Merton Grounds Farm, Wendlebury
Bicester, Oxfordshire

An Archaeological Recording Action

For Prime Park Limited

by Andy Taylor

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code MFW 06/17

September 2006

Summary

Site name: Merton Grounds Farm, Wendlebury, Bicester, Oxfordshire

Grid reference: SP 5780 1925

Site activity: Archaeological recording action

Date and duration of project: 24th April–18th May 2006

Project manager: Jo Pine

Site supervisor: Andy Taylor

Site code: MFW 06/17

Area of site: *c.*2 hectares

Summary of results: Ditches of probable Roman date

Monuments identified: Roman field systems

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course.

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Report edited/checked by:	Steve Ford✓ 29.09.06 Steve Preston✓ 29.09.06

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Merton Grounds Farm, Wendlebury, Bicester, Oxfordshire
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Report 06/17b

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at Merton Grounds Farm, Wendlebury, Bicester, Oxfordshire (SP 5780 1925) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr K Clarke of Simmons and Sons, 32 Bell Street, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, RG9 2BH on behalf of Prime Park Ltd.

Planning permission (05/01157/F) has been gained from Cherwell District Council for the creation of a 2-hectare reservoir, which will comprise a *c.*0.2 ha island with *c.*1.8 ha of water. Construction of the reservoir will also require construction of a temporary haul road and disposal area. The planning consent is subject to a condition relating to archaeology, which requires a watching brief to be carried out during groundworks.

This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Planning Policy Guidance, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990), and the District Council's policies on archaeology. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Richard Oram, Planning Archaeologist with Oxfordshire County Council, advising the District. A brief for the site (Oram 2006) outlined the archaeological potential and requirements for works. The fieldwork was undertaken by Andy Taylor, Danielle Milbank, Mary O'Donaghue, Paul Sanderson and Sean Wallis between the 24th April and 18th May 2006 and the site code is MFW 06/17.

The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course.

Location, topography and geology

The site is located 1.2km to the north of the village of Merton and 1.5km to the east of Wendlebury, Oxfordshire (Fig 1). The site is currently arable farmland and the underlying geology is Oxford Clay with Kellaway Beds and occasional cornbrash (BGS 1979); gravels and cornbrash were observed across the site. The site lies at a height of approximately 61m above Ordnance Datum.

Archaeological background

The site lies *c.*600m to the south-east of the Roman fortress and later civilian town of Alcester (Mahany 1994). This is a site of national importance, with evidence of a Roman military presence from the early years of the

conquest (SMR 1583) and settlement through to the 5th century when the town was abandoned (Munby *et al*. 1975). A possible parade ground associated with the settlement lies 350m to the north of the site. A Roman road, 160b Dorchester-Alcester (Margary 1955) is located 500m to the west of the site (SMR 8923). Roman field systems are laid out to the east of the road (SMR 12751). Less than 200m to the north are the remains of a Roman building with possible hypocaust and late 3rd-4th century pottery (SMR 15987). An evaluation carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services (Oram 2003) to the east of the farm did not identify any deposits of archaeological interest. A further evaluation on the proposal site (Taylor 2006) identified parts of a probable Roman field system.

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to;

Excavate and record all archaeological deposits and features within the areas threatened by the development;
Produce relative and absolute dating and phasing for deposits and features recorded on the site;
Establish the character of these deposits in an attempt to define functional areas on the site such as industrial, domestic, etc.;
Produce information on the economy and local environment and compare and contrast this with the results of other excavations in the region.

Specific research objectives were to answer the following questions:

When was the site first occupied?
When was the site abandoned?
What activities were taking place on the site?
What is the nature and date of any landscape features encountered (eg fields, boundary features, large enclosures) and what is their spatial organisation?
What is the chronology and organizational details of the field system?
How did these landscape features relate to occupied areas?
What is the palaeoenvironmental setting of the area?

