

# Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork

School of Archaeology and Palaeoecology  
Queen's University Belfast



**Excavations at Ballyaghagan, Co. Antrim**

**Data Structure Report: No. 80**

**AE/11/51**

On behalf of



**Data Structure Report: Earthworks, Ballyaghagan, Cavehill, Co. Antrim.**

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**Grid Reference: Grid Ref. J32260 79230**

**License No.: AE/11/51**

**CAF DSR No. 80**

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## **1.0 Summary**

1.1 Aerial photographs revealed the presence of two sets of earthworks earthworks, close to the summit of Cavehill, in the Cavehill Country Park which is owned and maintained by Belfast City Council. The NIEA asked the CAF at Queen's University Belfast to the investigate nature and date of these earthworks by conducting a small archaeological excavation there.

1.2 After obtaining the permission of the landowner, Belfast City Council, a single excavation trench, measuring 16m by 1m was excavated across and to the west of the bank. The excavation revealed the structure of the bank, showing how it was composed of a mixture of subsoil and sods, derived from two gullies located immediately either side of the bank, and placed directly on the ancient ground surface. To the east of the bank a considerable amount of pottery and struck flint was found. The flint was typical of later prehistoric or Early Medieval flint working. The pottery mostly appeared to be Souterrain Ware with sherds of three separate vessels identified. One rim sherd of a possible Neolithic vessel was also identified.

1.3 It is recommended that a programme of post-excavation is conducted, in order to complete the excavation and bring the project to completion and publication.

## 2.0 Introduction

Aerial photographs have revealed the existence of earthworks (Site A) and a small circular enclosure (Site B) at Ballyaghaghan, close to the summit of Cavehill (Figure 1, Photo 1). The earthwork structure (Site A), is difficult to measure because it covers varying topography and changes in character but it *may* be up to 220 by 130m in dimensions. It bisects the line of the existing footpath leading to MacArt's fort (Ant 056: 018) in two places. Close to the points where the earthwork meets the path a Bronze Age gold dress fastener was found in 1993 (Ant 056: 095) (Warner 1994). Evidence for Neolithic pottery, flint and Early Medieval pottery was found during field walking by Richard Warner, who also noted banks and possible ditches in the area (*ibid*). A kidney shaped enclosure (Ant 056:088), in some ways reminiscent of this structure, was found by Brian Williams in 1981 beside MacArt's fort.

The second structure (Site B) is a low circular stone footing, approximately 22m in diameter (Figure 1, Photo 1). Some Aerial photographs hint at the possibility of structures, potentially hut sites, within and around this circular wall.

When alerted to the existence of the earthwork, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency asked the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork at Queen's University Belfast to carry out an excavation to ascertain the nature and date of the earthworks. As the earthwork was situated inside the Cavehill Country Park, which is owned by the Belfast City Council, the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork had to obtain permission from Belfast City Council to carry out the excavation

A single 16m by 1m trench was excavated across the earthwork. The constructional and subsequent erosional sequence of the earthen bank was able to be deduced from the stratification of soil layers in this trench. The excavation found that the bank was made from earth and sods cut immediately up slope and down slope of it and that further earth for the construction and maintenance of the bank was probably scarped from the area southwest of the bank , giving the erroneous impression of a ditch.

## 2.1 Location

The large earthwork, Site A, is located in the townland of Ballyaghaghan, on the south side of the hill, close to the summit, at an altitude of approximately 300m (1000ft) (Grid Ref. J32260 79230). Mac Art's

fort is located about 400m to the northeast and a metal-detectorist found a gold dress fastener within some 30m of metres of the Site A earthwork in 1994.

The second site, a much smaller circular enclosure, Site B, is located around 100m to the northwest of Site A. Both sites lie within the Cavehill Country Park, which is owned by Belfast City Council.

