

**A report on the monitoring of ground
investigations within the precinct of St John's
Abbey and on the site of the Roman circus.
Alienated Land Area B1b (Flagstaff
Compound), Colchester Garrison, Essex
September 2013**



**report prepared by
Adam Wightman**

On behalf of RPS and Taylor Wimpey

CAT project ref.: 13/09h
NGR: TL 9974 2463 (c)



Colchester Archaeological Trust
Roman Circus House,
Off Circular Road North,
Colchester,
Essex CO2 7GZ

tel.: 07436273304

email: archaeologists@catuk.org

CAT Report 730
October 2013

Introduction (Fig 1)

This is a summary report on an archaeological watching brief undertaken during site investigations at Taylor Wimpey's Garrison Alienated Land (GAL) redevelopment Area B1b (Flagstaff Compound), Colchester Garrison, Colchester, Essex (NGR TL 9974 2463).

The ground investigations were undertaken by Merebrook Consulting Ltd in September 2013 in advance of the proposed redevelopment of the site. All groundworks were subject to archaeological monitoring due to the sites location within the southern and western part of the walled precinct of St John's Abbey (SAM no 26307) and the presence of the eastern end of the Roman circus (SAM no 46327) (Fig 1).

Eleven test-pits of varying sizes were excavated using a mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket. Seven of the test-pits (TP2, TP5-TP10) were excavated to obtain information on ground conditions, the presence of contamination and infiltration characteristics. Three test-pits (TP1, TP3 and TP4) were excavated to determine the level of survival of the Roman circus remains and the arrangement of service runs where they were believed to cross the circus walls. One test-pit (TP11) was excavated for a soakage test. Following the completion of the soakage test, the excavation area was extended to 5.5m x 5.5m in size to ascertain whether any archaeological features or deposits survived in the area of a proposed soakaway.

In addition, seven windowless sample holes (WS01- WS07) and three hand-auger pits (HA01-HA03) were excavated by geotechnical engineers to assess shallow ground conditions and obtain soil samples (Fig 1). All ten of these holes were hand-excavated to a depth of 1m below modern ground level under archaeological supervision.

Results

For each test-pit, an archaeological summary, plan and section drawing follows below. A table detailing the depth of deposits identified in the uppermost 1m of the windowless sample holes and hand-auger pits is also included in this report. In the identification of archaeological contexts, the context number is prefixed by either 'F' indicating a feature or 'L' indicating a layer.

Test-pit 1 (TP1): summary (Figs 1-3)

Test-pit 1 was excavated to determine the condition of the Roman circus remains beneath a roadway and to examine the possibility of laying new services along the lines of old ones since the archaeological remains in these places are likely to have been destroyed. The Roman circus remains were expected to take the form of two parallel, east-west orientated foundations which supported the outer and inner walls of the seating area known as the *cavea* (CAT report 412, 1345). Throughout TP1, modern tarmac, stone and crushed brick (L1) overlaid a thin layer of buried topsoil (L2) (Fig 3: Sx4).

In the northern half of TP1, fragments of Roman mortar and greensand stone were encountered at a depth of c 500mm below modern ground level in line with the projected position of the outer *cavea* wall (Fig 2a). Three modern service trenches cut the mortar and greensand deposit in this location (two deep drainage pipes and an electricity cable) (Fig 2b). There appeared to be a fourth service trench in this location, but no service could be located. It is probable that a modern pit (F16) similar to those identified to the north during an evaluation by CAT in 2007 (Trench 23, F67 and F68; CAT Report 438), existed in this location (Fig 2a). By examining the section through the mortar and greensand deposit where it was cut by F16, it was possible to ascertain that the foundation of the outer wall of the *cavea* had been completely robbed-out in this location (F11), probably sometime in the 12th or early 13th centuries (Cat Report 412, 1345). The robber trench measured 1.35m in width, indicating that this part of the foundation must have incorporated an external buttress. A thin spread of circus-derived debris from the robbing of the foundation was identified to the north of the robber trench (F12).

A section of the service trench to the south of F16 was hand-excavated to allow a hypothetical section across the robber trench (F11) to be recorded (Figs 2 & 3: Sx1).

Roughly 4.4m south of the southern edge of the outer *cavea* foundation, two small triangular patches of mortar and greensand (F13) were identified. F13 was 470mm below modern ground level (Fig 3: Sx2) in line with the projected position of the inner *cavea* foundation (Fig 2a). The remains of the inner *cavea* foundation were truncated by two service trenches and a concrete inspection chamber (Fig 2b). The modern backfill along the western side of the inspection chamber was hand-excavated to allow the easternmost part of F13 to be examined in section (Fig 3: Sx3). This revealed that the foundation of the inner *cavea* wall had also been completely robbed-out in this location.

The excavation of TP1 did not continue to the south as it was assumed that the service trenches would have destroyed the southern edge of the robber trench (F13). Instead, an area to the west of the inspection chamber was excavated to try to locate the southern edge of the robber trench (Fig 2a). A large spread of mortar and greensand over 2m in width was identified in this area at a depth of 375mm-500mm below modern ground level (Fig 2a & Plate 1). By excavating the modern backfill from a service trench (Plate 1), it was possible to distinguish the southern edge of a deep feature (F14) as well as a shallow spread of circus-derived debris (F15) immediately to the south (Fig 3: Sx4). The southern edge of F14 was located 0.8m to the south of the northern edge of robber trench F13, within the parameters for the width of the inner *cavea* foundation robber trench seen elsewhere around the circus (0.6m-0.9m; CAT Report 412, 1345). However, F14 was considerably deeper than the robber trench immediately to the west (F13) and would have been unusually deep for the inner *cavea* foundation. A more likely explanation is that F14 is the southern edge of a large post-medieval pit which contained circus-derived debris and was identified during the 2007 evaluation (F69; CAT Report 438) (Fig 2a).



Plate 1 TP1 southern end (F14 & F15), facing north.

Test-pit 2 (TP2): summary (Figs 1 & 4)

TP2 was located within the track of the Roman circus and to the south of the St John's Abbey precinct wall (Fig 1). Modern hardstanding (L1) overlaid a deep deposit of buried topsoil (L2) (Fig 4b). The natural orange sand (L3) was uncovered at a depth of c 950mm below modern ground level (Fig 4b).

Two features were identified in TP2 cut into the natural sand (L3), a large post-medieval/modern ?pit (F3) and a modern sub-circular pit (F4) (Fig 4a). F3 had a mid-grey/brown sandy-silt fill identical to the overlying topsoil. Peg-tile fragments (3@91.6g), clay pipe stems (2@11g) and an iron nail (22g) were recovered from F3 (but were not retained). F4 had a dark grey fill and contained modern bottles and brick fragments.

Where the buried topsoil remained seemingly undisturbed by post-medieval/modern truncations, no evidence of the arena surface of the Roman circus was distinguishable (Fig 4b).

Test-pit 3 (TP3): summary (Figs 1 & 5)

As with Test-pit 1, Test-pit 3 was excavated to determine the condition of the Roman circus remains in this area and to examine the possibility of following service lines during the installation of new services. Modern hardstanding (L1) overlaid a buried topsoil (L2) which, in turn, overlaid the natural orange sand (L3) (Fig 5b).

In the northern end of TP3, fragments of Roman mortar, greensand stone and Roman brick (F11) were encountered at a depth of between 700mm and 800mm below modern ground level in line with the projected position of the outer *cavea* wall (Fig 5a). One modern service was situated above F11 and another crossed the edge of the trench obliquely and truncated the uppermost 150mm of F11 (Figs 5a & 5b). A small section of F11 was hand-excavated (Fig 5a). This confirmed that the foundation of the outer *cavea* wall had been completely robbed-out in this location (Fig 5b). Three fragments of Roman brick (211g) were recovered from the excavated section. The northern edge of the robber trench was not uncovered in TP3, but the exposed section was already 1.15m in width suggesting that this part of the foundation may have also incorporated an external buttress. The natural sand (L3) was uncovered at a depth of 790mm below modern ground level.

As the excavation of TP3 continued to the south, it became apparent that the modern drain that was believed to cross the line of the circus foundations in this location was actually located further to the west. As it was not possible to ascertain whether the drain crossed the line of the outer *cavea* wall in this location, the excavation of TP3 ceased before the remains of the inner *cavea* wall were exposed (Fig 5a).

Test-pit 4 (TP4): summary (Figs 1 & 6)

TP4 was excavated to ascertain whether any remains of the inner wall of the *cavea* survived in this location (Fig 1).

Beneath a layer of modern topsoil 260mm thick (L4), a spread of large greensand pieces was identified in the location where the inner wall of the *cavea* was expected to cross TP4 (Fig 6a). To try to ascertain the context of the greensand pieces, an existing service trench to the south was hand-excavated and this section was subsequently extended northwards (Fig 6a). This revealed that the concentration of greensand pieces was located within a shallow pit (F6) which also contained modern brick fragments (Fig 6b). Furthermore, it was apparent that F6 cut a deep soil deposit containing residual circus-derived debris which is likely to be a large post-medieval quarry (F10) which was identified during the 2007 evaluation (CAT Report 438). Hand excavation into the quarry ceased at a depth of 650mm below modern ground level.

