

## Land off Exeter Road Topsham, Devon

### *Summary Publication Report for Devon Archaeological Society Proceedings*



for  
Burrington Estates Ltd

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**Site Name:** Land off Exeter Road, Topsham, Exeter, Devon  
**NGR:** 296220 088840  
**Type:** Excavation  
**Date:** 18 Sept – 27 October 2017  
**Planning Reference:** APP/Y1110/W/15/3005030  
**Location of archive:** Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, digital archive:  
Archaeological Data Service  
**Ref. Number:** RAMM: 17/54  
**Site Code:** TOPS17

# NEOLITHIC PITS, FIRST CENTURY AD ENCLOSURES AND A LATER ROMAN GRAVEYARD OFF EXETER ROAD, TOPSHAM

By JEREMY AUSTIN *and* RICHARD MASSEY

With contributions by Emma Aitken, Sheila Boardman, Katie Marsden and E.R. McSloy

## SUMMARY

*Archaeological excavation of an area of 0.628 ha was targeted on features identified in an evaluation, and revealed an extensive natural hollow surrounded by a group of pits containing burnt stone and charcoal, radiocarbon-dated to the Late Neolithic period. A ditched boundary of around the early to mid 1st century AD represents a period of land division. Other features lay exclusively to the east of this ditch and included a number of discontinuous ditches probably representing elements of a settlement enclosure. Closely associated ditches in the south of the excavation area were cut by a group of seven later Roman graves containing probable coffin nails but no surviving bone. The latest dateable feature was a post-medieval boundary ditch, which cut several earlier features.*

## INTRODUCTION

During September and October 2017 Cotswold Archaeology (CA) carried out an archaeological excavation on land off Exeter Road, Topsham, (centred on NGR: 296220 088840; Fig. 1). The work was undertaken ahead of the development of residential care housing at the request of Burrington Estates Ltd, on the advice of Andrew Pye, the Exeter City Council Principal Project Manager (Heritage).

The 3.1ha site is located on the north-western outskirts of Topsham, approximately 4km south-east of Exeter city centre on a terrace of the River Exe not far from its confluence with the River Clyst. At the time of excavation, it comprised a single rectangular field under arable cultivation. The topography of the site is low-lying and level, at an elevation of c.10m OD.

### **Archaeological setting**

The area is rich in archaeological remains from prehistoric times onward, many discovered ahead of development in the corridor of land between Exeter and Topsham (cf. Rippon and Gould 2021, 93–100). Neolithic pits were recorded at Topsham School (Sage and Allan 2004)

and ahead of the construction of the M5 motorway (Jarvis and Maxfield 1975), and more recently at the nearby Aldi site (Garland and Orellana 2018) which yielded one of the largest assemblages of Early Neolithic pottery from the Exeter area. This site also contained Early Bronze Age cremations. Evidence of Middle Bronze Age settlement was recorded at Seabrook Orchards north of Topsham Road, c.500m to the north-west (Wessex Archaeology 2017) and on adjacent land (JMHS 2008), and there was a ditch containing Middle/Late Bronze Age pottery at Wessex Close (AC Archaeology 2016; Rainbird and Farnell 2019). An Iron Age settlement was also found at Seabrook Orchards (Wessex Archaeology 2017) and another indicated by pits and a ring-gully at Wessex Close (AC Archaeology 2016; Rainbird and Farnell 2019).

A Roman military supply base was established at Topsham in c. AD 55 probably to control the river approach to the legionary fortress at Exeter (Bidwell 2021, 147-8), although the nature and military significance of the so-called 'fortlet' here is still a matter of debate (Holbrook 2021, 198–201). A later Roman burial ground occupied the same site (Sage and Allan, *op. cit.*). The Roman road is thought to have followed the line of the present Exeter Road (Margary 1973, 117) as far as the outskirts of modern Topsham, after which it seemingly lay to the south as it headed for the harbour (Holbrook, fig. 6.17). Recent excavations have indicated widespread Roman-period settlement to the south of the modern Exeter Road. To the north-west of the M5 motorway, the Aldi site had evidence of four Early Roman timber buildings, representing a possible storage complex which may well have had a military origin (Garland and Orellana 2018). This appears to be part of the same occupation as found ahead of the construction of the motorway where a three-roomed timber structure of 1st-century AD was found (Jarvis and Maxfield 1975). Nearby, excavation to the north of Wessex Close identified a sequence of occupation, with a series of early Roman rectangular plots followed by the establishment of an aisled stone-founded building of 2nd-3rd-century date (Rainbird and Farnell 2019). Nearby, small-scale investigations at The Retreat identified the foundations of a Roman building with a cremation burial within a possible timber enclosure (Griffiths 1974). Numerous stray finds of Roman pottery, coins and other artefacts have come from the land between The Retreat and Topsham School (Holbrook 2021, fig. 6.17). At Yarde's Field, south-east of the present site, a stone founded building of later Roman date was excavated in the 1930s (Morris *et al.* 1937-47; Radford and Montague 1937).

### **Background to the excavations**

The site was the subject of a geophysical survey (Stratascan 2014) and an archaeological evaluation (CA 2017). Geophysical survey recorded three anomalies, of which two, in the northern part of the site, were interpreted as possible field boundaries which did not conform to those depicted on historical mapping. Thirteen evaluation trenches were excavated

targeted on the geophysical anomalies (Fig. 2). A Roman ditch and two pits of 1st-century AD date were recorded in the northern and north-eastern part of the site, together with three post-medieval/modern ditches. These became the focus of later excavations in an area 0.628 ha in extent (labelled Area 17). An additional three evaluation trenches, T14, T15 and T16 (2m x 25m) were excavated concurrently with the excavation and positioned close to the south-eastern site boundary of the site to identify any remains relating to the Yarde's Field Roman building. These revealed little, although Trench 16, the southernmost, contained a shallow ditch running along it for 20m which yielded Roman tile and may have been of Roman date.

The excavation led to the production of a full report, which is available on Cotswold Archaeology's website (CA 2018). The following is a summary of the results with updates where the reports diverge in interpretation. The physical archive is to be deposited with Exeter Royal Albert Memorial Museum under accession code RAMM: 17/54 and the archaeological data is to be archived with the Archaeology Data Service, York.