### **3.0 Archaeological background**

The site investigated in this evaluation (Site A) is located close to a number of important archaeological monuments. MacArt's fort, a natural rock outcrop isolated from the rest of Cavehill by a ditch and external bank, forming a promontory fort (Ant 056:018), is located approximately 400m northeast of Site A, and 300m northeast of site B. Ballyaghaghan cairn (056:016), is located approximately 400m north of Site A and approximately 300m northwest of Site B. As mentioned above the findspot of a gold Bronze Age dress fastener (Ant 056: 095) is located at or very close to Site A. A sketch made by Richard Warner at the time of the finding of the gold, a copy of which resides within the SM7 plan, suggests it was approximately midway between the two points where Site A appears to cross the existing path. It is not outside the bounds of possibility that this path, while surfaced in recent times may have had an ancient antecedent.

#### **4.0 Methodology**

A single trench, measuring 1m by 16m was excavated across the bank and into the depression to the southwest. All excavation was carried out by hand. The standard context recording method, with a drawn, written and photographic record, was utilized for recording artefacts, features and strata uncovered by the excavation. Soil samples were taken of all significant strata and all artefacts were labeled by their context. After the excavation the trenches were be backfilled.

Health and Safety: Health and Safety is always a prime concern of CAF excavations. At Ballyaghagan, Cavehill the usual precautions safeguarding the excavation team during the working day were rigorously enforced. The excavation was conducted in a public park owned by Belfast City Council, to which the public have access 24 hours a day 365 days of the year. As a consequence a 3m wire fence was erected around the excavation trench. During working hours, when the team was present, one panel of the fence was removed to facilitate access to the trench for both excavators and accompanied visitors. At the close of the working day, the fence was closed, prohibiting access to the excavation, although still allowing interested by-passers to view the excavation trench in our absence.



## 5.0 The excavation (Figure 2, Photo 2 and 3)

The excavation trench measured 16m, approximately east - west by 1m, approximately north-south. The trench was located so as to cross both the bank and a depressed area, running in parallel to the bank, but several metres west and further down slope. It was assumed in advance of the excavation that this depression was a ditch and that the bank was the remnant of an earthwork cast up from it. Excavation showed this not to be the case however.

The sod and thin brown sandy loam topsoil (101), which was up to 8cm thick, covered the entire trench. It was stratified above a layer of peat up to about 14cm thick (102). This peat sat on top of orange brown, sandy clay, loam (103). This layer extended across the entire trench however it became apparent towards the end of the excavation that the character of the (103) at the east end of the trench, in and around the bank, was somewhat different, rather more loamy and slightly darker, than the 103 at the west end. As a consequence 103, for the purposes of labeling finds and soil samples, was split into two sub contexts: 103 at the east end of the trench was renamed 103b where as 103 at the west end kept its original name.

At the western end of the trench 103, sat directly above the subsoil but at the eastern end of the trench it was located above the layers composing the earthen bank, specifically the core bank layer 105 and two bank slump layers derived from it (111) and (113).

The earthen bank was constructed by excavating two shallow gullies and piling the sods and subsoil obtained from these gullies on the pre-existing ground surface still detectable as the dark brown loamy clay (106). The more easterly gully (107) was at most 0.8m wide and 0.2m deep. The westerly gully was somewhat wider, up to 1.4m wide and also about 0.2m deep. The gullies were approximately 1.6m apart. The easterly gully (107) was filled by a grey brown silty loam (108) and the westerly gully (109) was filled by a light grey brown clay loam (110). These layers are likely to be the result of humic build-up, in the case of gully 107, soil creep from up-slope and slumping of the earthen bank. To the east side of the earthen bank there are two other layers which appear to be derived from bank slump. There is (112) a yellowish sand with loam which appears to be mainly wash or collapse from the primary bank material (105) with the admixture of only a little extra loam. Above it is a dark brown, quite silty loam,

(111), which abuts the core material of the bank (105). To the west side a dark brown silty loam (113), quite similar to (111), also abuts the core of the bank and directly covers the fill, (110), of the cut (109).