Test-pit 5 (TP5): summary (Figs 1 & 7)

The excavation of TP5 began at the eastern end (Fig 7a), where a modern pit (F17) and two electricity cables were encountered beneath a modern topsoil layer c 300mm thick (L4). As a result, the excavation of TP5 was continued to the west where a third electricity cable and a deposit of building materials in loose mortar (F5) were uncovered 400mm below the modern ground level (Fig 7a). As well as modern brick and peg-tile fragments, F5 also contained pieces of greensand, septaria and Roman brick (Fig 7b). It is possible that F5 may be associated with the modern repairs to the standing remains of the abbey precinct wall to the north-east and north-west (Fig 1).

Test-pit 6 (TP6): summary (Figs 1 & 8)

Modern hardstanding (L1) overlaid a buried topsoil (L2) which, in turn, overlaid the natural orange sand (L3) (Fig 8b). Two features were identified in TP6 at a depth of c 550mm below modern ground level. F1 was circular in shape and was either a pit or a well (F1) and F2 was either a large pit or a linear feature (Fig 8a). Both F1 and F2 had mid grey/brown sandy-silt fills which contained fragments of peg-tile and oyster shell. A sherd of post-medieval stoneware (early 18th century or later) was recovered from the upper fill of F1.

Test-pit 7 (TP7): summary (Figs 1 & 9)

Just over 400mm of topsoil (L4) overlaid an extensive midden deposit (F8) containing a high density of oyster shells in a brown/grey sandy-silt fill (Fig 9b). The edges of the

midden were not visible in the trench which indicates that it extended beyond the test-pit in all directions (Fig 9a). F8 is probably part of the same medieval/post-medieval midden identified 7m to the north during the 2007 evaluation (Trench 11, F126; CAT Report 428). F8 was cut by a small pit (F9) which had a dark grey sandy-silt fill and contained sherds of modern pottery and peg-tile (Figs 9a & 9b).

Test-pit 8 (TP8): summary (Figs 1 & 10)

Roughly 400mm of modern topsoil (L4) overlaid a deep deposit of modern made-ground consisting of large pieces of stone, brick and a layer of compressed tarmac pieces (L6) (Fig 10b). At a depth of 1.2m below modern ground level, a brick drainage gully with a metal grill was encountered (Fig 10a). The drain is probably associated with the Victorian and later barracks and road layout and is probably the same drain that was identified 12m to the south in the 2007 evaluation (Trench 9, F120; CAT Report 438).

Test-pit 9 (TP9): summary (Figs 1 & 11)

In TP9, 300mm of modern topsoil overlaid a modern surface (F18) made of stone and brick pressed into tarmac (Fig 11b). Due to the solidity of the surface, the excavation of TP9 ceased at this depth.

Test-pit 10 (TP10): summary (Figs 1 & 12)

Between 500mm and 650mm of modern topsoil (L4) overlaid a buried topsoil layer (L5) and a large pit or linear feature (F7) (Fig 12a). F7 had a loose grey/brown sandy-silt fill which contained many oyster shell inclusions (Fig 12b). F7 cut the natural sand (L3), but it was uncertain whether it cut the buried topsoil (L5) or whether it was overlain by it (Fig 12b). A rim sherd from a medieval pot (Fabric 20, 28g) indicates that F7 is probably associated with activity within St John's Abbey in the 12th or 13th century. Other finds from F7 included mammal bones/teeth from pig, sheep and cattle (13@140g), bird bones (4@1g), fish bones (5@5g), a re-used Roman brick (208g) and a re-used flue tile fragment from a Roman hypocaust (253.3g). A piece of greensand (258g) and an oyster shell (5g) were also collected but were not retained.

Test-pit 11 (TP11)/soakaway: summary (Figs 1 & 13)

TP11 was located within the arena of the Roman circus (Fig 1). Modern hardstanding (L1) overlaid a buried topsoil (L2) which, in turn, overlaid the natural orange sand (L3) (Fig 13b). The natural sand was uncovered at a depth of between 750mm and 850mm below modern ground level. No surviving surface of the arena was discernible during the excavation of TP11. This supports the theory that the arena was a dirt track which is now indistinguishable from the soil accumulation which overlies it (CAT Report 412, 1348).

TP11 was excavated to a depth of c 4m to facilitate a water soakage test. The test-pit was then backfilled before the excavation area was extended to ascertain whether any archaeological features or deposits survived in the area of a proposed soakaway (Fig 13a). A sherd from a Roman storage jar (82g) and a sherd of medieval pottery (Fabric 20, 6g) were recovered from the accumulated soil (L2) in the area of the soakaway. However, no archaeological features or deposits were identified (Plate 2).



Plate 2 The area of the proposed soakaway, facing south-west.

Windowless sample holes (WS01-WS07) and hand auger pits (HA01-HA03) (Fig 1)

No significant archaeological layers or deposits were identified during the excavation of the c 400mmx400mm holes to facilitate these ground investigations. The table below details the approximate thickness of the three layers distinguished during the hand-excavation of the uppermost 1m by the site engineers from Merebrook Consulting Ltd.

	L1 (Modern hardstanding)	L2 (topsoil/subsoil)	L3 (natural)
WS01	110mm	840mm	50mm
WS02	280mm	440mm	280mm
WS03	150mm	900mm	50mm
WS04	380mm	550mm	50mm
WS05	120mm	880mm	
WS06	280mm	820mm	
WS07	400mm	500mm	100mm
HA01		300mm	600mm
HA02		720mm	280mm
HA03		1000mm	

Acknowledgements

CAT would like to thank Taylor Wimpey for commissioning and funding the project. The site work was undertaken by Merebrook Consulting Ltd under the supervision of CAT archaeologists A Wightman and M Baister. The digital survey was carried out by C Lister and the pottery was identified by H Brooks.

The project was monitored by Rob Masefield for RPS, Martin Winter for Colchester Borough Council and Debbie Priddy for English Heritage.

References

Note: all CAT fieldwork reports are available online in .pdf format at <http://cat.essex.ac.uk>

- | | | |
|----------------|------|--|
| CAT Report 412 | 2011 | Report on the archaeological investigations carried out on Areas C1, C2, E, J1, O, Q and S1 of the Alienated Land, Colchester Garrison, including the Time Team trenches and the Alienated Land watching brief: May 2004-January 2005, unpublished CAT archive report, by L Pooley, B Holloway, P Crummy, D Shimmin, H Brooks and R Masfield |
| CAT Report 438 | 2008 | Stage 1b archaeological evaluation, Alienated Land Area B1b, Colchester Garrison, Colchester, Essex July-September 2007, unpublished CAT archive report, by H Brooks, B Holloway and R Masfield |

