

A Bronze Age roundhouse at Bellever Tor, Dartmoor Forest, Devon

NGR SX64867675

Results of an archaeological evaluation

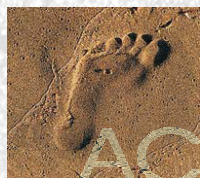
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archaeology

A BRONZE AGE ROUNDHOUSE AT BELLEVER TOR, DARTMOOR FOREST, DEVON.

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RESULTS OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

CONTENTS

	Summary	
1.	Introduction	1
2.	Archaeological background	1
3.	Aims of the work.....	2
4.	Methodology.....	2
5.	Results.....	2
6.	The finds.....	4
7.	Scientific analysis.....	5
8.	Discussion.....	5
9.	Conclusions.....	6
10.	Archive.....	6
11.	Acknowledgements.....	7
12.	References.....	7

List of figures

Fig. 1: Site and trench location

Fig. 2: Plans of structural and occupation features and deposits

Fig. 3: Plan of trench showing probable cairn and collapsed walling

Fig. 4: Sections and profiles

List of plates

Plate 1: General view of the trench from the north

Plate 2: Posthole F514 and stakehole group. View from northwest

Plate 3: Stone surface 509, view from southeast

Plate 4: Probable cairn structure 502, view from northwest

Summary

An archaeological evaluation of a tree-damaged stone roundhouse at Bellever Tor, Dartmoor Forest Parish, Devon, was undertaken by AC archaeology during October 2008. The site is located to the northeast of Bellever Tor and is part of a prehistoric settlement consisting of stone roundhouses, associated field systems and a cairn.

The evaluation was carried out in order to investigate the nature and extent of damage sustained on the monument as a result of tree growth and felling, and comprised the hand-excavation of a single quadrant of the internal area of the roundhouse, an area of 17.5m². The trench exposed a sequence of archaeological features and deposits which included floor surfaces, postholes, stakeholes and an occupation layer, which were sealed by a layer of collapsed walling. The presence of a sub-squared stone cairn feature, set on the collapsed walling material, provides evidence for secondary use of the monument following its abandonment.

The pottery recovered from the investigation (69 sherds/744 grams) dates to the middle Bronze Age Trevisker tradition, between c. 1500 and 1150 BC.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The prehistoric settlement of Bellever is located to the northeast of Bellever Tor in Dartmoor Forest Parish, within an area managed by the Forestry Commission. Until recently the area was heavily planted with conifers and several mature trees, felled by wind, have disturbed many of the structures within the settlement. To assess the extent of this damage, an archaeological evaluation of a stone-constructed roundhouse was undertaken by AC archaeology during October 2008. The work was commissioned by Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA).
- 1.2 The upstanding granite roundhouse structure lies adjacent to a modern forest track at NGR SX64867675 (Fig. 1). It is located on ground which slopes moderately down to the east. The structure survives as an upstanding earthwork, comprising a sub-round granite wall, which protrudes partially above the scrub and grass. The perimeter wall encloses a broadly flat to slightly concave internal area measuring 8.7m long and 8m wide, with the long axis orientated northwest to southeast. A number of tree stumps and root plates are present throughout the monument and the largest of the trees was located towards the south of the monument.

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The roundhouse is encompassed within Scheduled Monument no. 28689, a prehistoric settlement consisting of stone roundhouses, an associated field system and round cairn positioned on high ground to the northeast of Bellever Tor. The Scheduled Monument is sub-divided into separate components, of which the excavated roundhouse is number 144275.
- 2.2 A previous trench evaluation of the structure (South West Archaeology 2007) established variable survival of archaeological deposits, with some areas heavily disturbed by root activity, while in others, internal features such as pits and postholes were present, as well as a surviving buried soil and collapsed layer.

3. AIMS OF THE WORK

- 3.1 The principal aim of the evaluation was to investigate the extent and nature of the damage sustained on the monument as a result of tree growth and felling and consequently establish the survival, extent, depth, character and date of any *in situ* archaeological features or deposits. This would inform on the date of construction and period of use of the monument. The results as set out in this report may be used to inform on any subsequent work carried out on this or adjacent damaged monuments.

4. METHODOLOGY

- 4.1 The evaluation was carried out in accordance with a Project Design prepared by AC archaeology (Valentin 2008), approved by the DNPA Archaeologist and English Heritage Inspector prior to commencement on site.
- 4.2 The southern internal quadrant of the roundhouse, an area covering of 17.5m² and the most extensively disturbed by tree disturbance, was chosen for excavation (Fig. 1; Plate 1). Turf and topsoil was removed by hand, with the underlying archaeological deposits hand-cleaned and recorded. Once the top of structural/occupation deposits was reached, a sondage was excavated alongside the northwest limit of excavation and all exposed cut features hand-excavated.
- 4.3 The site was recorded in accordance with the AC archaeology pro-forma recording system, comprising written, graphic and photographic records, and in accordance with AC archaeology's *General Site Recording Manual, Version 1*. All plans and baulk sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20 and sections of excavated features at 1:10. All levels have been related to Ordnance Datum.
- 4.4 Following completion of the work the trench was covered in plastic sheeting and backfilled by hand.