## **6.0 The Artefacts**

### *The pottery*

Sixty four pieces of coarse pottery were found in context 103, the only context to produce ceramic finds. They were all found within the westerly 2m of the trench. There were four fabric types within this context.

Type A , ten sherds, was mainly dark grey but with some, possible post-depositional, iron oxide staining to the exterior surfaces. These sherds had a very laminated appearance in section. Inclusions were few, irregular shaped, ill-sorted fragments of quartzite and, probably basaltic, rock, naturally present in the clay rather than deliberately added as temper. These inclusions are typical of what might be expected from locally occurring clays in east Antrim. A number of the sherds exhibited grass marking on their exterior surface. Three matching rims were from a single vessel of Type A fabric. The three matching rims were rounded on the outside edge but had a slightly chamfered inside edge.

The Type B fabric, thirty three sherds, had a dark grey core and orange / brown margins, somewhat thicker than the other fabric from this context and some traces of grass marking on a couple of sherds. A single rim with this type of fabric was identified. It was flattened and slightly inverted with incised linear decoration in the flattened top of the rim.

The Type C fabric was composed of twenty sherds. It had an orange brown fabric and light to mid grey brown exterior surfaces with grass marking on the exterior face.

Type D fabric, represented by one sherd was very different from any of the other sherds from the excavation. It had a light orange fabric, was not laminated like the other sherds and had iron oxide and crushed flint inclusions.

Of the sixty four sherds found during the excavation four vessels can be identified. One vessel, the Type B vessel with the incised decoration and flattened rim, is, despite its small size, almost certainly Souterrain Ware and given absence of early decorated variants of Souterrain Ware, likely to be ninth or

tenth century, or layer (Ryan 1973). The Type A fabric vessel with the rounded and slightly chamfered rim is also likely to be Souterrain Ware, although with no decoration it could date to any period of production of Souterrain Ware from the eighth to thirteenth or even fourteenth century (McSparron and Williams 2009). The Type C vessel with no rims surviving is more difficult to attribute to type although grass marking is common on Souterrain Ware and with so many other fragments of this type of pottery in the immediate area it is most likely that this represents a third Souterrain Ware vessel

The Type D rim is somewhat different however. It has a rather different fabric than any of the other sherds, more evenly fired, in an oxidizing atmosphere and displays slightly different inclusion types, including a few fragments of crushed flint. This vessel had a simple rounded rim. It is very difficult to accurately identify very small pottery fragments but it is possible that this is not a Souterrain Ware vessel piece, like the other sherds from the site. It is reminiscent of Neolithic pottery.

#### *The Flint*

Seventy six fragments of flint were found during the excavation. Although a small number of these may be natural most show evidence of having been struck. There are clearly several cores within the assemblage, several struck flakes and a large number of fragments or debitage and micro-debitage. The overall impression of the flint from Cavehill is of a late prehistoric or possibly even Early Medieval assemblage (*Pers comm.* Brian Sloan).

## 7.0 Discussion

The excavation trench uncovered the remains of the earthen bank and its constituent components. The bank was initially constructed from earth and turves cut from two depressions or gullies either side of the bank. The earth and turves must have included a significant amount of subsoil as the colour and texture of the bank core (105) is a mix of the sandy subsoil and loam. It is difficult to estimate the exact height of the earthen bank as it has eroded significantly since its first erection however looking at the amount of material excavated from the two depressions either side of the bank it must have stood about 1m above the level of the relic topsoil. This would have been enhanced by the depression excavated to the west of the bank, giving the impression of a bank about 1.5m high as it was approached from the down slope.

The location of the bank straddling the current path through the Cavehill country park may be of significance. The natural approach from the south to Mac Art's fort, identified by Liz Fitzpatrick as a likely early Medieval Inauguration site (Fitzpatrick 2004), is along, or close to, the line of this path. Just after the point on this approach where the bank is situated the path makes one final upward surge, turns north and levels to reveal the vista that it the top of Cavehill.

