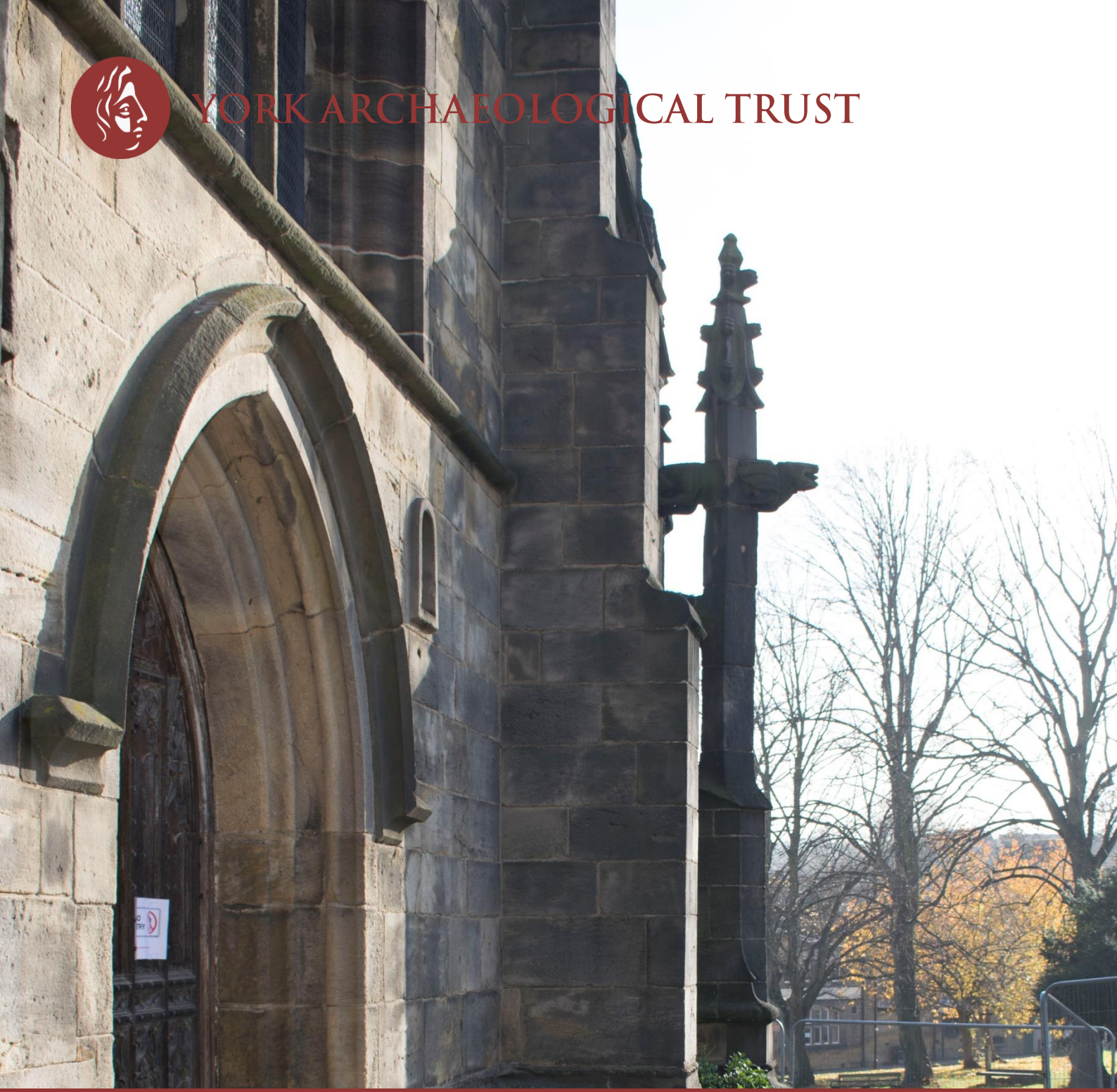




YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST



## Archaeological Investigations at St Mary's Church, Ecclesfield

By C. Jackson-Slater

YAT Assessment Report 2020/135 November 2020





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## CONTENTS

<b>NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>KEY PROJECT INFORMATION .....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3 LOCATION, GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>5 RESULTS .....</b>	<b>3</b>
5.2 Medieval.....	3
5.3 Post-medieval .....	3
5.4 Modern.....	4
<b>6 SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>LIST OF SOURCES .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>PLATES.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>FIGURES.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1 – INDEX TO ARCHIVE .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>APPENDIX 2 CONTEXT LIST .....</b>	<b>24</b>

### Plates

Cover: View of site

Plate 1 View of site, south facing .....	6
Plate 2 Context C1028, view south, 1m scale .....	7
Plate 3 Fragments of decorated cross shaft, view east, 1m scale.....	8
Plate 4 Decorated cross shaft in situ.....	9
Plate 5 Base of cross shaft, 0.5m scale .....	10
Plate 6 Side of base stone, 0.5m scale .....	11
Plate 7 Underside of base stone, 0.5m scale .....	11
Plate 8 Second fragment of decorated cross shaft, 0.5m scale .....	12
Plate 9 Third fragment of decorated cross shaft .....	13
Plate 10 Fragments 2 and 3 joined, 0.5m scale .....	14
Plate 11 Underside of fragments 2 and 3 of cross shaft, 0.5m scale .....	14

### Tables

Table 1 Index to archive.....	23
Table 2 Context list .....	24

## Figures

Figure 1 Site Location .....	15
Figure 2 Works Location .....	16
Figure 3 Burials C1007 and C1011.....	17
Figure 4 Burials C1002, C1014, C1017 and C1024 .....	18
Figure 5 Burials C1002 and C1020.....	19
Figure 6 Plan of C1028 .....	20
Figure 7 Photogrammetry of foundation C1028.....	21
Figure 8 Plan of all Burials.....	22

## Abbreviations

AOD	Above Ordnance Datum
DAC	Diocesan Advisory Committee
TBM	Temporary Bench Mark
YAT	York Archaeological Trust

## NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Between the 2nd and the 6<sup>th</sup> November 2020 York Archaeological Trust conducted a small excavation at St Mary's Church, Ecclesfield (SK 35281 94215). The work was undertaken for Wiles and Maguire Ltd in advance of construction of an access ramp to the west door of the church. YAT was asked to undertake the work in response to the uncovering of burials and significant stone foundations during the course of initial ground removal and watching brief. The works involved the excavation and recording of seven burials, a stone foundation and three large fragments of carved stone, deemed to be part of a medieval cross shaft.