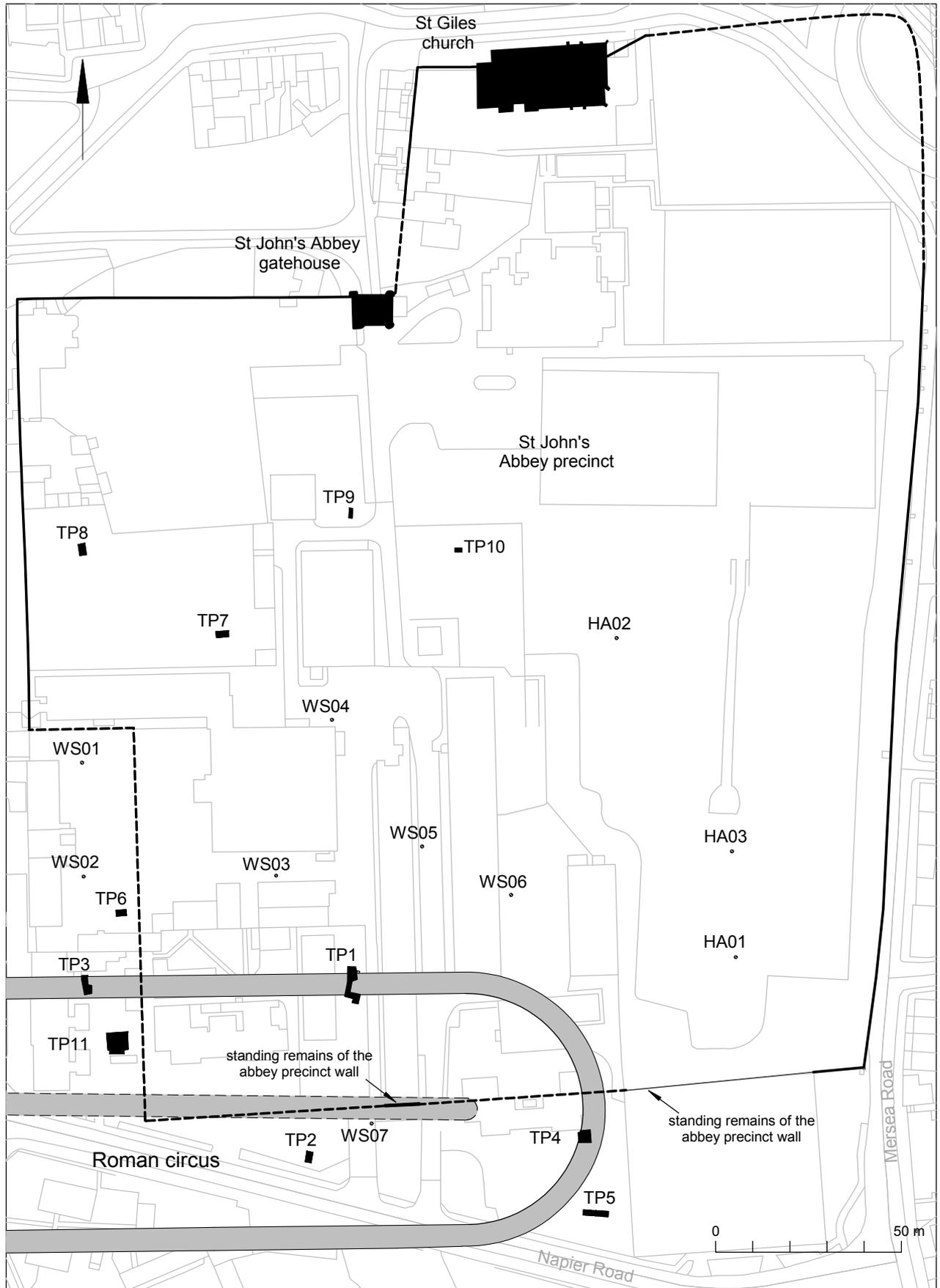
© Colchester Archaeological Trust 2013



Colchester Archaeological Trust

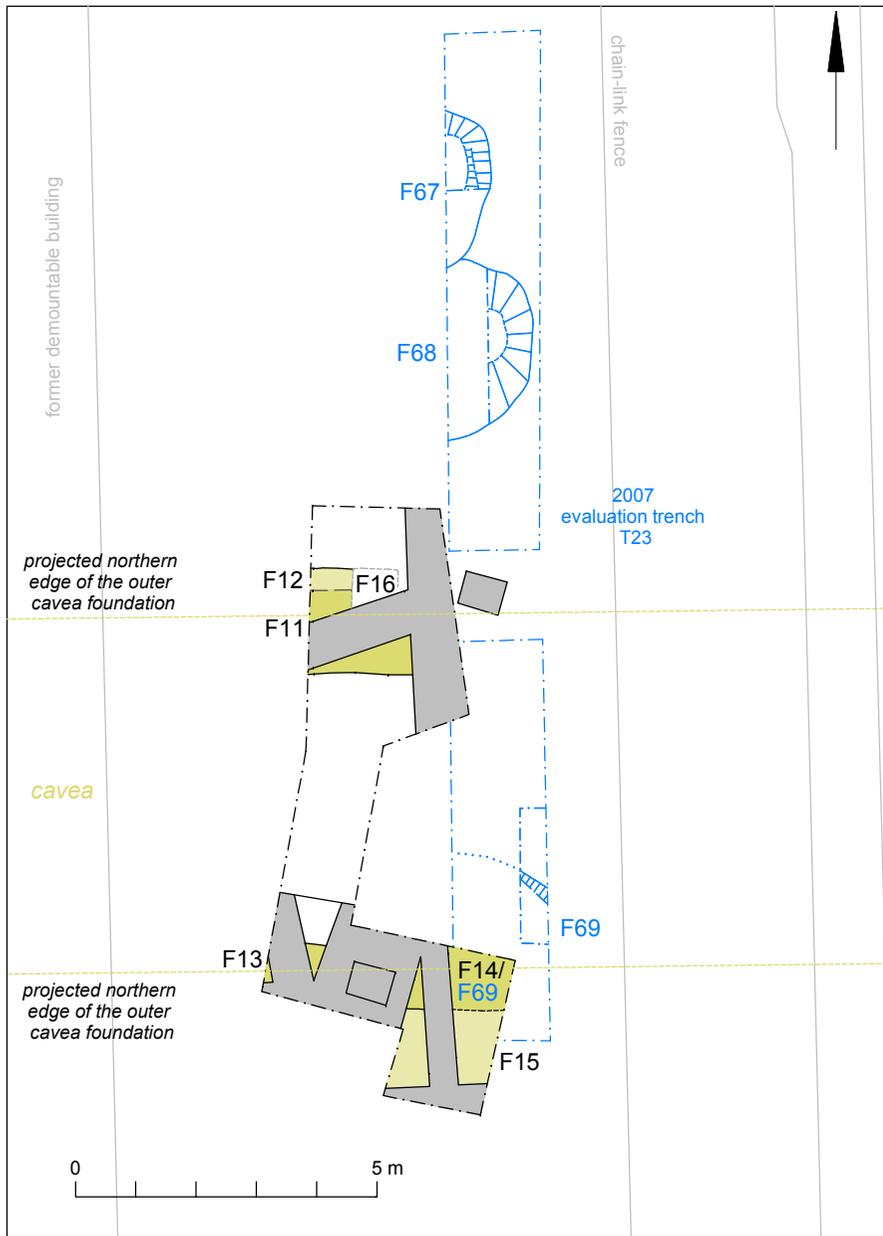
Roman Circus House,
off Circular Road North
Colchester,
Essex CO2 7GZ

tel.: 07436273304
email: archaeologists@catuk.org



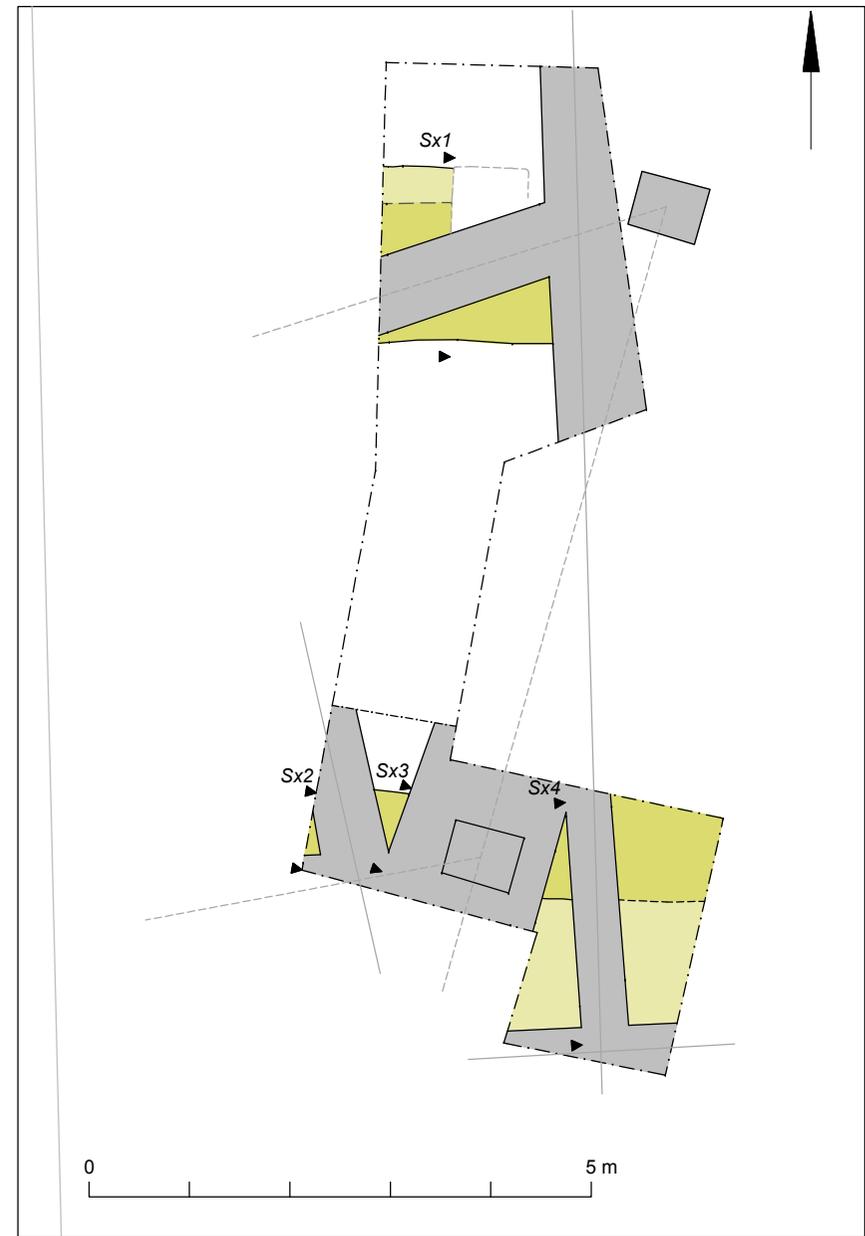
Copyright Colchester Archaeological Trust. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100039294.

Fig 1 Location of the test-pits TP1-TP11, the windowless samples WS01-WS07 and the hand-auger pits HA01-HA03.



© Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100039294.

Fig 2a Plan of TP1 showing the areas of Roman circus-derived debris (possible robber trench remains are shaded dark yellow and circus rubble spreads are light yellow) and the 2007 evaluation trench (shown in blue).



© Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100039294.

Fig 2b Plan of TP1 showing the modern service trenches (shaded grey) and the locations of the section drawings (Fig 3).