## EXCAVATION RESULTS

Fieldwork commenced with the removal, under archaeological supervision, of topsoil and subsoil from the excavation area by mechanical excavator with a toothless grading bucket. The archaeological features thus exposed were sample-excavated by hand to the bottom of archaeological stratigraphy. Modern and post-medieval features were not fully investigated but were recorded in plan.

The depth of overburden varied throughout; the natural substrate, 17003, was exposed at a depth of 0.73m below present ground level in the west, and 0.93m in the east and consisted of a firm, red or yellow sand, with patches of red clay. This was overlain by 17001, a subsoil, of red/brown sandy silt 0.63m deep in the east and 0.34m deep in the west. The subsoil was overlain by topsoil 17000.

### **Hollow 17062**

A large natural hollow, 17062, lay towards the north-western corner of the excavated area. The hollow extended from the eastern edge of the excavation area, as an irregular feature approximately 25m east/west and 12m north/south. It had been infilled by a sequence of natural deposits to a depth of 0.58m. The hollow contained no dateable material but was cut by a number of pits considered to be of Late Neolithic date (below) and the hollow can therefore be considered earlier prehistoric in date. A lithostratigraphic assessment from two



(overlapping) column samples was undertaken to establish whether a buried soil could be identified and characterised, and whether pollen was preserved (Grant 2018). The assessment concluded that there was no identifiable buried soil and very little pollen throughout the sequence and so no useful information on the palaeo-environmental context of the earliest features on the site. From the upper deposit (17066, soil sample 18) a charred grain of emmer wheat (*Triticum* cf. *dicoccum*) and another of hulled barley (*Hordeum vulgare*), together with a possible pea/vetch fragment (*Vicia* sp./*Lathyrus* sp./*Pisum* sp.), probably relate to the Late Neolithic activity (Boardman 2018).

## Phasing

There were three reasonably clear phases of significant activity across the site, although a number of features were not datable directly and their phasing is inferred through stratigraphic position, form, or spatial configuration.

- Later Neolithic pits. A relatively large group of pits are thought to be of Late Neolithic date on the basis of a radiocarbon date from one of them. They contained no closely datable artefacts.
- Late Iron Age/Early Roman enclosures (c. 50 BC – AD 100). The majority of features spanned the period of the 1st century BC/1st century AD. Much of the pottery was of Late Iron Age ‘transitional’ type, suggesting a phase of activity around or shortly before the Roman occupation, with the other Roman pottery indicating continuation into the later 1st century AD.
- Later Roman burials (c. AD 200-400). A group of seven graves provide the main evidence for use of the site in the later Roman period.
- Post-medieval/modern (from AD 1540). A number of ditches were of post-medieval date.

## Late Neolithic pits

A collection of 28 pits of similar form and fills was examined. They principally formed a discrete group to the north and west of natural hollow 17062 but were also present in smaller numbers to the south. The pits ranged in size from 2.3m to 0.5m in length, 1.4m to 0.35m in width and 0.35m to 0.04m in depth, averaging c.1m across and 0.3m in depth. Most contained a sandy primary fill, overlain by a dark secondary deposit containing burnt stone and charcoal. No pit contained evidence of *in situ* burning, nor any evidence of associated processes or activity.

Sub-circular pit 17076 had a maximum diameter of 1.15m, and depth of 0.22m, (Fig. 3, section AA). It contained a lower fill, 17075, of orange/brown sand, and an upper fill, 17074,



of dark, black/brown loose silty sand, containing abundant charcoal and burnt stone. This fill was closely comparable with those of the discrete pit group immediately to the north and west of hollow 10762, and with a smaller number of other pits elsewhere across the excavation area (Figs. 4, 5). Yew charcoal from fill 17074 yielded a radiocarbon date of 2376-2577 cal. BC, at 95.4% probability (SUERC-81998), indicating a later Neolithic origin (Table 1). Sample 8 from this fill contained wood charcoal from a wide range of taxa, including yew, blackthorn, hawthorn, oak, hazel lime and holly (Table 3). On the basis of the close comparability of pit profiles, character of fills, and range of wood charcoal taxa from the seven sampled pits, some 28 pits were assigned a similar Late Neolithic date.

Prehistoric activity was also represented by a small number of residual worked flints of Bronze Age or Neolithic date, recovered from later features, and as possibly stratified items within pit 17178.

The considerable uniformity of character and content of the pit fills appeared to represent a consistent pattern of deposition, possibly over a short period, while the consistent presence of burnt stone is reminiscent of burnt-mound deposits. The charcoal from a number of sampled pits suggests some conformity in the relatively wide ranges of taxa present, including the unusual presence of yew (*Taxus baccata*) (Boardman, this report).

### **Later Iron Age/Early Roman ditches**

The later Iron Age ditches showed more than one phase of cutting and there seems to have been some time-depth to their development, although there was insufficient to suggest discrete phases of Iron Age or early Roman activity. Ditch A (cut 17070) was an early, short, discontinuous gully cut by the principal land division of this period, Ditch C. Also early, Ditch D was a short, shallow, feature, cut and apparently replaced by Ditch E, which was an irregular, curvilinear feature, 0.59m wide and 0.16m deep, extending for 8m from the south-eastern edge of the excavation area and terminating at its north-western end. Some fills of Ditch E were associated exclusively with pottery of hand-made 'Durotrigian' character.

Ditch C was a prominent boundary, with all contemporary and later archaeological features on its eastern side. The associated east/west Ditch B was of this date, as were Ditches F and H, and part of curvilinear Ditch G. Closely aligned Ditches I, J, K and L, to the south, are difficult to relate to contemporary ditches to the north. Collectively, these ditches appeared to comprise truncated elements of a ditched enclosure or enclosures. Of the numerous smaller features recorded, only three, 17236, 17249 and 17095, produced pottery of this date.

*Ditches C, B, F and H and 'pit' 17095*

Ditch C, of 1st-century AD date, varied in dimensions from 1.34m wide and 0.3m deep in the south (cut 17040) to 0.6m and 0.2m respectively in the north (cut 17091), with early Roman pottery from fill 17258. The Roman road is not adjacent to the site and its alignment here is uncertain (Fig. 1).

Ditch B, measuring only 0.04m–0.07m in depth, extended at right-angles for 12m east of Ditch C, and terminated within the top of natural hollow 17062. It was without finds.