## KEY PROJECT INFORMATION

Project Name	St Mary's Church, Ecclesfield
YAT Project No.	6226
Document Number	2020/135
Type of Project	Excavation
Client	Wiles and Maguire Ltd
NGR	SK 35281 94215
OASIS Identifier	Yorkarch1-408201

## REPORT INFORMATION

Version	Produced by		Edited by		Approved by	
	Initials	Date	Initials	Date	Initials	Date
1	CJ	18/11/20	MS	25/11/20	MS	27/11/20

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> November 2020 York Archaeological Trust conducted a small excavation at St Mary's Church, Ecclesfield (SK 35281 94215; Figure 1). The work was undertaken for Wiles and Maguire Ltd in advance of construction of an access ramp to the west door of the church. YAT was asked to undertake the work in response to the uncovering of burials and significant stone foundations during the course of initial ground removal and watching brief.

The works involved the excavation and recording of seven burials, a stone foundation and three large fragments of carved stone, deemed to be part of a medieval cross shaft.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The excavation covered a total area of 17.5m<sup>2</sup> (Figure 2), and was focussed on the area where burials and stone foundations had been uncovered during an earlier watching brief. In response to this Hugh Willmott, the DAC Archaeological Advisor, provided advice on how the excavation was to proceed;

*Only the area to the north of the south transept buttress needs to be subject to full excavation, the area to the south of here has been thoroughly truncated by a succession of service, although any disarticulated bone observed here will need collecting.*

*In the northern area of the path the watching brief revealed substantial stone foundations which require full exposure, planning, photographing and any other relevant recording before they are lifted and any features below similarly recorded. In the area to the south of these foundations, the burials thus far encountered will need to be excavated and lifted. These can be recorded traditionally or by photogrammetry, so long as a final digitised plan is made for the report and archive. It is entirely possible further burials might be encountered at a slightly lower depth, and if so these will also need recording and excavation, but only to the depth indicated by the architects plans and sections. Should only limited parts of a burial be encountered within the confines of the trench, these portions should be lifted but the remainder left in situ...(.)*

*It would be very useful to be able to relate the structural foundations within the trench to the standing fabric of the church, and therefore I'd like the western edge of the excavation to go right up to the west wall of the nave.*

Excavations on the site followed this advice, and all finds and human remains were given to Hugh Willmott, DAC Archaeological Advisor, to be analysed by the University of Sheffield.

Once the stone foundations were fully uncovered and recorded it was deemed that the best method of removal would be straps attached to a small excavator. This was undertaken on the 11<sup>th</sup> November and was supervised by the attendant YAT archaeologist and Hugh Willmott, DAC Archaeological Advisor. The stones were initially loosened from the sandy bedding by hand and checked for any carvings or evidence of worked stone. Once this had been undertaken, the stones were lifted by straps attached to the bucket of a small rubber-tracked

excavator. Three fragments of carved stone were revealed during the course of the excavations. These were carefully lifted and set aside to be looked at, at a later date.

### 3 LOCATION, GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The excavation was located in front of the west door of St Mary's Church, Ecclesfield, a village about 4 miles north of Sheffield. The church and churchyard of St Mary's is located north of the junction between Priory Road and Church Street, at the northern edge of the village. The site is bordered to the north by residential housing, the vicarage and the remains of a Benedictine Priory. Agricultural fields, along with Ecclesfield cemetery lie to the west, whilst further residential housing lie to the south and east.

The church is located on the south side of a slope, with the southern side of the churchyard sloping down to Church Street. The path leading to the west door is also at a slightly lower depth than the area. A TBM taken next to the west porch was 88.65m AOD.

The underlying bedrock geology comprises Pennine Lower Coal Measures Formation – Sandstone, a sedimentary bedrock formed between 319 and 318 million years ago in the Carboniferous period. No superficial deposits were recorded (British Geological Survey).

### 4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The church of St Mary is a Grade I listed building (List Entry No. 1192775), mainly Perpendicular in date, with earlier arcade piers, dating to 1200 (Historic England). The earliest mention of a church in Ecclesfield was in 1141, when the church was given to the monks of Fontenelle Abbey, near Rouen, and became an alien priory. After the alien priories were dissolved in 1386 by Richard II, the church was given to the Carthusian monks of Coventry, who held it until the Dissolution in the 1530's, when it was then given to the Lords of Hallamshire. The parish became one of the largest in England at that time, with an area of 82 square miles. Construction of the present church was begun in 1478 and completed around 1500 (St Mary's Church, Ecclesfield).

The church contains an Anglo-Saxon cross-shaft, probably of 11<sup>th</sup> century date, which was found in 1893 during works in front of the west door (Gatty 1917, 38). The flagstones of the pathway in front of the door were taken up and the ground lowered to the level of the west door entrance. The shaft was found around 2ft 8in (0.85m) below the pathway and the base was under the grass border between the path and the west wall of the church. A full description of this cross is provided in the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture (Durham University), which is summarised as follows. The sandstone shaft is set in a sandstone base, and measures 145.4cm high, around 27.5cm wide and around 18cm deep. The base measures 148cm long, 62cm wide and around 26cm high, and contains two sockets, the empty one of which measuring 31 x 23 cm. The shaft was found broken in two, though now joined. The edges of the shaft are lightly rounded, decorated with a wavering incised outline. Incised motifs are present on one of the broad facing sides; including Latin crosses, circled crosses and stepped line patterns. The shaft has been compared with local examples, including one at Cawthorne and a late cross-head at Stainton.

The only known recent archaeological investigations undertaken at St Mary's Church was a watching brief conducted in 2003 (HE no. 1476048). No archaeological features or deposits were recorded during these works.

## 5 RESULTS

### 5.1.1 Natural Deposits

A natural deposit of orange brown clay (C1029) was recorded at the northern end of the excavation area and at the base of grave cut C1020. The natural deposit sloped down from north to south, at depths of 88.15m AOD in the north, to 87.90m AOD around the centre of the excavation area.