5. RESULTS

- 5.1 The results from the investigation are set out below and detailed plans and sections are included as Figs. 1-4. There are clearly different phases of occupation and use within the roundhouse, but for the purposes of this report the results are described broadly by the construction and use of the monument and then deposits associated with its abandonment.
- 5.2 Undisturbed natural subsoil (context 512) was only exposed within cut features and was composed of a light reddish-brown silty sandy clay, present at a depth of 0.5m below current ground level.
- 5.3 **Structural and occupation features and deposits** (Plans Fig. 2, Sections Fig. 4)
The perimeter wall (511) comprises a 0.9m wide dry stone construction composed entirely of granite and surviving to a maximum height of 0.85m (Plate 1). The stone within the wall is composed of pieces up to 1.6m long, lain flat at the base and upon

which smaller granite blocks are arranged on top of the basal stones. This created a broadly level course for subsequent masonry. This subsequent course of stone had only limited survival in the exposed quadrant. The internal face of wall 511 was broadly smooth with a moderately tapering profile.

Immediately overlying natural subsoil within the interior of the structure was a compact reddish-brown silty clay layer (510), which contained granite pieces pressed in to the deposit (some vertically), with these increasing in density towards the northeast. This layer was the earliest exposed surviving floor surface and was up to 0.1m thick. It is not known if the layer extends throughout the exposed internal area of the roundhouse.

Cut into layer 510 were two postholes (F506 and F514) and six stakeholes (F515, F517, F519, F522, F524 and F526).

Posthole F506 was located towards the centre of the structure. It had a diameter of 0.35m, with a steep-sided and a blunt base present at a depth of 0.42m (Fig. 4c). The posthole contained two fills, comprising a homogenous basal fill of sandy silt (508) and an upper fill of dark grey sandy silt (507). No finds were recovered.

Posthole F514 was located towards perimeter wall 511 and was sub-round in plan (Plate 2). The posthole, which measured 0.34m in diameter and 0.43m deep, had an irregular steep to undercutting side and flat-based profile (Fig. 4d). It contained a series of three sandy silt fills (521, 529 and 513). A total of nine pottery sherds was recovered from secondary fill 529 and three sherds from upper fill 513, all of which were dated to the Middle Bronze Age.

Stakeholes F515, F517, F519, F522, F524 and F526 (Plate 2) were arranged in an approximate northwest to southeast line adjacent to perimeter wall 511. Measuring between 0.07m and 0.1m in diameter, the round to sub-round stakeholes had steep to vertical sides and blunt point profiles that were between 0.07m and 0.15m in depth. Each of the stakeholes contained consistent dark reddish-brown silty sand fills (516, 518, 520, 523 525 and 527). No finds were recovered.

Located adjacent to stakehole F526 was a section of preserved wood (528 on Fig. 2a). This measured 0.16m long, 0.1m wide and 0.04m thick and may have been the remnants of a split stake or planking.

Overlying the fills of the six stakeholes, the upper fill of posthole F514 and preserved wood 528, was a mixed light brown to dark grey clayey sandy silt layer (505). This layer was up to 0.04m thick and was present towards perimeter wall 511 of the roundhouse, sealing layer 510 and becoming wider towards the southeast. This possible occupation layer or later floor contained a total of 55 middle Bronze Age pottery sherds.

Above the upper fill 507 of posthole F506 and layer 505 was a possible linear arrangement of granite stone (504). This was positioned in the northwest part of the trench, was orientated northeast to southwest and extended beyond the limit of excavation.

Sealing deposit 505 towards the southeast and the entrance of the roundhouse was an arrangement of flat granite pieces (509) of up to 1m long, that were set out to form a roughly level surface (Plate 3). The surface extended 2.9m from perimeter wall 511 towards the centre of the roundhouse.

5.4 Abandonment features and deposits (Plan Fig. 3, Sections Fig. 4a & b)

An extensive layer of loose granite stone (503), representing structural collapse, overlay surface 509, granite arrangement 504 and the upper fill of posthole 514. This deposit densest adjacent to the perimeter wall. A single worked flint (SF2) and three pottery sherds dated to the middle Bronze Age were recovered.

Set within collapsed walling 503, towards the south of the roundhouse interior, was a sub-squared cairn arrangement of granite pieces (502). This measured 2.4m long and 2m wide and was constructed of mixed size granite pieces, which in places were arranged in a radial arrangement around the perimeter of the feature (Plate 4). The structure was 0.6m high (Fig. 4a) and contained a dark grey sandy silt between the stones. A single water-worn pebble whetstone was recovered from within the masonry.