Ditches F and H, together with the southern-western return of Ditch G, lay parallel to Ditch C. The 14m-length of Ditch F terminated to the north, and was cut by an undated pit, 17044, at its southernmost extent. At the intersection with this pit it was only 0.08m deep but elsewhere it displayed a width of 0.67m and depth of 0.21m, with gently-sloping, concave sides and base. It was largely without finds, although the northern terminal, 17251, yielded Late Iron Age/Early Roman material. The distance between Ditches C and F, averaging 4.5m, may suggest that they flanked a trackway. The short length of Ditch H lay c.1m to the east of Ditch F, and closely parallel to it and was without datable material.

Elongated pit 17095 (cut by Ditch G on its eastern side) ran parallel to Ditches C and F, suggesting a length of remnant ditch rather than a pit. It was 5m long, up to 0.72m wide and 0.17m deep. Fill 17147 yielded Late Iron Age/Early Roman pottery.

#### *Ditch G*

Curvilinear Ditch G ran parallel with Ditches C and F for a short distance and the 2.5m interval between its south-western terminal and the northern terminal of Ditch H may represent an entranceway (with Ditch F therefore either earlier or later). Ditch G ranged from 0.98m to 0.2m in width, and from 0.25m to 0.07m in depth. Early Roman pottery came from fill 17153. Close to its eastern terminal, Ditch G was cut by two undated postholes, 17185 in the north and 17187 in the south.

#### *Ditches I, J, K and L*

Four, closely associated segments of ditch on the southern margin of the excavation area were of likely 1st-century AD date. Ditch L may represent a westward continuation of Ditch I beyond later grave cut 17103. Ditches I, J and K were very closely spaced, on a broad north-east/south-west alignment, and extended south-westward from the south-eastern edge of the excavation area. The earliest of this group appeared to be Ditch I, which was cut by Ditch J on its south side. This suggests that the ditches may represent a sequence of recut boundaries, rather than strictly contemporary features. Pottery came from Ditches J (fill 17112) and K (fill 17114).

#### **Later Roman graves**

Later Roman activity was represented by a small, discrete group of seven inhumation graves (17003, 17005, 17028, 17030, 17103, 17105 and 17107), without any surviving bone, lying close to the southern edge of the excavation area and cutting the enclosure ditches here (Figs 2, 6, 7). The graves generally displayed steep sides and concave or flat bases. Two orientations were evident; five graves were broadly oriented north/south (17003, 17005, 17028, 17030 and 17105), while graves 17103 and 17107 lay east/west.

All graves contained a single fill. The dimensions of individual graves varied; all exceeded 2m in length, to a maximum of 2.35m (Graves 17005 and 17028), with widths ranging from 0.8m (Grave 17003) to a maximum of 1.2m (Grave 17103) and depths between 0.18m (Grave 17030), and 0.49m (Grave 17107). It is likely that each originally contained an extended inhumation. Two graves were intercutting, with north/south grave 17105 cutting east/west grave 17103 (Figs 6, 7). There is no way of knowing whether there is generally any chronological significance to the orientation of the graves.

Iron carpentry nails were recovered in varying quantities from all the graves. Their quantity and distribution, particularly in graves 17003, 17107 and 17030, suggest the use of wooden coffins at least partly constructed using nails, but they were also recovered from the other graves in smaller quantities (Fig. 7). An iron fitting, in the form of a double-spiked loop, from Grave 17105 may also have been for a coffin, although the distribution of ironwork from this grave may be indicative of a smaller box. A large collection of hobnails from the south-west corner of Grave 17030 indicates the location of footwear, although these may have been placed to the side of the feet rather than worn at burial. A corroded fragment of a possible iron brooch (RA1) from Grave 17003 may have been placed at the feet of the individual. Pot sherds from graves 17028 and 17107, and glass from 17105, are almost certainly residual in the grave fills. The hobnails, in particular, strongly suggest a later Roman date for the burials (Smith 2018, 264, 266, table 6.4).

### **Post-medieval and Modern**

Post-medieval activity was principally represented by Ditch M, which ran on a south-west/north-east alignment across the excavation area, and cut a number of earlier features, including Ditches A, C and G (Fig. 2). While Ditch M contained no dating evidence, a post-medieval date is confirmed by its depiction as a boundary on the Topsham Tithe Map of 1843 (The Genealogist).

### **Undated pits and postholes**

There were a large number of undated pits and postholes. Two undated pits, 17044 and 17052, were located at the respective southern limits of Ditches F and H (Fig. 2). Neither ditch extended further to the south and, although the relationships of the pits with the ditch terminals

may simply be coincidental, they may alternatively represent large post settings (albeit without packing stones) at an entranceway. Pit 17044 was 1.85m long by 1.01m wide and 0.21m deep, with steep straight sides and a flat base. Pit 17052 was particularly large, 2.37m long by 1.52m wide and 0.1m deep, with a flat base and moderately sloping sides. In addition, there were 11 undated postholes, four within the northern group of Late Neolithic pits, and seven to the south of Late Iron Age Ditch G. There was no clear patterning to them.

**Radiocarbon dating** by Emma Aitken

Radiocarbon dating was undertaken in order to confirm the date of pit 17076. The samples were analysed during September/October 2018 at Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC) Glasgow. The methodology employed by SUERC Radiocarbon Laboratory is outlined in Dunbar *et al.* (2016).

The uncalibrated date is a conventional radiocarbon age (Table 1). The radiocarbon age was calibrated using the University of Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit calibration programme OxCal v4.3.2 (2017) (Bronk Ramsey 2009), using the IntCal13 curve (Reimer *et al.* 2013).

**Table 1: Radiocarbon dating result**

Feature	Lab No.	Material	$\delta^{13}C$	Radiocarbon age yr BP	Calibrated radiocarbon age cal. BC 95.4% probability	Calibrated radiocarbon age cal. BC 68.2% probability
Context 17074 Pit 17076	SUERC-81998	Charcoal: Yew ( <i>Taxus baccata</i> )	-20.9‰	3967±26	2572–2512 (42.0%) 2505–2453 (49.6%) 2419–2407 (1.4%) 2376–2351 (2.4%)	2559–2536 (27.0%) 2491–2466 (41.2%)

FINDS

**Pottery** by Katie Marsden and E.R. McSloy

A small assemblage (Table 2), amounting to 229 sherds (2802g), was recovered, derived from 20 deposits. The group includes four sherds (75g) recovered by bulk soil sample of two of these deposits. Recording has been undertaken directly to an MS Access database and in line with national guidelines for the analysis of pottery assemblages (Barclay *et al.* 2016). Alphanumeric codes have been assigned to fabrics and where possible, codes matching those of the National Roman Fabric Reference Collection (Tomber and Dore 1998) and Exeter type series (Holbrook and Bidwell 1991) have been applied to Roman fabrics.