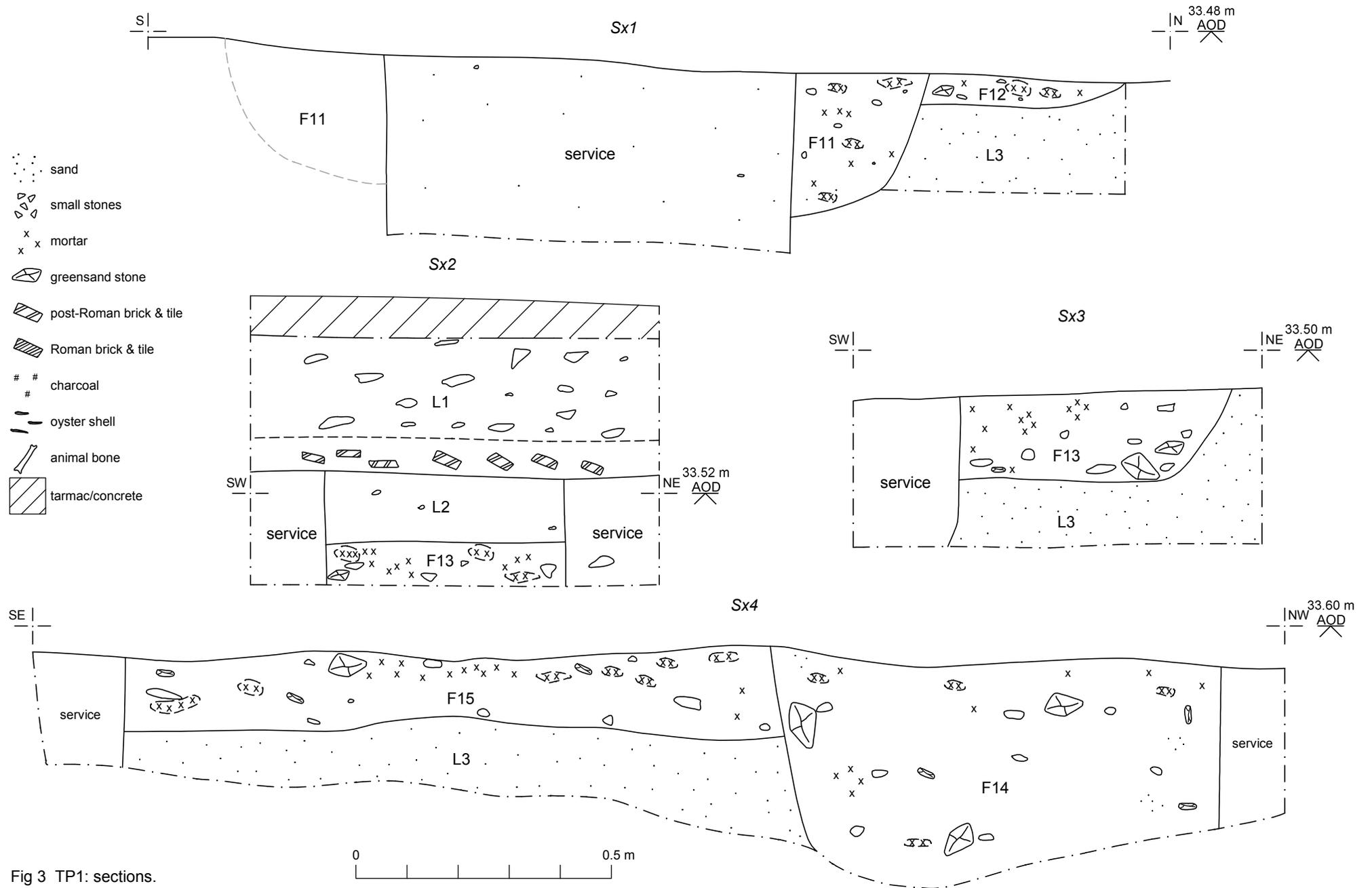


Fig 3 TP1: sections.

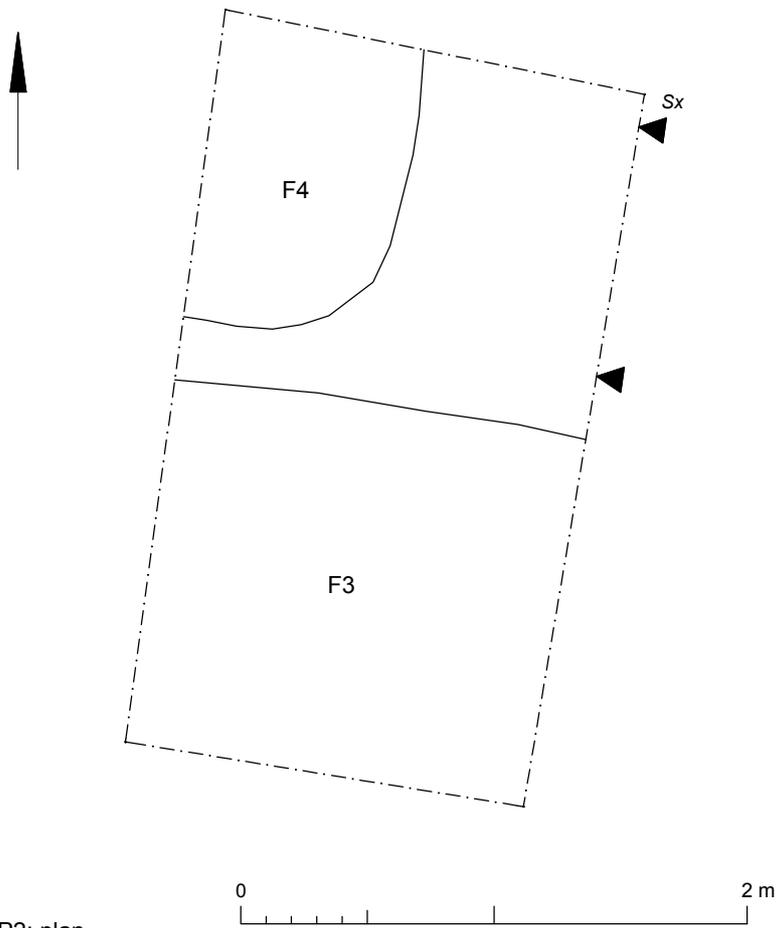


Fig 4a TP2: plan.

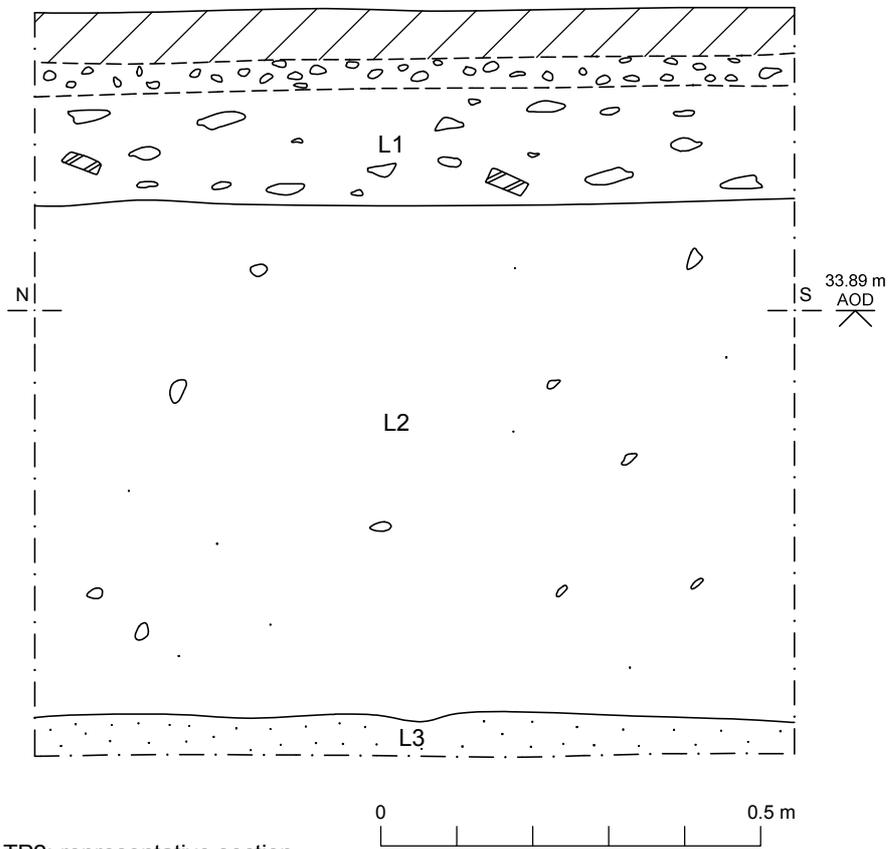


Fig 4b TP2: representative section.