Overlaying cairn 502 was a 0.22m thick dark grey sandy silt accumulation deposit (501), which contained further granite pieces (501). This was in turn overlain by a 0.18m thick layer of topsoil and turf (500). A single worked flint was recovered from layer 501 (SF1).

6. THE FINDS

- 6.1 The finds assemblage comprises mainly prehistoric pottery, but two pieces of worked flint and a whetstone were also recovered. All finds by quantity/weight in grams are itemised by context in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Finds quantification

Context	Context description	Pottery		Flaked stone		Worked stone
		No.	Wt.	No.	Wt.	No.
501	Subsoil			1	4	
502	Cairn structure					1
503	Collapsed walling	3	52	1	27	
505	Accumulation deposit	55	656			
513	Upper fill, posthole F514	2	6			
529	Secondary fill, posthole F514	9	30			
Totals		69	744	2	31	1

6.2 The pottery by Henrietta Quinnell

A total of 69 sherds of pottery weighing 744 grams was recovered. The assemblage is within the Trevisker tradition and is likely to date to between c. 1500 -1150 BC. There are likely to be six separate vessels represented, split into at least four fabrics, including gabbroic ware. The small group of sherds from posthole fill 529 are unusual in that they don't contain the coarse filler usual in middle Bronze Age ceramic forms in this area.

6.3 Worked flint

Two pieces of prehistoric worked flint were recovered. Both are secondary waste flakes and are undiagnostic to period, although the broad example from context 501 indicates a later, possibly Bronze Age, date.

6.4 Worked stone

The water-worn pebble from cairn 502 is likely to have been utilised for grinding and/or possibly as a small whetstone.

7. SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS

- 7.1** Soil samples taken from the evaluation are currently with the School of Geography, Faculty of Science, University of Plymouth, where they are attempting to extract plant macrofossils for radiocarbon dates from both postholes and two of the stakeholes. Monolith sample 15 (Fig. 4b) is currently being assessed for pollen evidence. Results are expected by the end of March 2009.

8. DISCUSSION

- 8.1** The results of the evaluation indicate that the preservation of archaeological features, deposits and artefacts within the roundhouse was generally good and the disturbance caused by trees was limited. The upstanding perimeter wall, however, had sustained more direct disturbance as a result of tree action. The large root plate located on top of the wall on the south side had caused damage mainly to the upper part of the structure when felled, but there was also distortion to the curved internal line of the wall in this location, apparently caused during growth.
- 8.2** Where exposed, the internal area of the roundhouse was covered by a floor surface (510), which probably directly overlay natural subsoil 512. The broadly flat to concave nature of the floor surface, while located on a moderately-sloping hillside, may suggest that the roundhouse was constructed on a prepared terrace, although this could not be established with certainty.
- 8.3** The two postholes and the series of six stakeholes provide some information on the internal arrangement of the roundhouse. The two postholes are likely to have held posts supporting a roof, although it is not known if these are contemporary or represent subsequent re-modelling. The linear arrangement of stakeholes is likely to have supported stakes for a wooden lining to the internal side of the perimeter wall, possibly to mask or provide additional weatherproofing to the internal exposed stone face. The adjacent wood fragment 528 may have been associated with this lining, although it could not be properly identified other than as a split stake or plank section.
- 8.4** The composition of layer 505 was similar to the upper fill of the postholes and the fills of the stakeholes. The layer is likely to represent an occupation deposit above floor surface 510. As layer 505 was overlain by the granite-paved surface (509), this would suggest that the stone paving 509 represents a later phase of floor surface superseding surface 510, probably constructed after a period of occupation/accumulation. The pottery recovered from 505 is middle Bronze Age in date and the sherds were scattered

throughout and largely on the surface of the layer. The fresh nature and location of the scatter close to the entrance may indicate some form of deliberate deposition, either casual refuse dumping, or more significantly some form of closing deposit for the first phase of occupation of the roundhouse.

- 8.5** Similar areas of paving to 509 have also been recorded at Heatree and Kestor, Dartmoor (Gerrard 1997). The location of the surface in the southeast part of the roundhouse next to the probable entrance indicates the need for more robust flooring in this location.
- 8.6** The stone alignment 504 may represent a collapsed internal structure or even a later phase of division within the roundhouse. However, the feature was fairly ephemeral and it could merely represent collapsed perimeter wall material.
- 8.7** The composition of probable cairn structure 502 indicates that the stones had been placed deliberately, with stones around the perimeter positioned in a radial arrangement. The structure was probably built shortly after the roundhouse had gone out of use and the presence of this is evidence for secondary use of the monument following abandonment.

