

**An archaeological evaluation
on the route for Colchester
Northern Approach Road
Phase 3
(Severalls Hospital/Cuckoo Farm),
Colchester, Essex**

September-October 2001

**on behalf of
AERC Ltd
for
Colchester Borough Council**

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Colchester Archaeological Trust
12 Lexden Road,
Colchester,
Essex CO3 3NF

tel.: (01206) 541051
tel./fax: (01206) 500124
email: archaeologists@colchester-arch-trust.co.uk

CAT Report 159

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1 Introduction

This report describes the results from an archaeological field evaluation which took place between 5th September and 4th October 2001. The work was commissioned by Applied Environmental Research Centre Ltd (AERC), on behalf of Colchester Borough Council, as part of the environmental assessment for land affected by the proposed route for Phase 3 of Colchester's Northern Approach Road.

2 Background

- 2.1 In February 2000, at the request of AERC, a desk-based archaeological assessment covering the land currently subject to investigation (CAT Report 55) was prepared by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT). The assessment principally noted the presence of three undated cropmark features in the immediate vicinity of the new road, and also loose finds of Roman brick discovered in the south-western part of the hospital grounds during evaluation work in 1997 (Appendix A: fig 2, circled plot 3).
- 2.2 In March 2001, Colchester Borough Council's Archaeological Officer produced an evaluation brief for the road, in response to which a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) was prepared by CAT. This was accepted on 11th July 2001. Copies of the WSI and the desk-based assessment are included as appendices to this report.

3 The field evaluation

- 3.1 The evaluation consisted of 25 trenches covering a total area of 3,400 square metres along the proposed course of the road (Fig 1). The trench numbers set out in the WSI have been retained for this report.
- 3.2 Two trenches (Trench or T24 and T25) which were originally intended to investigate the route for the Severalls Lane link road were not dug, since it was not possible to gain access to rough grassland at the north side of the Royal London sports ground.
- 3.3 One additional trench (T27) was dug to locate a cropmark to the north of Severalls Hospital (Appendix A: fig 2, plot 41).

4 Methods

The project was carried out in accordance with the requirements detailed in Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (1996a) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (1996b). Trenches were progressively stripped of modern topsoil by machine and exposed subsoil features were examined by hand and recorded using the methods set out in the WSI (Appendix B).

5 Results

- 5.1 The fieldwork results from each trench are set out below. Generally, cultivated topsoils were found to lie directly on natural subsoils, with no intervening deposits in evidence. Since all the features were sealed by topsoils, the thickness of topsoil is quoted for each trench as a guide to the depth at which any archaeologically sensitive material might occur in the immediate area. Overall, the natural subsoils consisted of silts and light clays with occasional small areas of sandy gravel.
- 5.2 In addition to the features described below, the subsoil surface displayed a variety of irregularities, most of which on manual examination were established to be of probable geological origin. These are not included here. Where some uncertainty remained (eg Feature or F1201), this is noted accordingly.

- 5.3** More detailed descriptions are included in the full archive which will be deposited with Colchester Museum.

5.4 The trenches

Trench T1 (Fig 2)

Due to a local obstruction, this trench was divided into two sections, numbered T1a and T1b.

Total length: 52.9m. Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 35-55cm. Topsoil thickness: 25cm.

F101

Removal of the topsoil in trench T1a revealed a small pit with poorly-defined sides. The pit fill, a pale grey silt loam, contained a scatter of charcoal. No datable material was recovered from the feature.

Trench T2

Length: 62m. Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 65cm. Topsoil thickness: 20cm.

No archaeologically significant features were revealed in this trench.

Trench T3

Length: 77.6m Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 55cm. Topsoil thickness: 25cm.

No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T4

This trench was dug to either side of a hedge and numbered T4a and T4b.

Total length: 72.4m. Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 35-40cm. Topsoil thickness: 20-25cm.

No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T5 (Figs 3, 4 and 5)

This trench was divided into two lengths, with trench T5a located to the north and trench T5b to the south of a security fence.

T5a - length: 29.6m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 60-70cm. Topsoil thickness: 30cm.

T5b - length: 46.8m. Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 45cm. Topsoil thickness: up to 50cm.

F501 (Figs 3 and 4)

The southern end of trench T5a contained a 0.9m-wide east-west trench with vertical sides and a clay fill topped by 35cm of olive brown sand. The depth of the trench is unknown: the fill was manually excavated to a depth of 1.2m, but stopped short of full excavation for safety reasons. The feature lay at the lowest point of the field, close to the present field boundary to the south. In the absence of any firm evidence to the contrary, the feature is assumed to be modern. If modern, it seems most likely to have been dug for drainage purposes.

In the area immediately to the south of F501, Layer or L503 (Fig 4) contained a single piece of septaria with small patches lime mortar adhering to its surface. The possible implications of this find are considered in the discussion section below.

F502 (Fig 5)

An east-west orientated gully sealed by topsoil. The fill contained one fragment of peg-tile.

Trench T6

Length: 70.8m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 45-50cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 30-35cm.

No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T7 (Fig 6)

Length: 67.5m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 45-50cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25-35cm.

F701

The ploughsoil sealed a small oval pit with a silty clay fill. No datable material was recovered from the feature.

Trench T8

Length: 54.5m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 30-40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 20-30cm.

No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T9

Length: 71m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 50cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25-40cm.

No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T10 (Fig 7)

Length: 63m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 40-50cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25-35cm.

This trench contained two features, both sealed by ploughsoil. Neither feature contained datable material.

F1001

A pit with a charcoal-rich fill, partly exposed against the western section of the trench.

F1002

A shallow elongated cut with a bulbous end, filled with a very dark grey ashy soil in which occasional minute flecks of charcoal were discernible.

Trench T11

Length: 73.5m. Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 35-40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25-35cm.

No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T12 (Fig 8)

Length: 71.6m. Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 25-40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25cm.

F1201

Ploughsoil-removal revealed a shallow, 80cm-wide linear feature orientated NE-SW. The pale grey silt loam composition of the fill was typical of that found in naturally occurring subsoil irregularities. Closer examination suggested that, although this resembled a geological feature, its plan and profile were more regular than most naturally-formed equivalents. On balance, but with reservations, it was felt more likely to be a natural feature.

Trench T13 (Fig 9)

Length: 63.9m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 30-35cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 20-35cm.

F1301

Projecting from the east side of the trench was a 2.8m-wide, 15cm-deep, sub-circular pit with a dark brown clay loam fill. No datable material was recovered from the pit fill.

F1302

Near the south-eastern end of the trench, a 70cm-wide pale grey silt loam filled NE-SW linear feature was examined and found to bear similar characteristics to F1201

(see above, trench T12). The same comments therefore apply to F1302; ie the feature is probably, but not certainly, natural.

F1303

Situated approximately 4m to the south of F1301, this was an 80cm-wide, 25cm-deep circular pit containing a mixed fill of approximately equal amounts of grey silt loam and charcoal. The sides of the pit were burnt red, suggesting that the contents were either burnt *in situ* or were hot when deposited.

Trench T14

Length: 48.8m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 35-45cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25-40cm. No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T15

Length: 41m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 20-30cm. No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T16 (Fig 10)

Length: 67.5m. Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 20-30cm.

F1601

A large shallow pit with a charcoal-rich fill. The surrounding natural greyish brown silty clay subsoil displayed a dark reddish brown discolouration.

Trench T17

Length: 51m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 20-35cm. No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T18 (Fig 11)

Length: 62.1m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 25-40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25cm.

F1801

An irregular elongated pit (or pits) with a mixed silt loam fill containing varying amounts of charcoal.

F1804

A small circular pit with a very high charcoal content in the silt loam fill.

Trench T19

Length: 78m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 25-40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25cm. No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T20 (Fig 12)

Length: 84.8m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 25-40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25cm.

F2001

A small shallow circular pit with a very high charcoal content in the silty clay lower fill. In places, the sides of the pit displayed brownish-red discolouration.

F2002

A small circular pit with a very high charcoal content in the silty clay lower fill. The sides of the pit displayed slight brownish-red discolouration.

F2003

A shallow pit containing silt loam with a high charcoal content.

F2004

A pit with a silty clay loam fill dominated by charcoal. The natural subsoil at the pit bottom was burnt red.

Trench T21

Length: 56.4m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 25-35cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25cm.
No archaeologically significant features.

Trench T22 (Fig 13)

Length: 54.4m. Width: 2.4m. Overall depth: 25-40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25cm.

F2201

A 20 to 40cm-wide linear groove with a straight near-vertical east side and irregular west side.

This shares a similar orientation to F2202, F2301 and F2302.