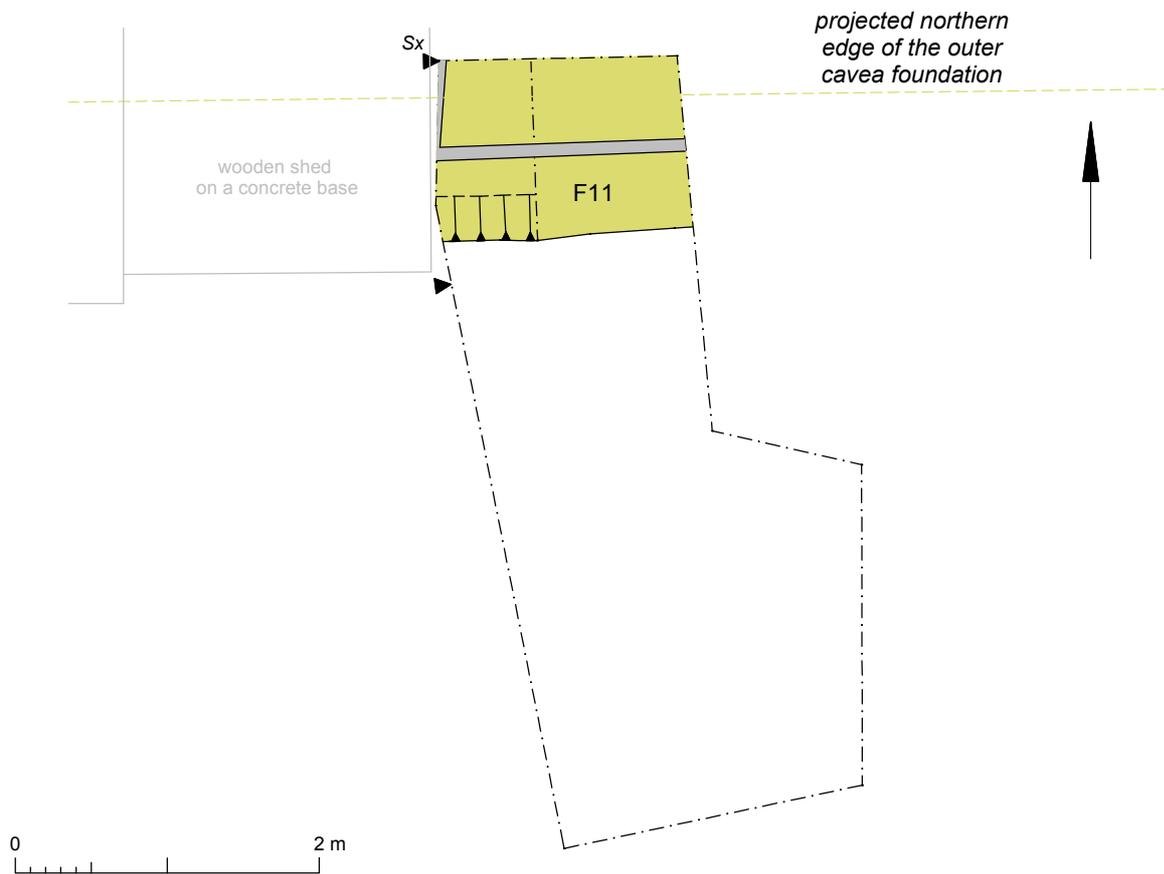


Fig 5a Plan of TP3 showing the robbed out remains of the outer wall foundation (shaded yellow) and the modern services (shaded grey).

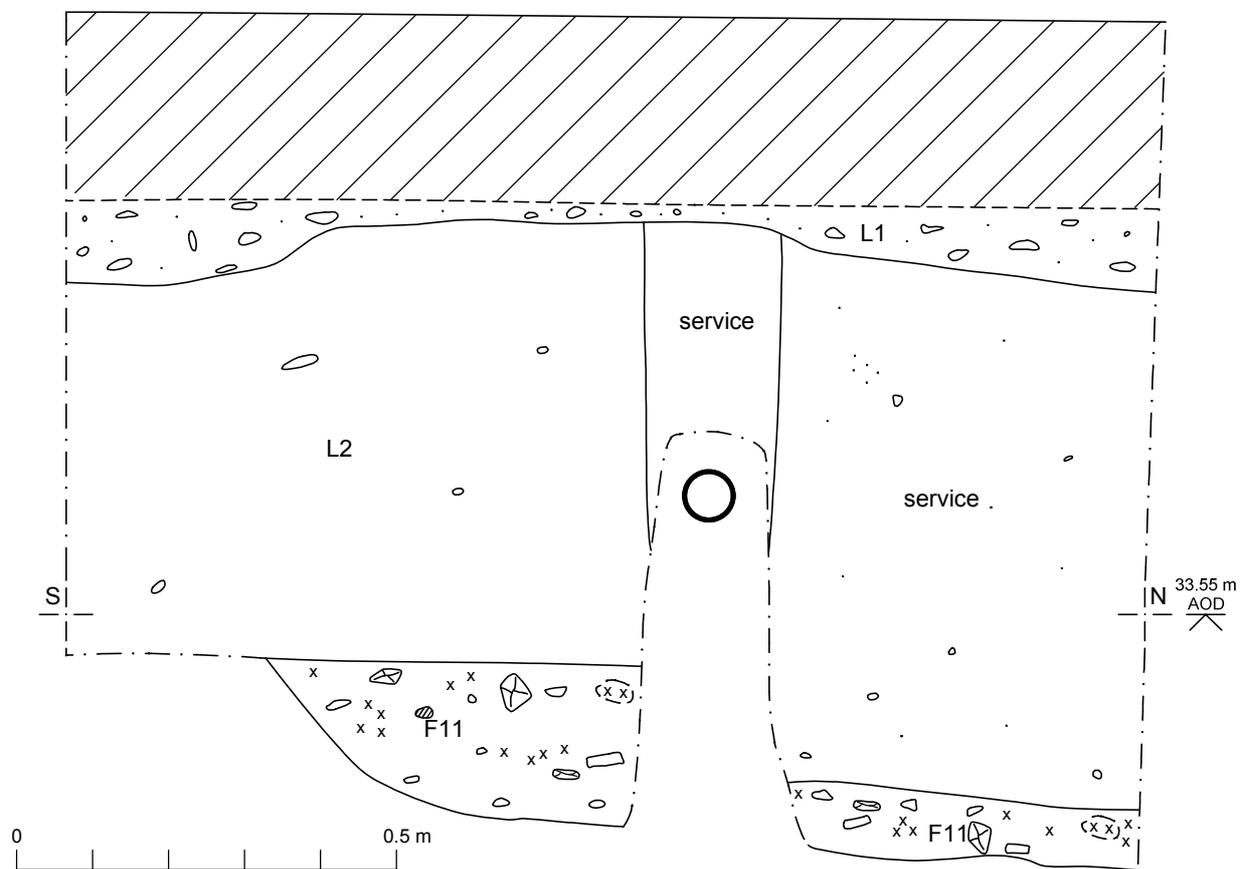


Fig 5b TP3: representative section.

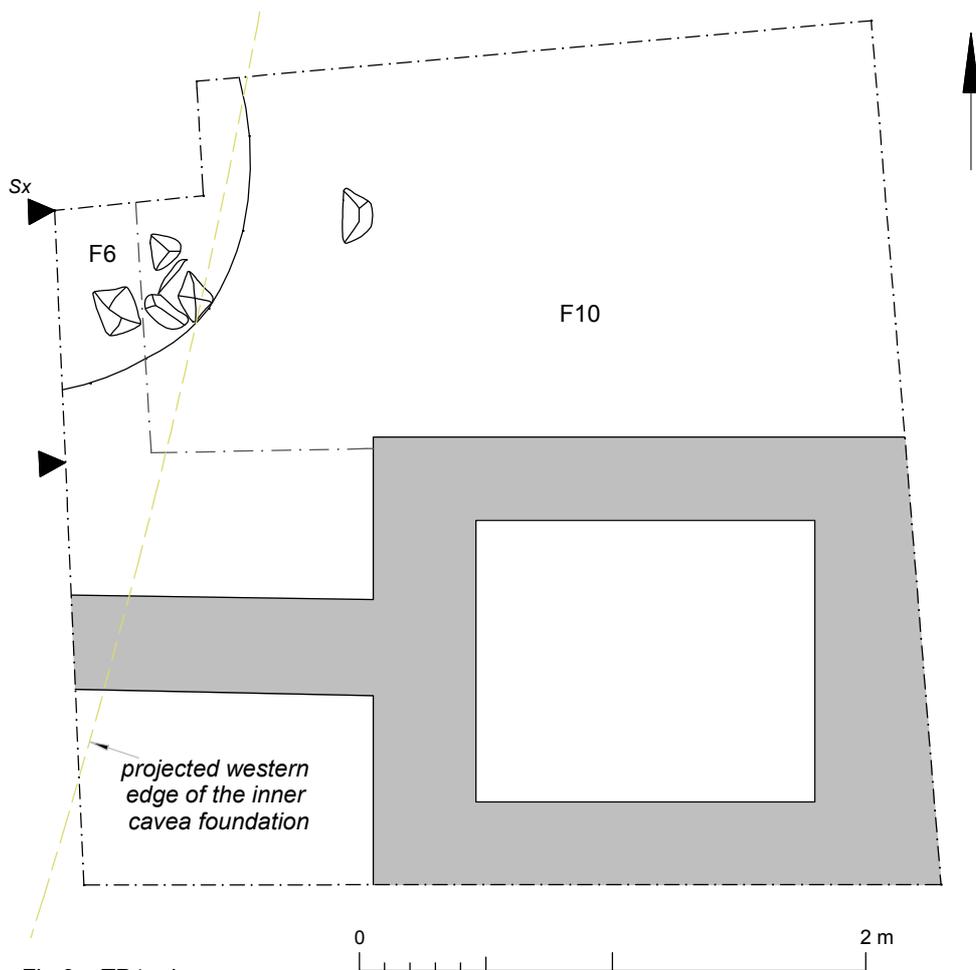


Fig 6a TP4: plan.

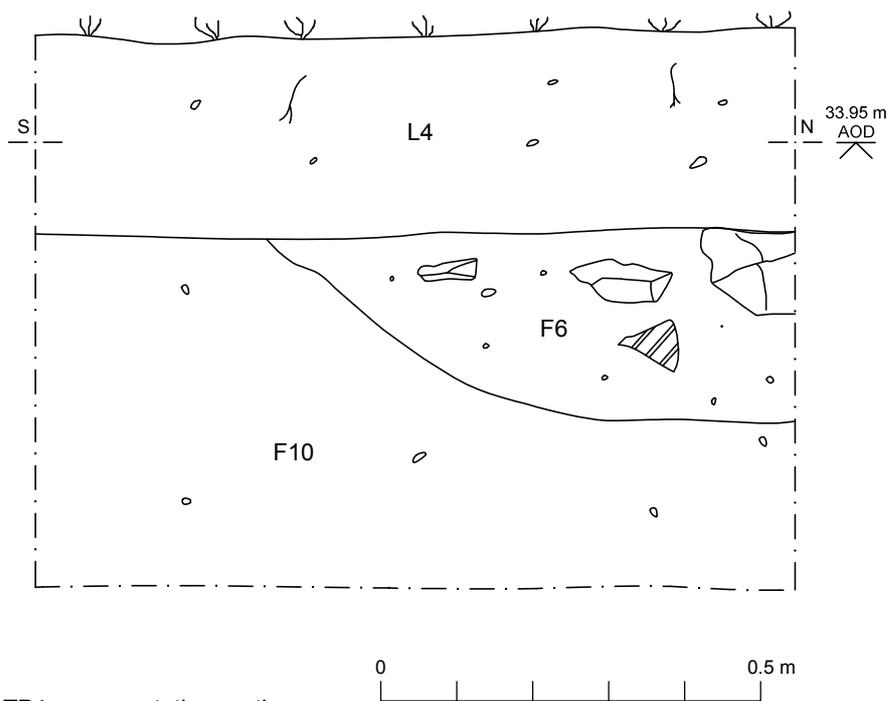


Fig 6b TP4: representative section.

