

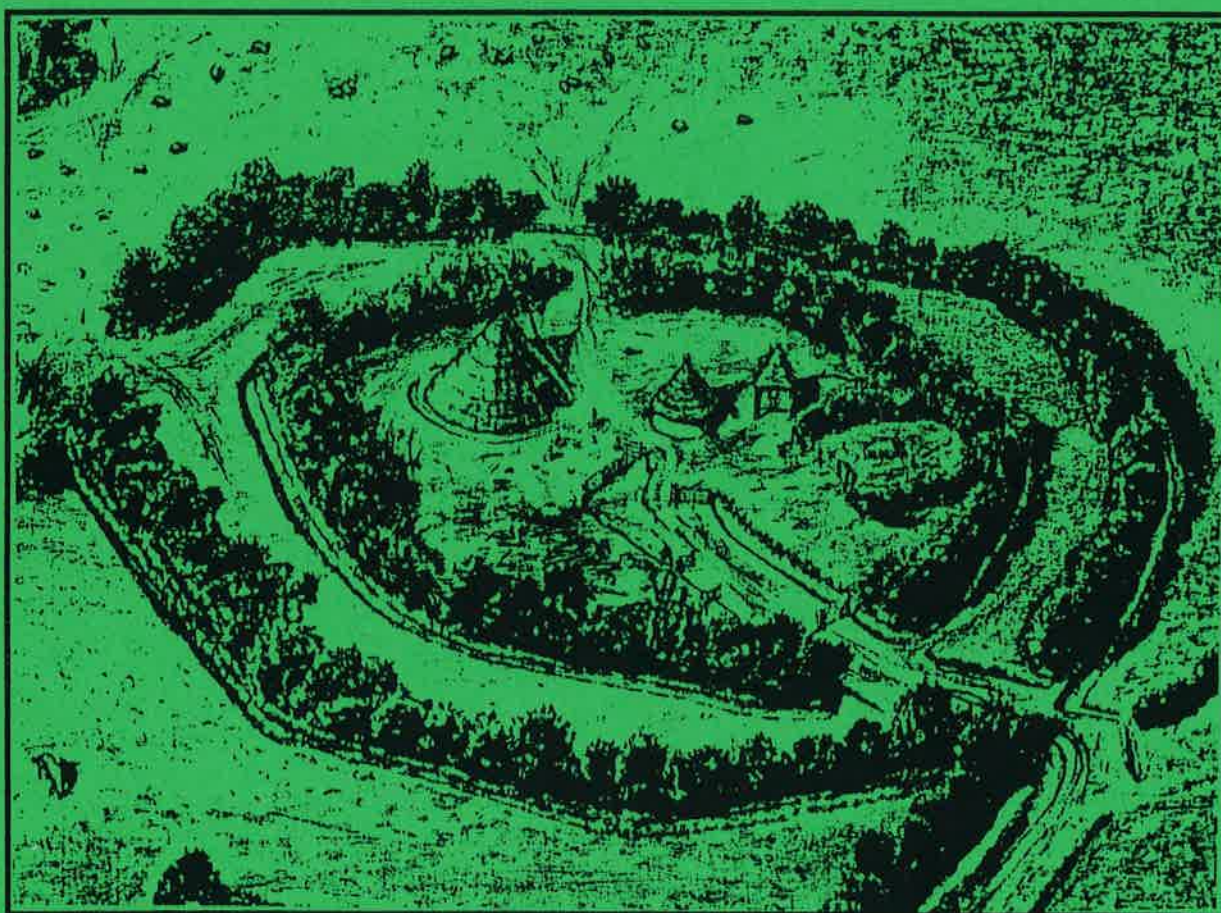
Peripheral Road and Housing Area

C2

Blackbird Leys, Oxford

NGR SP 555 020

Archaeological Excavations 1995-96:
Post-excavation assessment
and publication synopsis



Oxford Archaeological Unit

October 1996

ZONE A

PERIPHERAL ROAD AND HOUSING AREA C2

BLACKBIRD LEYS, OXFORD

Archaeological Investigation

Post excavation assessment

and publication synopsis

by

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October 1996

1. EXCAVATION SUMMARY - ZONE A

The 1995 archaeological Evaluation and Watching Brief along the peripheral road (now Grenoble Road) and within the adjacent Housing Area C2 revealed evidence of important Iron Age settlement remains, with some Early Bronze Age activity. These results led to the 1995 excavations on the roadline and subsequently the 1996 excavation within Housing Area C2 adjacent to and N of the 1995 investigation, in all covering an area of approximately 0.5 ha.