The majority of the pottery dates to the Roman period, with some material possibly a little earlier and of the transitional Late Iron Age/Early Roman periods. The pottery is well-

fragmented, the mean sherd weight on the low side for a mostly Roman group at 11.6g. Surface preservation was mixed, with some fabrics seemingly more susceptible to surface loss than others, probably as the result of the burial environment. A proportion of the assemblage (42%) was recorded from grave fills, however there were no indications that this material represented deliberately deposited grave goods or related to funerary rituals. This material is considered to be residual, probably a consequence of the grave cuts disturbing earlier occupational deposits.

Table 2: Prehistoric and Roman pottery summary

Period	Fabric Description	Fabric Code*	Exeter fabr.	Count	Weight (g)
Prehist.	Exeter volcanic	RT		1	2
Roman (including Late Iron Age to Early Roman)	Durotrigian proto BB1	DurotBB		41	288
	South West Black-burnished ware	<b>SOW BB1</b>	40	102	881
	South-east Dorset Black-burnished ware	<b>DOR BB1</b>	31	<b>3</b>	6
	Buff-firing fabric	Buff		5	105
	Black-firing quartz-rich fabric	Qz1		15	68
	South Devon (micaceous) ware	<b>SOD RE</b>	5	24	98
	Greywares	GW 1–3		13	177
	unid. Red slipped fabric	RS		1	23
	Central Gaulish samian ware	<b>LEZ SA</b>		1	8
	North Gaulish White Ware fabric 4.	<b>NOG WH4</b>	FC2-5	3	405
	Baetican (southern Spain) amphorae	<b>BAT AM2</b>		3	404
<i>Total</i>				<i>211</i>	<i>2463</i>

\*Roman types in bold equate to NRFRC codes (Tomber and Dore 1998)

### *Prehistoric*

One small flake of pottery (1g) from tree throw feature 17249 (fill 17250) probably dates to this period. The sherd occurs in a fabric with coarse rock inclusions and is probably of the Exeter volcanics series, which occurs locally across the Bronze Age and Iron Age periods.

### *Roman (including Late Iron Age to Early Roman ‘transitional’)*

The bulk of the assemblage falls within this category (Table 2). The earliest material was that represented from ditches D (17018, fill 17019) and E (17024, fill 17025), and from graves 17028 (fill 17029) and 17030 (fill 17031) - evidently residual in the latter two features. The pottery from these deposits occurs as a handmade, quartz-rich fabric (DurotBB), the identified vessel forms (Fig. 8; nos. 1–3) characteristic of the Durotrigian style (Brailsford 1958; Holbrook and Bidwell 1991, 90–91). This tradition, ancestral to the South-east Dorset Black-burnished ware, has its origins the 1st century BC and persists into the mid or later 1st century AD. A deep, straight-sided vessel from grave 17030 (no. 1) is probably a tankard. Neither this nor

the high-shouldered and bead rimmed forms (nos. 2–3) can with certainty be ascribed a pre-conquest date (see discussion below). One further sherd for which dating is most likely in the mid or later 1st century AD is from grave 17003 (fill 17004), although it occurred with later material and is redeposited. The sherd, which was small (1g), is in a fine grog-tempered fabric and featured a narrow, raised cordon.

The remaining portion of the assemblage group dates to the earlier or middle Roman periods (c. the later 1st to 2nd or earlier 3rd centuries). The majority comprises locally or regionally produced reduced coarseware types. Most common is South-West Black-burnished ware (SOW BB1), a type which commonly dominates local assemblages across the later 1st and 2nd/earlier 3rd centuries and for which there is now clear evidence for manufacture in the East Devon area (Bidwell *et al.* 2021, 312). Identifiable vessel forms in this type are limited to jars (cooking pots) characteristic of the type, with vessels from grave 17105 (fill 17106) and Ditch J (17111, fill 17112) featuring countersunk handles. South Devon micaceous greyware (SOD RE) is present in small quantities and as bodysherds only from Ditch J (17111, fill 17112) and grave 17103 (fill 17104). It is a type which was probably produced throughout the period and common locally in the later 2nd to 4th centuries. The others, represented by grey or black-firing coarseware types (GW1–3 and Qz1), are almost certainly of local origin, as is an oxidised type (Buff). Rim sherds among the reduced types are from necked and neckless jar forms (Fig. 8; nos 4–5). The buff fabric occurs as body sherds only, although the large sherds from graves 17103 and 17105 (fills 17104 and 17106) clearly come from flagons.

Finewares are underrepresented in the assemblage, and samian is limited to a single Central Gaulish (LEZ SA) body sherd from grave 17103 (fill 17104). The sherd, which was abraded, is from a plain dish or bowl but not more closely datable than of the 2nd century. A base sherd from the same deposit, recovered from a soil sample, occurs in a very micaceous fabric pale orange with a patchy red-slipped fabric. The source for this vessel is unclear although its form (Fig. 8, no. 7) is clearly imitative of a samian Drag. 18r or 18/31r and equivalent late 1st or earlier 2nd-century dating is likely.

The single mortarium (Fig. 8; no. 6) in the assemblage is a North Gaulish vessel recorded as large, joining sherds from Ditch K (17113, fill 17114). The type and its form (Hartley 1991, 198–200; Type TC24/25) are relatively well known from Exeter and can be dated to the late 1st century. Amphorae are represented by sherds of Baetican fabric (BAT AM2), recorded from grave 17105 (fill 17106) and Ditch C (17091, fill 17092) and associated with the globular Dressel 20 form used primarily for transportation of olive oil and in use across the mid 1st to 3rd centuries.