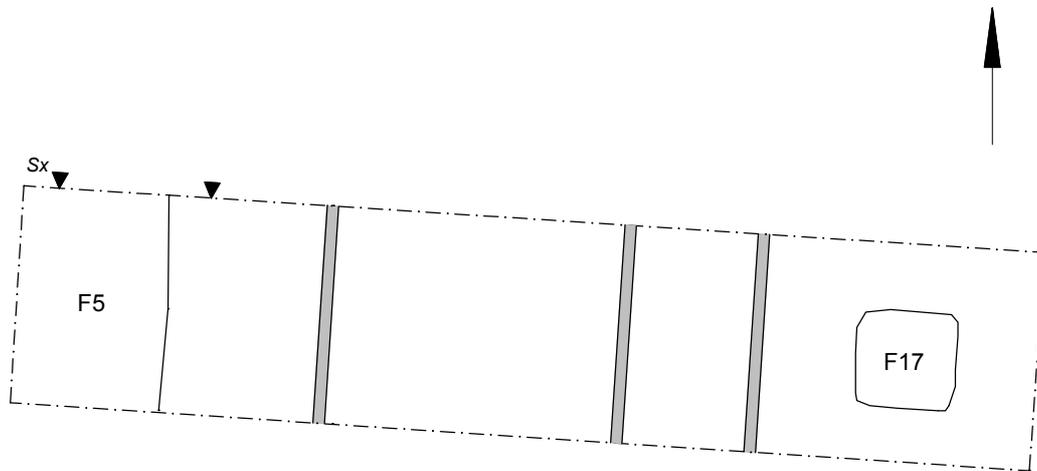


Fig 7a TP5: plan.

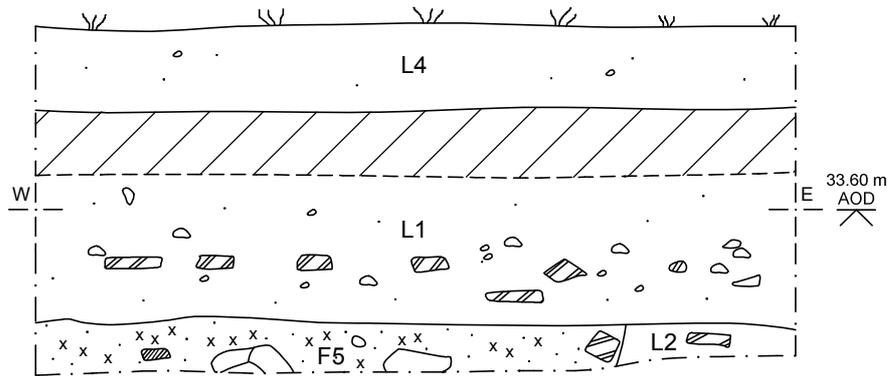


Fig 7b TP5: representative section.



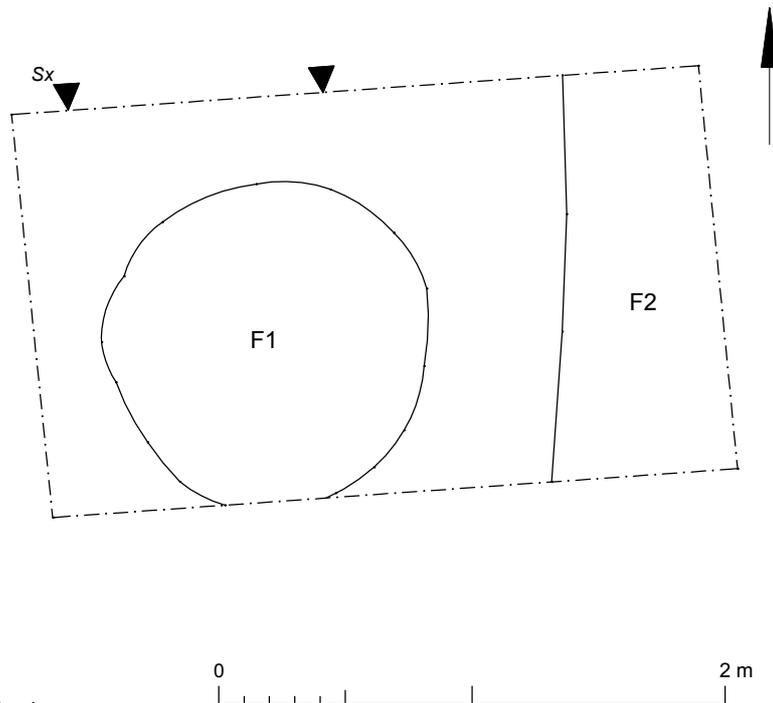


Fig 8a TP6: plan.

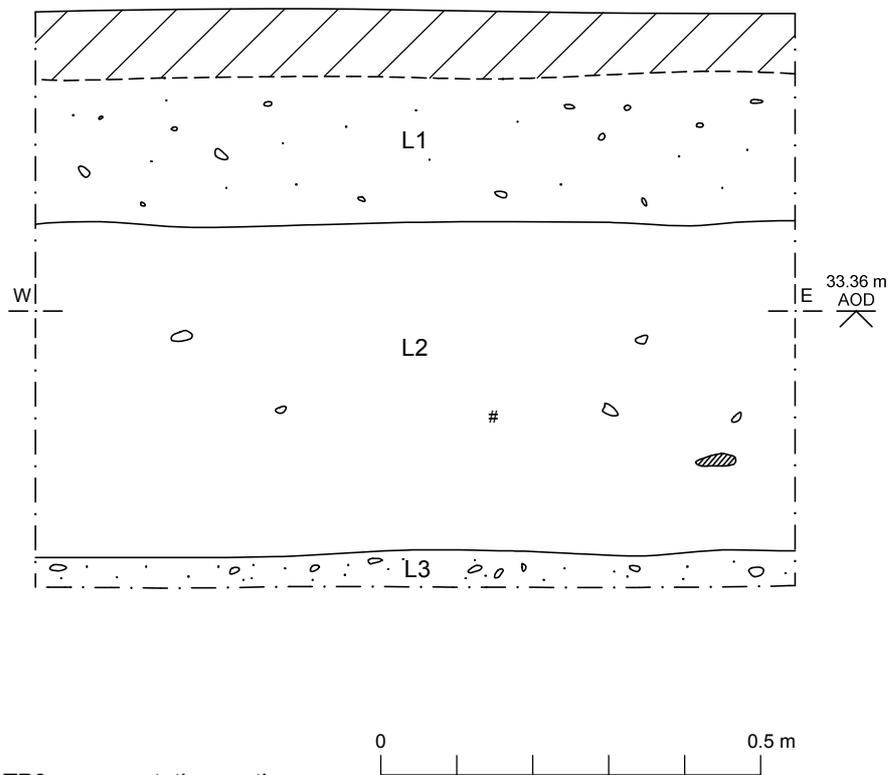


Fig 8b TP6: representative section.

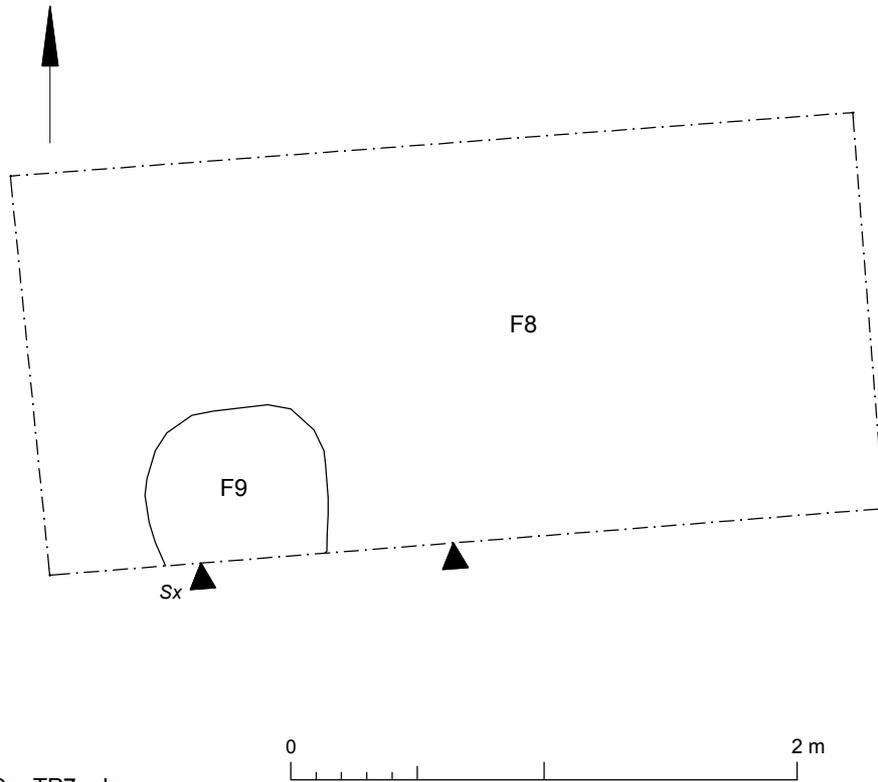


Fig 9a TP7: plan.

