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SUTTON
COURTENAY
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ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

SUTTON COURTENAY : OTNEY

OCTOBER 1989

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Introduction

An archaeological assessment was undertaken in July and September on behalf of J. Curtis and Sons Ltd to provide information for a planning application for gravel extraction.

The application site comprises of c.7 hectares of first terrace gravels adjacent to the River Thames. The eastern part of the site on the "island" of Otney (Area C) had been recently ploughed at the time of assessment while the remaining areas were under pasture. The application site is bisected by the old County boundary along the line of a relic course of the River Thames.

Archaeological Background

The area has been the subject of intensive archaeological study over the years. The Abingdon and Area Archaeological and Historical Society (AAAHS) has conducted excavations and watching briefs on various Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments and enclosures to the north (now under the Abingdon Marina) while excavations on the Neolithic cursus and Roman field systems immediately to the east have been carried out recently by the Oxford Archaeological Unit and AAAHS. The area has also been extensively fieldwalked.

Aerial photography has revealed two enclosures at Otney (Area C) and two prehistoric monuments east of the cursus (Area B) as well as the Roman field boundaries and trackways associated with the small Roman Settlement immediately to the south-west of the present plant site of Curtis and Sons (fig 1).

Strategy

The assessment was carried out by digging a series of 30m long trenches by 360° excavator (fig 2). A 2% sample of the land was excavated in areas of known archaeology with a 1% sample in other areas. Some trenches were located to investigate features seen on aerial photographs. Hand excavation of features was carried out to establish their type, condition and date range.

Soils

Over the "island" of Otney a thin ploughsoil 20 to 30 cm thick immediately overlay the natural gravel. In localised areas, traces of an earlier ploughsoil survived. On the north-east side of the island, alluvial deposits were found in Trench 8.

Alluvial deposits up to 1.9m thick were found across the old course of the River Thames (Trenches 21-27). Deposits of peat up to 1m thick were found under the alluvium.

To the west of the old river course, the topsoil/modern ploughsoil varied between 15 and 30cm in thickness. An earlier ploughsoil survived in the hollow created by the trackway in Trench 16. Post-Roman deposits of alluvium were found in Trenches 19, 20, 30-33 (Area A).

Results

Roman settlement. Area C Fig 3

Two enclosures are visible on aerial photographs. Trench 13 bisected the south-eastern side of the northern enclosure. The ditch was 1.8m wide and survived 45cm deep. The ditch was flat bottomed with sides of 50-60°. No features internal to the enclosure were found. Trench 7 bisected the north-eastern side of the southern enclosure. This side of the enclosure was found to have been formed by a series of five ditches, perhaps successive phases. The ditches varied in width from 0.4 to 1.8m and 25 to 40cm in depth. Again no features internal to the enclosure were founded.

Between the enclosures in Trench 14 was a recut ditch orientated NNW-SSE surviving 80cm deep. From this ditch came a small sherd of Roman course ware. 34m to the east was a large post hole 80-95cm in diameter and 65cm deep with near vertical sides.

On the same orientation as the main axis of the southern enclosure were three ditches 5/7 - 5/9 in Trench 5. At right angles to these and stopping c.6m short of the eastern-most were two ditches 5/5, 5/6 and a gully parallel to each other. These ditches varied in width from 0.7 to 2m with depths varying from 21 to 40cm. The gully 5/4 was 35cm wide and 15cm deep.

While only the ditch in Trench 14 is definitely dated the other features discussed above are considered to be of Roman date. There were several other undated features that may be related to the enclosures. In the north end of Trench 3 was the butt end of a possible ditch surviving 45cm deep. 13m to the south was small post hole 40-60cm in diameter and 48cm deep. Two irregular gullies in Trench 4 formed a T-junction while a circular pit 8/6 2m in diameter and 60cm deep was located near the edge of the gravel terrace in Trench 8.