The site was stripped of topsoil and overburden by between one and at times two 360º-type machines fitted with a toothless grading buckets under constant archaeological supervision.

Results

The programme of works began with a perimeter key trench being dug around the edge of the proposed lake in order prevent the high water table affecting future phases of the project (Fig. 2). This measured approximately 4m wide along its length and *c.* 0.50m deep and comprised topsoil overlying subsoil overlying gravel and cornbrash natural. Several linear features, were identified: these are discussed as a whole below.

The central area of the lake comprised the same stratigraphy that had been identified during the perimeter trench.

At the southern end of the site was a gully (1000) aligned approximately east-west which terminated at its eastern end. A total of four slots (106, 112, 113 114) were excavated along its length. These measured between 0.63m and 1.10m wide and between 0.20m and 0.28m deep. No finds were retrieved from its mid bluey grey clay fill (Figs 2 and 3).

Ditch 1001 was aligned approximately north-south and a total of three slots (3, 107, 115) were dug along its length. At its southern end, identified in the key trench, slot 107 measured 2.56m wide, and 0.50m deep and was found to contain two fills (160, 161). A possible recut through the centre of the ditch (109) was not evident elsewhere along the length of the feature. The remaining slots were found to contain between two and four fills, but failed to produce any dating evidence.

Ditch 1002 was aligned approximately NW–SE and seems to stop somewhere under the island. Two slots (111, 116) were dug through it. It measured between 1.40m and 1.50m wide and between 0.38m and 0.45m deep. Slot 116 was found to contain 10 pieces of unidentifiable animal bone.

A further small gully was found to come out from under the island and although it appeared to stop before reaching ditch 1003, no terminus was evident. A slot, 117, was excavated through it measuring 1.09m in length, 0.85m wide and 0.33m deep. No dating evidence was retrieved. It does not appear to be a continuation of 1002, being much less substantial, although this cannot be ruled out.

Ditch 1003 was aligned approximately north-south and had a total of six slots dug along its length (5, 6, 110 in the key trench, 118, 119, 125). This measured between 1.02m and 1.30m wide and between 0.22m and 0.44m deep. Slots 5 contained a rim sherd from a flagon and 118 contained three sherds of Roman greyware. This ditch was not evident in the southern part of the key trench and must stop somewhere between the lake edge and the key trench.

Gully 1004 was aligned east-west and terminated at its western end. A total of three slots (104, 120, 121) were dug through it measuring between 0.60m and 1.00m wide and between 0.15m and 0.38m deep. No finds were retrieved from its mid grey silty clay fill.

1005 was an irregular feature which curved at its northern and southern ends although its full extents were not evident. Three slots were dug through it measuring between 0.95m and 1.00m wide and between 0.26m and 0.35m deep. No finds were retrieved from its light mottled grey brown clayey silt fill. It is possible, given its irregular nature, that in fact represents a natural feature, possibly a former channel into the stream.

Five other linear features (100, 101, 102/3, 105, 108) were identified crossing the key trench but did not continue into the lake area. Again, none of these contained any dating evidence.

Finds

Pottery by Andy Taylor

A rim sherd from a Roman flagon, and three small, highly abraded body sherds of an undiagnostic Roman greyware were the only pottery finds retrieved during the excavation.

Conclusion

The recording action has shown the presence of a modest amount of archaeological deposits in the form of a number of ditches and gullies. It is most likely that these represent field systems and may well be directly associated with the nearby Roman town of Alcester (Mahany 1994). However, the paucity of the finds from these features precludes and possibility of secure dating. It is evident that further linear features are present outside the lake area indicating that only a fraction of the field pattern has been identified at Merton Grounds Farm though from a wider perspective these can be considered as a continuation of those already identified around the periphery of Alcester, many of these having been identified by aerial photography. The features observed on this site were not, though, evident on aerial photographs, serving as a reminder, if one is required, that even such extensive aerial photographic data as exist for the Upper Thames Valley, reveal only partial information at best.