F2202

A 40 to 50cm-wide linear feature with a straight near-vertical east side and sloping west side.

This shares a similar orientation to F2201, F2301 and F2302. The grey silt loam fill of the feature contained a small fragment of modern glass.

F2203

A small pit with a grey silt loam fill containing approximately 10% charcoal flecks. The sides of the pit displayed slight reddish-brown discolouration.

Trench T23 (Fig 14)

Length: 69m. Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 25-35cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25cm.

The eastern end of the trench was extended as near as practically possible to the broad hedgeline with the Royal London grounds in order to locate a cropmark, part of the group listed as ESMR 2644 (Appendix A: fig 2, plot 28). This very mixed pattern of cropmarks, which seems unlikely to represent a single phase of activity, includes a linear cropmark which projects south toward the corner of the field. No corresponding feature was revealed at the eastern extremity of the trench. However, linear features found elsewhere in this trench (F2301 and F2302, described below), and to the west in trench T22 (F2201, F2202), may throw some light on the linear southern projections of this cropmark group. This is explained more fully in the discussion section below.

F2301

A 30cm-wide linear feature with irregular sides and a flat bottom. This shares a similar orientation to F2201, F2202 and F2302.

F2302

A 35cm-wide linear feature with straight near-vertical sides and an irregular bottom. This shares a similar orientation to F2201, F2202 and F2301.

F2303

A small pit with a grey silt loam fill containing approximately 15% charcoal flecks. The sides of the pit displayed slight reddish-brown discolouration.

Trenches T24 and T25

The proposed trenches T24 and T25 were not dug as it was not possible to gain access to the Royal London sports ground.

Trench T26 (Fig 15)

Length: 64.5m. Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 65-80cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 40-70cm.

F2601

A pit sealed by ploughsoil.

F2602

A pit containing 17th- to 18th-century salt-glazed stoneware (fabric 45B), a fragment of 45mm-thick brick, and cambered peg-tile, probably all of post-1600 date.

Trench T27 (Fig 16)

Length: 55.6m. Width: 1.8m. Overall depth: 25-40cm. Ploughsoil thickness: 25cm.

F2701

This trench was added to the evaluation programme because the adjoining trench to the south (T12) did not locate the source of a large T-shaped cropmark previously plotted in this area (Appendix B: fig 2, plot 41). The cropmark feature was revealed at the northern end of this trench. On investigation, the feature was found to be a ditch containing a modern cement land-drain.

F2702

A shallow pit with a very high content of charcoal in the lower part of the fill.

F2703

A shallow circular pit with a charcoal-rich fill.

6 Discussion

- 6.1 The overall stratigraphy in most of the trenches can be summed up simply as topsoil cover above natural subsoil. The subsoil level was shallow, generally between 20cm and 40cm, and only in the easternmost trench (T26) did it exceed 50cm.
- 6.2 Very few datable finds were recovered. Those features which did produce artefactual dating evidence were either post-medieval or modern. Finds included a piece of septaria from a residual context in trench T5a (L503). Septaria is a soft stone found naturally as a nodule in clay. Archaeologically it is significant because locally it was used extensively for building in the Roman period and often salvaged for re-use in later periods. The single example of mortared septaria recovered from trench T5 might just be a chance occurrence, as might its find spot, which was adjacent to a substantial and insecurely-dated clay-filled trench (F501).
- 6.3 Among the commonest features to be uncovered were small pits with charcoal-rich fills. A total of 15 such pits were found, scattered over a large area but most frequent in the region of trenches T27, T18 and T20. Of these, three (F1303, F1601, F2004) exhibited red discolouration around their sides, resulting either from *in situ* burning or the deposition of hot embers into the pit. A further four (F2001, F2002, F2203, F2303) showed signs of peripheral discolouration so slight that the effect might be the result of natural iron accretion in the subsoil. The date of these pits could not be determined: stratigraphically, they were sealed by modern topsoils and none contained dating evidence.
- 6.4 The trenches have thrown some light on previously observed cropmark features. Trenches T22 and T23 contained four more or less parallel linear features of similar width, depth, orientation, and, to a lesser extent, profile (F2201, F2202, F2301, F2302). These features are almost certainly related. The presence of modern glass

in F2202 implies that all four are likely to be modern, and probably dug for drainage. The four features lie at a similar orientation to linear projections at the southern part of the nearby cropmark group ESMR 2644 (Appendix A: fig 2, plot 28), which suggests that the southern end of the cropmark complex may be modern but probably unrelated to the more extensive main group to the north, which differs in both character and orientation. The northern end of trench T27 intersected the east-west arm of a T-shaped cropmark (Appendix A: fig 2, plot 41) and established that it was a ditch containing a modern land-drain. The ditch itself is likely to predate the drainpipe and no doubt represents an earlier field boundary. Trenches in the vicinity of the cropmark group ESMR 14317 (Appendix A: fig 2, plot 40) produced no man-made features which could be associated with the large curvilinear mark, nor with the rather vague cluster of small marks to the south - unless the small marks are charcoal pits, which appear to be at their commonest in this area.

In Severalls Lane, the easternmost trench (T26) yielded post-medieval building material and pottery indicating occupation dating to 1600-1750 (F2602). The Chapman and Andr  map of 1777 shows a nearby house, 'Several Hall', on the east side of the lane, but nothing to the west where the trenching took place.

7 Archive

The evaluation archive, consisting of site and post-excavation records, plans, photographic material and finds, will be deposited with Colchester Museum for permanent retention under cover of museum accession code 2001-177.

8 Acknowledgements

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Carl Crossan, October 2001

Distribution list:

Stephen Heading, AERC
Martin Winter, Archaeological Officer for Colchester Borough Council
Essex Heritage Conservation Record, Essex County Council
National Monuments Record



Colchester Archaeological Trust

12 Lexden Road,
Colchester,
Essex CO3 3NF

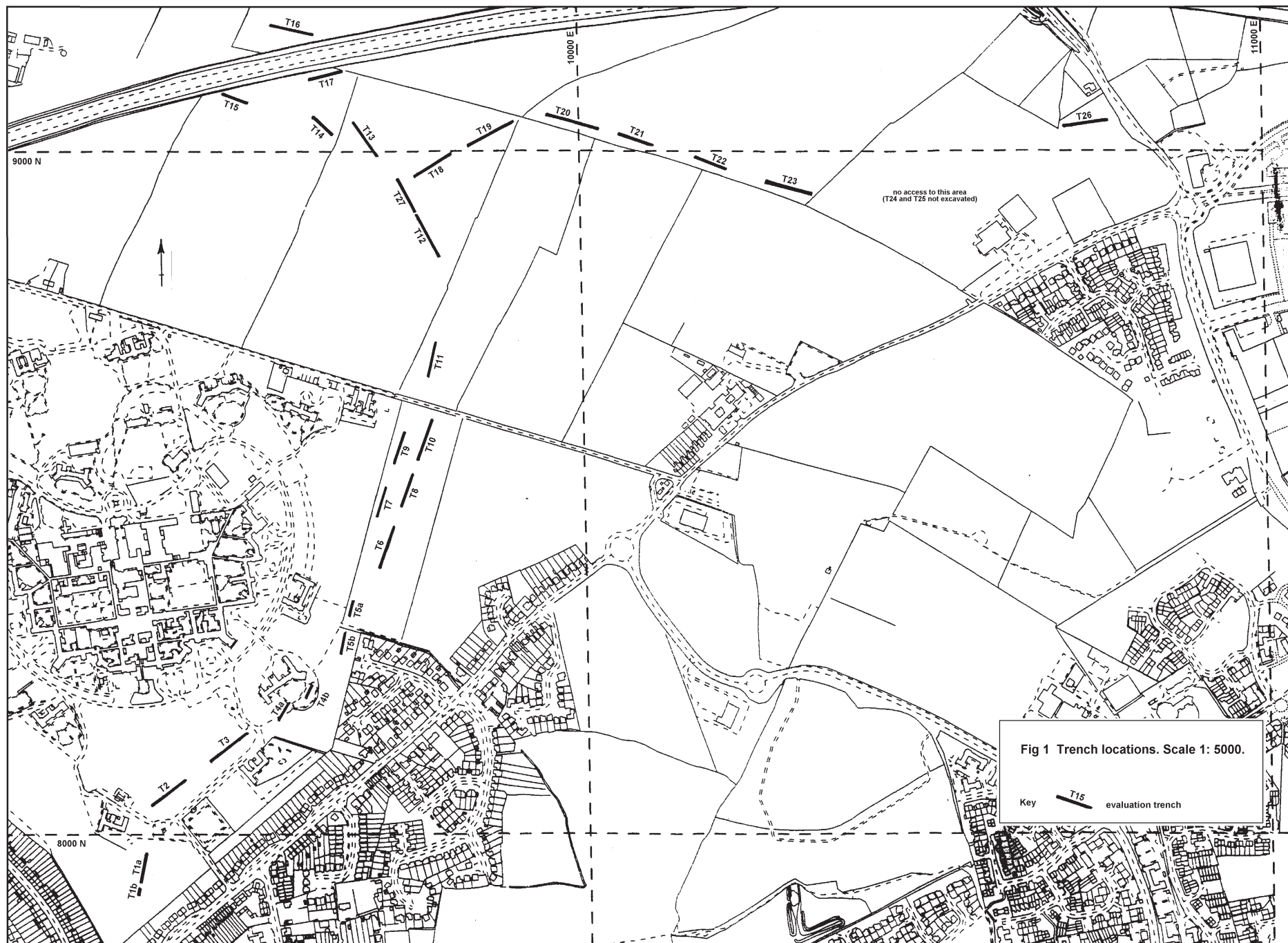
tel.: (01206) 541051
tel./fax: (01206) 500124
email: archaeologists@colchester-arch-trust.co.uk