On the west side of the island in Trench 1 were three ditches 1/5, 1/6, 1/8 and a possible pit 1/7. The ditches 1/6 and 1/8 were 5.5m apart and may have flanked a track from Otney, although there is no crop mark evidence to support this from further west. While these features relate to the Roman occupation it seems more likely that they were associated with the farm buildings of Otney.

The total lack of surface finds of the Roman period was a surprising feature of this site as was the lack of prehistoric activity. Only one flint was observed on the surface during the work on the site.

Post-medieval - Area C

Extensive gravel quarrying was carried out during the post-medieval period. The aerial photographs show large scale diggings to the east of the farm buildings of Otney. Some of this was located in Trench 4 (4/5, 4/6, 4/11). Other gravel quarry pits of post-medieval date were located in Trenches 28 and 14 where extensive but shallow diggings had occurred (fig 3).

Prehistoric Monuments Area B

A Neolithic long enclosure is known from aerial photographs. Oriented NNE/SSW, parallel to the cursus it has a sub-rectangular enclosure some 15m to the south. The northern 50m of the long enclosure lies within the proposed extraction area.

Trench 15 located the northern terminal of the long enclosure. The ditch was 4m wide at the surviving top. The feature was not excavated. Trial excavation by AAAHS further south through the east ditch revealed that the ditch originally had almost vertical sides and a flattish base, (Gledhill & Wallis 1989, Sutton Courtenay : A Neolithic Long Enclosure. *South Midlands Archaeology* 19, 58).

External to the long enclosure several pits and possible post holes were located. Two pits 15/5, 15/6 lay partly within Trench 15 of c.2m in diameter, they were not excavated. A sub-ovoid pit 18/4 of 0.90 x 1.20m and 0.35m in depth was excavated in Trench 18 c.55m from the north terminal of the long enclosure. This pit produced fragments of animal bone. Three possible post holes (17/7-9) were excavated in Trench 17 c.30m north of the north enclosure terminal. A large ditch visible on aerial photographs orientated north-south was sectioned in Trench 17. The ditch was 3.30m wide and 1.20m deep and had a V-shaped profile. While no dating evidence was forthcoming, the nature of the fill indicates a prehistoric date for its use. A deposit of gravel in a hollow in the eastern 5m of the trench may be the upcast from the ditch. This gravel overlay post holes 17/7 and 17/9 but the relationship to the post hole 17/8 was unclear.

Roman features Area B

Trench 16 was placed to investigate a trackway visible on the aerial photographs. A slight hollow had formed flanked by ditches 16/5, 16/7 4.40m apart. These ditches had been truncated by later ploughing and survived only 1.00 - 1.40m wide and 0.22 - 0.40m deep. The smaller ditch had been re-dug after silting. Two other shallow ditches were found 4.5m and 15m to the north of the trackway. Both were parallel to the trackway at this point.

A further ditch 18/5 orientated NW-SE and two successive ditches 19/6 - 7 of the same orientation and 19/5 at right angles are thought to belong to the field system associated with the Roman settlement overlying the cursus. The ditches in Trench 19 had filled with alluvium, and had been buried by c.40cm of alluvium.

Post Medieval Area B

Recent gravel pits alongside Peep'O Day Lane were found in Trench 17. These may have been a source for surfacing the track.

Medieval Field Boundaries Area A

Ditches found in Trenches 30, 31 and 33 were parallel to Peep 'O Day and represent the medieval field system. The ditch in Trench 30 produced a green glazed sherd. The two ditches in Trench 31 (one ditch also located in Trench 33) may represent drainage ditches on both sides of a hedgerow. The ditches were 6.5m apart.

Summary

1) Area A. The only archaeology found within this part of the assessment area was part of the medieval field system. although occasional prehistoric features have been known to occur in this area (i.e. crouched burial in the field flanked by Area A) no evidence of prehistoric activity was recovered from these trenches.