Land allotment of Roman date has been widely recognized in the archaeological record, primarily from aerial photography (e.g. Riley 1980), or upstanding earthworks (Bowden *et al*. 1993) but it is only in recent years that due attention has been given to detailed recording and excavation of large expanses of field systems through the archaeological monitoring of gravel extraction and other development sites, such as at Kempsford, Gloucestershire (Hammond *et al.* forthcoming).

The lack of substantial dating evidence may be due to the rapid silting up of the features, which were, and still are, highly prone to flooding, a problem encountered across the whole area. As a result the ditches might have been only open for a short period, reducing the time available for cultural material (dating evidence) to enter the ditch. The 1st-century BC writer on agriculture, Columella, recommended a double ditch in which to plant a hedge:

> 'the most ancient authors preferred a living hedge to a constructed fence, because it not only called for less expense, but was more permanent and lasted for an indefinite time. The place which you intend to hedge … should be banked around with two ditches three feet apart. It is quite enough to make them two feet deep. We let them remain empty over the winter while the seeds are got ready to sow in them… Obviously this hedge cannot be destroyed unless you want to dig it up by the roots. There is no doubt that after fire damage it grows again better than before.' (*res rustica* XI.iii; quoted by Rackham 1997, 183–4)

It is likely that once dug the ditches were of no relevance as it was the spoil for a bank and/or the setting for the hedge that defined the boundary and made the fields stock proof (cf Farmoor; Lambrick and Robinson 1979, 121). The paucity of dating evidence may also be attributed to the position of the site, being sufficiently far away from a settlement area for the rubbish not to be distributed in the features identified.

Nevertheless, it is possible to date the site (if uncertainly) to the Roman period, and it seems likely that only a single phase of activity is represented, all the ditches appearing to be laid out to a single scheme. As implied above, however, 'single phase' need not mean 'short-lived', hedges in particular being capable of centuries of endurance. It has not been possible to test in detail models such as Fulford's (1992) suggestion that by the early 2nd century AD, rural sites on poorer, marginal land were being abandoned, and their lands combined into larger estates, with populations moving into the towns, or becoming tenant farmers. The evidence presented here does nothing to refute this hypothesis, but too much depends on an uncertain chronology, especially given that there is no evidence for intercutting features and the fact that only a relatively small area (on a landscape perspective) has been investigated makes it difficult to ascertain the full extent of the field systems. Rural settlement patterns, landscape organization, and the articulation of social relationships in the landscape are currently highlighted research topics (Taylor 2001). This site shows how sparse the evidence can be unless it is seen on a large enough scale, but does provide a baseline for expanding such research.