## Discussion

Although small, the pottery assemblage is noteworthy in regard to its inclusion of vessels in 'Durotrigian' Black-burnished ware, a tradition with Late Iron Age origins. There is some evidence for the occurrence of this type, thought to be made in the Poole Harbour area, at sites close to Exeter (Bidwell *et al.* 2021, 310). The dating of the Durotrigian vessels identified here is made difficult by its presence primarily as redeposited material in later graves. An absence of certainly pre-conquest material from the site, including in the local Late Iron Age Plain Ware tradition, is probably significant in suggesting that the Durotrigian material is later and probably of the early post-conquest period. Other pottery recorded from graves and from other deposits is certainly later, the majority probably dating to the 2nd century. In its range and character this later material is typical for the area, the majority consisting of local coarsewares. Vessel forms comprise mostly utilitarian jars, some with evidence for cooking in the form of carbonaceous residues. Drinking/serving vessel classes were largely absent, although some access to imports and finewares is suggested by the presence of Central Gaulish samian, North Gaulish mortaria and southern Spanish amphorae.

*Illustration catalogue (Fig. 8)*

1. Fabric DurotBB. Deep, straight-sided vessel (?tankard). Grave 17030 (fill 17031)
2. Fabric DurotBB. High-shouldered, bead-rim vessel (jar or bowl). Grave 17028 (fill 17029)
3. Fabric DurotBB. High-shouldered, bead-rim vessel (jar or bowl). Ditch E (17024, fill 17025)
4. Fabric QZ1. Neckless jar, bead rim (handmade?). Grave 17105 (fill 17106)
5. Fabric QZ1. Necked jar or bowl; bifid rim. Ditch J (17111, fill 17112)
6. Fabric NOGWH4. Mortarium (cf Hartley 1991, 200; Type TC24/25). Ditch K (17113, fill 17114).
7. Fabric RS. Dish/platter copying samian Drag 18r or 18/31r. Grave 17103 (fill 17104).

**Metalwork** by Katie Marsden

A group of metalwork, comprising 119 items of iron, was recovered from eight deposits. All are from graves, with 45 items from grave 17030 (fill 17031) being the largest group from a single feature (Fig. 7).

The bulk of the assemblage (79 items) comprises nails or nail fragments. Their inclusion in grave deposits and the traces of mineralised wood on some examples may indicate the use of coffins made from long planks. The positioning of nails within individual graves differs, suggesting a variety of coffin types. For example, grave 17107 (fill 17108) has nails spread around the edges, possibly from a lid. Conversely, within grave 17028 (fill 17029) nails appear to have been used to secure the coffin at head and foot (e.g. Poundbury, Dorset,



cf. Farwell and Molleson 1993). Where identifiable, all nails confirm to Manning's common 'Type 1B' (Manning 1985).

A double-spiked loop was recovered from grave 17105 (fill 17106). These are common Roman iron fittings, generally known to have been hammered through planks and could therefore have been utilised as coffin fittings (Manning 1982).

Hobnails, from the soles of studded shoes were recovered from grave 17030 (fill 17031). The hobnails were concentrated in a discrete group at the southern end of the grave. Inhumations with studded shoes are well known, and they appear to become more numerous in the later Roman period (Smith 2018, table 6.4).

The remaining item is a probable brooch fragment, recovered from grave 17003 (fill 17004), within the group recorded as RA 1. The foot and bow fragment is heavily corroded, and any compositional details that would aid dating are obscured.

### **Wood charcoal and charred plant remains** by Sheila Boardman

Eight samples (6-20 litres in vol.) were submitted for analysis of wood charcoal and charred plant remains, seven from the fills of different Late Neolithic pits and one from natural hollow 17062 (deposit 17066). Considerable quantities of wood charcoal and burnt stone were recorded. Yew charcoal, from fill 17074 of pit 17076, produced a radiocarbon date in the range 2572–2351 cal. BC, at 95.4% probability (SUERC 81998) (Table 1). Analysis of the charcoal and charred plant remains was undertaken to shed light on the processes that produced the distinctive fills, and to provide evidence for foodstuffs and the nature and use of the local landscape.

### **Results**

#### *Wood charcoal*

Anatomical features observed on wood charcoal are consistent with the taxa in Table 3. There was a great deal of similarity in the wood charcoal remains, particularly regarding the overall range of tree and shrub taxa present, but the samples were quite variable in other respects. Three different taxa dominate individual samples in terms of overall numbers of fragments. Oak (*Quercus*) fragments, largely from timbers, were dominant in three samples (18, 9 and 23, from hollow 17062, and pits 17079 and 17123 respectively). Three samples were dominated by hawthorn group (Pomoideae) fragments (samples 10, 12 and 8, from pits 17082, 17088 and 17076 respectively). Again, these were largely timber fragments. There was limited evidence for other thorny species in these three samples, such as blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), so it is likely that the fuel wood was collected predominantly from woodlands, rather than thorny scrub. Two samples (7 and 11, from pits 17032 and 17085 respectively) were

dominated by hazel (*Corylus avellana*) charcoal. The latter was mostly from timbers, but small quantities of roundwood were also present in most samples.

Oak, hawthorn group and hazel were the main taxa in the samples, and there were small concentrations of yew (*Taxus baccata*), holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and blackthorn/cherry (*Prunus*). A few fragments of lime (*Tilia*) were present in four samples, and single fragments of probable elm (cf. *Ulmus*) and beech (cf. *Fagus sylvatica*) were seen in two samples. The presence of yew in different features is significant, and this and other woodland taxa are discussed (below).

#### *Charred plant remains*

The few charred plant remains are listed by sample in the archive report (CA 2018). In addition to emmer wheat, hulled barley and indeterminate cereal remains, there was a poorly preserved legume (of c. 4mm) identified as vetch/wild pea/garden pea (*Vicia* sp./*Lathyrus* sp./*Pisum* sp.), plus a fragment of a smaller (c.2mm) vetch/wild pea (*Vicia* sp./*Lathyrus* sp.) and an indeterminate seed/fruit fragment.

The charcoal-rich fills with heat-affected stones in most of the Late Neolithic pits, are reminiscent of burnt mound technology. Many burnt mounds in south-west Britain seem to have been used primarily for cooking purposes (Fitzpatrick 2008), although there is no evidence from the plant remains to indicate that the pits here were used for food preparation or cooking. Emmer is the main wheat species present at sites across the region from the Neolithic until at least the later Bronze Age period, after which spelt (*Triticum spelta*) generally replaces it (Greig 1991; Fitzpatrick 2008). Barley is the other important cereal species on sites dating from the Neolithic until the Roman period, and beyond.