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Date: 30.10.01

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Appendix B

Written Scheme of Investigation for an archaeological evaluation on Northern Approach Road Phase 3: Cuckoo Farm/Severalls Hospital, Colchester, Essex



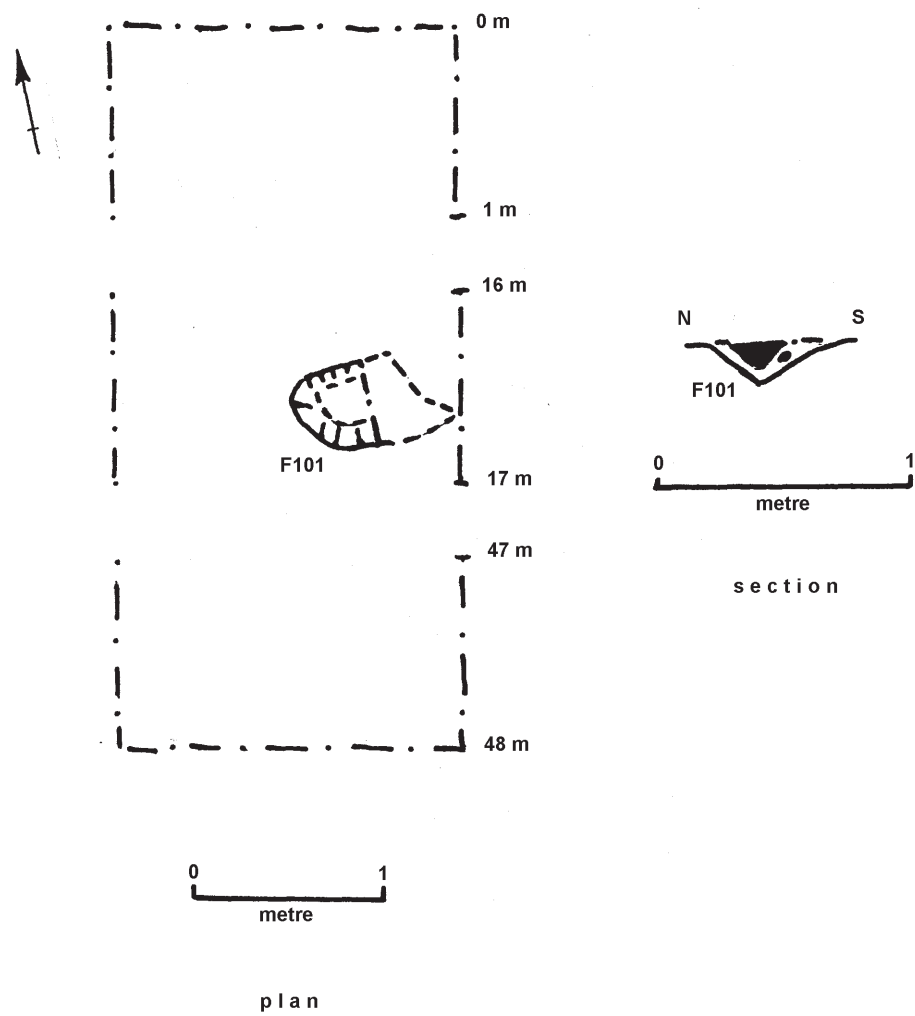


Fig 2 Trench 1a.

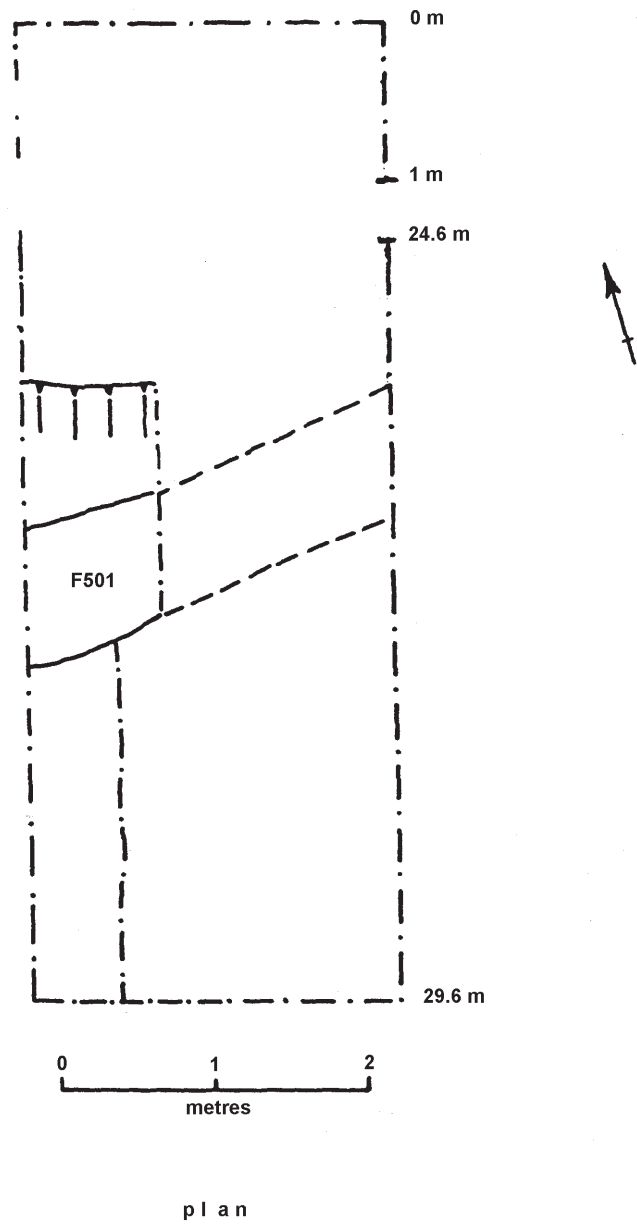


Fig 3 Trench 5a.