### 5.2 Medieval

The earliest feature recorded was a stone foundation (C1028; Figure 6; Plates 1-2), extending almost the full length of the excavation area and measuring 6.26 x 1.6m, at depths of 88.39m to 88.20m AOD. The foundation was formed from sandstone, predominantly unworked apart from around six large stones with roughly hewn straight edging along one side, which formed the east and west edges of the structure at the northern end. In addition, three carved stone fragments also formed part of the foundation. The construction at the northern end was formed from large stones, laid flat, measuring a maximum of 1 x 0.68+ x 0.24m. These large stones were then packed around with smaller rocks, measuring around 0.10 x 0.11 x 0.10m. At the southern end the construction changed; the foundation in this part was formed from numerous small to medium sandstone fragments, randomly arranged, and extending under the foundations of the church. The foundation was loosely mortared together with a light-yellow brown slightly silty sand with chalky limestone inclusions. A large gap in the stones at the northern end, measuring 0.75m diameter could be the cut for a large posthole; however, it could also be a space for a large foundation stone, now removed.

It is unclear what the function of the structure could be; however, the fact that it extends beneath the church at the southern end, indicates it is contemporaneous with the construction of the present church in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. One thought is that it could be the foundation of a scaffolding structure for the construction of the upper levels of the church.

The three carved stones found within the structure are of interest (Plates 3-11). They look to be three fragments of the same cross shaft (Plate 10), with one of the fragments clearly the base (Plates 5-7). The stones measured between 0.62 x 0.40 x 0.33m and 0.44 x 0.40 x 0.33m and were carved on all four sides, with a similar incised edging pattern as the cross shaft found in 1893. One of the patterns on the cross was of interlacing circles, typically 12<sup>th</sup> century in date (Plate 9), though there are possible indications that this is a later addition to an earlier Anglo-Saxon cross (Hugh Willmott, *pers comm.*).

### 5.3 Post-medieval

Above the stone foundation (C1028) was a leveling layer of mid- greyish brown clayey silt (C1008), which contained occasional charcoal inclusions, as well as very occasional sandstone fragments, pottery dating to the late post-medieval period, and disarticulated bone. The layer was recorded at a depth of around 88.25m AOD. A linear cut (C1026), of unknown function, truncated through the layer along the eastern edge of the excavation area, on a roughly



north/south alignment. The cut was filled with a mid- grey brown silty clay containing disarticulated human bone (C1025).

Cut into layer C1028 were seven graves, (cuts 1002, 1007, 1010, 1014, 1017, 1020 and 1024; Figures 3-5), containing adult to potentially neonate remains. The graves were on a roughly east/west alignment, in line with the church, with the heads facing west. Shroud pins were found on the majority of the burials, as well as coffin nails in the surrounding grave fill.

#### **5.4 Modern**

The underlying archaeology was covered by the current flagstone pathway and planting beds which lie along the western edge of the church. A former ceramic drain and its cut (C1004) extended from the southern side of the west door, and extended southwards, truncating the feet of burials C1010 and C1014. The drain had been removed and the cut backfilled with a loose, brownish grey silty sand containing frequent sandstone and occasional charcoal inclusions (C1003).

A modern water pipe extended along the western edge of the excavation and truncated the skulls of burials C1019 and C1001.

## **6 SUMMARY**

This report is a summary of the deposits and features found during the course of the excavations at St Mary's Church. A full analysis of the site, including the carved stone and human burials will be undertaken by Sheffield University.

The earliest feature recorded was the medieval stone foundation, containing three fragments of a cross shaft, dating to the 12<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. It is unclear what the foundation was for, as its northern end has no physical attachment to the church and therefore is unlikely to be a former extension or porch. One thought is that it is part of a substantial scaffolding or temporary works structure related to the construction of the church in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This is supported by the evidence of the southern part of the foundation joining the current church's foundation as it extended east, and the presence of the 12<sup>th</sup> century cross shaft as part of the foundation, possibly a reuse of a relic from the earlier church.

The fragments of the carved cross shaft are a significant find and should be conserved, researched and properly recorded. There is a possibility that the shaft is the missing second cross shaft from the double socketed base currently in the church. The fragments were all found in close proximity and therefore possibly belong together.

The burials are considered to be part of the post-medieval cemetery, possibly of a similar date to nearby 19<sup>th</sup> century graves.

## LIST OF SOURCES

Church History Doomsday and Monk, St Mary's Church, Ecclesfield [accessed 24/11/2020]  
[https://www.stmarysecclesfield.com/History/History\\_Page01.html](https://www.stmarysecclesfield.com/History/History_Page01.html)

The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture – Durham University [accessed 24/11/2020]  
[http://www.ascorpus.ac.uk/catvol8.php?pageNum\\_urls=73](http://www.ascorpus.ac.uk/catvol8.php?pageNum_urls=73)

Historic England Listed Building [accessed 24/11/2020]  
<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1192775>

Archaeological Data Service [accessed 24/11/2020]  
<https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/record.xhtml>

British Geological Survey [accessed 24/11/2020]  
<https://www.bgs.ac.uk/>

## REFERENCES

Gatty, R., 1917. *Guide to Ecclesfield Church, with Notes*. Leng & Co., pp 38

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Wiles and Maguire Architects for commissioning the work and Hugh Wilmott for his knowledge and help on site.

