

Saint Nicholas Church, Newbury, Berkshire

Archaeological Evaluation

**Oxford Archaeological Unit
March 1992**

St Nicholas church, Newbury: excavation of a foundation for a new heating system.

Introduction

A foundation trench within the church was excavated by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in cooperation with the builders (B. Head). This work revealed the existence of an east west wall which pre-dated the present building. This wall is probably the north wall of an early Norman church.

Character of development

The purpose of the excavation was to provide for the necessary space to take the air-ducts for the new Crolla heating system. This involved the excavation of a trench some 5.8 m long by 1.8 m wide and 1.6 m deep. In all, this amounted to 16.8 cubic metres of material. The trench was located in the NW corner of the church from the eastern side of the entrance of the north porch to the western end of the church (see inset on Fig 1).

Timing

The excavation took place between March 3rd and March 9th, 1992 and involved

a total of 17 man days, including the recording of the results.

Contractor

The work was funded by the parish authorities of St Nicholas.

Archaeological and Architectural background

The present church was built at the beginning of the 16th century by John Smallwood alias Winchcombe, a wealthy clothier (VCH IV, 148). Work began in 1509 and was completed around 1532. There was an earlier church on the site since it is mentioned in Domesday Book (1086) as having been granted by William I to the newly founded Abbey of St Pierre de Preaux.

No evidence of the earlier church remains above ground. The only evidence for the physical existence of an earlier church was recorded in 1921 by Walter Money (Pearce 1986). He described the 'piers of an entrance porch, extending 7 ft on either side....showing that there was a large doorway on this spot, either entirely closed in or pierced with small windows. There is a six foot opening between the two side walls, which are some little distance eastward of the existing entrance. The foundations are constructed of flints and rough blocks of clunch-close-grained hard limestone of great irregularity in size and shape,

evidently grouted with hot mortar, forming a most compact and solid footing' (ibid).

This porch 'stood 12ft in advance of the north front of the present church' (ibid).

The present day porch projects about 9ft 6 ins from the north wall.

The Archaeology

Method

Due to considerations of time, finance and relevance the excavation was aimed at recording the structural evidence in preference to those of the numerous inhumations. The burials were, for the most part, of post-medieval date, although they were almost certainly disturbed medieval ones present. However, no attempt was made excavate or record individual inhumations the majority of which had been disturbed by subsequent burials. The human skeletal remains were, nonetheless, treated with as much care and attention as was permissible within the constraints of the excavation. In all, some ten containers (dustbin liners) of bones were recorded. These will be reinterred in a space at the SW corner of the present excavation. The work was all executed by hand using picks, shovels and a fork. The spoil was barrowed out into skips and a small truck and taken to local land fill sites.

The Excavation

The present day floor (1992) level rests on timber sleeper beams which rest on narrow brick-built piers which in turn lie on double brick-built foundations. After the removal of the brick supports it was evident that the lowest courses had been reinforced or at least set within a compact concrete foundation (101) that was about 0.12 m thick. This means that the present day floor surface and its associated foundations lies about 0.5 m above the pre-mid 19th century deposits (see Fig 4).

The brick-built tomb

After the removal of the concrete floor foundation (101) and its associated brick foundations (102) the ground was composed of a thick, disturbed layer of a greyish-brown, sandy loam mixed with fragments of decayed coffin debris (handles and nails) and disturbed skeletal remains (110). Set within this matrix were the remains of two brick built tombs (Fig 2 and Fig 4) which lay E-W and parallel to the north wall of the north aisle (114). The more complete tomb (108) consisted of a single rectangular brick lined chamber (internal measurement of 0.6 m wide x 1.65 m +) 0.3 m deep and filled with brick and clunch rubble. The bones had been removed, presumably when the feature was cut by the construction of the new floor foundation (102) circa 1866.

Immediately to the south of the brick lined tomb lay another (105) which had cut

an earlier grave (103) and an earlier E-W wall (121). This tomb was of a more robust construction since its northern wall was built of alternate headers and stretchers (Flemish garden wall style. However, its western end was constructed of only a single line of bricks. The overall length was 2.2 m and its surviving depth just under 1 m. There was at least one inhumation present associated with a white substance (lime?) and some flaky material (shroud). The fill of the burial consisted of a concrete type mix (120).

