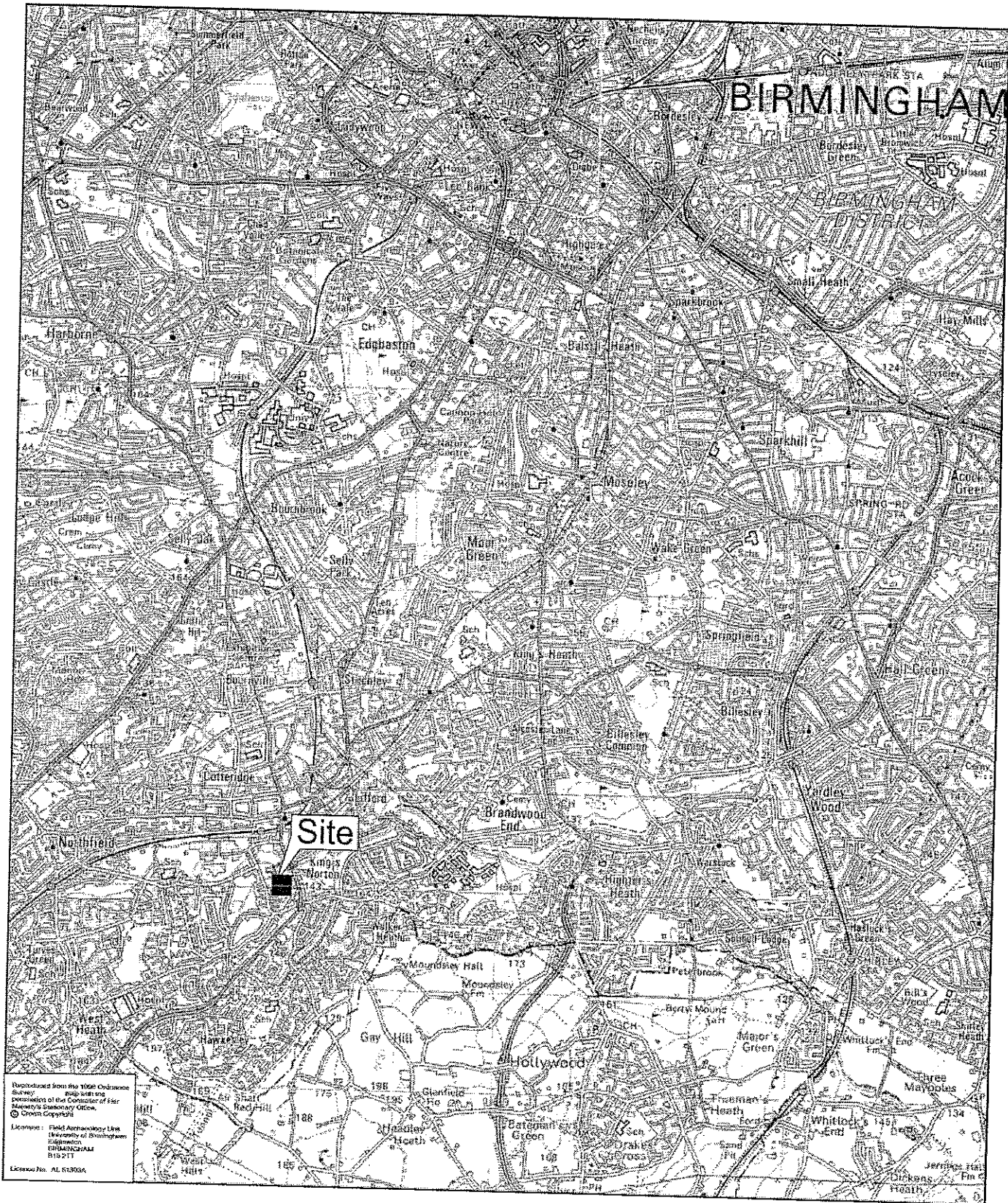


Fig.1