**PLATES**



**Plate 1** View of site, south facing



**Plate 2** Context C1028, view south, 1m scale



**Plate 3** Fragments of decorated cross shaft, view east, 1m scale



**Plate 4** Decorated cross shaft in situ



**Plate 5** Base of cross shaft, 0.5m scale



**Plate 6** Side of base stone, 0.5m scale



**Plate 7** Underside of base stone, 0.5m scale





**Plate 8** Second fragment of decorated cross shaft, 0.5m scale



**Plate 9** Third fragment of decorated cross shaft



**Plate 10** Fragments 2 and 3 joined, 0.5m scale

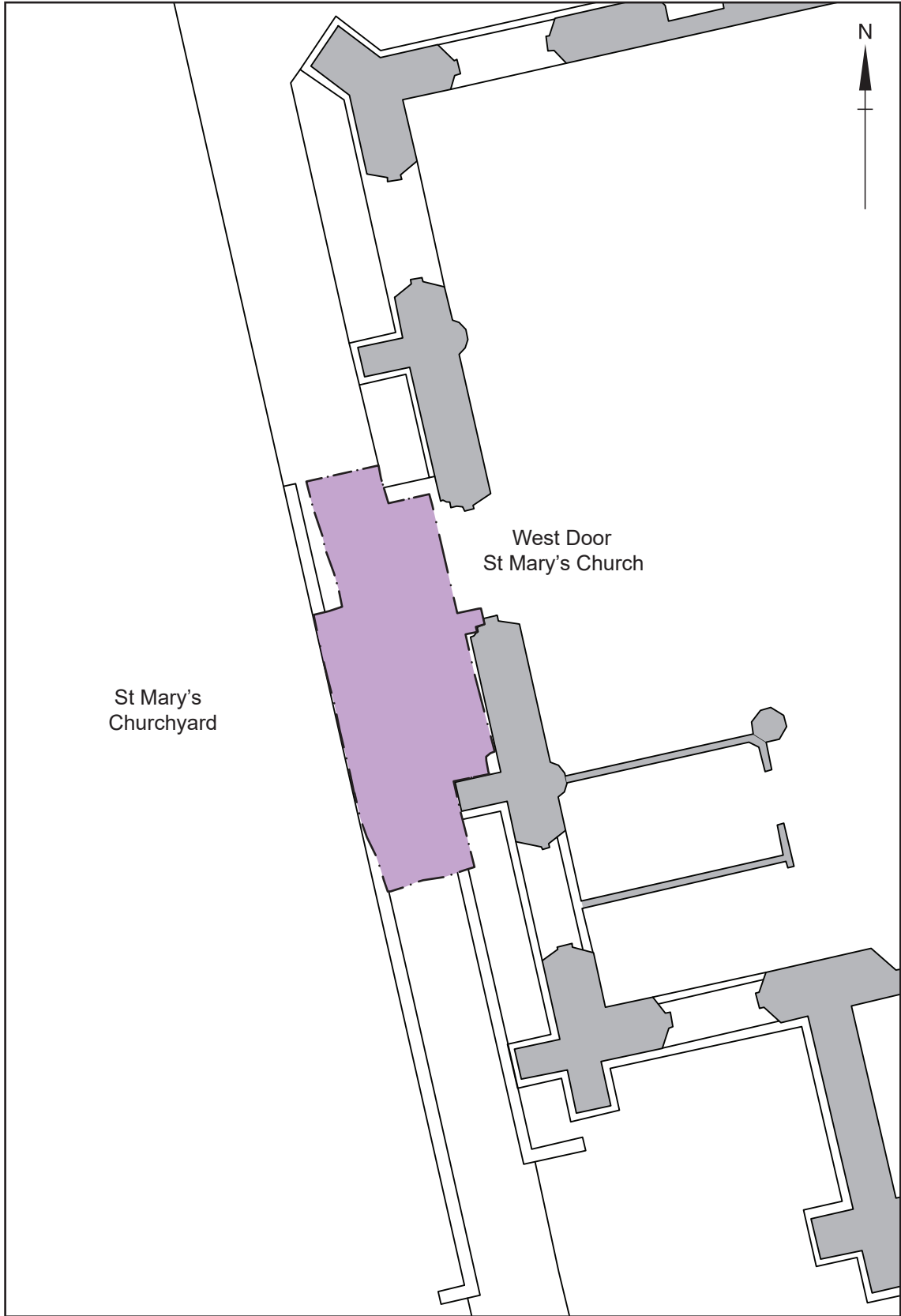


**Plate 11** Underside of fragments 2 and 3 of cross shaft, 0.5m scale



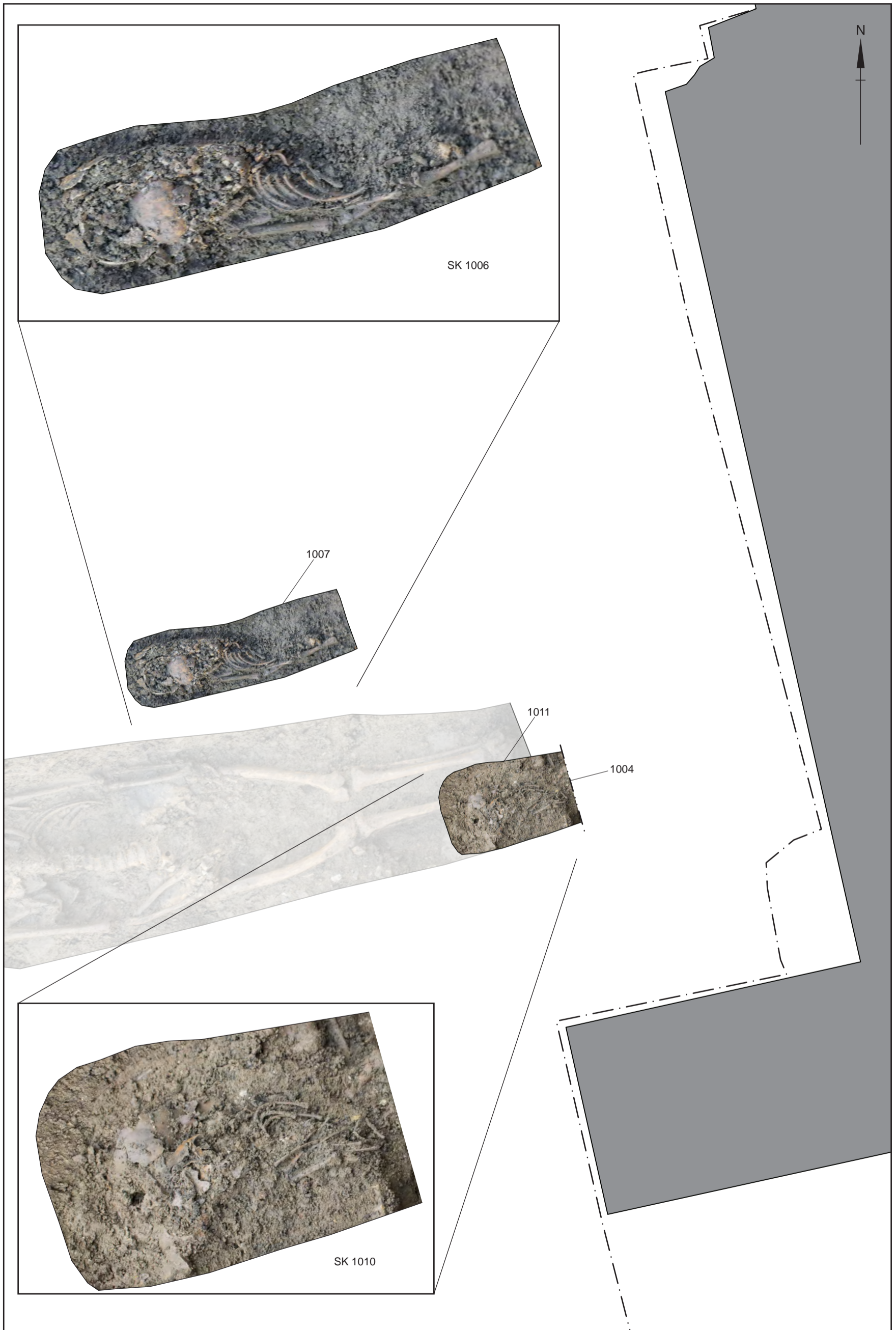
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Figure 1 Site Location