Although both excavation areas had been disturbed by deep ploughing, medieval ridge and furrow and land drains, a factor limiting the quality of the environmental and ecofactual evidence, enough of the integrity of this site has remained to justify further analysis. An archaeological sequence from the EBA to the MIA was recovered.

The main bulk of the settlement and associated features viz the Iron Age double ring-ditch and associated linear and discrete features, were seen within the Peripheral Road excavation (Trench 20). Trench 21, within the Housing Area C2, confirmed the continuation of two of the Iron Age ditches.

The double ring-ditch in the W part of Trench 20 consisted of a substantial outer ditch (Structure 2081) and a smaller, later inner ring-ditch, (St. 2167), both with entrances facing SE.

Associated gullies and ditches and pits and postholes were seen to extend N and E for some 40-50m within the excavated area. Three ditches ran basically N/S. The westernmost (St. 2183) and the one to the E of this (St. 2188), were picked up in Trench 21 continuing in a slightly more NE direction. The western-most ditch, (St. 2166), was not found in Trench 21.

The main concentration of discrete features was seen to the W of the ring-ditch and to the E of St. 2166. Most were pits or postholes though only a few contained dating evidence. There were no notable discrete features within Trench 21.

2. PROJECT BACKGROUND

2.1 Planning background

All investigations were carried out on behalf of Oxford City Council, in fulfilment of an archaeological condition placed upon planning permission by the above (originally planning applications 95/712/NO and 95/1176/NF) in advance of the construction of dwellings and associated highways on the Blackbird Leys development sites. They were undertaken in accordance with a brief prepared by Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service on behalf of Oxford City Council.

2.2 Site Location

The site lies on the N end of a N-S spur extending from the clay hill to the S of Blackbird Leys. The housing area C2 is on the N slope of this spur and the flatter clays to the N, by Northfield Brook.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS AND SEQUENCE

The phasing sequence outlined below has been based on spot dates produced from the pottery assemblage.

3.1 Peripheral Road Excavation Trench 20

This trench was 110 m long and 30 m wide and aligned E-W along the axis of the peripheral road.

3.1.1 Early Bronze Age

Possible EBA pottery evidence came from a discrete feature, 2127, situated in the far SE corner of Trench 20. The feature, measuring just over 1 x 1 m and just under 1 m deep, also contained a layer of burnt material with some burnt stones.

3.1.2 Middle/Late Bronze Age

Evidence for this phase of activity came from five pits/postholes (2028, 2024, 2147, 2101 and 2123), a group of discrete features situated towards the centre of Trench 20 and between later ditches 2166 and 2188. These pits/postholes ranged in size from 0.5m to 1.15m in diameter and all were relatively shallow. Feature 2101 produced a decorated, MBA loomweight.

3.1.3 Early /Middle Iron Age

In Trench 20 the outer ring-ditch, St. 2081, two linear ditches, St.s 2183, 2203, and the southerly continuation of the latter containing 2109, 2128 and 2131 and pits/postholes 2157, 2164, 2170, 2071, 2026 and 2035 all produced pottery dateable to the E/MIA.

Only the N and W arc of the substantial outer ring-ditch was seen in the excavated area, with a terminus to the SW which may be interpreted as the N side of an entrance. The ditch was substantial, having an average width of c. 2 m, and an average depth of c.1.2m. The overall diameter was c. 33 m. Three sherds of M/LBA pottery were recovered from the upper fills of the NW part of 2081. Feature 2170, possibly a gully segment running NE, was immediately associated with St.2081 on its W edge.

Segmented gullies 2157 and 2164, respectively 6 m to the NW and 12 m to the SW of St. 2081, ran NW, with posthole 2182 between them. These features together with 2170 are likely to be part of the settlement enclosure given their proximity to the ring-ditch.

A segmented linear feature in the centre of Trench 20 was formed by St.s 2183, 2203 and its S continuation containing 2109, 2128 and 2131. It ran N/S from the S limit of the Trench, for a distance of c. 18 m before changing course in the centre of the site towards the NE and running for a further c. 14 m to the N limit of the site. The average width and depth for St. 2183 was 1 m and 0.3 m respectively, and for St. 2203, c. 1.5 m and 0.20 m. This ditch was seen to continue in a NE direction within Trench 21 as St. 3010.