9. CONCLUSIONS

- 9.1** The evaluation has provided important information on the construction, internal arrangement and date of a middle Bronze Age roundhouse on Dartmoor. The generally good level of preservation, having largely survived localised tree damage, has provided a phased site sequence that comprises the construction of the structure, its occupation and subsequent re-use following abandonment. The pottery assemblage will potentially provide an increase in the present understanding of middle Bronze Age styles and fabrics utilised in the region.
- 9.2** Potential research aims for any further investigations of the roundhouse could include:
- Establishing if there is evidence for earlier structural phases beneath surface 510;
 - to confirm if the structure was deliberately terraced into the hillside;
 - to determine if the perimeter wall was constructed within a trench and if there is a porch to the structure leading off the entrance; and,
 - to refine the phased sequence for construction and occupation and to establish if there is further evidence elsewhere for the secondary use of the structure following its abandonment.

10. ARCHIVE

- 10.1** The paper and digital archive and finds are currently held at the offices of AC archaeology Ltd, in Unit 4 Halthaies Workshops, Bradninch, Nr Exeter, Devon, EX5 4LQ. They will be deposited at Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter along with any archive generated by future work on the monument, under the accession number 24/2009.

11. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

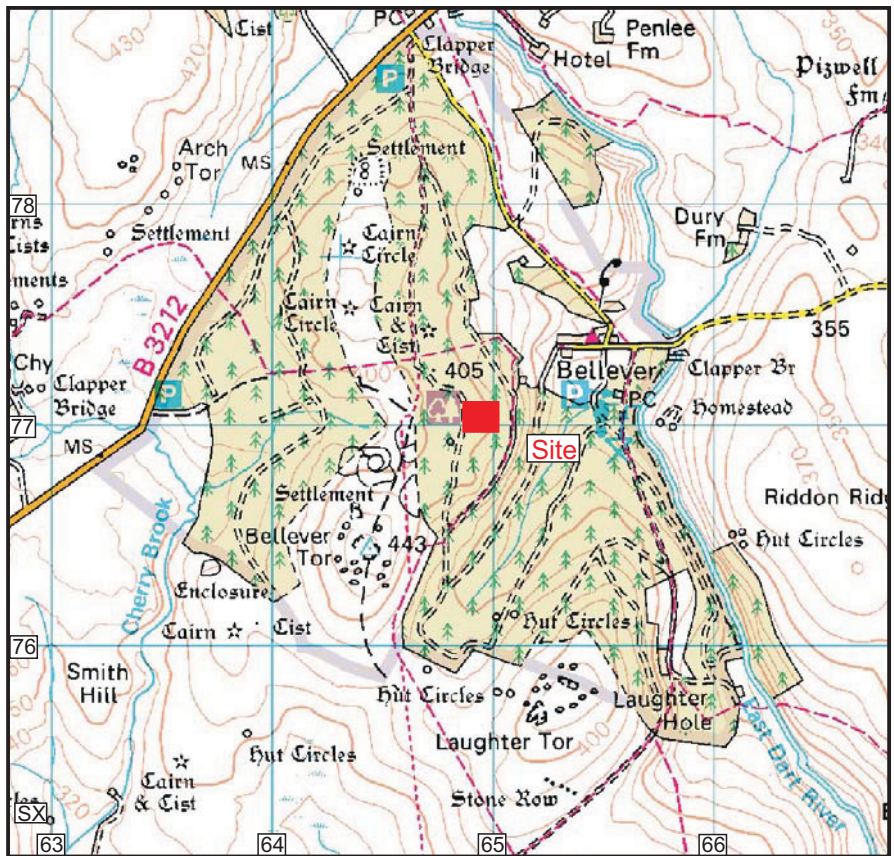
- 11.1** The evaluation was commissioned by Jane Marchand and Andrew Crabb, Archaeologists, Dartmoor National Park Authority. The fieldwork was carried out by Simon Hughes and Colin Wakeham and the illustrations for this report were prepared by Sarah Cottam.

12. REFERENCES

Gerrard, S., 1997, *Dartmoor*. Batsford/English Heritage.