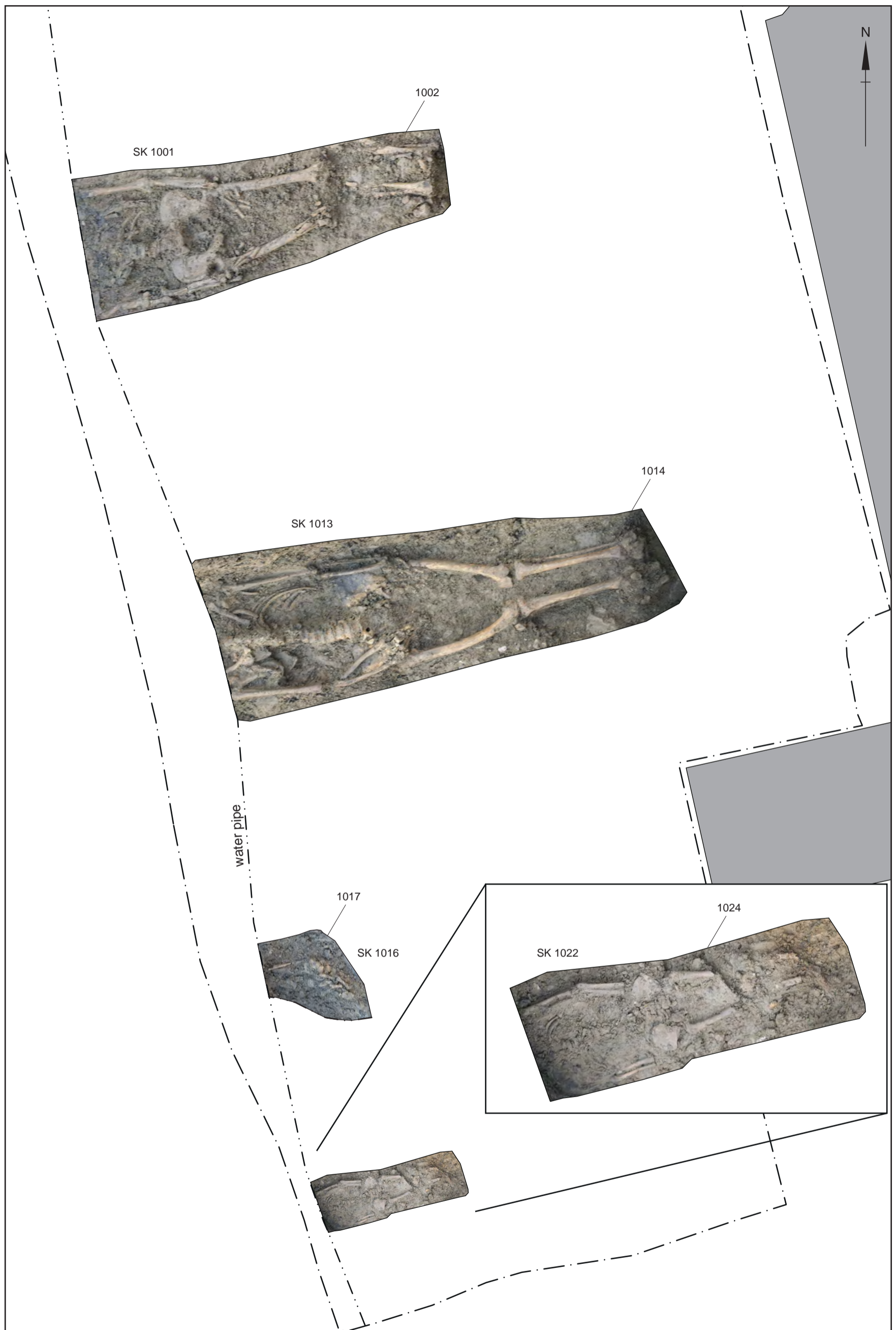
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Figure 2 Works Location  
(using plan provided by client, Drawing no. (A) Plan of west end-ECC:03/310 Revision B)