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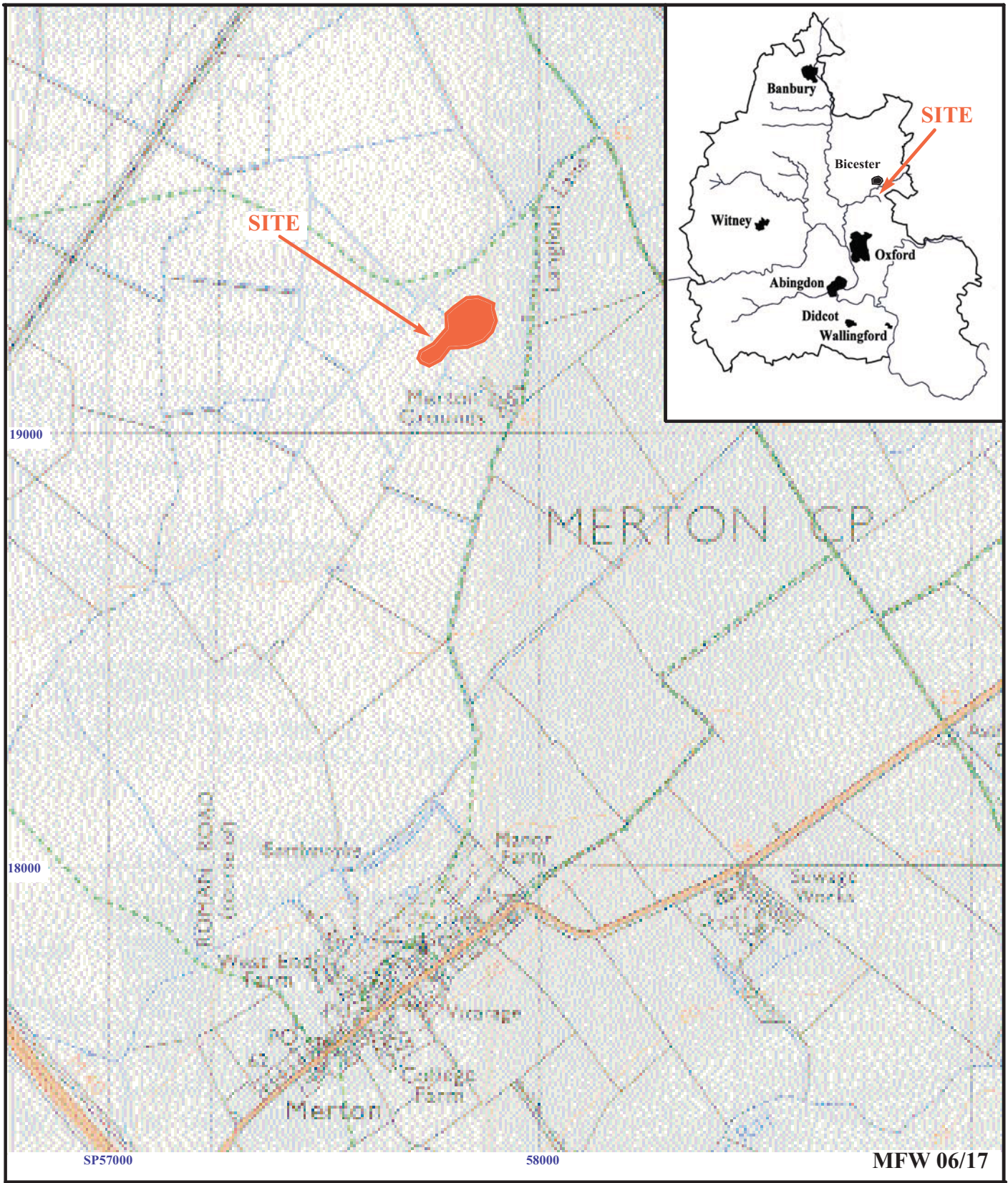
APPENDIX 1: Catalogue of excavated features

Group	*Cut*	*Deposit*	*Type*
	100	150	Gully
	101	151, 158	Ditch
	102	152, 153	Gully
	103	154	Gully
1004	104	155	Ditch
	105	156, 157	Ditch
1000	106	159	Ditch
1001	107	160, 161	Ditch
	108	163	Ditch
1001	109	162	Ditch
1003	110	164	Ditch
1002	111	165, 166	Ditch
1000	112	167	Ditch
1000	113	168	Ditch
1000	114	169	Ditch
1001	115	170, 171, 172, 173	Ditch
1002	116	174, 175	Ditch
	117	176	Ditch
1003	118	177	Ditch
1003	119	178	Ditch
1004	120	179	Gully
1004	121	180	Gully
1005	122	181	Ditch
21005	123	182	Ditch
1005	124	183	Ditch
1003	125	184	Ditch



Merton Grounds Farm, Wendlebury, Bicester, Oxfordshire, 2006
An archaeological recording action

Figure 1. Location of site at Merton Grounds Farm and within Oxfordshire.