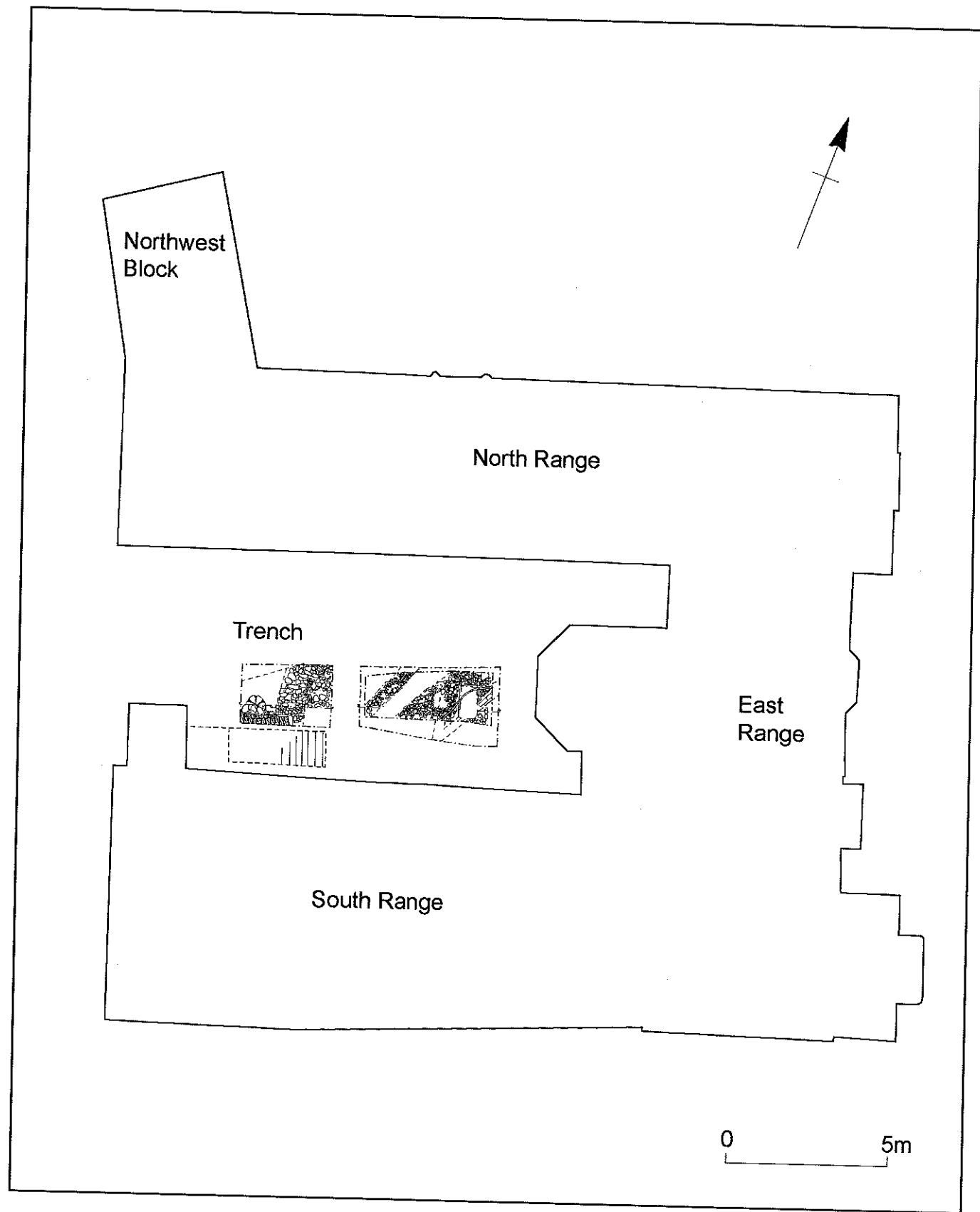


Fig.2