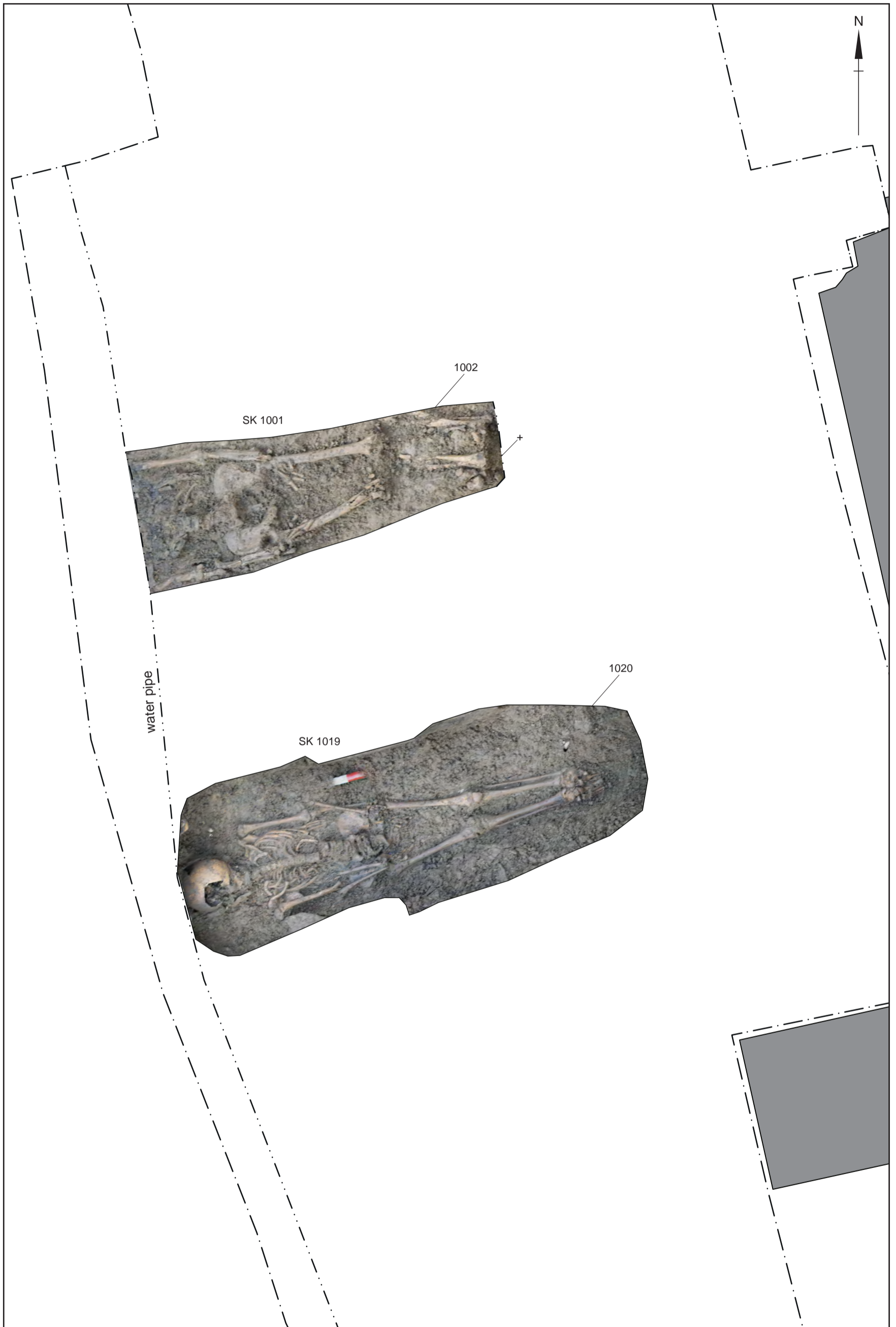
scale 1:100

Figure 3 Burials C1007 and C1011



scale 1:125

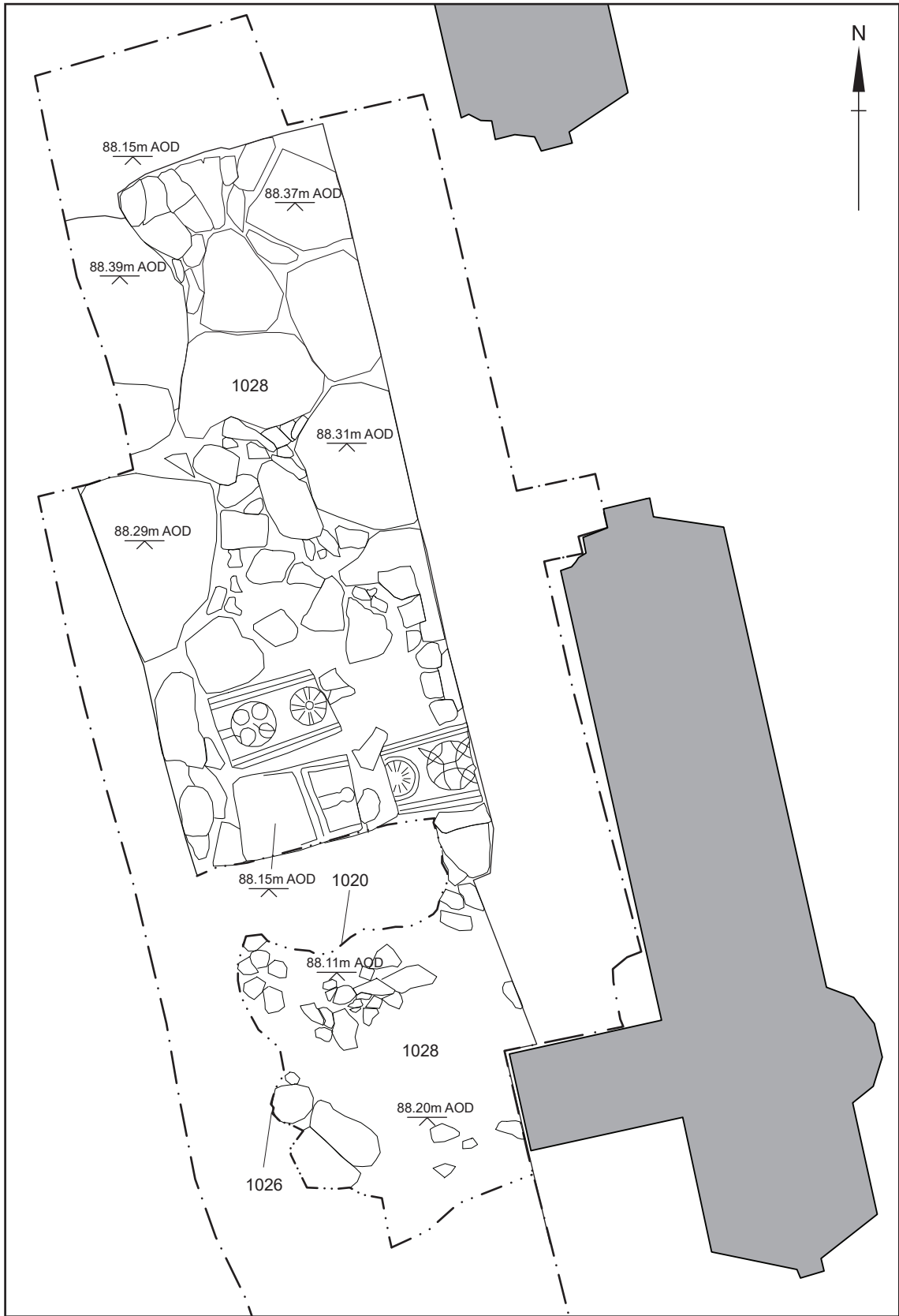
Figure 4 Burials 1002, 1014, 1017 and 1022