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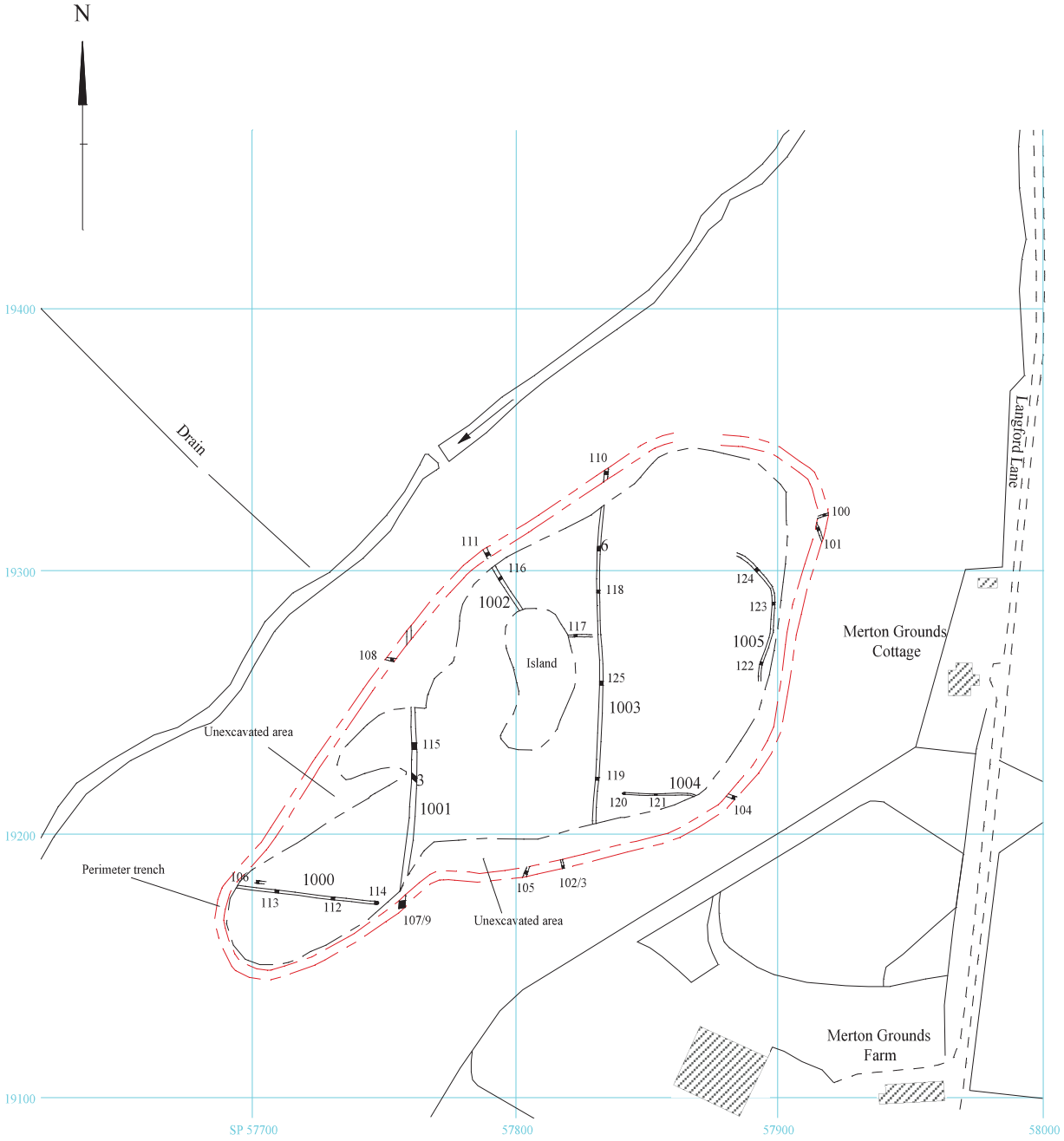