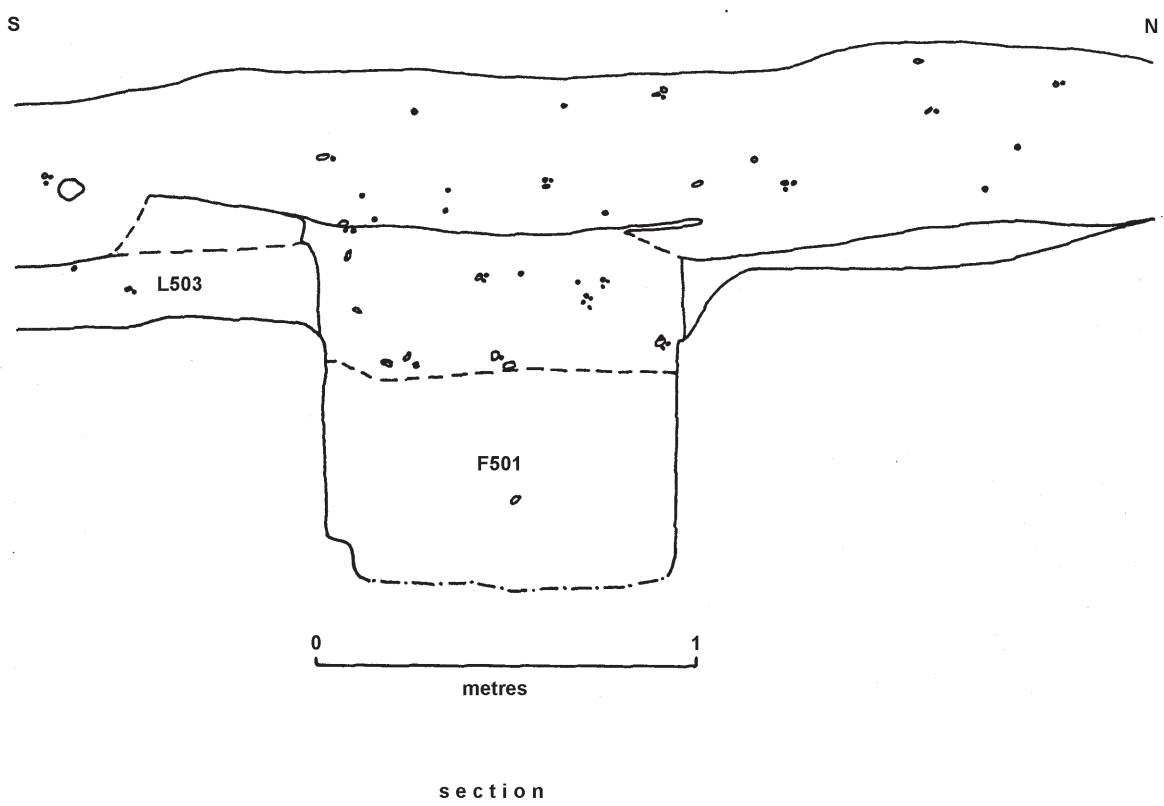


Fig 4 Trench 5a.

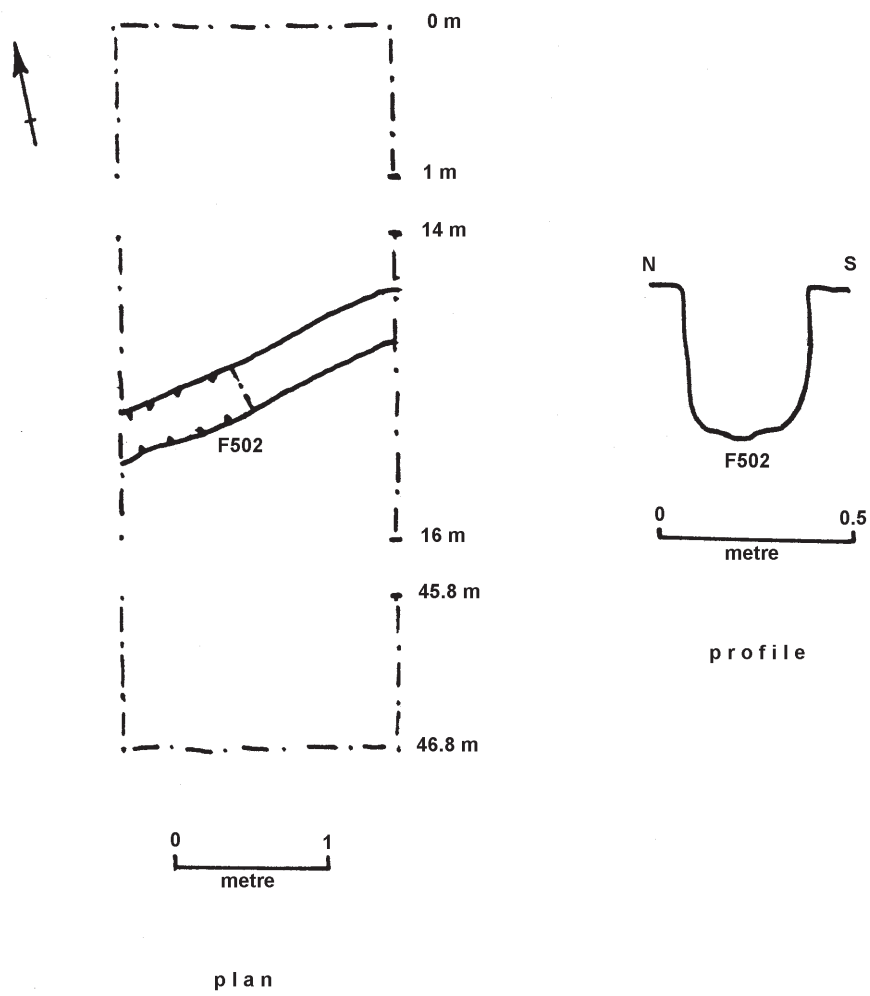


Fig 5 Trench 5b.

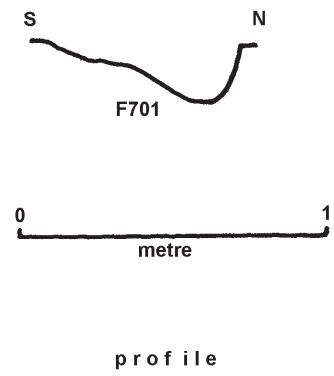
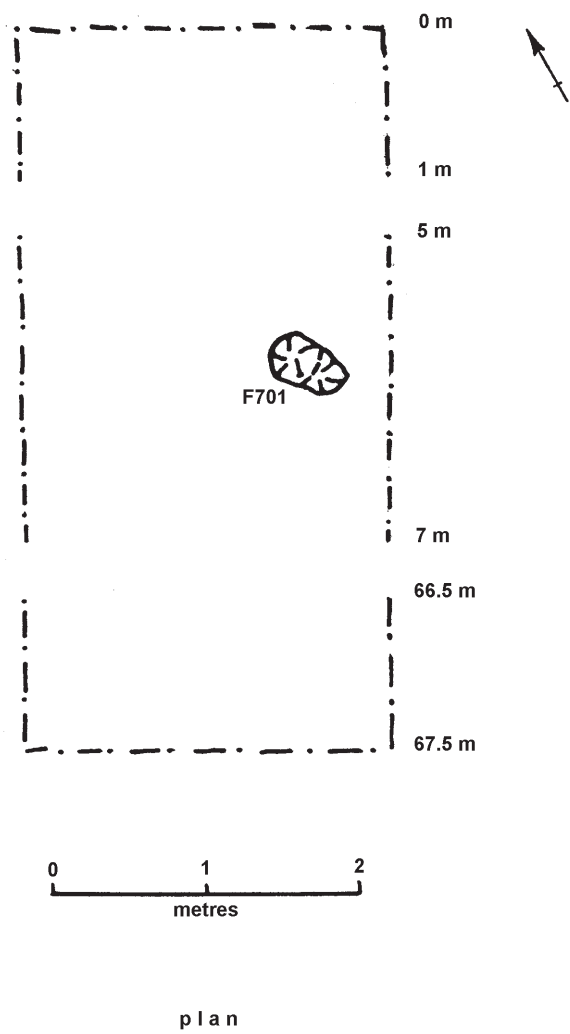


Fig 6 Trench 7.