#### *Discussion of the wood charcoal* by Sheila Boardman

Wood charcoal analyses from eight samples from the site have provided a rare glimpse of lowland woodland vegetation in the Exeter area towards the end of the Neolithic period. This included oak, hazel, hawthorn-group species, lime, yew, holly, blackthorn, and possibly elm and other woody taxa. The presence of yew charcoal in samples in the different groups of features here is interesting for several reasons. Yew is a large bush or spreading tree, of up to 28m in height, often with multiple trunks. Today this is found predominantly on well-drained limestone and calcareous soils, but also grows locally on acid sandstone (Stace 2010). In Britain, yew has become strongly associated with chalk downland areas, where it sometimes forms monospecies stands. Yew is also found in more diverse woodland, growing with beech, hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and other trees. Yew is suited to a mild oceanic climate, and tree seems to have flourished at several lowland localities in southern Britain, e.g. the lower Thames valley (Branch *et al.* 2012), and also in parts of coastal Belgium

and the Netherlands (Deforce and Bastiaens 2007), from about 5000 cal. BP until 4000 or 3500 cal. BP. Work at Hornchurch Marshes in the lower Thames valley, drawing on evidence from soils, pollen, plant macrofossils, wood and charcoal data, and coleopteran analyses, indicate that yew was probably growing on the lowland peat surfaces there from c. 4900 cal. BP, where it formed woodland with alder (Branch *et al.* 2012). This was probably aided by a combination of favourable climatic conditions, stable sea levels and stable peat surfaces. Yew trees may have expanded onto drier ground at this time. At c. 3900 cal. BP, yew declined on the peats of the lower Thames valley, in part due to marine incursions, which are also associated with declines in lime and oak, and due to anthropogenic activity (*ibid.*). If the yew in the Topsham samples was growing on peats in the Exe estuary, this would fit into the same broad time-frame as the lower Thames valley evidence described above.

Yew wood is present in archaeological deposits in the South West from pre-agricultural times, e.g. at the Sweet Track, Somerset (Coles *et al.* 1973; Coles and Orme 1976, 1979, 1984), but it is largely absent from pollen diagrams. Much early pollen work in southwest Britain was focused on the uplands, in order to establish the general character of Mesolithic vegetation. Pollen work carried out by Fyfe and others (2003) along the Exe valley in Devon has demonstrated significant differences between vegetation development in the uplands and the lowlands. Pine and birch dominated early Mesolithic woodlands in the lowlands, while sparse pine woodland, with discontinuous birch, covered the uplands. Hazel became established in the lower Exe valley after c.9000 cal. BC. Oak and elm appear at c. 7600 cal. BC, but elm is absent from the uplands. Lime appears after oak and elm, but this is restricted to land below c. 200m OD. Lime went on to play a dominant role in woodland on the wide gravel terraces of the lower Exe (Fyfe *et al.* 2003). Prior to deforestation, the uplands would have been dominated by oak and hazel woodlands, while at Lower Chitterley, c. 16 km north of Topsham, woodlands included lime, oak and hazel, with areas of pine until c. 3000 cal. BC. The presence and importance of alder varies considerably within the Exe valley, reflecting different site gradients and other local conditions (Fyfe *et al.* 2003). Alder was absent from the Topsham charcoal assemblage.

On the basis of pollen work at Lower Chitterley, there seem to have been at least three elm declines. The last decline (in the early 4th millennium BC) is associated with the occurrence of the first cereal-type pollen, and this is followed by a decline in lime. Lime continues to decline over a longer period, until c.1000 cal. BC, and this is accompanied by declines in other trees, including oak (Fyfe *et al.* 2003). At Topsham, lime charcoal seems to be associated with yew and holly charcoal. A similar association of species, plus alder, was seen in Early to Middle Bronze Age burnt mound deposits from Bexhill, Sussex, but this material remains undated at the time of writing (Boardman *et al.* 2019). It is possible that the chronologies for the woodlands with yew, lime and/or holly, at both Topsham and Bexhill, are

consistent with those for yew woodlands in the lower Thames valley (see above) and elsewhere.

## DISCUSSION

By Richard Massey

### *The Neolithic Evidence*

Yew charcoal from upper fill 17074, of pit 17076, produced a radiocarbon date-range of 2572–2351 cal. BC, at 95.4% probability (SUERC-81998). This has provided a basis for dating those pits with comparable fills and charcoal assemblages, which were principally concentrated within the northern part of the excavation area. There is, however, little evidence of the activity these pits represented. The charcoal and burnt stones perhaps suggests cooking although this does not appear to have resulted in the deposition of any charred food remains. The virtual absence of any cultural material, including flintwork, makes a suggestion of settlement here tenuous and temporary occupation of some nature appears likely. The charcoal itself does, however, provide an insight into the wider woodland environment (Boardman, above). This evidence for Neolithic activity complements a considerable body of evidence around Exeter, and within the lower land of the Exe valley and its neighbouring tributaries (cf. Quinnell and Farnell 2016; Quinnell 2017). This appears to indicate a pattern of widespread occupation on favourable lower valley slopes, and within river corridors. The M5 motorway site, c. 0.5km west of the current site contained a group of 13 pits, some associated with pottery of Late Neolithic/Beaker date, perhaps indicating a settlement (Fig. 1; Jarvis and Maxfield 1975). The early Bronze Age cremations at the nearby Aldi site may be associated (Garland and Orellana 2018). Pit groups of Neolithic date have also been recorded further north at Old Rydon Lane (Pearce *et al.* 2011) At Pinn Brook, Redhayes, (6km to the north-west) there was a Neolithic pit alignment along with an Early Bronze Age barrow and later prehistoric enclosure (Garland 2019). Here, pits contained a small assemblage of Middle and Late Neolithic sherds, including Grooved and Peterborough Ware, together with stratified items of worked flint. Comparable scattered pit groups of confirmed Neolithic date have been recorded elsewhere in the Exeter area, including at Hayes Farm in the Clyst valley (Hart *et al.* 2014; Wood 2014).