Cavehill and the Belfast area were within the territory of the Ulaid in the Early Medieval period, the chief dynasty of which was the Dál Fiatacht. The Dál Fiatacht for much of the Early Medieval period carried out their rituals of inauguration at Crew Hill (Byrne 1973, 125), which has recently been investigated by Philip Macdonald (2008). In the aftermath of the battle of Crew Hill in 1004 in which the Dál Fiatacht *derbfhine* was almost wiped out fighting the Cenél nEógain (Byrne 1973, 127) there was a period of dynastic flux lasting several generations, with different groups competing for the kingship. It is possible that at this time one of the competing groups of the Dál Fiatacht, one which did not have access to the traditional inaugural site at Crew Hill, began to use the summit of Cavehill, centred on MacArt's Fort, as an inauguration site. The presence of a stone chair on MacArt's fort, now lost, (Fitzpatrick 2004) hints strongly at inauguration. Important as the actual site of the inauguration itself was it is unlikely that it would have been the only site associated with these rituals. It is possible to view the entire summit of Cavehill as a ritual landscape associated with kingly inauguration.

In human rituals of all types anthropologists have uncovered unconscious structure. Some structure is related only to small groups of individuals, possibly individuals of the same cultural or linguistic group, other structure is apparently cross-cultural such as the stages of ritual identified by Van Gennep (1960). Van Gennep discussed these stages in the various “rites of passage”, such as entering adulthood, marriage, even travel between nations. Kingly inauguration is clearly one of these “rites of passage”. These rituals are split into several stages, the stage before the actual ritual, possibly involving purificatory rites and preparations, the actual ceremony itself, and the return as the changed individual. These rites can, and often will, be played out on the landscape, the ceremonial procession to the inaugural site, the inauguration itself, the return as a king. These events will not only be played out on the landscape but will actually be described on the landscape physically by human constructions. If the inauguration is carried out on MacArts’ fort itself then the function of its external ditch becomes more understandable as the focus of activity is turned to the interior as opposed to the exterior. Also the processional route is likely to become etched on the landscape with the construction of a path or road from the secular kingdom to the inaugural site. There may be barriers, or thresholds, along this route, not everyone may be entitled to see or take part in the rituals of kingship, and at these thresholds the social structure of Early Medieval society may be inscribed upon the soil. The positioning of our excavated bank, just below the point where the path turns to view the vista with MacArt’s fort in the centre of the field of vision, is what we might expect if the landscape of the ritual inauguration were to be subdivided from the secular landscape of the kingdom below.

Possibly of great importance is the finding of a late Bronze Age gold dress fastener (Ant 056: 095) approximately 80m west of the site of the excavation. The find spot was identified by Richard Warner, then of the Ulster Museum, with the assistance of the metal detectorist who found the object. Subsequently a 3m square trench was excavated around the findspot (Warner 1994). This revealed a gully filled with earth and stone, interpreted as a path, upon which the dress fastener had been set. Beside the dress fastener a hearth was discovered which produced charcoal which, when radiocarbon dated gave, an Early Medieval Date. Warner allowed for two possibilities, firstly that the Gold Dress Fastener was a Late Bronze Age deposition with a chance Early Medieval hearth laterly located beside it or that secondly the gold dress fastener was deposited in the Early Medieval Period.

The latter possibility is not as unlikely as it sounds. Early Medieval Kingship was very good at appropriating earlier sites as symbols of ancient entitlement. Burying an ancient artefact at a threshold

may also have been a mechanism for consecrating a ritual site, giving it a heritage. The fact that there was probably no direct ancestral link between the artefact and the Dál Fiatacht was incidental, it is the belief which was important, not the reality. The entire area between the spot of the burial of the gold object and the excavated earthen bank may have been a boundary zone a “liminal” region at the edge of the sacred landscape, where possibly the procession assembled before ascending the mountain and well wishers watched the progress of the king elect and awaited his return .