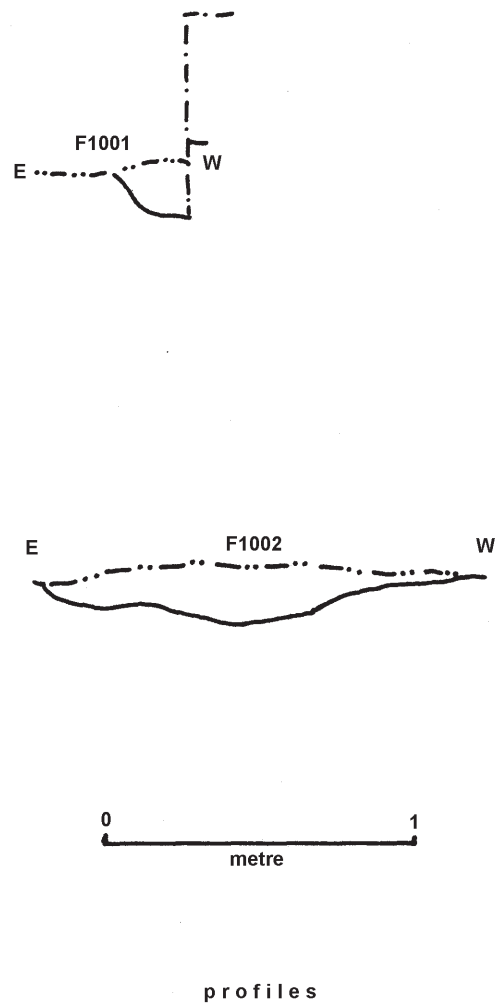
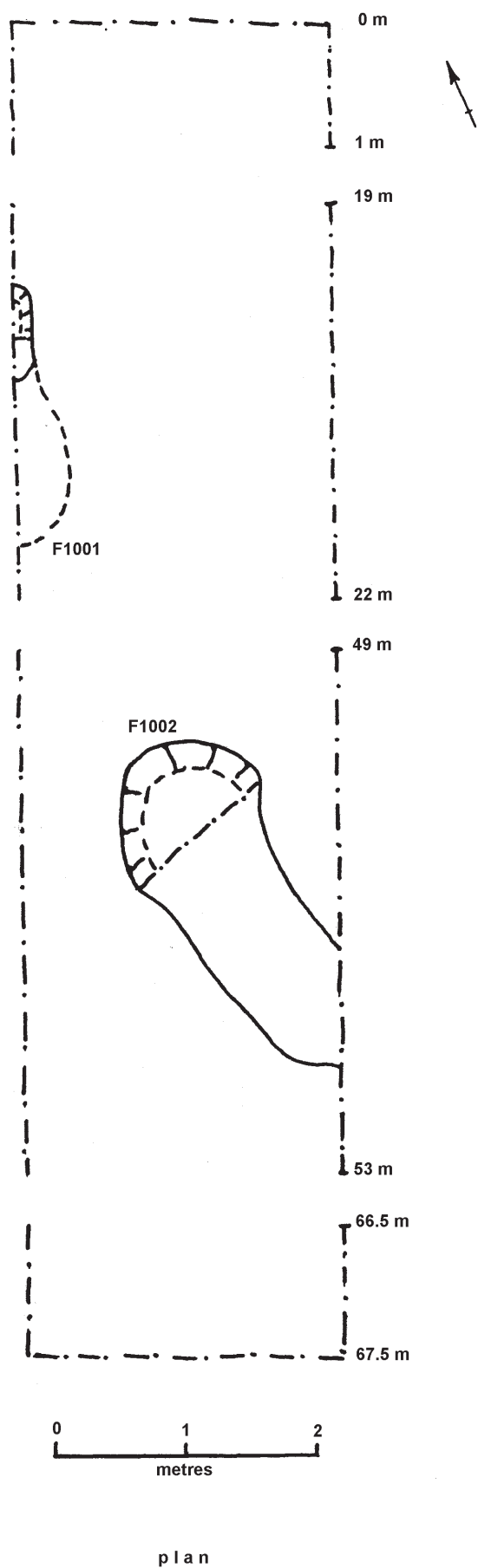


Fig 7 Trench 10.

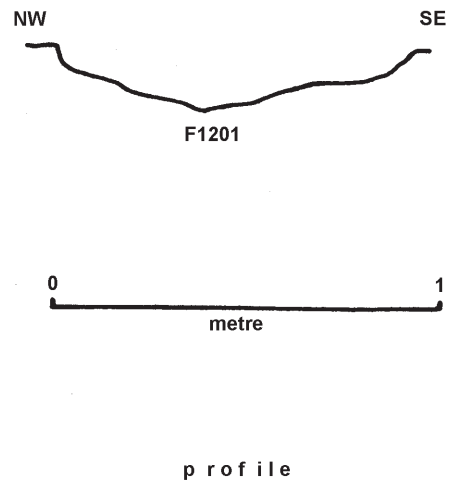
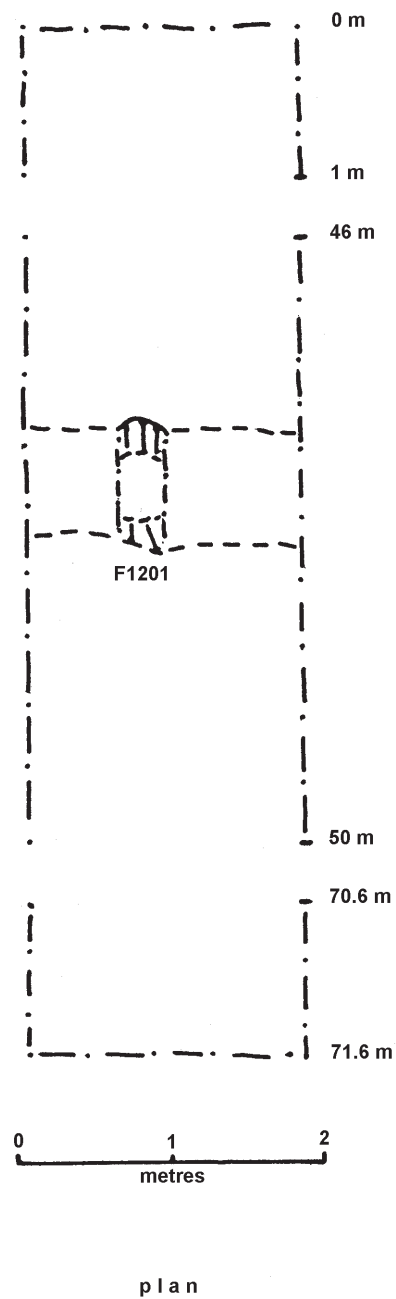
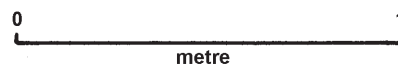
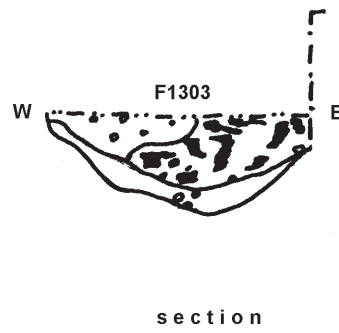
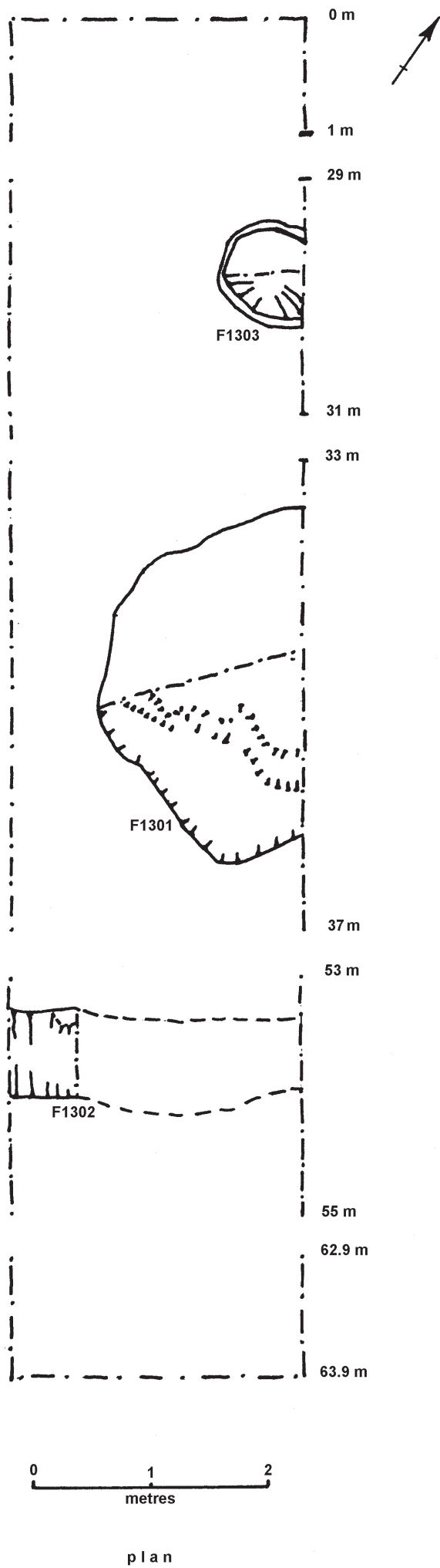


Fig 8 Trench 12.



profiles

Fig 9 Trench 13.