Figure 2: Plan of site showing all excavated features

MFW 06/17

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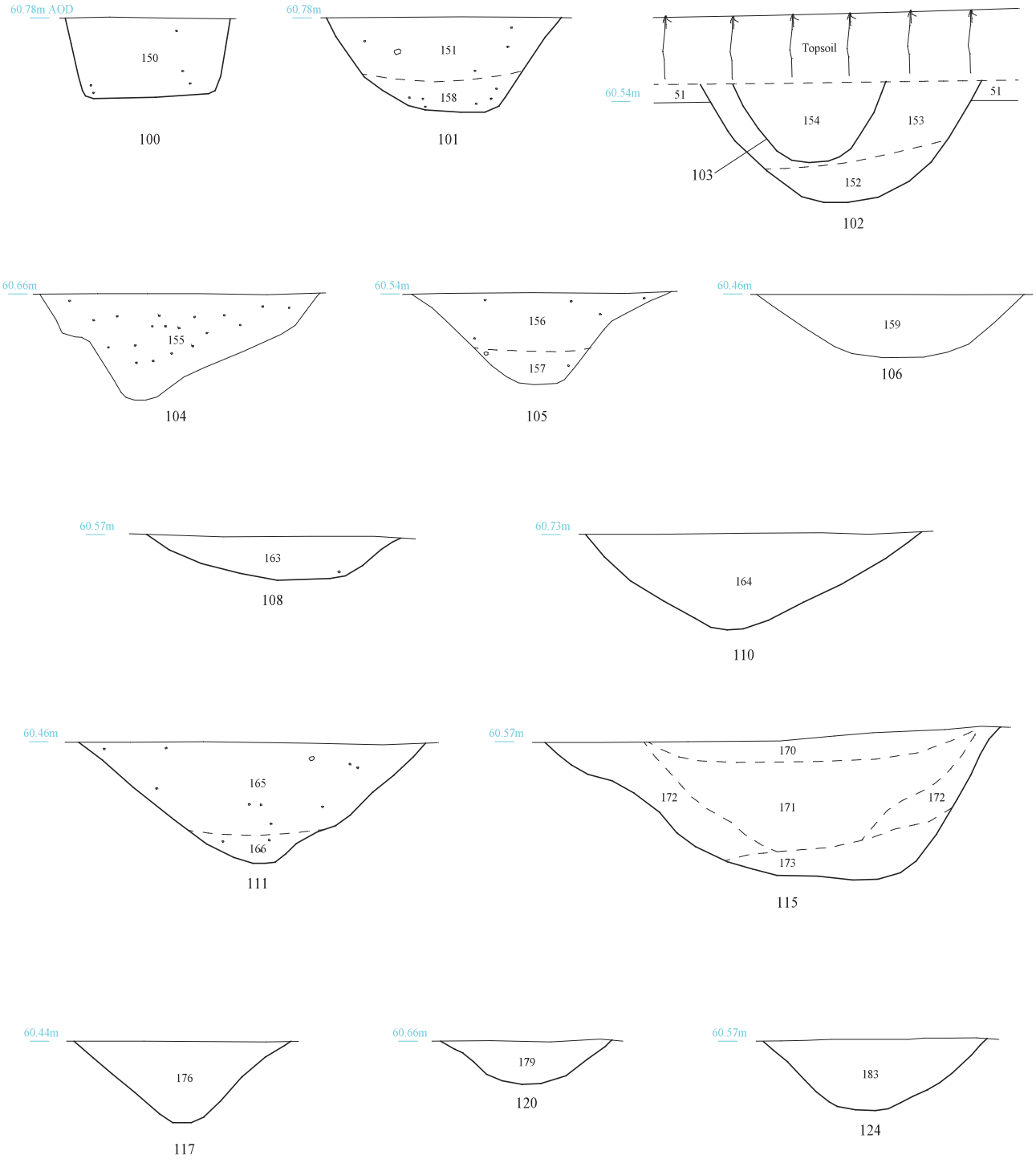

Figure 3: Sections

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