2) Area B.

i) The assessment pinpointed the northern terminal of the Neolithic enclosure. The pits and possible post holes indicate activity external to the enclosure along the main axis of the two monuments. This type of activity has also been found at West Cotton, Northants (D.Windell 1986, The Raunds Area Project: second interim report. **Northants Archaeol. 21,9**)

The only other known long enclosure in the county is a Buscot although the "D" shaped enclosure at Dorchester (later to be included within the cursus) may be comparable.

ii) The large N/S ditch and up-cast maybe the remains of another monument to the north of the long enclosure. The upcast may have formed a core for a turf mound such as found at West Cotton, Northants.

iii) Ditches forming part of the Roman field system associated with the settlement further to the west were located. Better examples of this field system have already been investigated by the OAU at the south end of the cursus. Here the field boundaries were found in association with Roman alluviation and differing types of land use associated with the change in climactic conditions were able to be identified.

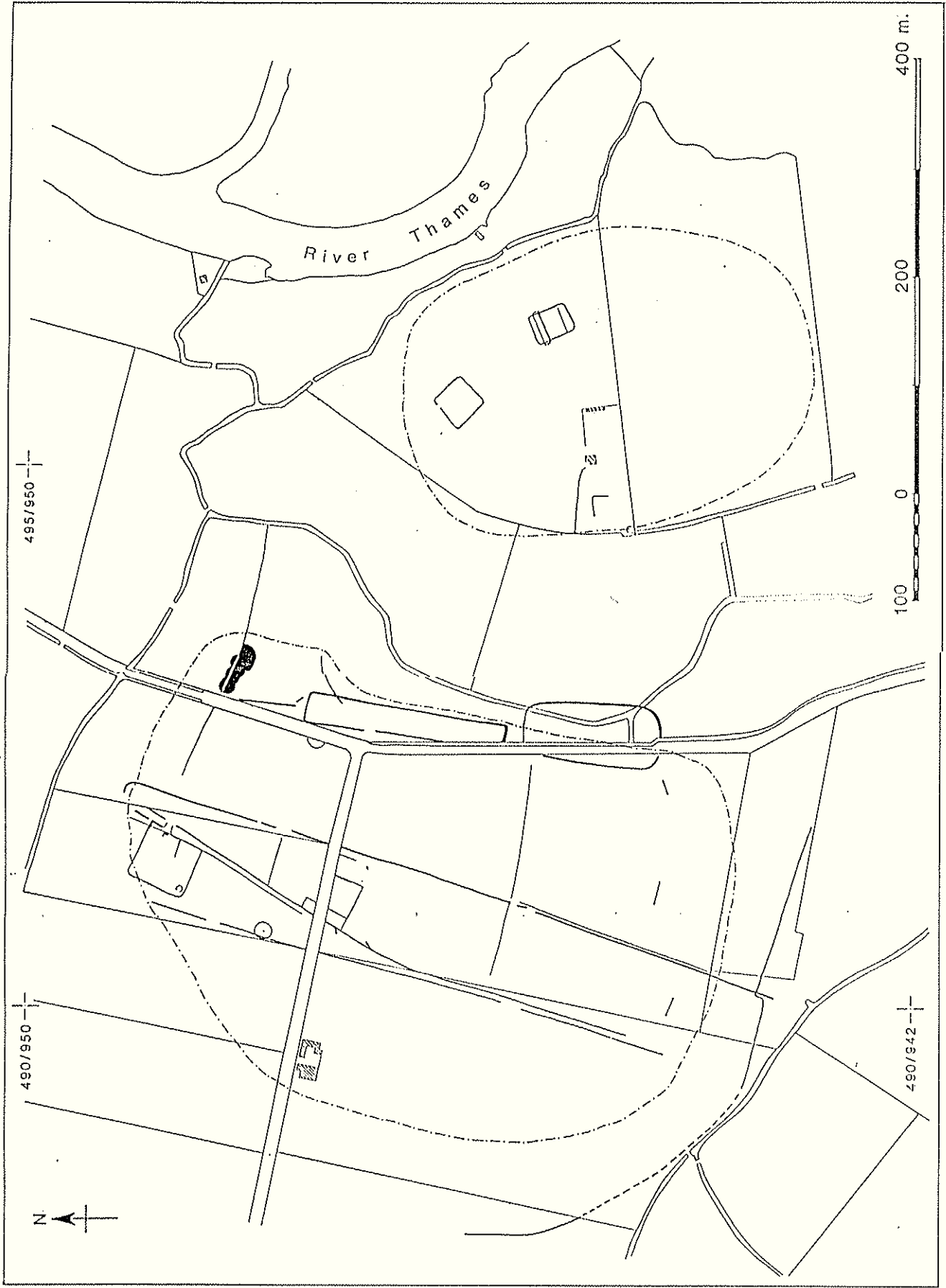
3) Area C