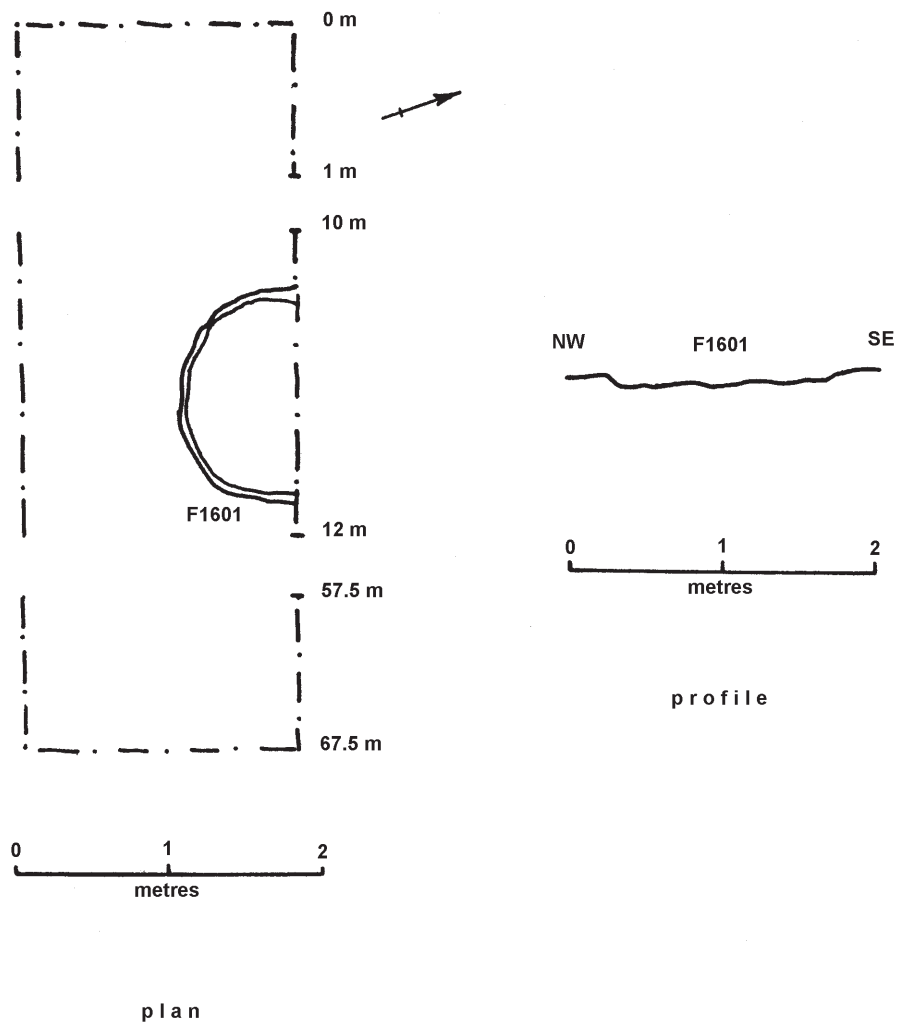


Fig 10 Trench 16.

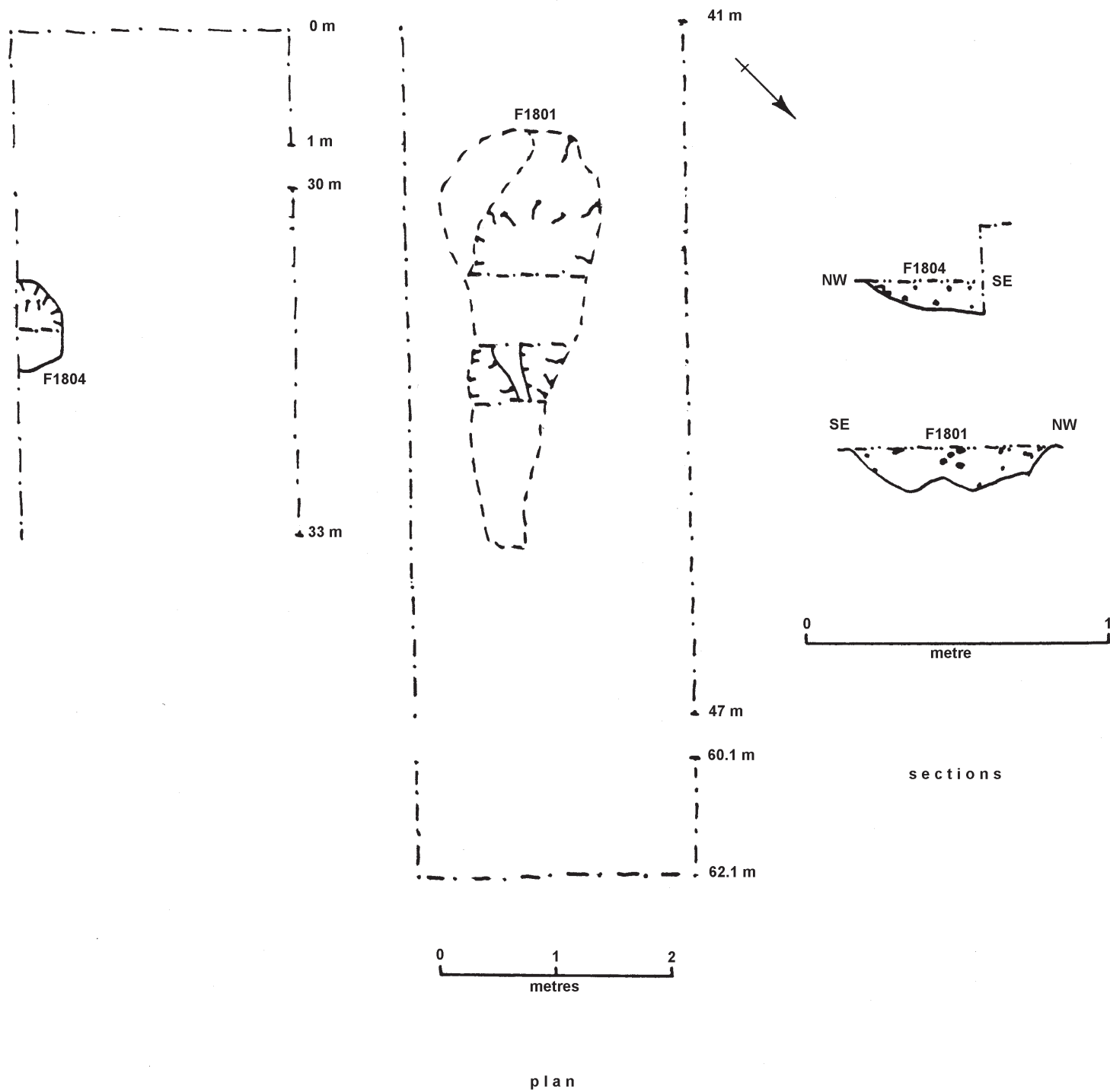


Fig 11 Trench 18.