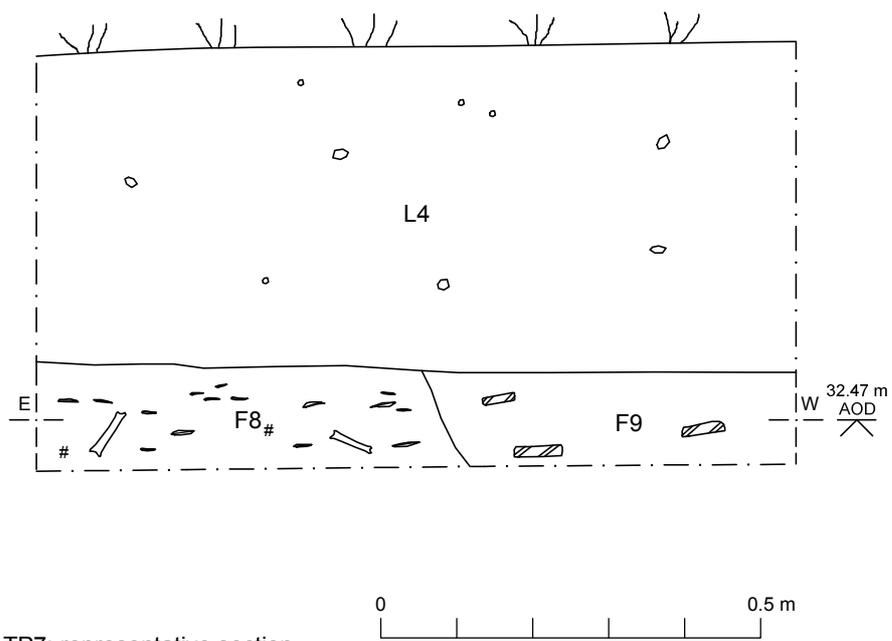


Fig 9b TP7: representative section.

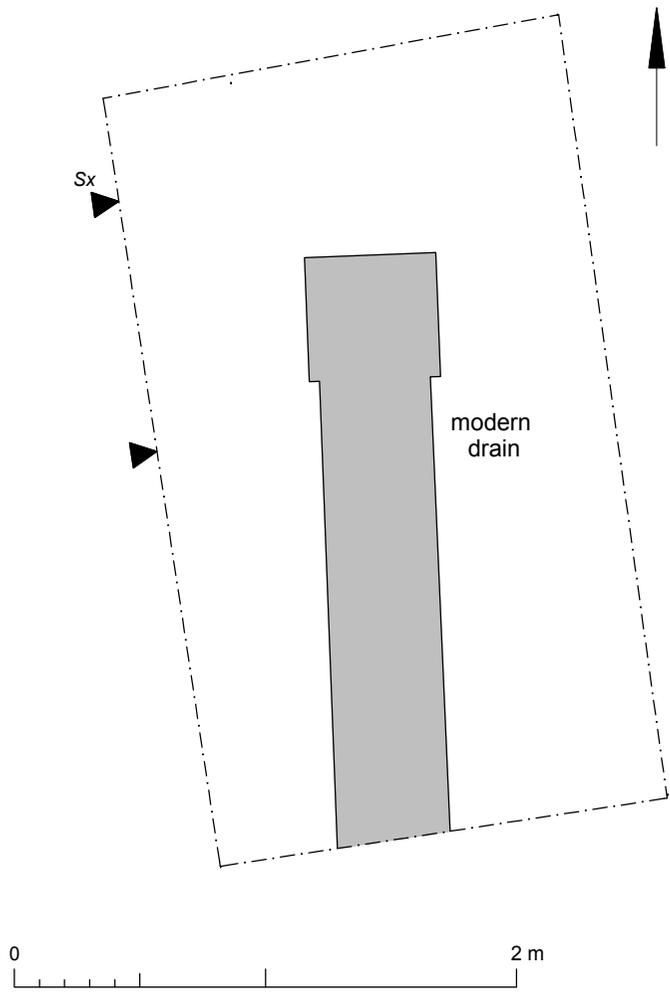


Fig 10a TP8: plan.

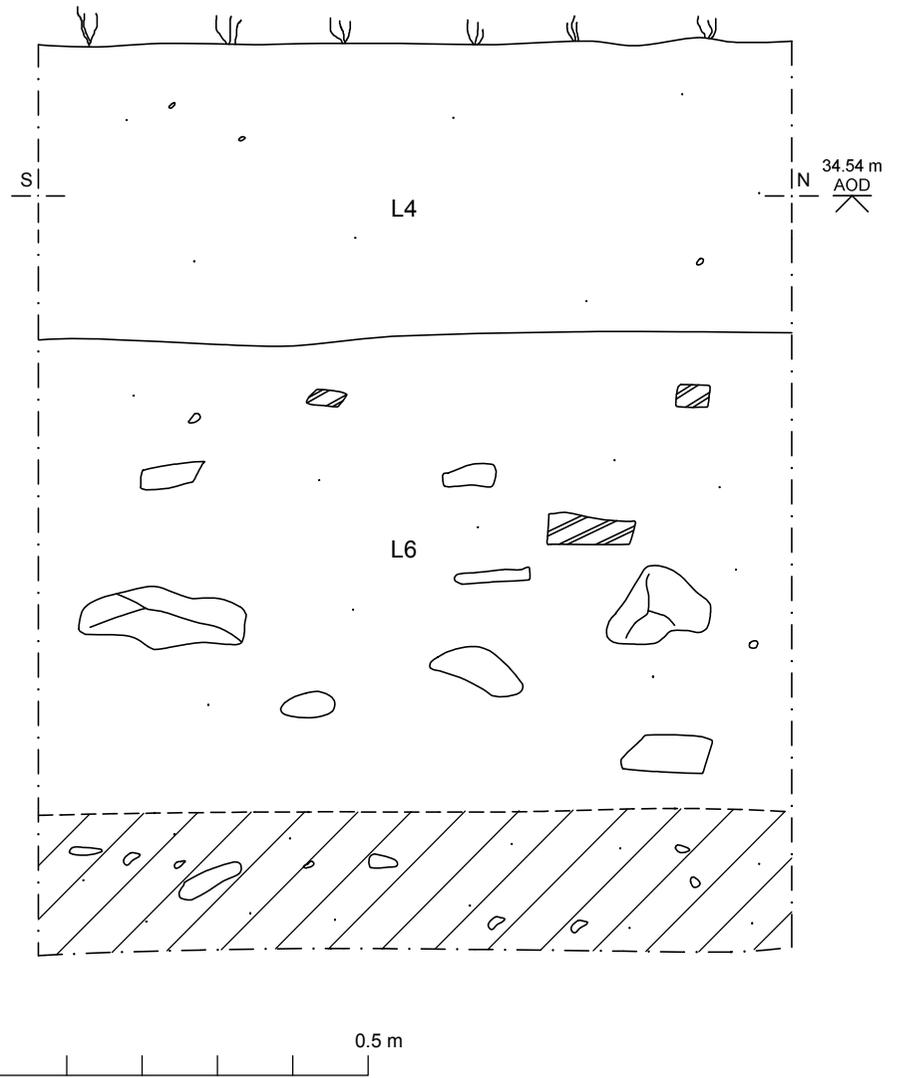


Fig 10b TP8: representative section.

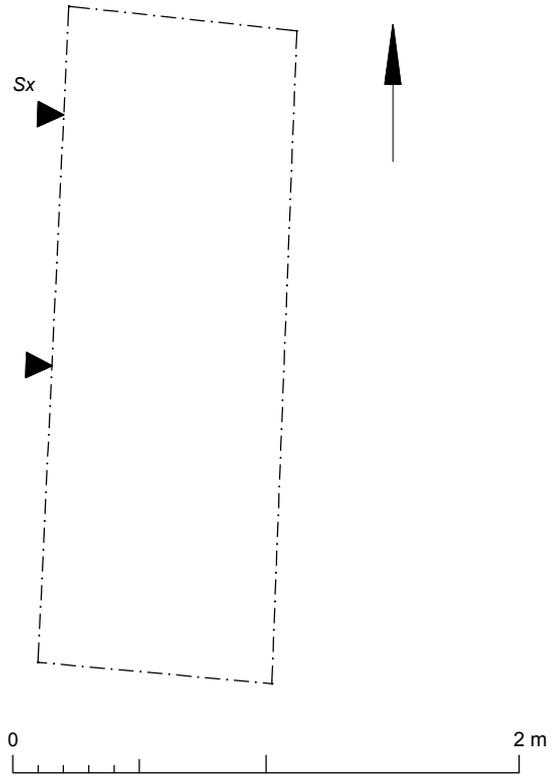


Fig 11a TP9: plan.