## 8.0 Conclusions

The excavations at Ballyaghagan have demonstrated that the earthen bank is likely to be an Early Medieval boundary, matched by several other banks in the immediate vicinity. It is not likely to be a simple field boundary as it neither matches with other banks to make any sort of field pattern or respect the topography or physical geography of the hill. It does seem to make some sense however as a boundary along the approach from the south to MacArt's fort. Also the finding of so much Souterrain Ware pottery in a small area gives testimony to potentially quite intense Early Medieval activity near the top of the hill. This is not likely to be primary settlement, although early Medieval booleying is known in the Belfast Hills and cannot be ruled out at this site without further investigations.

The small scale of the archaeological investigations carried out at this site and other sites in this part of the Cavehill Country Park, demonstrate how relatively untouched the landscape is here. That the earthen banks, which are not very large, have survived for 1000 years or more demonstrates this. It is apparent also from even a brief examination of the area around our excavation that there are large numbers of unrecorded archaeological features visible on the ground, other fragments of earthen banks, ditches, gullies etc which it was beyond the resources and scope of our project to formally survey .

There is much scope for further survey and targeted research excavation on the summit of Cavehill which could test the hypothesis of Early Medieval inaugural rituals there and also provide information of early prehistoric and later Medieval and post-Medieval uses of the area.

## 9.0 Recommendations for further work

*Soil sample processing:* 23 sample bags of samples from the strata at Ballyaghagan were collected from the excavation trench. These samples must now be processed. It is envisaged that the samples be subjected to standard wet sieving and flotation as it is not though likely that there will be survival of insects or pollen from the dry hill strata. It is envisaged that this processing will be carried out at the Analytical Laboratory in the School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

*Macrofloral analysis:* If plant macrofossils are recovered from the soil sample processing then it is important that they are identified and their significance assessed. It is envisaged that Dr Gill Plunkett of the School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, possibly working with a student, would carry out this work and produce a report.

*Flint Report:* A significant amount of flint was found during the excavation, some of which may be contemporary with the construction / use of the site. It is suggested that this flint is examined by Brian Sloan of the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

*Radiocarbon Dating:* If suitable samples are found during soil sample processing it is envisaged that confirmation of the supposed Early Medieval date of the earthwork is obtained by radiocarbon dating. It is suggested that three radiocarbon dates, one preferably from the relic soil beneath the bank and two from the soils associated with the bank use and collapse should be obtained in the hope of bracketing the period of the actual construction of the bank. It is suggested that these radiocarbon dates would be carried out by the Chrono Centre, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.



## **10.0 Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Ruairi O’Baill, Ruth Logue, Grace McAlister, Stuart Alexander, Sarah Kerr, Rachael Patterson and Dermot Redmond for their help excavating this site, Philip Macdonald and Colm Donnelly for helpful suggestions with the text and Sapphire Mussen for digitising the field drawings. I would also like to thank Robert Heslip, Ken Anderson and Fintan Grant of Belfast City Council for help getting permission and access to dig in the Cavehill Country Park.

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Appendix 1 Context Register

Context No.	Description
101	Sod / Topsoil layer
102	Dark peaty material beneath sod layer (101)
103	Orange / brown, sandy clay loam, layer
104	Sandy yellow subsoil
105	Redeposited bank
106	Dark brown loamy clay, relic topsoil.
107	Gully cut to east of bank
108	Grey brown silty loam fill of 107
109	Gully cut to west of bank
110	Light grey / brown clay loam fill of 109
111	Darker more loamy variant of 108
112	
113	

Appendix 2 Drawing Register

Drawing No.	Scale	Description
1	1:20	Pre-ex plan of trench
2	1:20	Post-ex plan of trench
3	1:20	Northwest facing section of trench

Appendix 3 Sample Register

Sample No.	Context	No. bags	Description
1	103	1	Western end of site
2	103	1	Western
3	103	1	Western
4	103	1	Western
5	103	1	Western
6	103	1	Western
7	103	1	Western
8	103	1	Western
9	103	1	Western
10	103	1	Western
11	103	1	Western
12	103	1/2	Western
13	103b	1	Upper bank loam
14	103b	1	Upper
15	103b	1	Upper
16	103b	1	Upper
17	106	1	Lower bank
18	106	1	Lower bank
19	110	1	Slippage from bank
20	110	1	Slippage from bank
21	108	1	Fill of 107
22	108	1	Fill of 107
23	111	1	Fill of 107