3.1.4 Middle Iron Age

Features attributed to this phase include the inner ring-ditch St. 2167, and ditches and segmented gullies St.s 2188, 2166, 2073 and 2091.

The complete inner ring-ditch was seen in the trench with the exception of a small section on the SW edge which lay outside the W limit of the excavation. An entrance or gap of c. 3.5 m faced SW corresponding to proposed for the outer ring-ditch. The maximum diameter was c. 22 m. The width of the ditch ranged from between 1.2 m and 3 m with an average depth of 0.5 m. The inner ring-ditch was concentric with and lay between 2 and 3 m within the outer ditch. A modern field boundary marked by a run of postholes ran in a NE direction through the centre of St. 2167.

Segmented gullies St.s 2073 and 2091 lay c. 4 m W of the outer ring-ditch. Both were similar in form to the earlier gullies 2157 and 2164. 2073 was a curvilinear gully segment running NE for a length of c. 1.75 m, approximately 0.4 m wide and 0.2 m deep. This formed a T- shape in plan with St. 2091, a segmented gully running SE for a length of c. 22 m. It terminated c. 1 m W of the earlier St. 2203 suggesting in plan that its function was that of an enclosure/settlement boundary.

Toward the centre of Trench 20 a continuous N/S running ditch St. 2188 was seen c. 5 m to the E of and roughly parallel to the earlier linear St. 2183 etc.. It ran across the N/S width of the trench, curving slightly to the NE towards the N limit of the site, and was seen continuing in that direction within Trench 21 as St. 3048. The ditch had an average width of 1 m and depth of 0.4 m.

A third continuous and straighter linear feature, St. 2166, was seen in the E end of the site running in a slightly NE/SW direction and parallel with St. 2188. Its average width was 0.5 m and depth was 0.25 m. It was not seen up in Trench 21.

3.2 Housing Area C2 Trench 21

This trench was 60 m by 30 m with extensions to the N and W. An area covering some 200 m sq. to the N of the trench extending along the E side was seen to have no archaeological features and was therefore backfilled for construction purposes.

Four structures, 3010, 3014, 3027 and 3048, all linear features, were seen in Trench 21. As noted above St.s 3010 and 3048 were continuous from St.s 2183 and 2188 respectively in Trench 20. All four converged within the centre of the site.

3.2.1 Early/Middle Iron Age

Segmented ditch and gully St.s 3010 and 3027 were dated to the E/MIA. 3010 continued in a NE direction for a distance of c. 25 m with an average width of 1.0 m and depth of 0.3 m. 3027, a shallower feature ran E/W for a total length of c. 25 m in two segments creating an entrance/gap of 1.25 m in the W part of the site. 3027 was cut by 3010. It was noted that 3027 ran parallel to the segmented gully 2091 in Trench 20.

3.2.2 Middle Iron Age

St.s 3014 and 3048 are attributed to the MIA. 3014 was a segmented ditch running NE/SW for about 19.5 m. Average width was c. 1 m and depth 0.4 m. It followed the alignment of 3010 and may be a continuation of that structure. 3014 is cut into by 3048 at its S terminus. 3048 was a continuation of sSt. 2188 in Trench 20.

Layers occurring at intervals along certain ditches, notably 3014, contained substantial amounts of animal bone, indicating the localised dumping of rubbish away from the settlement.

All these structures converge within a relatively small area creating a network of entrances giving access to an organised land use system.

4. RESULTS OF ASSESSMENT

4.1 Approximate quantification of the archive

EXCAVATIONS - PERIPHERAL ROAD AND HOUSING AREA C2

RECORDS	QUANTITY
Context sheets	290
Small finds	2
Plans; A1	9
Plans; A3	1
Plans; A4	3
Level sheets	5
Sections	85
Photographs	10 films

Artefactual and ecofactual material	Quantity
Pottery	1239 sherds
Copper Alloy finds	0
Struck flints	0
Fe finds	1 (modern)
Soil Samples	20
Animal Bone	1016
Other	1 (modern glass)

5. STATEMENT OF POTENTIAL

This section follows the guidelines proposed by English Heritage in their recommendations for post-excavation assessment (*Management of Archaeological Projects*, 1991b: Appendix 4).

The following is a summary statement of the value of the data gained in the excavation in terms of their potential in addressing the research aims of the investigation. Fuller finds assessment reports by individual authors are contained in Appendices 1-5 and section 4 contains a statement of the academic objectives of the project.