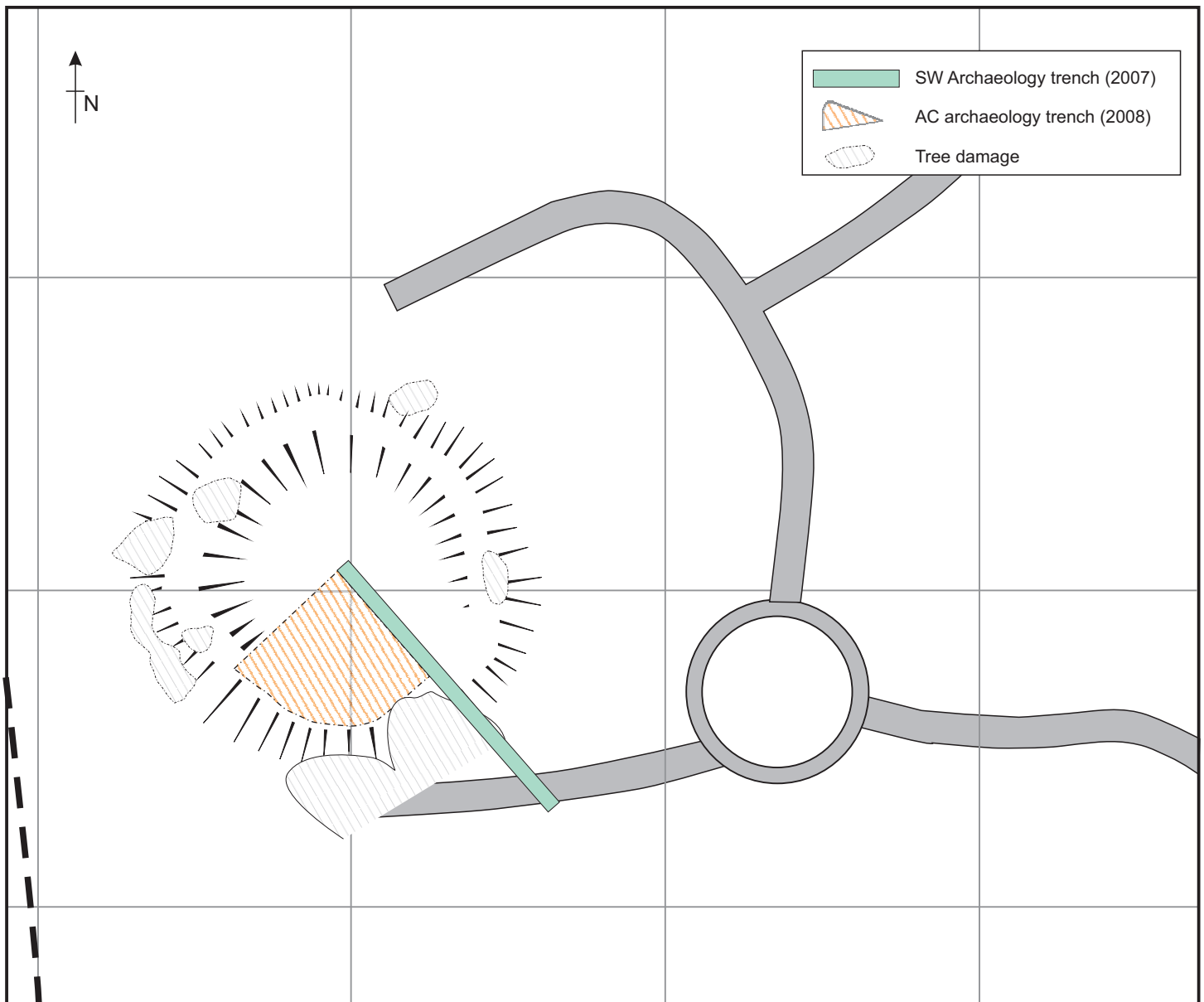
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Fig. 1:
Site and trench location