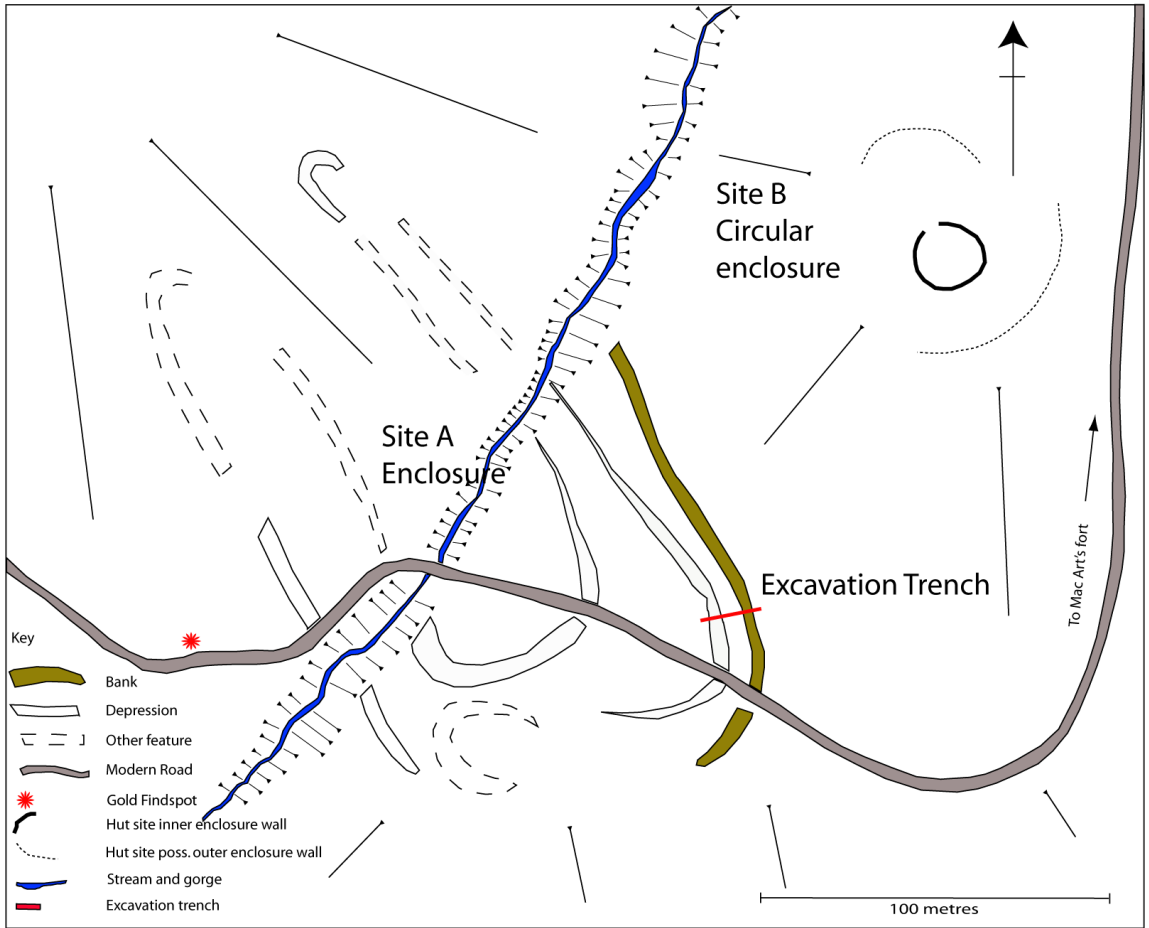


Figure 1: Location map showing bank, linear depressions, excavation trench and 1994 gold findspot.