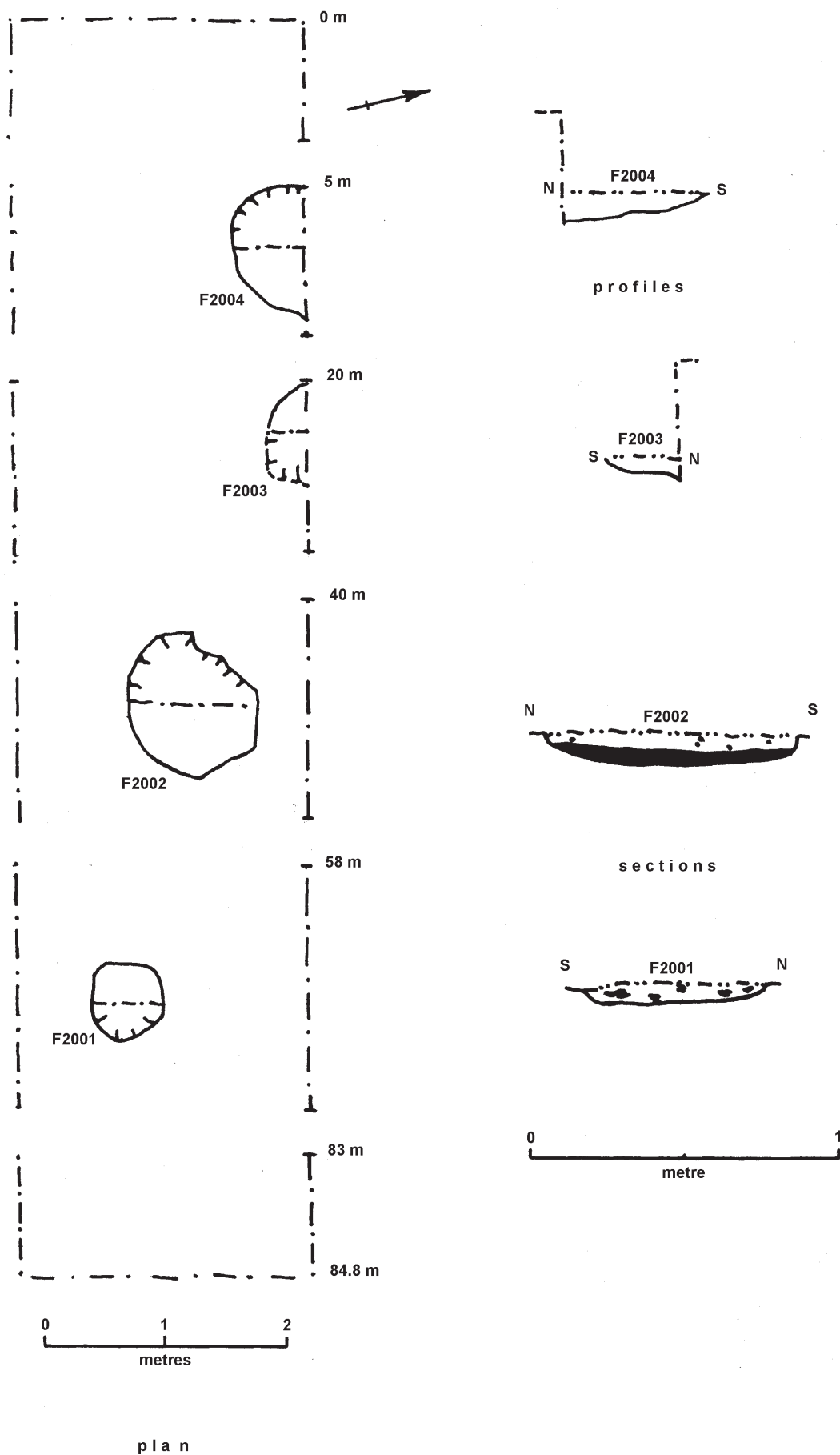


Fig 12 Trench 20.

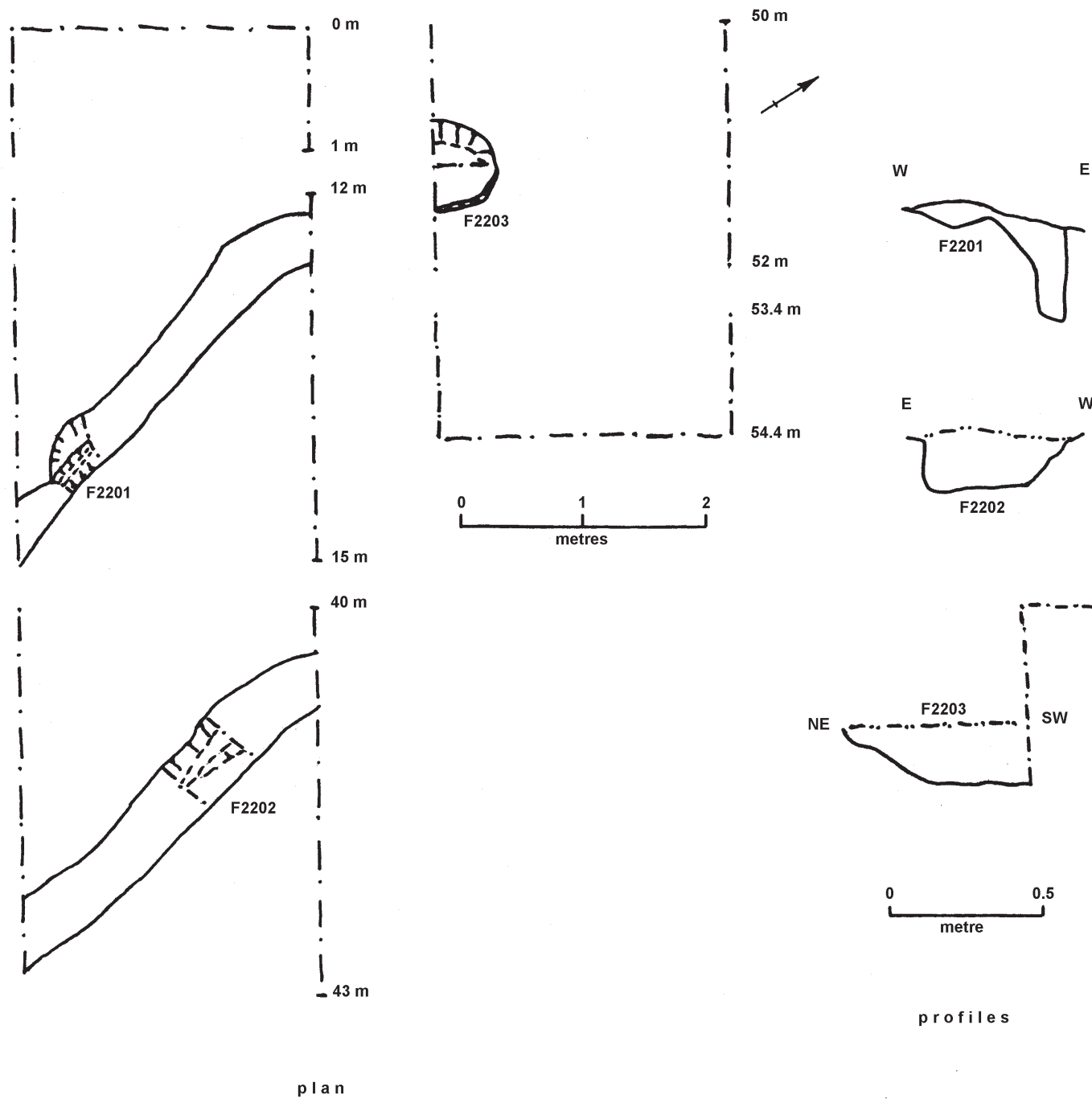


Fig 13 Trench 22.

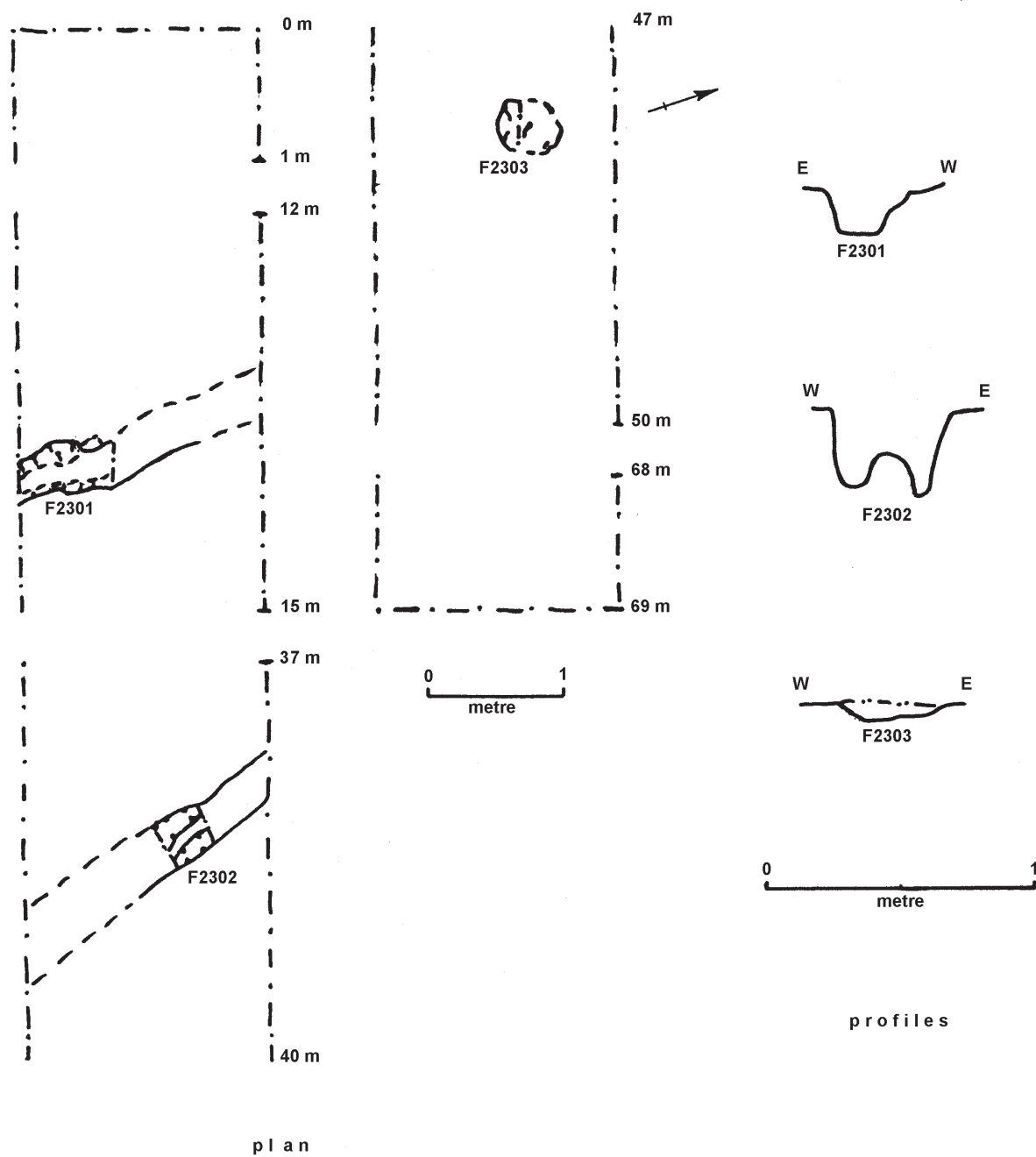


Fig 14 Trench 23.