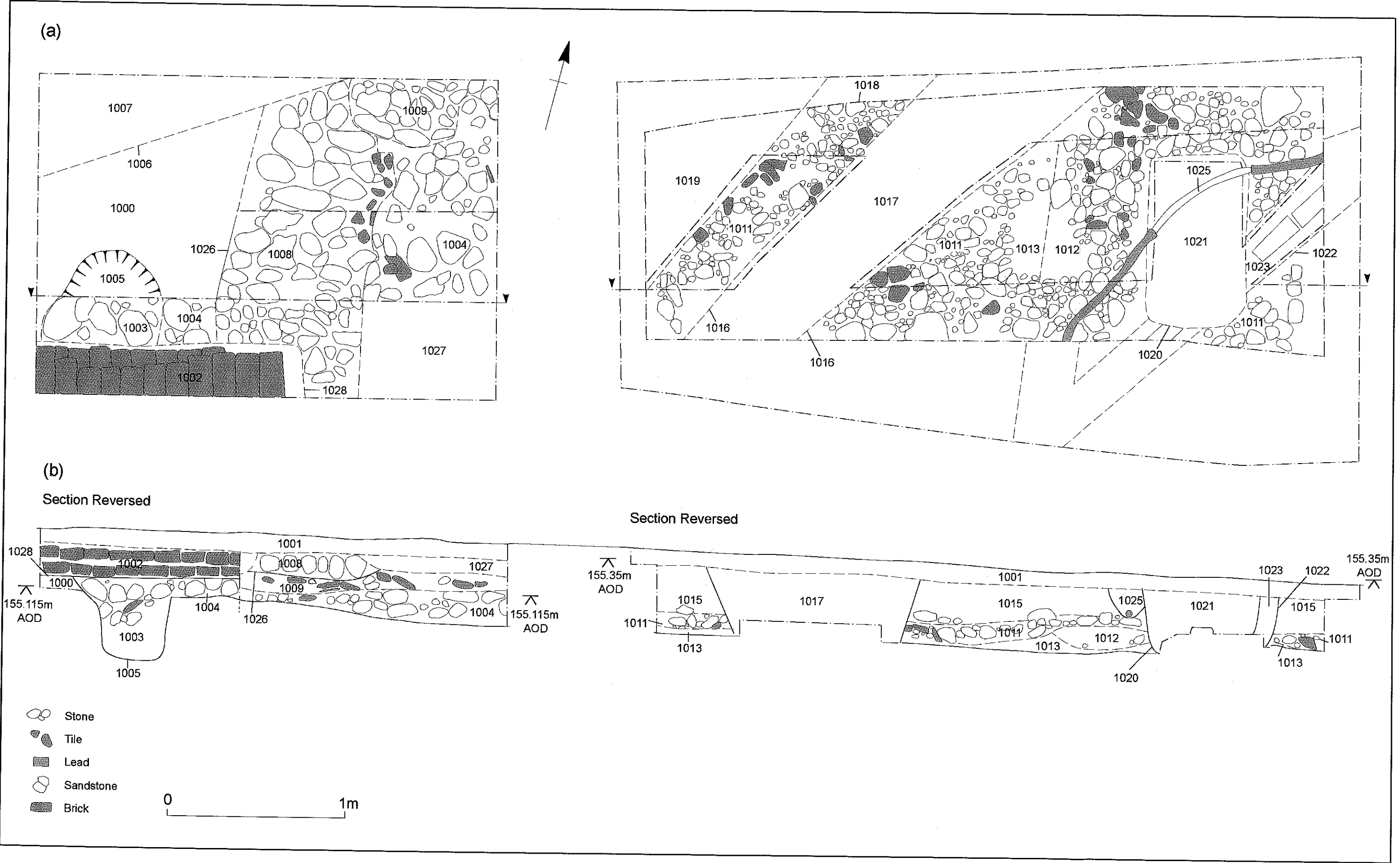


Fig.3



Plate 1



Plate 2