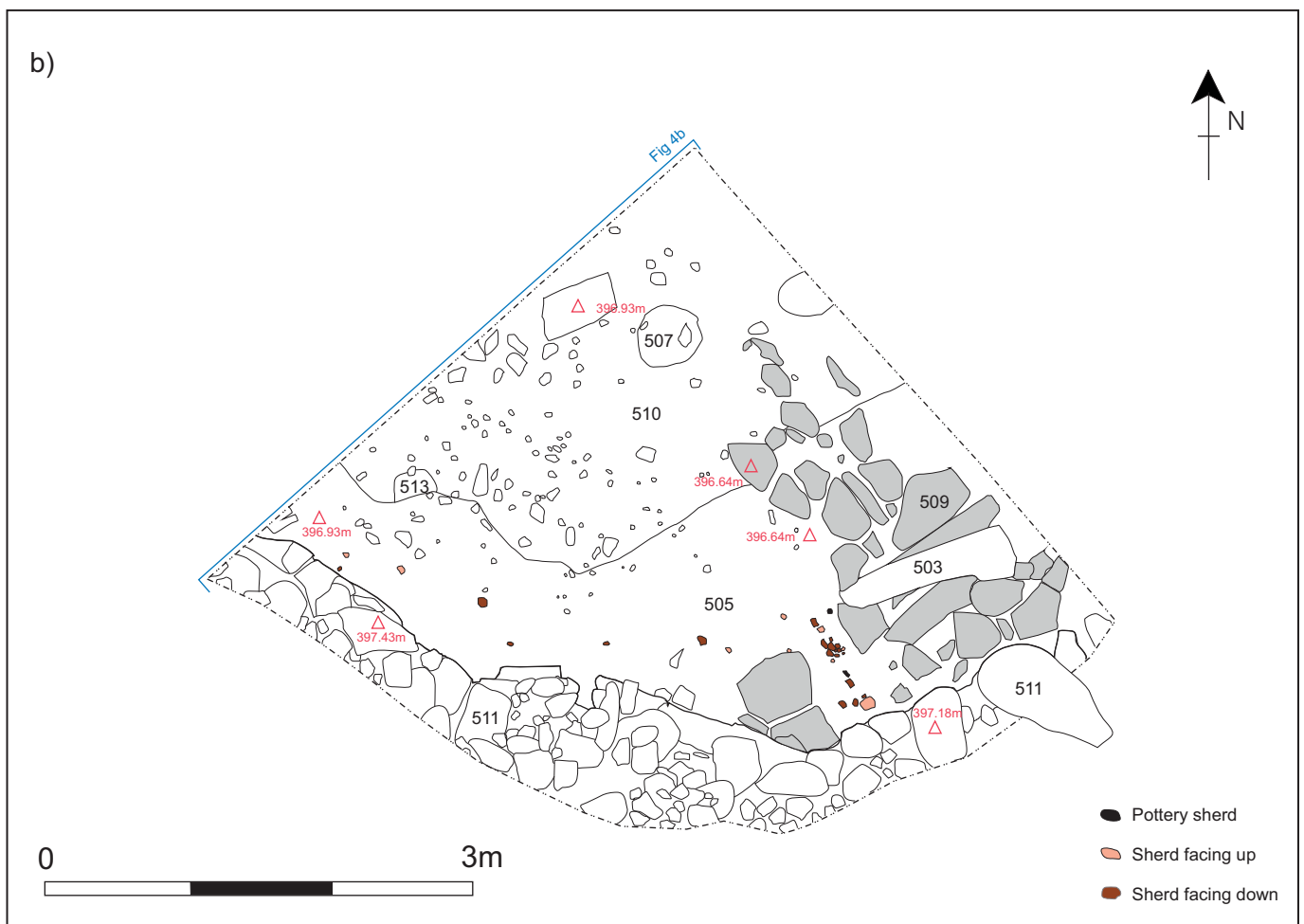
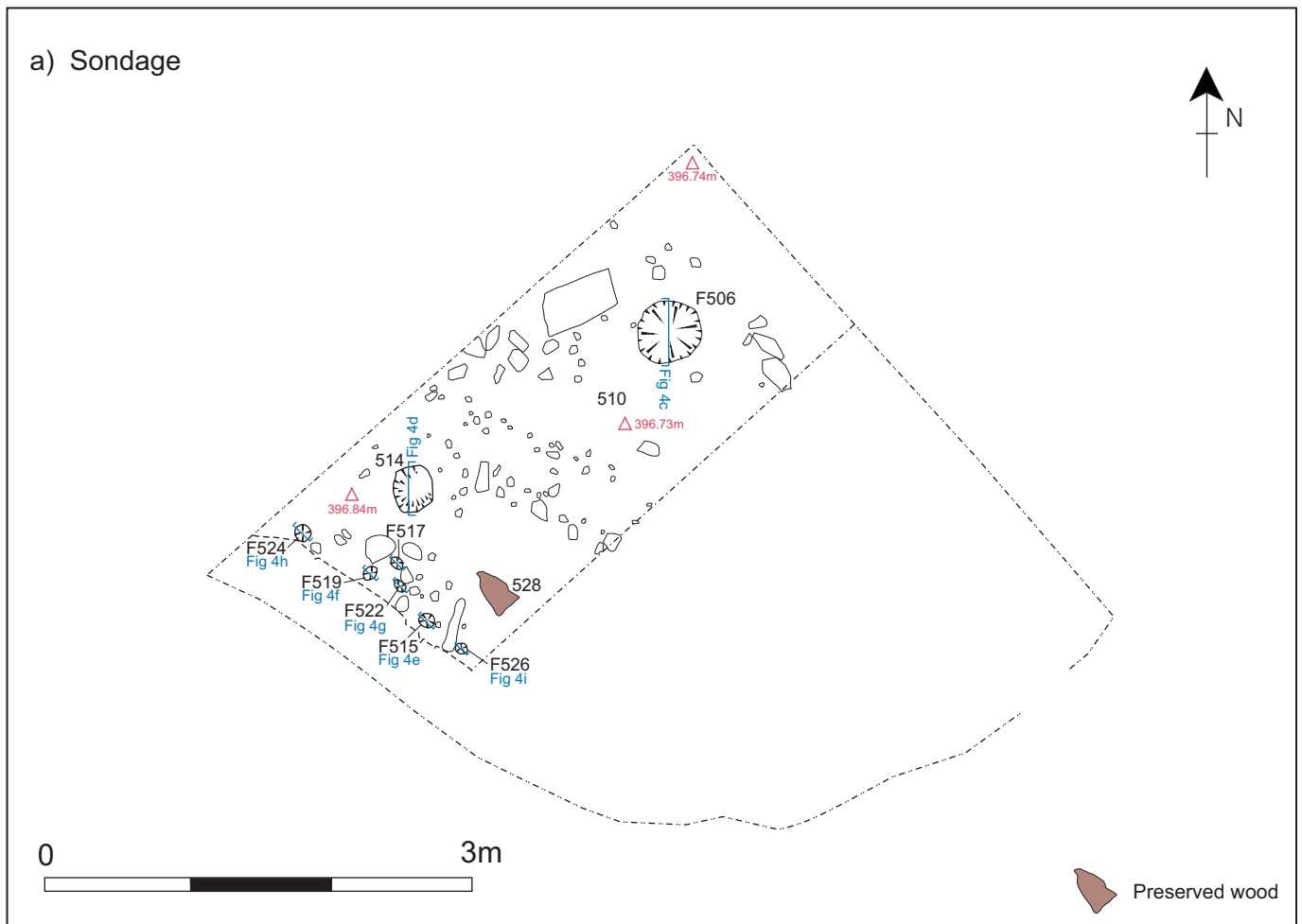