While the enclosures can not definitely be affirmed to belong to Roman period nothing was found to disprove this likelihood. The enclosures were found to be poorly preserved with only the bottom of deeper features surviving

more recent ploughing. Extensive post-medieval gravel excavation has probably damaged parts of the Roman settlement. The total lack of surface finds of the Roman period recovered during the assessment work and only 1 sherd found during hand excavation points to a lack of artefactual evidence to complement any surviving features. Environmental evidence associated with the archaeological features was very poor. No waterlogged deposits were found and carbonised plant remains were noticeable by their absence.

- 4) The shallow depth of ploughsoil overlying the known archaeology to the south of Area B is a concern. Heavy plant should be prevented from operating in this area so that the important archaeological features lying outside the proposed extraction area are preserved without further damage.

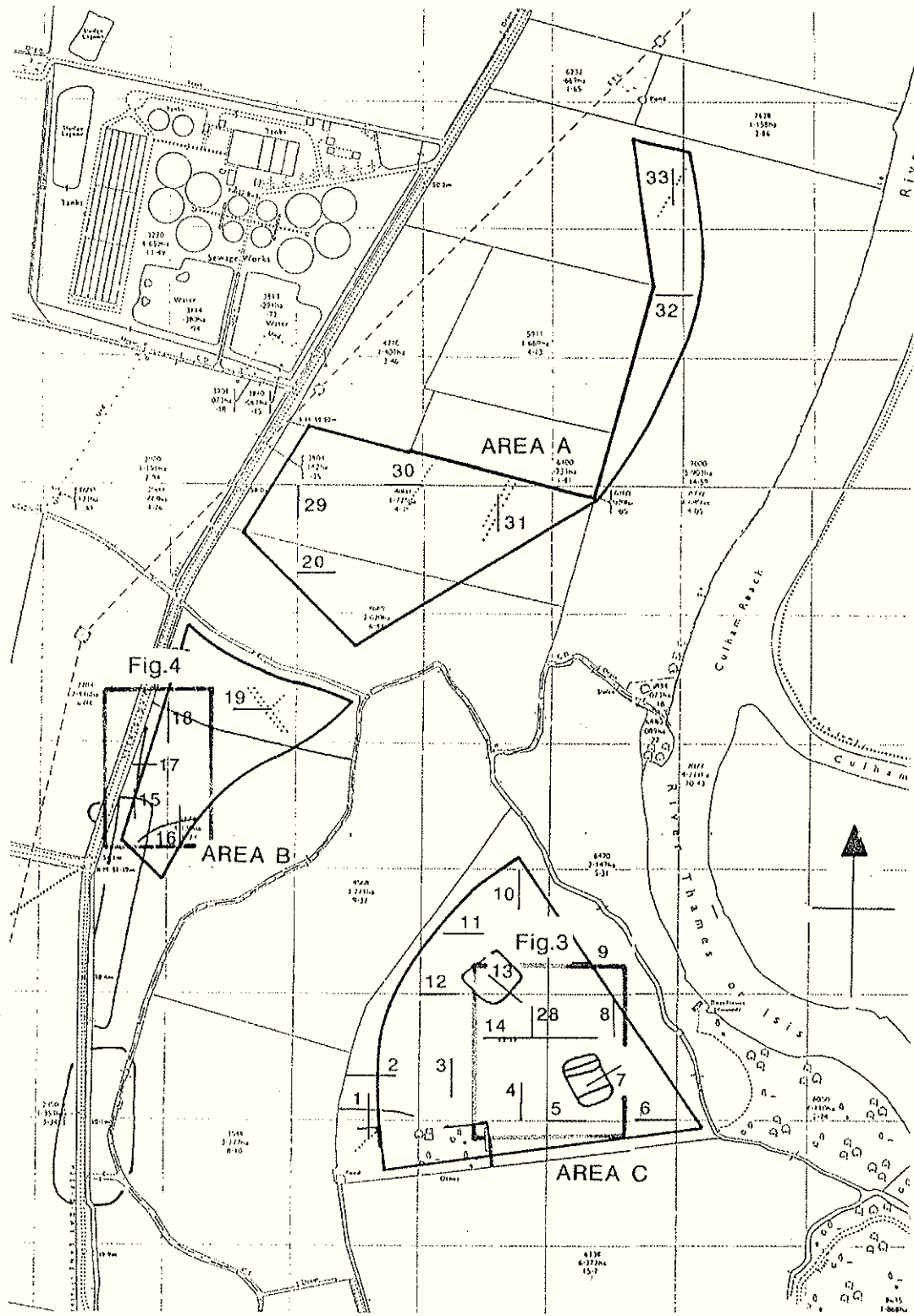
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Oxford Archaeological Unit
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Fig 1