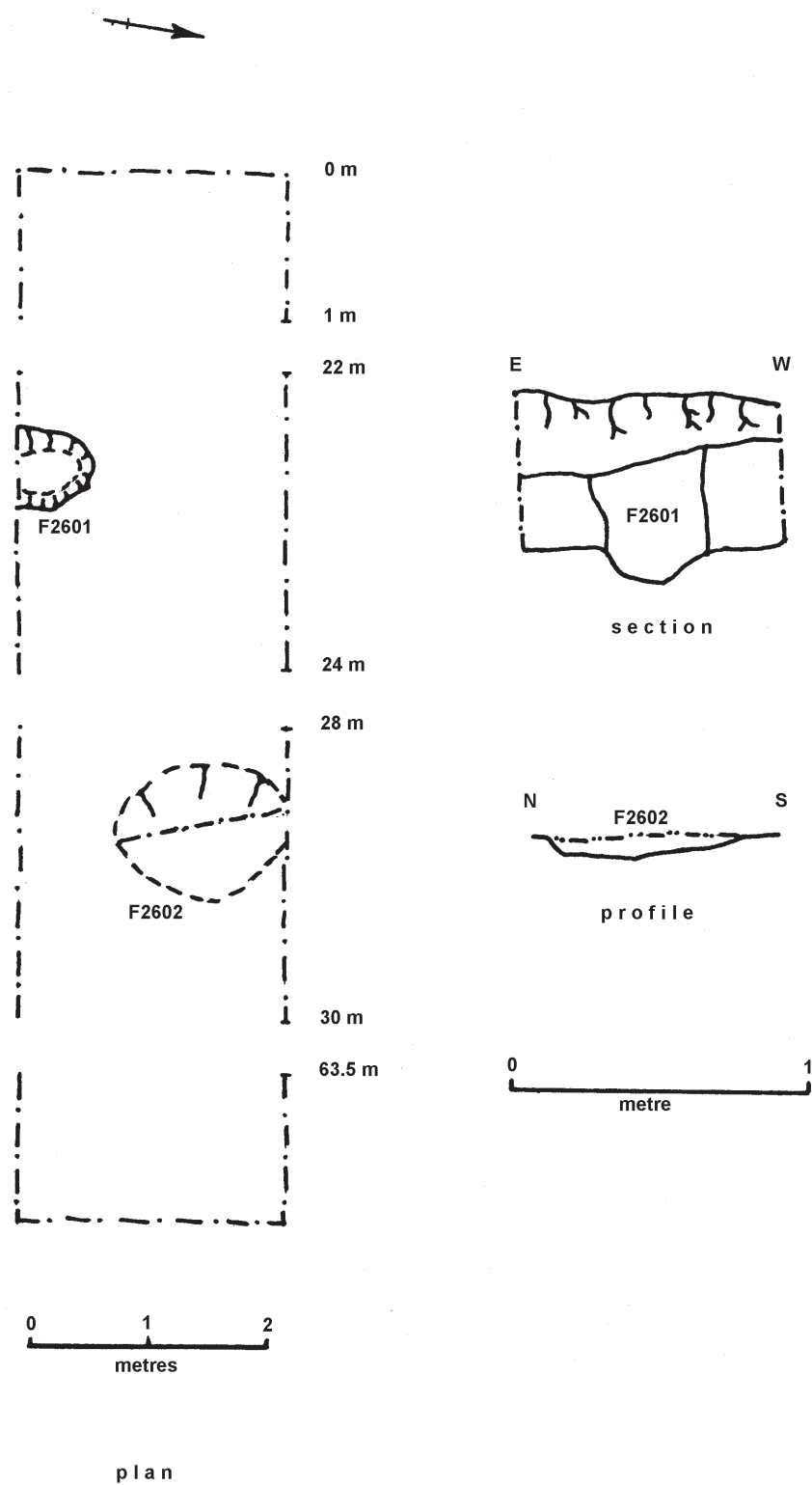


Fig 15 Trench 26.

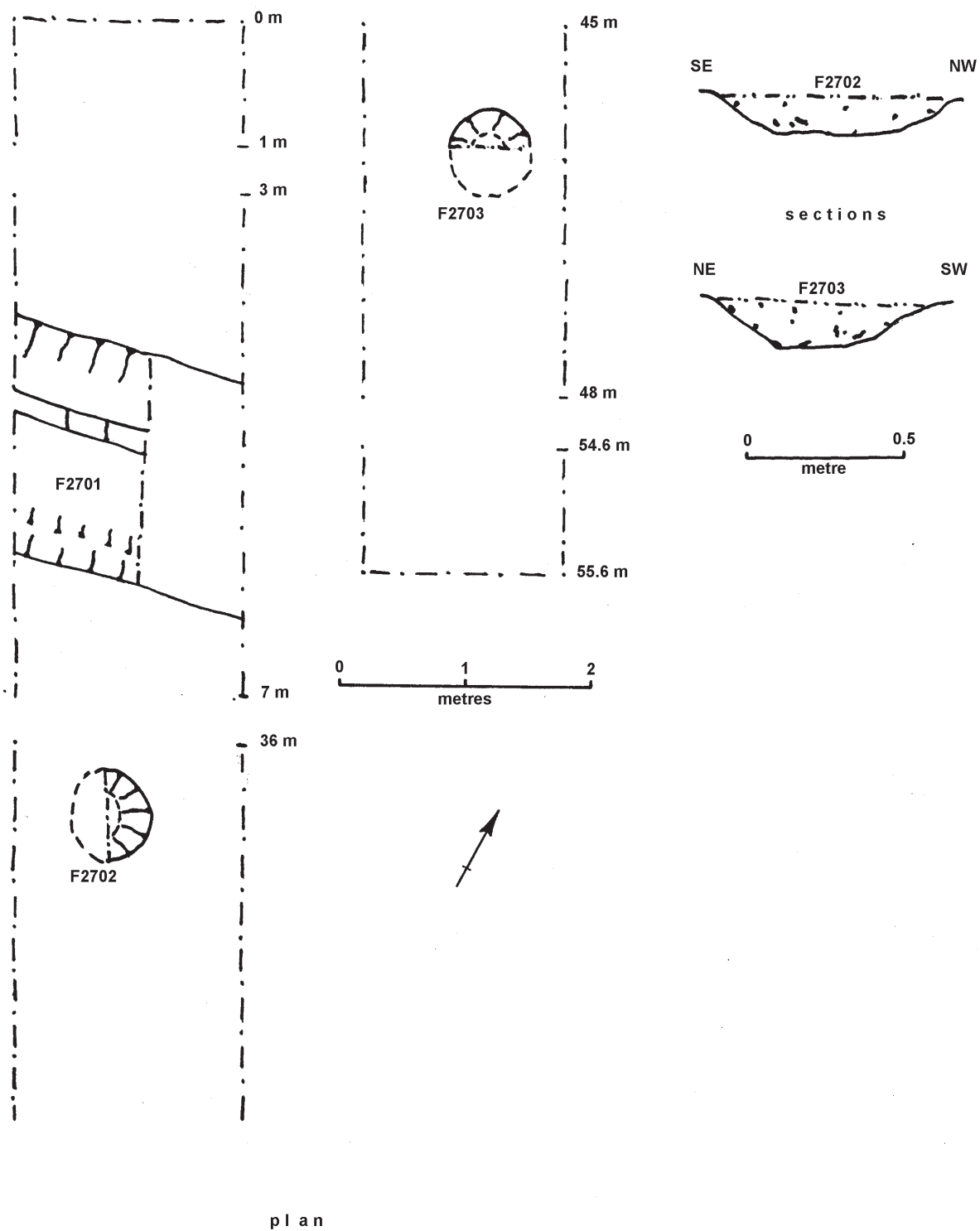


Fig 16 Trench 27.