scale 1:125

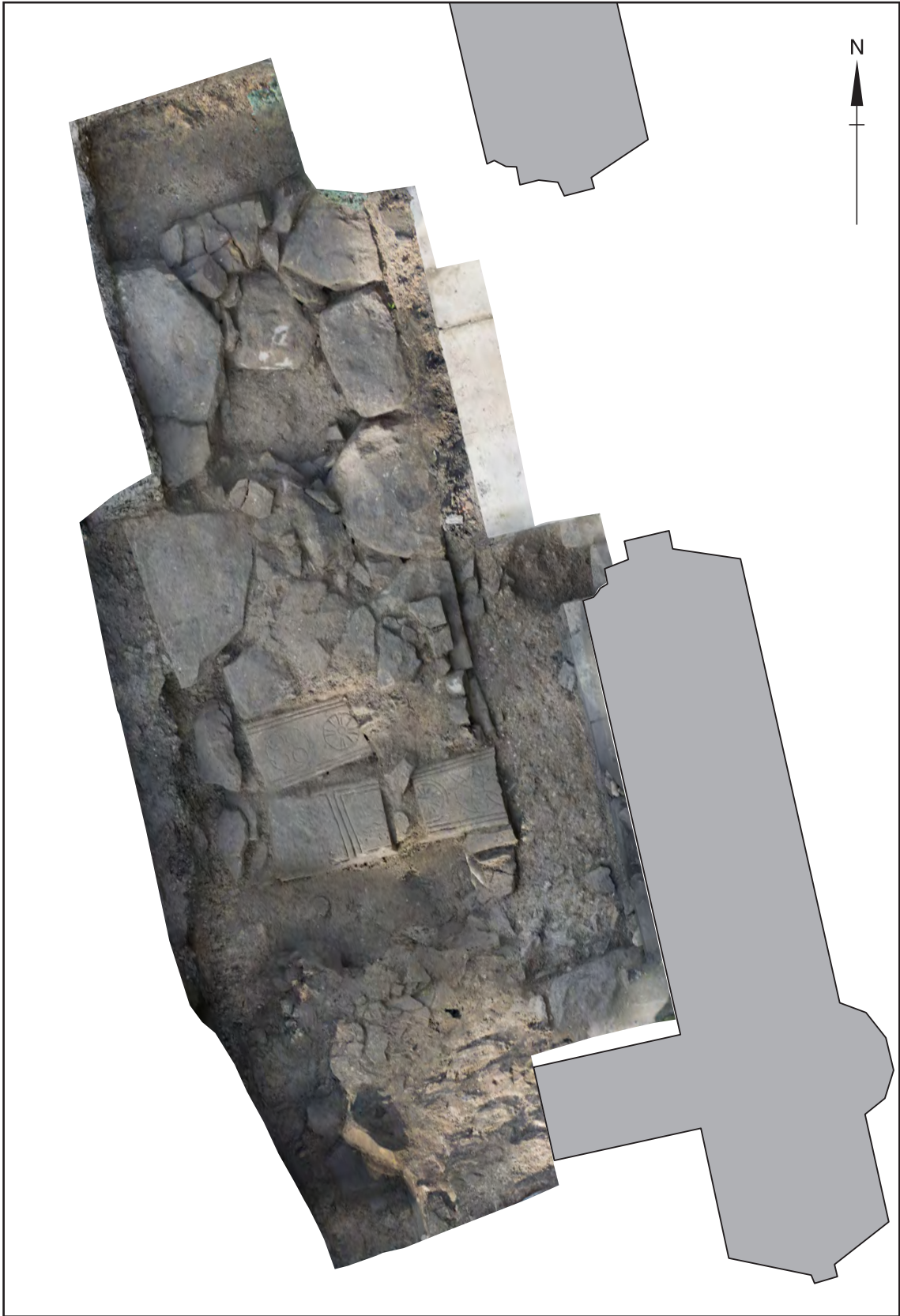
Figure 5 Burials 1002 and 1020





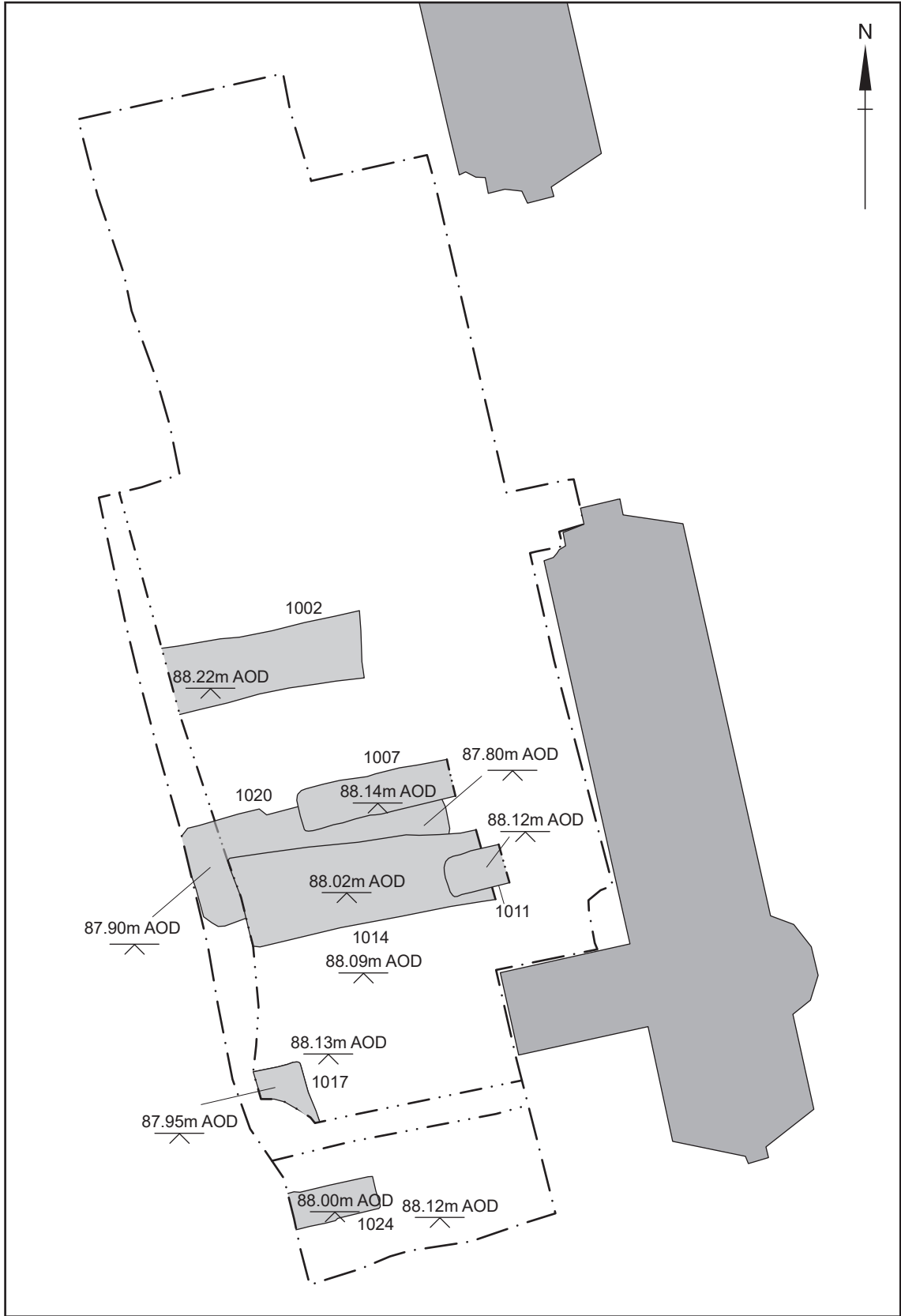
scale 1:300

Figure 6 Plan of foundation C1028



scale 1:300

Figure 7 Photogrammetry of foundation C1028



scale 1:350

Figure 8 Plan of all Burials

**APPENDIX 1 – INDEX TO ARCHIVE**

Item	Number of items
Context sheets	29
Original drawings	17
Digital photographs	100+
Report	1