### *Late Iron Age /Early Roman enclosures*

Occupation in the late 1st century BC/early 1st century AD took the form of ditches of presumed agricultural use. These included what appears to have been a major land boundary (Ditch C) with an irregular enclosure and other small features to the east. The alignment of

Ditch C is it at variance to the presumed line of the Roman road between Exeter and Topsham and this might, but by no means certainly, suggest that the ditch pre-dated the road. The pottery indicates that this occupation may not have extended much beyond the 1st century AD, and there are few sherds that need be later, but further refinement of the chronology is not possible. To the north-west at the Aldi site, the post-military period field boundaries, which superseded Roman military-style timber buildings, were aligned perpendicular to the present road alignment (Garland and Orellana 2018, fig. 2). Nearby, a Roman enclosure north of Exeter Road was also on this alignment (Sage 1999) while on the opposite side the Roman boundary ditches at Wessex Close were aligned in a similar fashion (for an overall plan see Holbrook 2021, fig. 6.17). However, those sites lay closer to the presumed road-line than the present site and the disparity in orientation may be of less significance.

The local evidence indicates widespread settlement and landscape organisation from the later Iron Age. This includes settlement evidence nearby at Seabrook Orchards and Wessex Close (Wessex Archaeology 2017; AC Archaeology 2016; Rainbird and Farnell 2019). At St Loye's College, Exeter, two successive settlement enclosures of late pre-Roman Iron Age date underlay a Roman military-period settlement (Salvatore and Steinmetzer 2018; Bidwell 2021, 141-7). Nearby, at the Exeter and Devon Crematorium car park site, an Iron Age roundhouse was revealed (Govier and Rainbird 2016).

#### *Later Roman burials*

The enclosures may not have continued beyond the 1st century AD. Subsequently there is little evidence of Roman activity except for seven inhumation burials, broadly dated to the middle or late Roman period. There is, however, evidence for later Roman occupation nearby, including at Yarde's Field where a masonry building has been excavated (Morris *et al.* 1937-47; Radford and Montague 1937).

Understanding of later Roman inhumation rites in the south-west peninsula is limited by a general dearth of evidence, and the local record displays little consistency in this respect (Holbrook 2021, 200; Smith 2018, figs 6.13–6.15). At Topsham School, evidence of inhumations survived only as occasional soil stains (Sage and Allan 2004). Many burial sites in the south-west have been assigned a later Roman date on minimal evidence, although one preserved inhumation at Hookhills, Paignton, Devon, produced a radiocarbon date of 230-390 cal. AD (Chandler 2008). The sparsity of scattered inhumation burials in the Romano-British countryside of the south-west peninsula stands in contrast to certain other regions of Roman Britain. Conceivably, their presence in the environs of Topsham, and adjacent to the road to Exeter at St Loye's College reflects their proximity to the nucleated settlements at these two locations. Regionally, the evidence suggests restricted use of coffins, although incidence of coffined burials appears to differ widely between investigated cemeteries (Smith 2018, 254;

Philpott 1991). There is an assumption that this rite indicates higher social status. The varying numbers of nails from the Exeter Road graves perhaps suggests different types of coffin construction, unless some of the nails were unrelated to a coffin.

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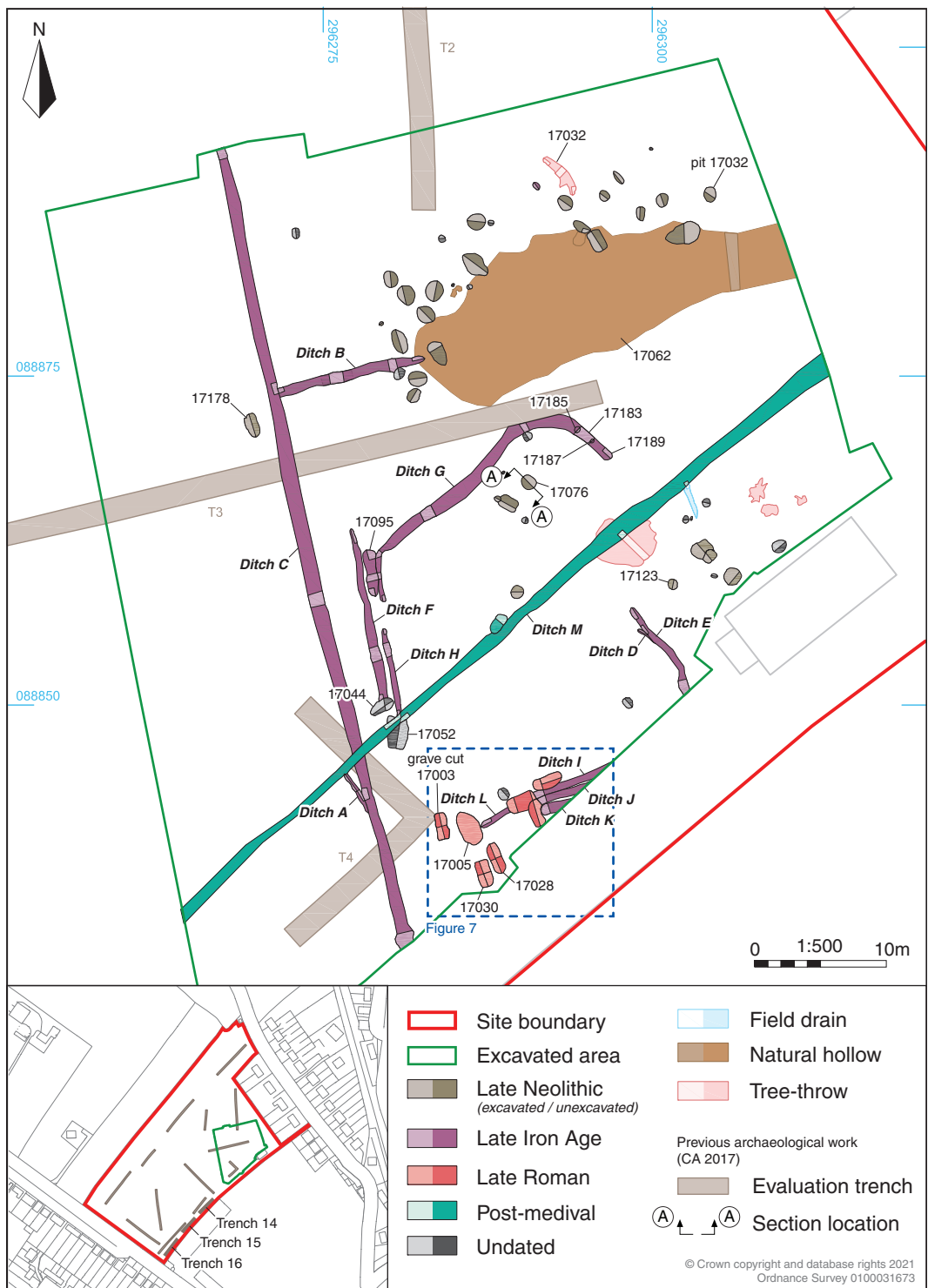