An almost obliterated third tomb formerly existed to the west of the brick-built grave (108). This seems to have consisted of some form of limestone built structure (117) but which was too damaged to suggest any idea about its form and date.

The pre-16th century structural remains

The most interesting feature of this small recording operation was undoubtedly the location of an early E-W wall (121). This lay between 1.6 m and 1.8 m to the south of the present north wall. Only one side of this feature was exposed as its southern edge is obscured by the present day floor structure. The wall itself (maximum length exposed was 5.45 m) is composed of about 70% of rubble flint (average size 0.08 m with occasional pieces up to 0.24 m x 0.2 m x 0.14 m towards its base). The remainder of the wall is made up of a light orangey-brown hard sandy marl with 15% fine to coarse flint gravel. In addition a few small fragments of tile were included. The wall has a maximum depth of approximately 1 m and appears to slope from E-W. As can be seen in Fig 3.3 the foundations of the 16th century wall

are more than 0.4 m deeper (their precise depth is not known). At the western end of this wall it appears to be abutted by another wall or buttress foundation (124). The precise relationship between the early wall (121) and the wall or buttress (124) to the west is not clear. That they did in fact abut is suggested by what might appear as rather crude quoins at the west end of 121.

16th century church foundations

The Western section

Fig 3.2 shows the relationship between the various stratigraphic elements. These will be described in sequential order.

126: This consists of a pale sandy silt possibly derived from river deposition.

121: The wall, probably dating to the early Norman period has been described above.

124: This is either a wall foundation or buttress, depending on its interpretation. It is crudely built and is made up of about 50% small irregular pieces of flint (0.06 m on average), 45% of a fairly hard creamy mortar with occasional pieces of chalk, limestone, pieces of tile and human bone fragments. It is either contemporary with

or later than 121 and has also been discussed above.

119: This is the western footing for wall 114 associated with wall footing 115. It is composed of about 90% crudely faced pieces of clunch stone (average size 0.16 m x 0.12 m x 0.08 m), 8% irregular shaped pieces of flint and occasional pieces of limestone and chalk. The bonding consists of a medium to hard, almost creamy mortar containing 15-20% fine and small flinty gravel.

122: This is part of the wall footings of wall 115. A distinction from 119 was made purely on the basis of a slight variation in the percentage of clunch and the small size of flinty gravel (30-35%) in the mortar. There is probably no significant difference between contexts 122 and 119. The west wall of the church (115) is cracked at the junction of 119 with 124, presumably because of the weaker nature of the foundations to the north.

101: This is simply the remains of mid-19th mortar.

The North wall

The description of this wall is similar to the foundation material 119. The principal difference is that it contained several fragments of architectural stonework which had traces of red paint adhering to them. Except for the foundations below the

porch entrance this wall was not recorded due to the limitations of time, however, it was photographed. Fig 3.1 shows how the wall runs obliquely to the foundation footings. It is not immediately apparent why this should have occurred. Had the foundations been consistently offset to the wall alignment it might have produced greater stability at the NW corner of the church. It is perhaps more likely that the foundation trench had been only approximately set out and excavated before the masons infilled the rubble footings for the superstructure.

Fig 5 shows the composition of the foundations below the north door way. These have been removed to make way for the new heating duct system. The area of demolished foundation measures 1.75 m wide x 1.55 m x 1.30 m. This was composed of mainly reused clunch and occasional flint. The lower part of the wall footings consisted of mortar and flints above large blocks of chalk. Only one portion of a grey clunch respond was visible in section and this also showed traces of having been decorated with red paint.

The material from this demolished foundation was not excavated by the unit (O.A.U) but was inspected by Mr Higgott of the local museum.

Discussion

There seems little doubt that much of the top levels of the site (ie. the NW corner

of the church) was truncated during the mid-19th century refurbishment of the church. This resulted in the removal of possibly up to 0.5 m of made-up ground. During this operation any brick-built tombs above ground were demolished and in one case (108) partially cut through with its burial removed and then filled with concrete. In the case of the other brick-built tomb (105) the void above the coffin was also filled with concrete (120). The foundations for the floor and for the heating system were substantial and are eloquent testimony to the thoroughness and quality of the workmanship.