**Table 1 Index to archive**

## APPENDIX 2 CONTEXT LIST

Context Number	AOD (m)	Description
1000	88.23	Grave fill. Friable light to mid- brownish grey sandy, clayey silt with frequent small rounded pebble and occasional charcoal fleck inclusions. Glass and pottery recovered
1001	88.23-88.20	Skeleton. Almost complete adult. Supine position with hands on top of thighs. Feet and skull missing. Poor preservation. Coffin nails and shroud pins present. Truncated at western end by modern water pipe.
1002	88.22-88.19	Grave cut. Rectangular in plan, aligned WSW/ESE, with near vertical sides. Truncated at top, sharpish break of slope at bottom. Flat base slightly sloping east. 1.18 x 0.38 x 0.02m+
1003	88.31	Pipe trench fill. Loose light brownish grey silty sand with frequent small to large angular/fragmented sandstone and occasional flecks of charcoal
1004	88.05-87.98	Pipe trench cut. Linear in plan, on a NNW/SSE alignment. Sharp break of slope at top, vertical sides and a sharp break of slope at bottom. Flat base. 2.75 x 0.6 x 0.45m
1005	88.19	Grave fill. Friable light to mid- brownish grey sandy, clayey silt with frequent small rounded pebble and occasional charcoal fleck inclusions
1006	88.23-88.19	Skeleton. Child. Supine position with hands on top of thighs. Large part of right-hand side missing. Otherwise good preservation. Coffin nails and shroud pins present
1007	88.14	Grave cut. Rectangular in plan, aligned WSW/ESE, with near vertical sides. Truncated at top, sharpish break of slope at bottom. Flat base. 0.63 x 0.18 x 0.09m
1008	88.39-87.09	Levelling layer. Mid- greyish brown, friable clayey silt with occasional charcoal flecks and small rounded pebbles, and very occasional small to medium sandstone fragments. 4.22 x 0.43m
1009	88.16	Grave fill. Friable light to mid- brownish grey sandy, clayey silt with moderate small angular sandstone fragments and occasional charcoal fleck inclusions
1010	88.16	Skeleton. Possible neonate. Supine position. Legs missing, truncated by cut 1004. Poor preservation. Coffin nails present
1011	88.12	Grave cut. Rectangular in plan, aligned WSW/ESE, with near vertical sides. Truncated at top, sharpish break of slope at bottom. Flat base. 0.26 x 0.25 x 0.04m
1012	88.17	Grave fill. Friable light to mid- brownish grey sandy, clayey silt with moderate small angular sandstone fragments and occasional charcoal fleck inclusions
1013	88.08-88.14	Skeleton. Almost complete adult. Supine position with hands on top of thighs. Feet and skull missing. Good preservation. Coffin nails and shroud pins present. Truncated at western end by modern water pipe and at eastern end by cut 1004.
1014	88.02	Grave cut. Rectangular in plan, aligned WSW/ESE, with near vertical sides. Truncated at top, sharpish break of slope at bottom. Flat base. 1.5 x 0.56 x 0.15m
1015	88.13	Grave fill. Friable light yellowish greyish brown sandy, clayey silt with moderate small angular sandstone fragments and occasional charcoal and CBM fleck inclusions
1016	88.07	Skeleton. The left foot and remains of left leg. Poor preservation. Severely

Context Number	AOD (m)	Description
		truncated by modern water pipe to the west and south.
1017	87.95	Grave cut. Irregular in plan, aligned WSW/ESE, with near vertical sides. Truncated at top, sharpish break of slope at bottom. Flat base. 0.38 x 0.28 x 0.18m
1018	88.13	Grave fill. Friable light to mid- grey clayey silt with occasional charcoal and rounded pebble inclusions
1019	88.06-87.91	Skeleton. Almost complete teen/child – lack of fusion between long bones and epiphysial. Supine position with hands on top of thighs. Good preservation. Coffin nails and shroud pins present.
1020	87.90-87.80	Grave cut. Rectangular with rounded ends, aligned WSW/ESE, with near vertical sides. Sharp break at top, sharpish break of slope at bottom. Flat base, sloping east. 1.6 x 0.57 x 0.33m
1021	88.12	Grave fill. Friable light yellowish-brown clayey silt with occasional charcoal and small angular pebble inclusions
1022	88.07	Skeleton. Small infant. Supine position with poor preservation. Skull, part of left arm, most of legs and feet are missing. Truncated at south-west end by modern water pipe. Shroud pins present.
1023	-	Coffin stain. Firm dark brownish- grey sandy clayey silt. Eight associated coffin nails also present.
1024	88.00	Grave cut. Rectangular with rounded ends, aligned WSW/ESE, with near vertical sides. Sharp break at top, sharpish break of slope at bottom. Flat base, sloping east. 0.54 x 0.23 x 0.12m
1025	88.11	Linear fill. Soft, mid- grey brown silty clay containing disarticulated human bone
1026	87.90	Cut. Irregular linear in plan, sharp break at top, vertical sides, sharpish break of slope at bottom, flattish base. 3.31m x 0.6m x 0.21m
1027	-	Unsecure skull found on site in bag, unknown origin
1028	88.39-88.11	Stone foundation. Constructed from sandstone, predominantly unworked apart from around 6 large stones located at northern end with roughly hewn straight edging along one side. In addition, three carved stone fragments were also present. The stones measured a maximum of 1 x 0.68+ x 0.24m and minimum of around 0.10 x 0.11 x 0.10m. At the southern end of the foundation were from tightly packed small to medium sandstone fragments, randomly arranged, and extending under the church's own foundation. The foundation was loosely mortared together with a light-yellow brown slightly silty sand with chalky limestone inclusions. The total measurement of the foundation was 6.26 x 1.6m x 0.24m
1029	88.15-87.90	Natural. Soft, orange/yellow brown clay

Table 2 Context list



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