- Assessment trench
- - - Cropmarks
- Modern ditch

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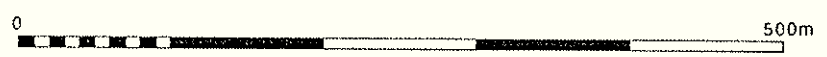
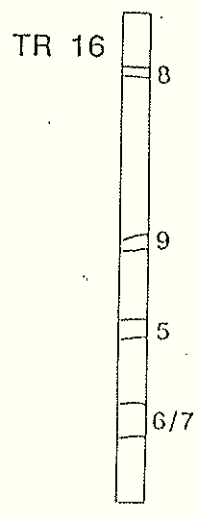
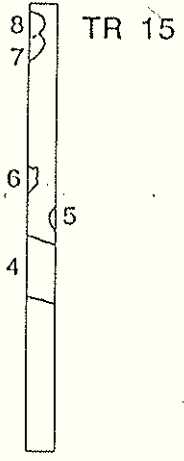
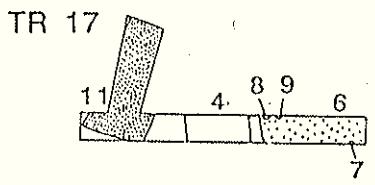
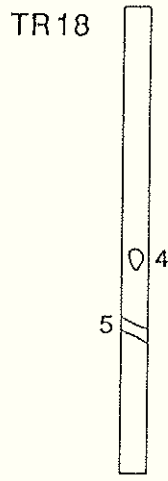