If the existence of the early wall (121) had been noticed by the builders, there is no surviving record of any such observation. The early wall (121) is on roughly the same alignment as the 16th north aisle wall, though its slighter foundations and composition distinguish it from the later church. It was recorded that the construction of the later church took place between 1509 and circa 1532, a period of 21 years. During the construction of the new building the original church would have continued in use. It is not certain how this earlier wall (121) relates to the discovery in 1921 of a porch which projected some 4 m from the wall of the 16th century buildings. Equally uncertain is the relationship between the west wall (115) and the earlier structure. Based on the evidence of the west wall (Fig 3.2) which shows that its foundations were shallower than those of the north wall and possibly the crude quoins previously mentioned, both hint that the structures 121 and 124 may have been associated sometime prior to the construction of the later

church. The irregular character of the western wall footings (Fig 3.1 and 3.2) suggest the existence of a possible former buttress. Nevertheless, the colour and consistency of the mortar of the 'buttress' (124) more closely resembled that of the 16th century north wall than the earlier E-W structure (121). In conclusion, the existence of a pre-16th century structure has now been demonstrated and only further work will be able to illuminate the structural history of the site.

References

Pearce, G.A. 1986: *The parish church of St Nicholas, Newbury.* Church guide.

V.C.H. 1924: *Victoria County History of Berkshire.* London. St Catherine's Press.