Fig. 2: Plans of structural and occupation features and deposits

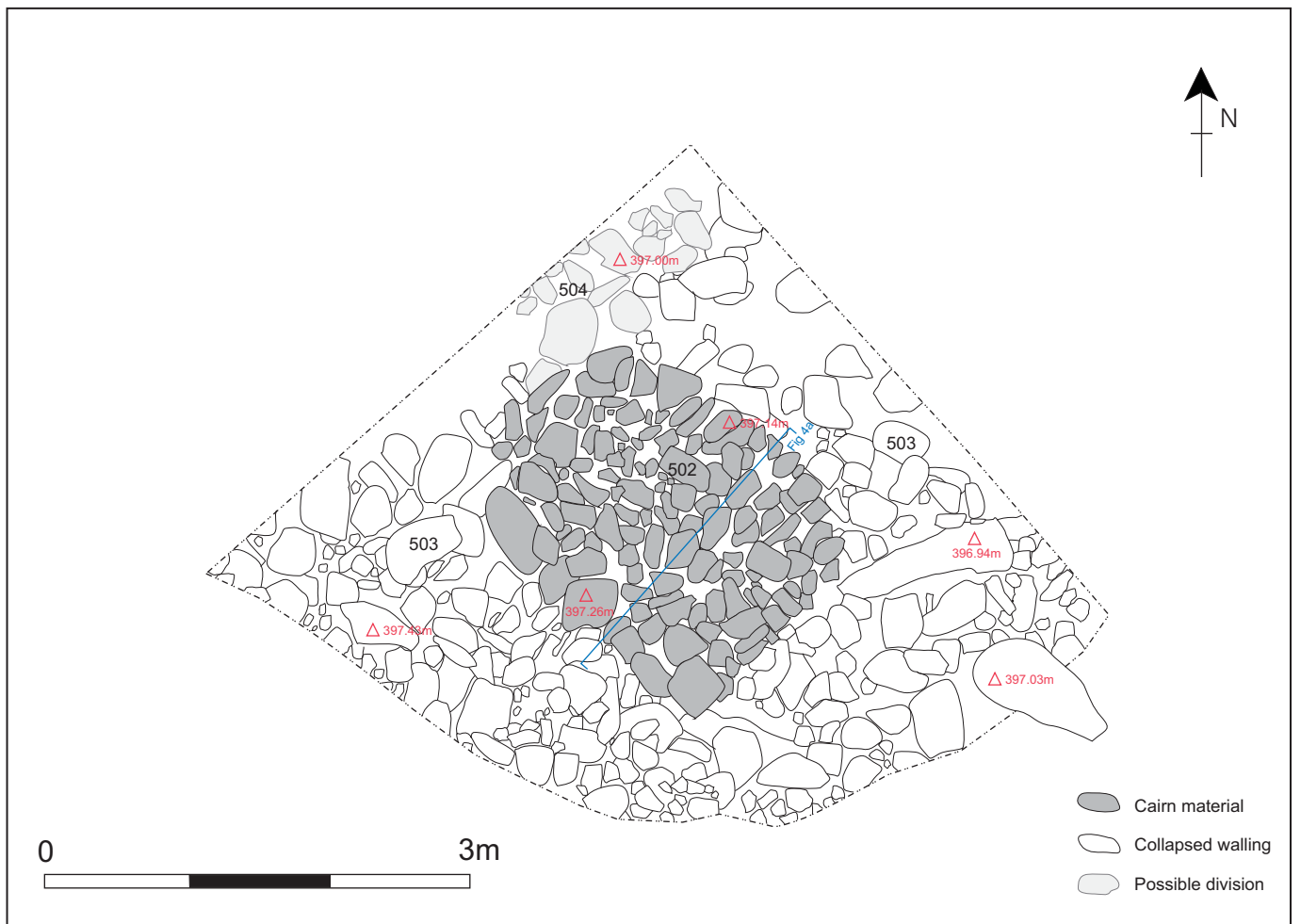
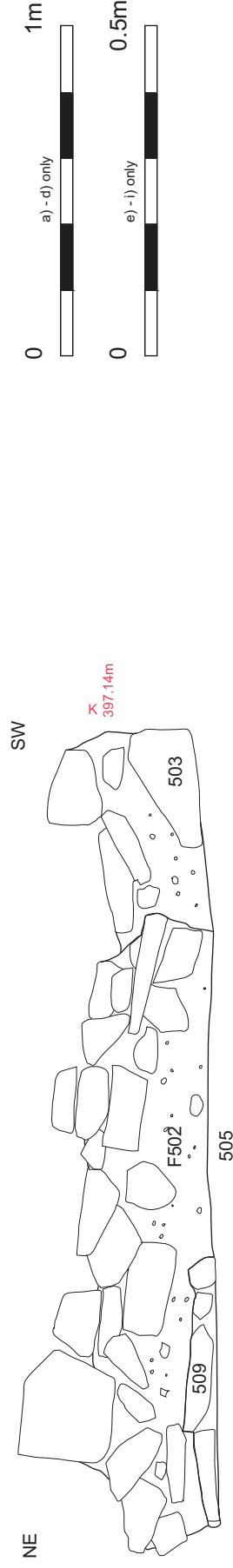
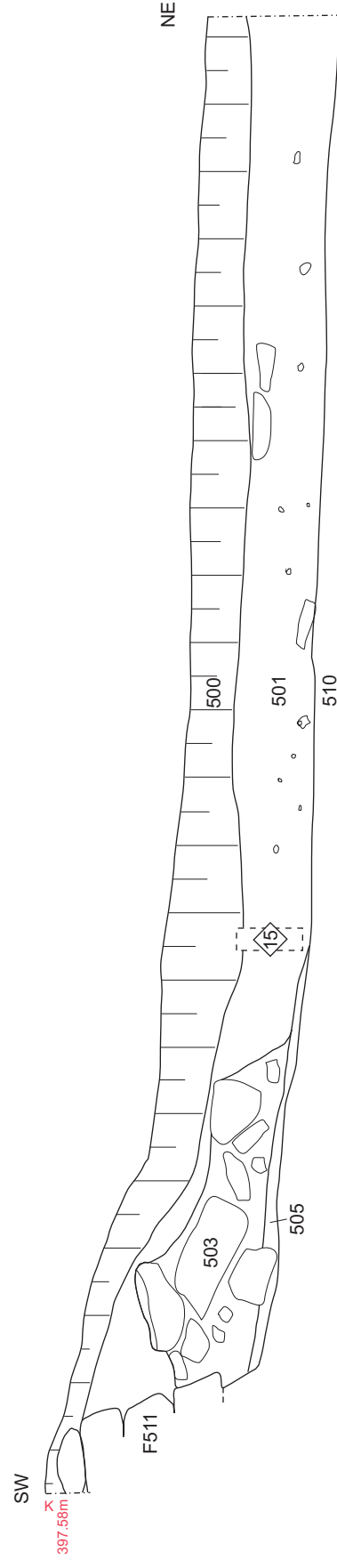