Figure 2

Section AA

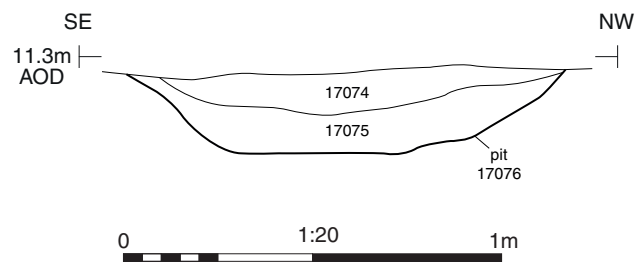


Figure 3



Figure 4





Figure 5



Figure 6

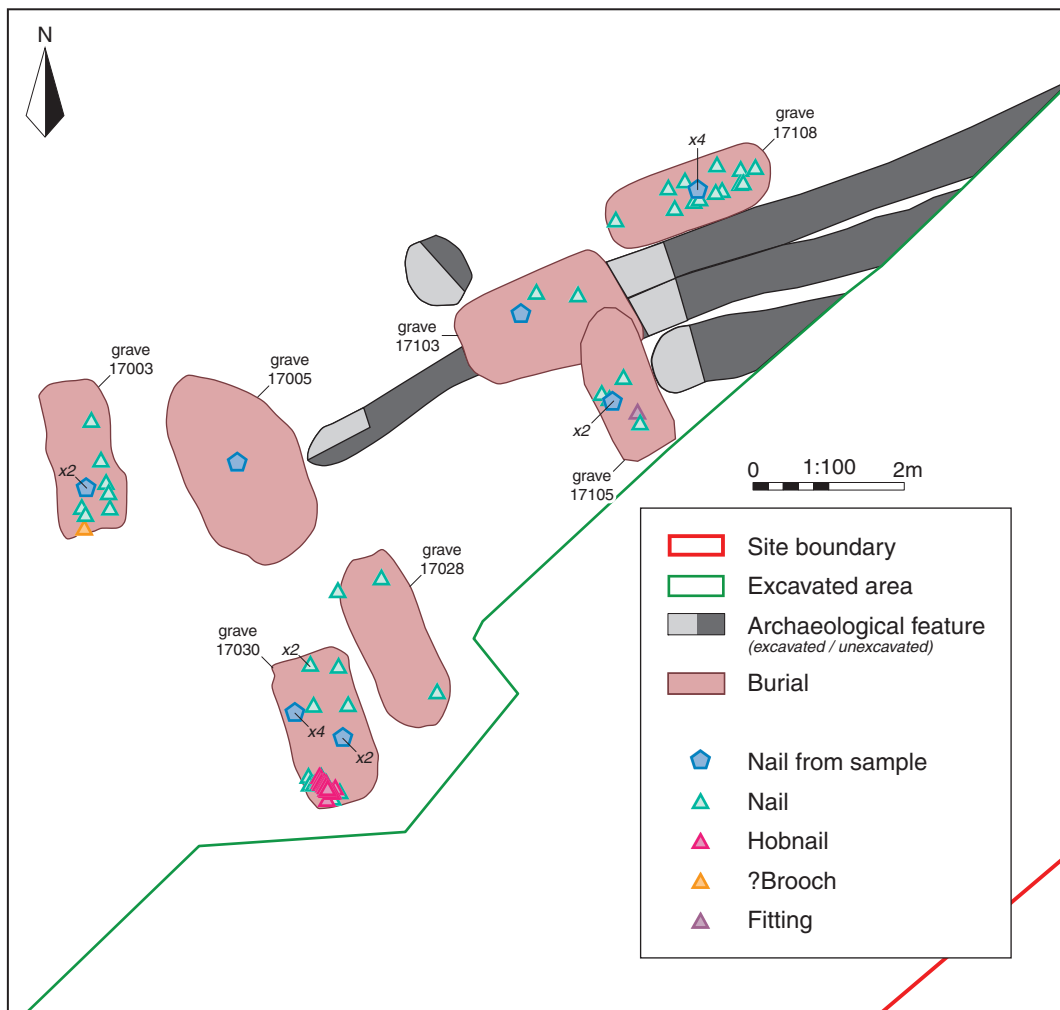


Figure 7

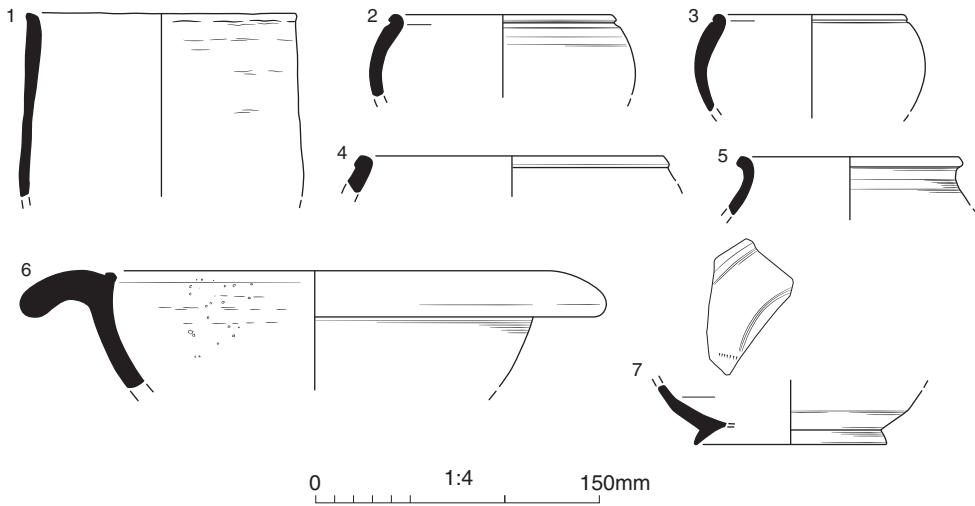


Figure 8



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