O.A.U 28.3.92

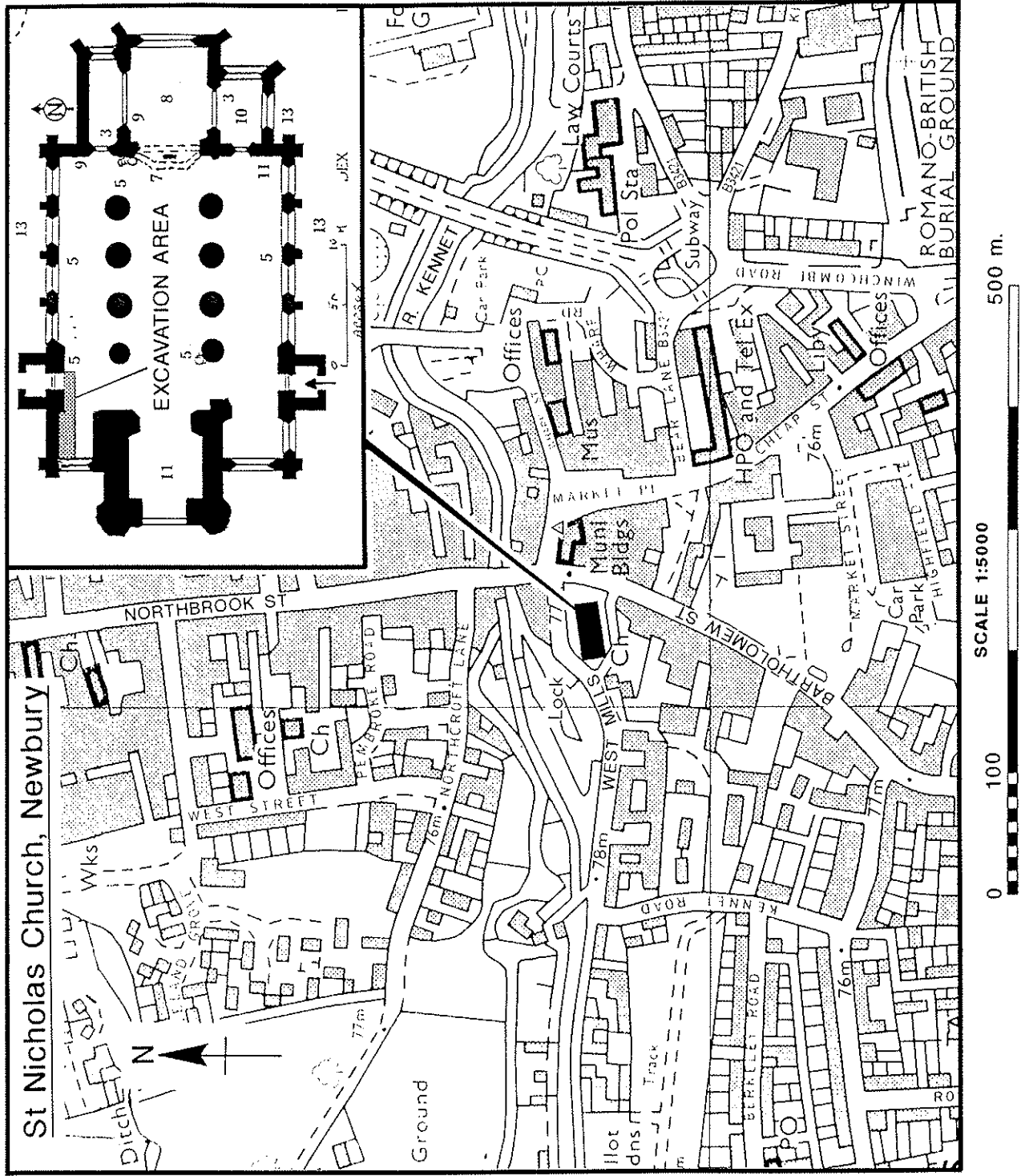


Figure 1



Plan

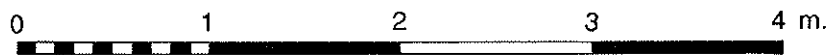
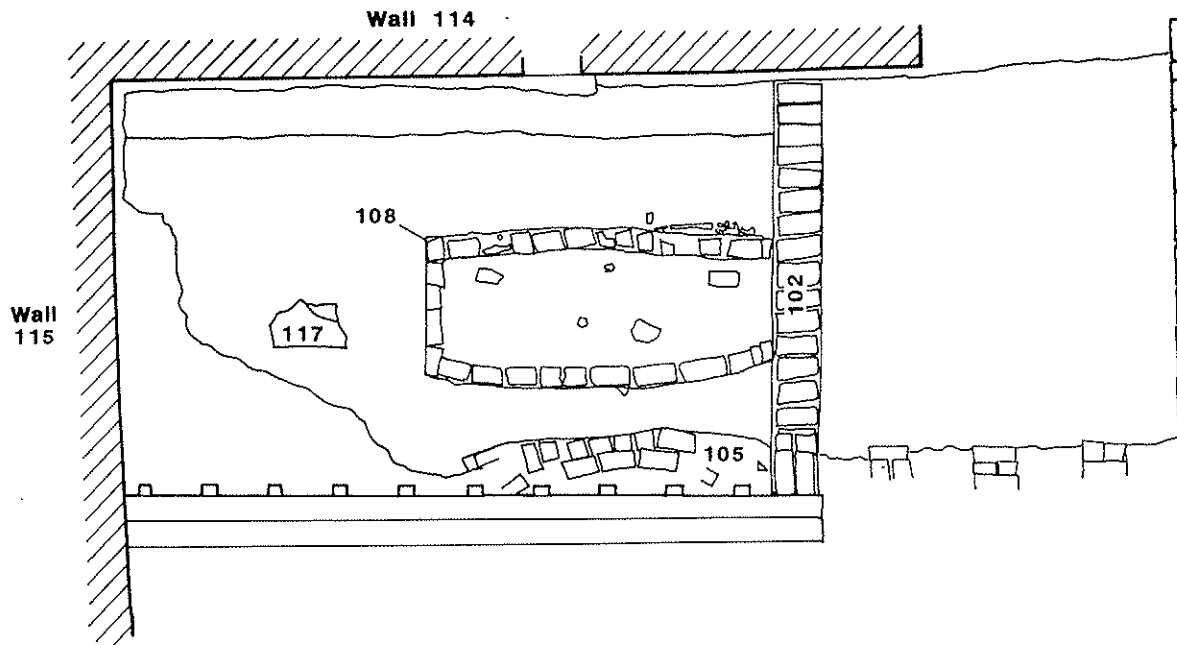