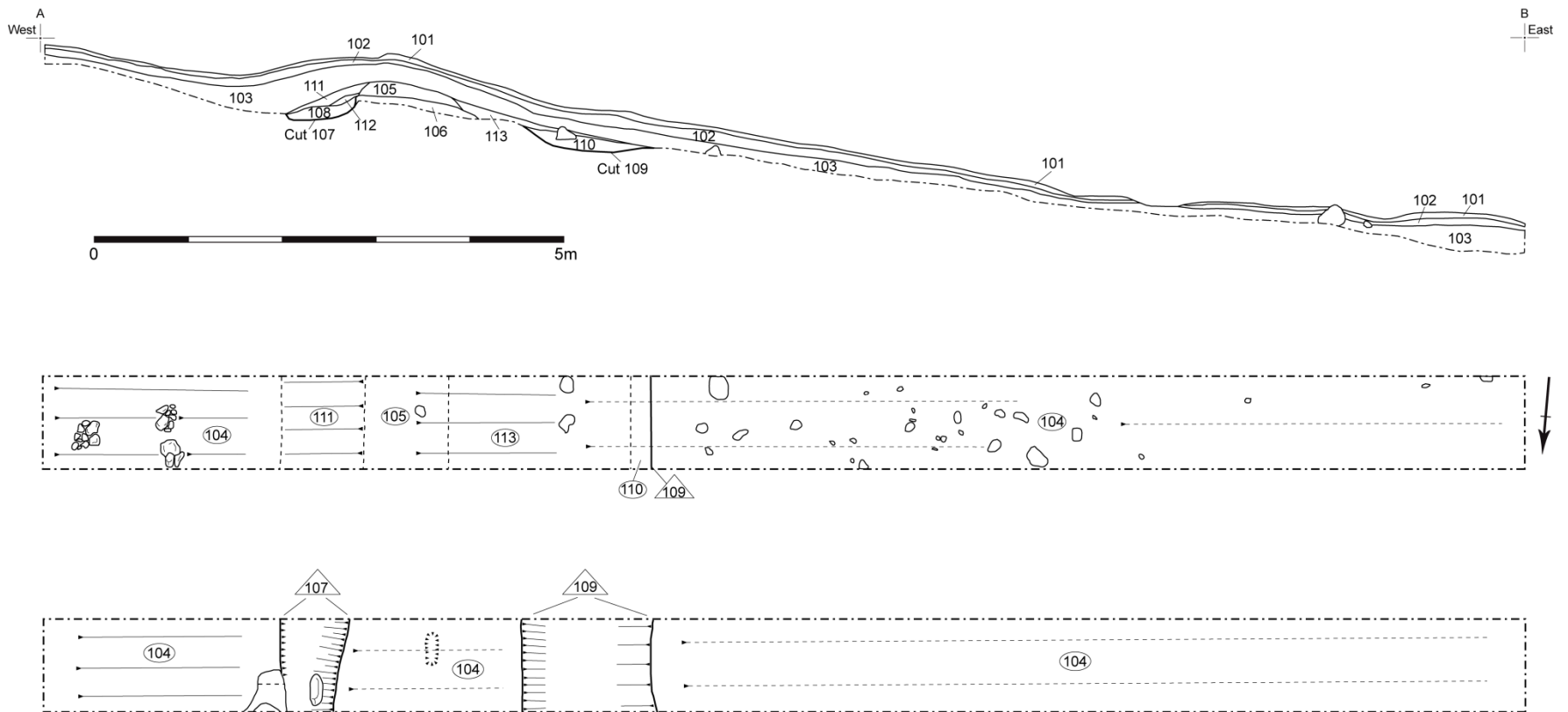


Figure 2: Plans, before removal of bank core (upper) and after showing relic topsoil (lower) and section of excavation trench.



Photo 1: Excavation trench from west





Photo 2: Excavation showing residual bank (in section) and relic ground surface.



Photo 3: Photo of residual bank (in section), and gully (107) to north of bank.