Pottery (Appendix 1)

A report has been written to date describing the assemblage of pottery recovered from the two phases of excavation. The assemblage is important from a typological point of view with regard to fabric and has intrinsic local and regional significance due to the site's location and topology. Further work required.

Faunal remains (Appendix 2)

The nature of the bone assemblage indicates that no further work is required.

Environmental samples (Appendix 3)

The majority of samples were contaminated with modern material. None of these or the charred plant remains offer any basis for determining the ecology or economy of the site. No further work required.

Charred remains (Appendix 4)

The nature of the charred remains indicates that no further work is required.

Artefactual remains (Appendix 5)

The two small finds are modern, and require no further work. They are not listed in this appendix. The MBA loomweight is unique and warrants publication within the final report.

Conclusion

There is sufficient evidence to address the problems of phasing and dating and to contribute to consideration of the use of the site. Comparisons with other published sites will assist in the interpretation of the evidence.

6. ACADEMIC OBJECTIVES

6.1 Research Frameworks

In the pre-excavation brief, the excavations were seen as offering the opportunity to record archaeological deposits in order to establish the potential for examining aspects of the site in the context of local, regional and national frameworks.

6.1.1 Local Framework

The site is situated within a multiperiod historic landscape which as yet has been predominantly represented by evidence of Romano-British activity, particularly on the clay-sand plain. Research on this level is integral to the understanding and study of the evolution of the immediate prehistoric landscape and within the historic context of the Oxford area.

6.1.2 National and Regional Frameworks

Study of this prehistoric site can be seen as having considerable importance for the understanding of clay-land and hilltop settlement in general, a fact recognised by English Heritage, especially for comparison with sites of a similar period and nature on contrasting geology. (*Exploring Our Past* 1991, 38).

6.2 Original research Aims

1. The principal aim was the recovery of archaeological data from the ground at a generalised level;
 - the recovery of an overall settlement plan within the physical limitations imposed.
 - low level excavation but compatible with defining form, relationships, function and date.
 - significant artefactual retrieval to form the basis for understanding the chronological sequence of the site.
 - significant ecofactual retrieval to form the basis for understanding the economic base of the site.
2. Presentation of an ordered archive and compilation of a summary report to consist of an outline description of the archaeological sequence, supported by an overall plan of the area examined and a summary of the artefactual and ecofactual record.
3. Social implications of the site and its artefacts within the known tribal landscape .

6.3 Revised research Aims

1. Aim 1 was covered by the fieldwork element.
2. The site and research archives to be ordered and indexed in accordance with the guidelines of the National Monument Record and security copies to be made. The archive will be prepared for deposition to the standards recommended by the UKIC, MGC and SMA and in accordance with the special requirements of the receiving museum.
3. To date and understand the character and function of the structures and features revealed in the excavations.
4. To establish a chronological sequence for the site as a whole, and to fit this into the local and regional framework.
5. To compare this site with other local and regional sites in respect to topology and location and assess the implications this may have in terms of structural and artefactual evidence, particularly the pottery assemblage.
6. To assess the implications of the lack of LIA evidence and to establish why settlement appears to cease in this location after the MIA.
7. Produce an accessible archive and publish the results (notably *Oxoniensia*).

7. METHODS FOR ACHIEVING AIMS

Aim 1 has been covered in the excavation.

Aim 2; a site archive will be created according to the guidelines outlined in *Management of Archaeological Projecs* 1991b Appendix 3. Archive to be deposited in the Oxfordshire County Museum.

Aim 3 and 4; phasing and relative dating of features will be carried out. Pottery data will be integrated with the phase information. An assessment of site formation and soil and finds deposition will be carried out. Comparison of the data from the site with published and unpublished data from sites in the region.

Aim 5; achieved through comparison of other known Iron Age sites locally, regionally and nationally to determine significant differences based on topography and location with particular reference to the pottery assemblage.

Aim 6; assess phasing and dating with the limited ecofactual evidence and compare locally and regionally with other published Iron Age site evolution. Establish if possible within the known local Iron Age settlement pattern and then assess regionally, and nationally if pertinent.