Figure 2

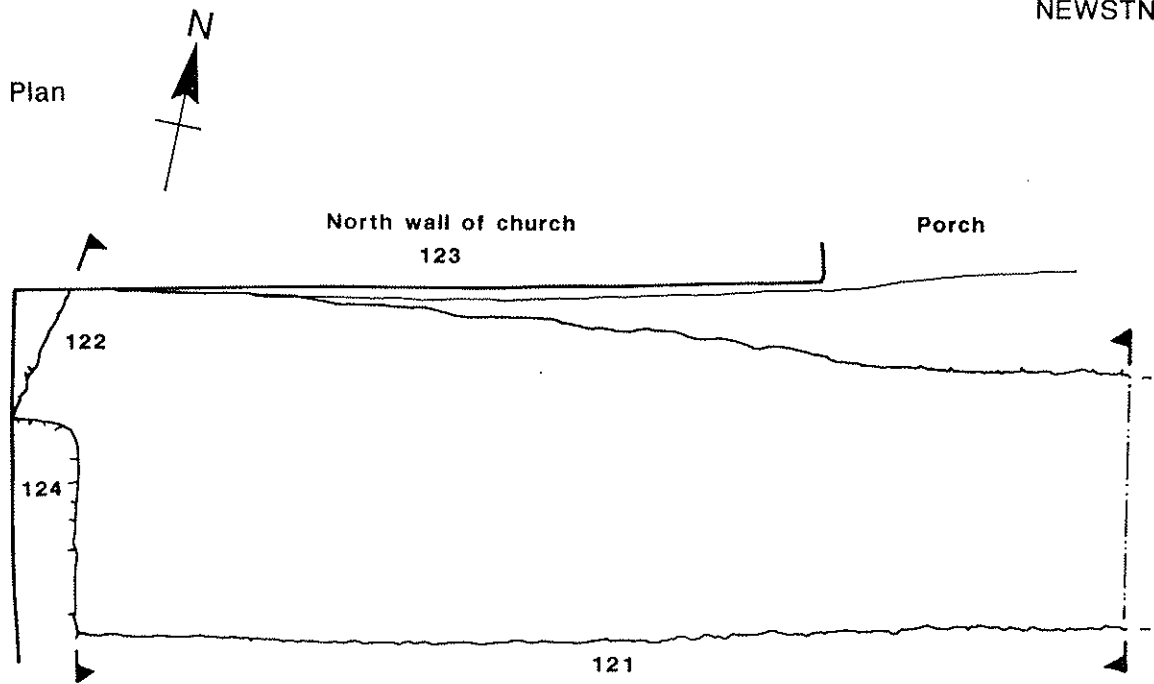


Figure 3.1

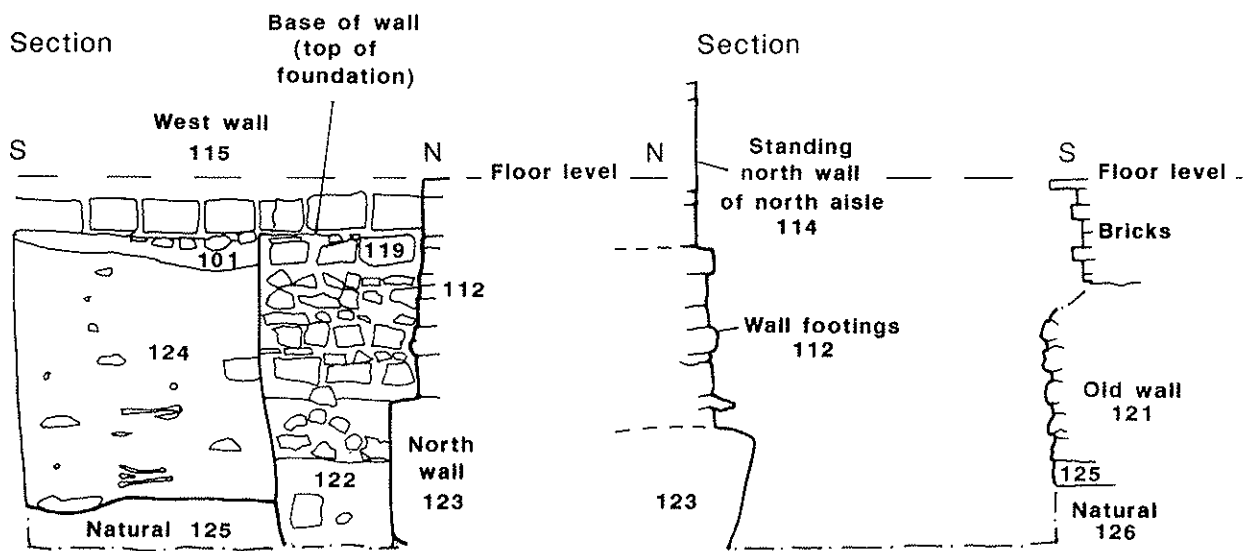


Figure 3.2

Figure 3.3

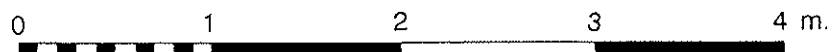