Fig. 3: Plan of trench showing probable cairn and collapsed walling

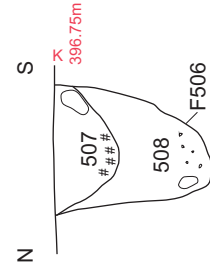
a) Section, possible cairn 502



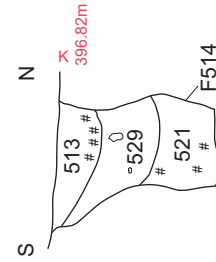
b) SE facing section of trench



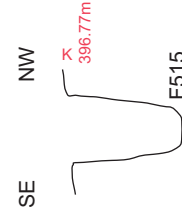
c) Section, F506



d) Section, F514



e) Profile, F515



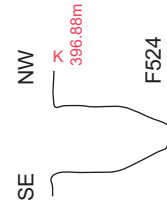
f) Profile, F519



g) Profile, F522



h) Profile, F524



i) Profile, F526



Fig. 4: Sections and profiles



Plate 1: General view of the trench from the north (scales 2 x 2m)



Plate 2:
Posthole F514 and stakehole
group. View from the northwest
(scale 0.5m)



Plate 3:
Stone surface 509, view from
southeast (scale 1m)



Plate 4: Probable cairn structure 502, view from northwest (scale 1m)

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