8. PUBLICATION

Proposed contents of Report

Text

Introduction	c200 words
Background & Methodology	c600 words
Arch description	c3000 words
Pottery	c8000 words
Smallfind report	c100 words

Discussion c1000 words

Illustrations

Location plan

Trench plan Trenches 21 and 22 (including Contingency Area)
Sections x 10-12

Pottery (including loomweight)

Tables

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Pottery

Introduction

This report deals with the material recovered in 1996 but includes a consideration of the material from the 1995 evaluation and excavation in the discussion.

A small assemblage of pottery was recovered from 30 different contexts (including topsoil) in the excavation. Two sherds each of Roman and post-medieval/modern material were found. The remainder, some 363 sherds weighing 1.797 kg, was probably all of Iron Age date.

The pottery was scanned briefly and summary notes on fabrics and vessel forms were recorded on standard recording sheets. Identification of both fabrics and forms was hampered by the poor condition of the material, which was generally very fragmented and sometimes had quite eroded surfaces. The latter characteristic was probably a consequence of the soil conditions on the site. The former seems to reflect the depositional history of the pottery, which may have been quite extensively broken up before reaching its final resting places. It is uncertain to what extent recutting of ditches or gullies could have been responsible for this.

Fabrics and Forms

Fabrics were not examined in detail at this stage. In any case they appeared to belong to a fairly small number of broad groups, all of which were represented in the larger assemblage recovered during the excavation of the adjoining part of the settlement in 1995. Three principal groupings were noted, in which shell, sand and clay pellets were the principal tempering agents. Sherds from a fourth group, consisting of tiny fragments with an average weight of less than 1 g, were not assigned to fabric at this stage. The overall quantities of the material in terms of these fabric groups were as follows:

Fabric	No. Sherds	% Sherds	Weight (g)	% Weight	Average Weight
Shell	274	75.5	1569	87.3	5.7
Sand	24	6.6	95	5.3	4.0
Clay pellets	12	3.3	84	4.7	7.0
Unassigned	53	14.6	49	2.7	0.9
Total	363		1797		5.0

In each case these represented the principal inclusion type evident in the sherds; in many sherds two or occasionally more inclusion types occurred together. The greatest variety of fabric was in

the shell-tempered group. There were two main subdivisions of this, one tempered with coarse fossil shell, the other with finer shell particles, sometimes in association with sand. The fabrics were generally consistent with those already noted from the site (from the 1995 evaluation), except that limestone-tempered sherds seem to be absent in the present assemblage.

The range of vessel types was very limited. Only eight different vessels were represented by rim sherds, six in shell-tempered and two in sand-tempered fabrics. With two exceptions the rims were from very simple, slack-profiled jars for which a Middle Iron Age date is likely. The exceptions, both shell-tempered, were an expanded rim with notches on its outer edge (the only decorated sherd in the whole assemblage), and three joining sherds (from contexts 3006 and 3061) from a vessel with a long curving neck which was probably carinated just below the surviving sherd edges. Both these vessels are likely to have been of Early Iron Age date, as was a single shoulder sherd, probably from a tripartite jar/bowl, in a fine, micaceous sand-tempered fabric from context 3012.

Chronology

The chronologically diagnostic sherds have been described above. In total three vessels, two represented by rims and one by a body sherd in a 'one-off' fabric, were of Early Iron Age date. Remaining discussion of chronology is largely based on fabric criteria and on negative evidence. The relative dearth of diagnostic Early Iron Age forms may in itself indicate that the majority of the assemblage was of Middle Iron Age date. The evidence of the fabrics, with a predominance of shell-tempered material, might suggest a greater emphasis on the Early Iron Age, however, in parallel with other assemblages in the Upper Thames Valley, but the character of the shell-tempering here is a little different from assemblages both from above Oxford (eg Gravelly Guy and Yarnton), and from important assemblages below Oxford such as Mount Farm and Little Wittenham. There was no evidence of material predating the Iron Age.

General Discussion

Some 286 prehistoric sherds (1940 g) were recovered in the original evaluation of this site, and a further 650 sherds came from the excavation which followed almost immediately from it. The latter group was only spot-dated at the time of the excavation (weight was not recorded), but clearly contained a rather wider range of material than that from either the evaluation or, in particular, the most recent work. Together the three groups provide an assemblage which should be adequate to phase and characterise the site, but may not allow much refinement of chronology within the broad periods of Early and Middle Iron Age. All three groups consist of sherds with a low average weight, but this characteristic seems to be most pronounced in the present assemblage. Since the latter appears to derive from features further removed from the settlement centre than other parts of the site the decreasing average sherd size here may be a genuine indicator of spatial variations in the taphonomic development of different groups. This could be considered in analysis of the total assemblage.