Fig.2



 Post Medieval feature
 Upcast

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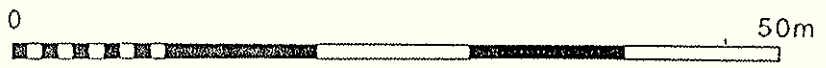
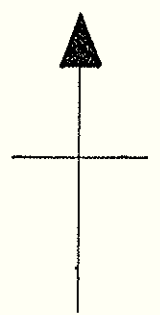
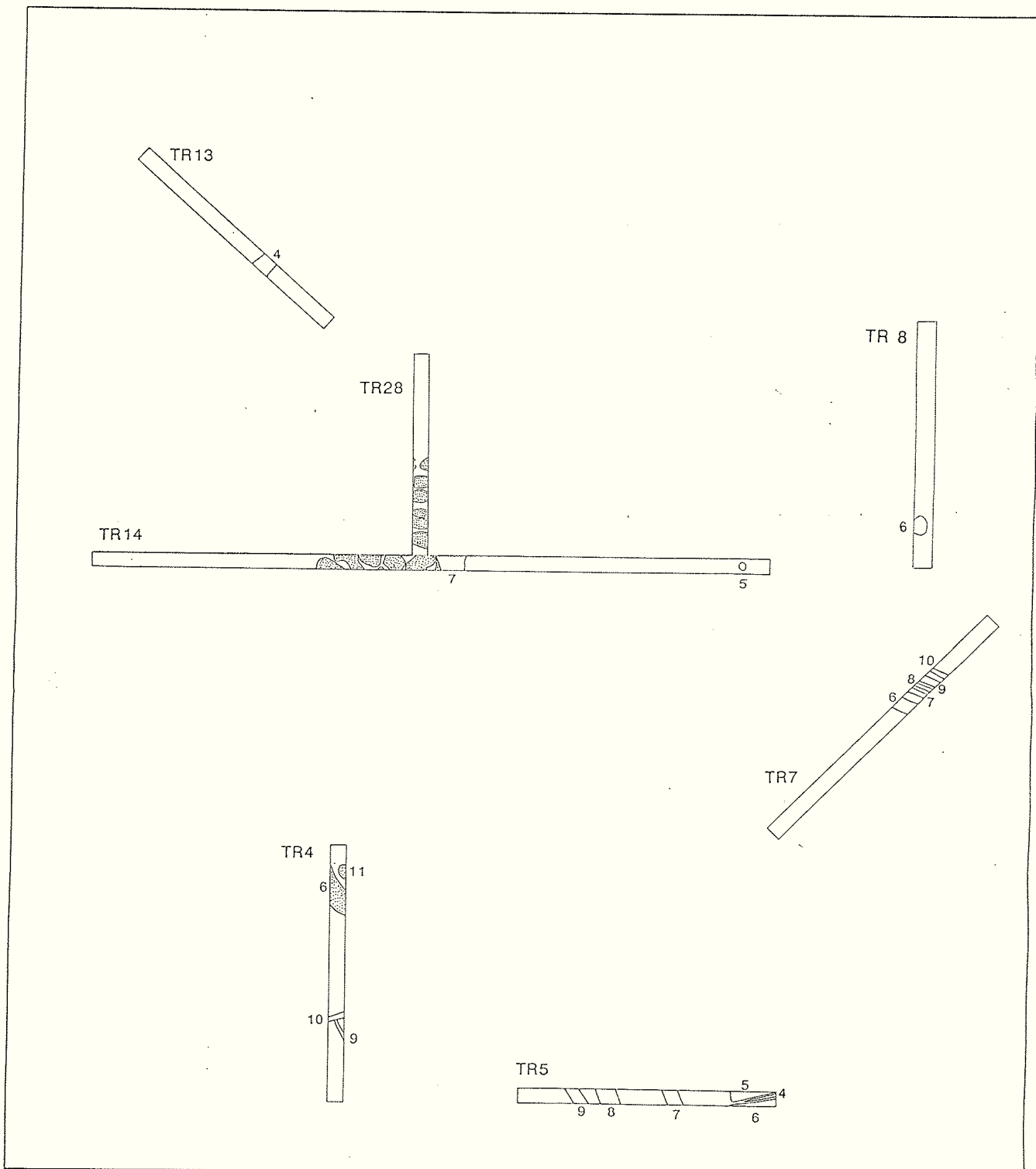



Fig.4



 Post Medieval feature
 Upcast



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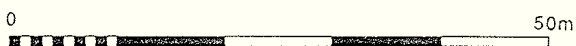


Fig.3