Figure 3

South section of excavation

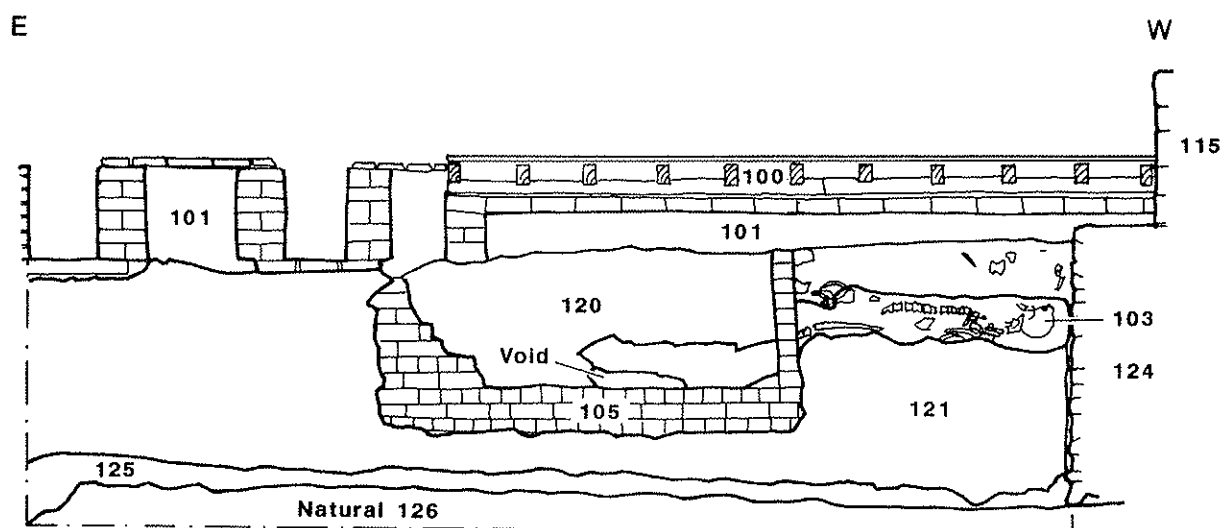


Figure 4

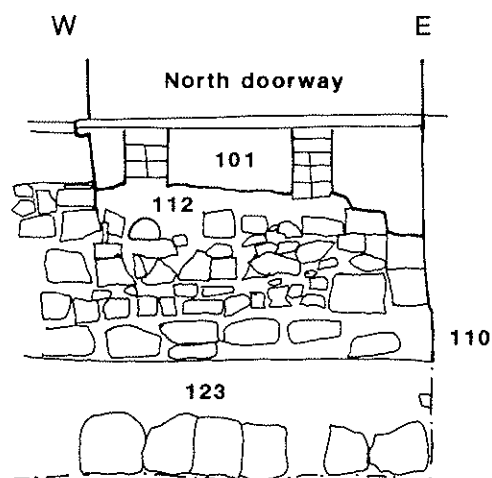


Figure 5