PMB

Appendix 2

Animal bone assessment

by Nicky Scott

Excavations 1995/96

A total of 1016 bone fragments were recovered of which 9.4% were identified to species and anatomical part.

The low identification percentage is due in part to the highly fragmentary nature of the bone recovered. This fragmentary nature also prevented detailed examination of butchery marks. Ribs and vertebrae were not identified.

The assessment shows cattle to be the predominant species represented although sheep/goat bones also figure significantly.

Despite the fragmentary nature of the bone the general surface condition was reasonable although certain contexts showed heavy encrusting with a cement like gravel mix. There was some evidence of burning notably in context 3047.

Appendix 3

Soil Sample analysis

by Greg Campbell

Blackbird Leys C2 and Peripheral Road (OXBLC2 95)
Assessment of fine residues

The fine residue (the 4-0.5 mm residue fraction) was retained and air-dried for all the samples except SS 210 and 2302-2305. For the assessment, the available residues were passed through a 1.0 mm mesh sieve, and the coarser portion (the 4-1 mm residue fraction) was rapidly scanned for the various materials discussed below, but without sorting. Following the scan the two portions of the residue were recombined and re-bagged. Those residues which contained material in quantity that meant that they might merit full sorting later were retained.

The detailed results of the assessment scan are discussed briefly below.

Intrusive material: Rare coked coal was found in many of the residues. This is possibly contamination from Medieval or later ploughing. Modern contamination is clear in the ditch fill 2303 as both the residues assessed from this fill contained germinating corn.

Mollusca: assessment for mollusc shell contemporary with the deposit was complicated by the high amounts of fossil shell in the residues, but it was still possible to differentiate recent from fossil shell by colour and thickness (the fossil shell is from thick-shelled marine organisms, and is coloured mid-grey or mid-grey brown). The recent mollusca were never in high concentrations, and none of the residues merit sorting on their mollusc content alone. They have been retained to keep the non-floating molluscs should detailed analysis of the molluscan evidence be indicated by the shells in the flots.

Bone: All bones observed in the residues were stained a uniform pale pink, but otherwise preservation appeared good, with edges sharp and little sign of chemical degradation. Chips from the chopping of large bones were observed in most of the residues, but were in low concentrations.

The bones of small animals were rarely observed, and then only in very low concentrations. Fish bones were not observed. Only Sample 214 appeared to merit full sorting to recover its bone.

Charred Plant Remains: The mechanical processing of these samples appears to have removed the great majority of the charred remains from the samples. While charred remains were observed in virtually all the residues, the concentration was very small. The only exception to this was Sample 209 (Context 2125) which contained charred remains which were mineralised and therefore did not float, but these remains were almost entirely wood charcoal.

Pottery: Small sherds were seen in most of the residues, but was a large amount of the residue only for the pottery waste dump fill 2303. None of the residues (including fill 2303) merit sorting on their pottery alone.

Iron-working: In contexts 2057 (SS 201), 2110 (SS 205) and 2017 (SS 214) iron-rich nodules formed a large part of the fine residue, and the residue included small quantities of burnt flint. This is unlike the other residues which were dominated by fossil shell and flint and quartz-like sand. Possible iron-working slag or bloom was seen in the first two residues. Other components such as chips of large bones indicate a domestic element in these deposits, but these residues need to be reviewed as they indicate the possibility of iron-working in the settlement. NB this material is almost certainly intrusive from the 19th-century sewage and refuse dumping cf comments on Fig pip below.

Discarded Samples: Samples 200 and 207 contained nothing meriting their being kept, and were therefore discarded. Sample 2300, a duplicate of 2310 but with rarer pottery inclusions, was also discarded.

Appendix 4

Charred Samples

By Gill Campbell

Assessment of charred samples

There is very little material in the twelve flots assessed and none merits further work. The middle Bronze Age pit, 2125, produced a fair amount of oak charcoal. Early Middle Bronze Age features produced a little wheat grain and a possible barley grain. Middle Iron Age features produced a single hazel-nut fragment, the odd wheat grain and a possible oat grain, although whether cultivated or wild oat was present cannot be determined. Molluscan studies on this material are not merited. The middle Iron Age ring-ditch produced an uncharred Fig pip which is likely to be intrusive.