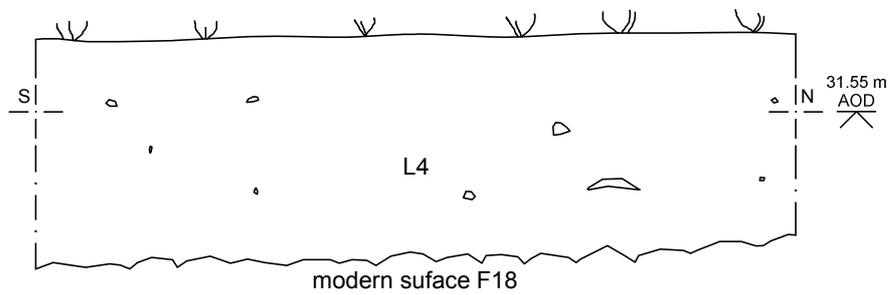


Fig 11b TP9: representative section.



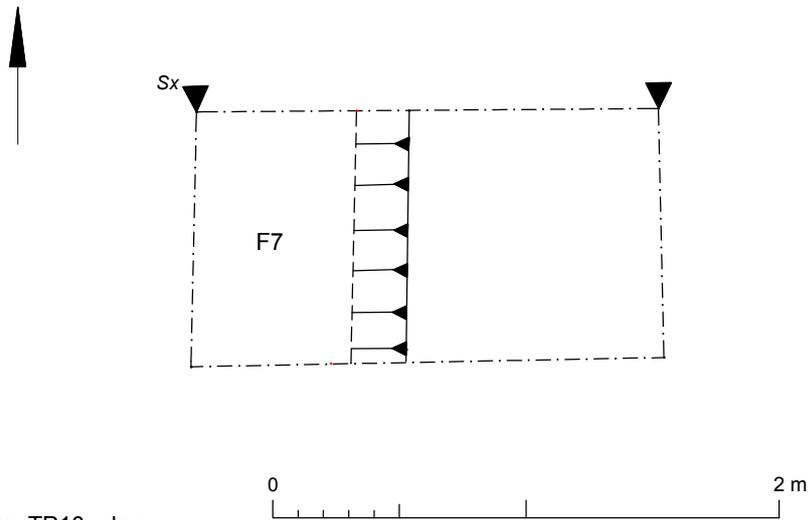


Fig 12a TP10: plan.

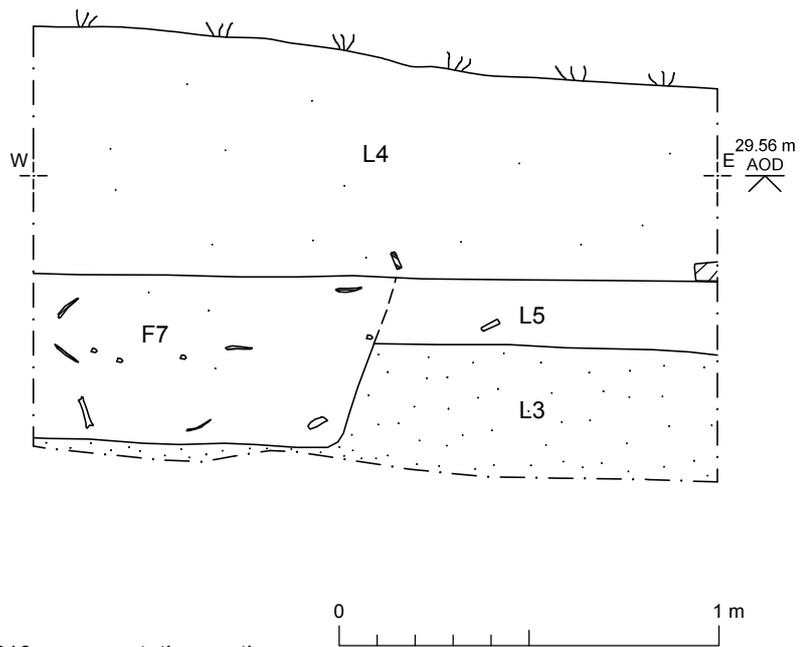


Fig 12b TP10: representative section.

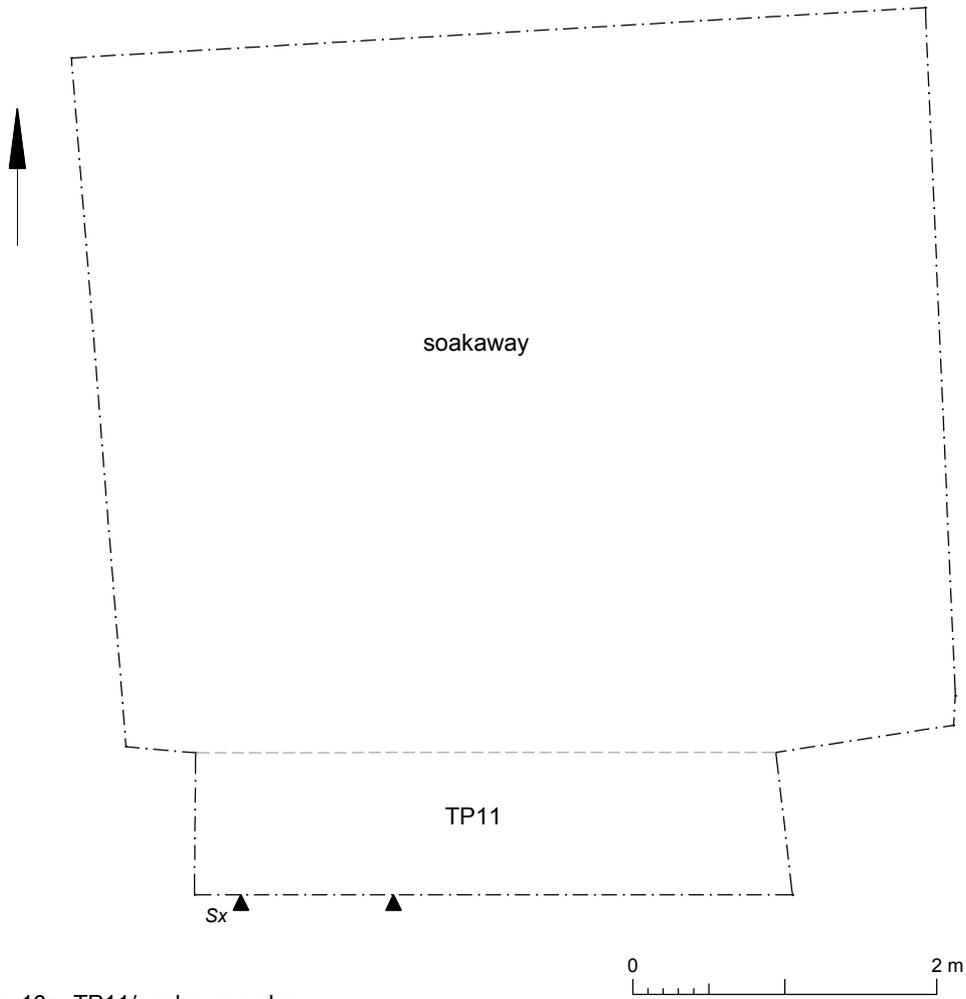


Fig 13a TP11/soakaway: plan.

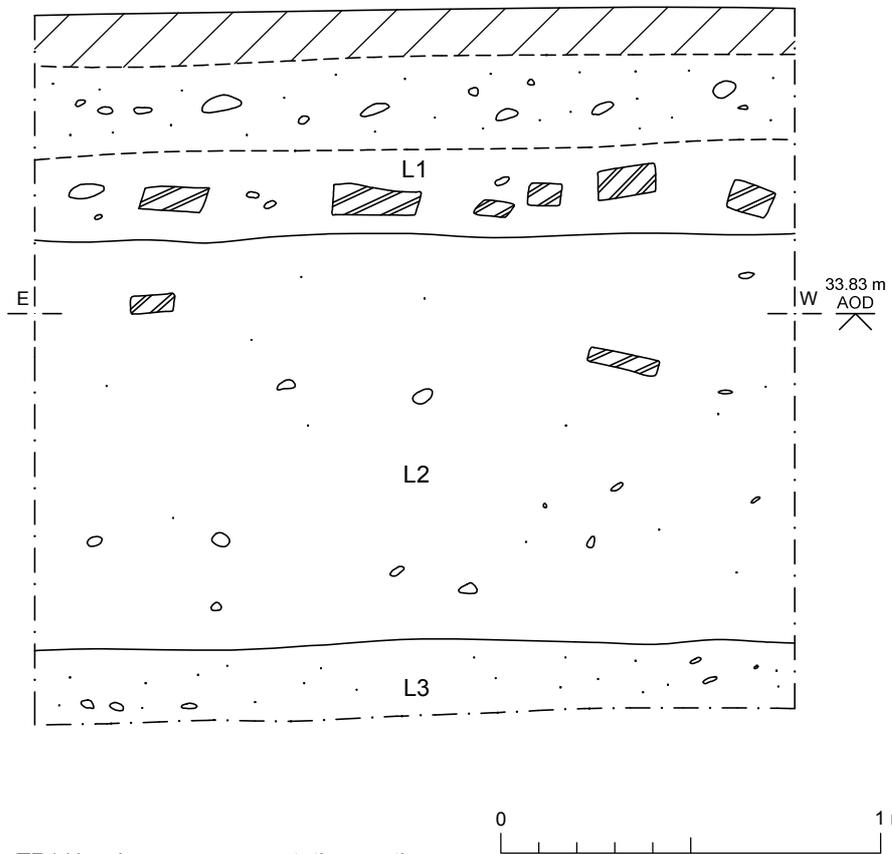


Fig 13b TP11/soakaway: representative section.