Appendix 5

The decorated cylindrical loomweight

by Alistair Barclay

The loomweight, from context 2101, is in semi-complete and fragmentary condition. It has been made from fired clay and has been decorated with impressed round-toothed comb. Cylindrical loomweights have a mid- to late Bronze Age date range. The fact that this example has round-toothed comb impressions would tend to suggest a middle rather than a late Bronze Age date. This type of decorative technique also occurs on some middle Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury style pottery. Cylindrical loomweights are quite rare in general and it is highly likely that this comb decorated example is a unique find.

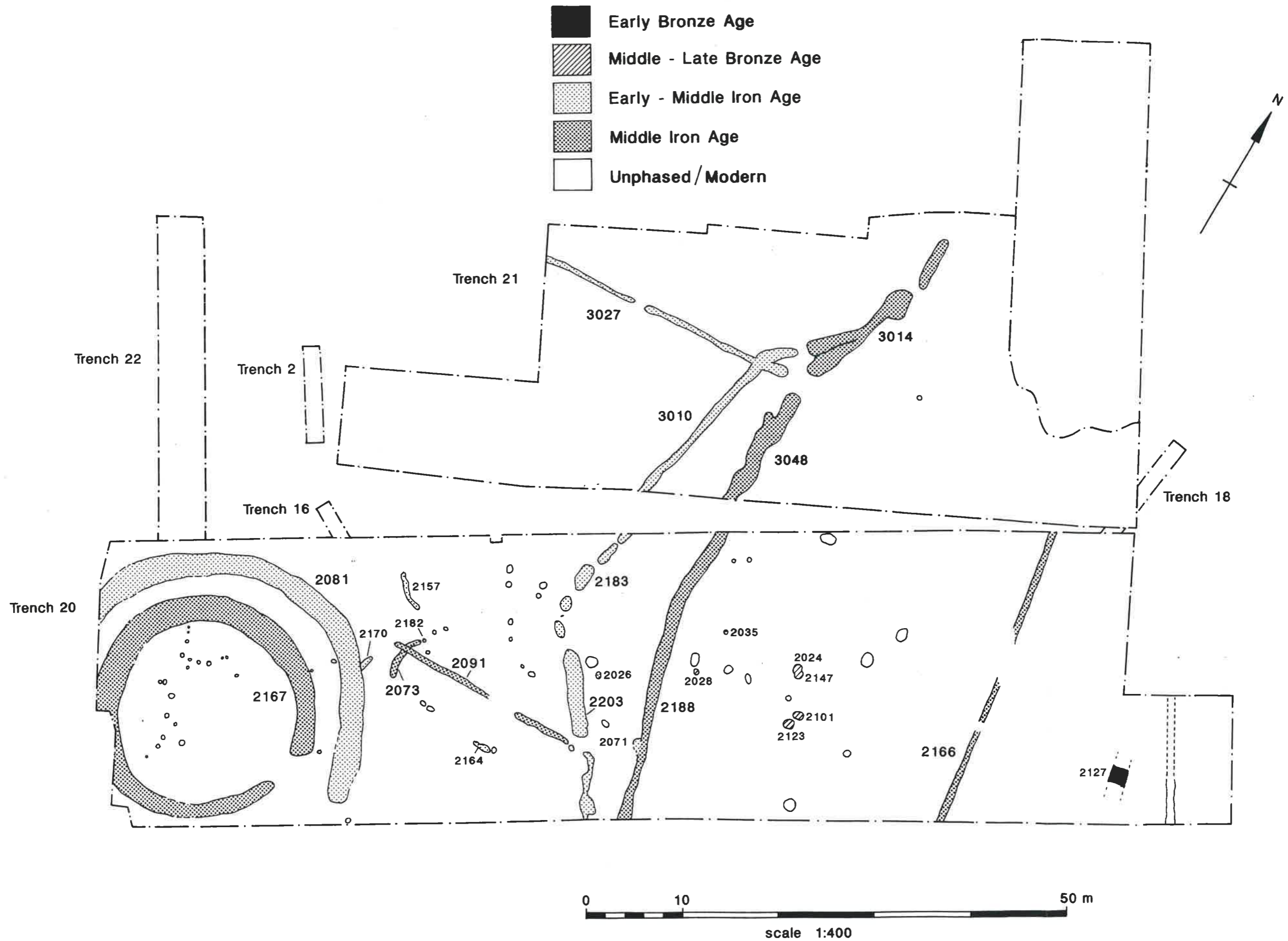


Figure 1



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