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Historic Scotland  
Properties in Care  
Minor Archaeological Works 2001

Hilton of Cadboll Chapel Site  
Archaeological Excavation

7<sup>th</sup> March 2001



ARCHAEOLOGY

**Site**      Hilton of Cadboll Chapel Site

**N.G.R**      NH 8730 7688

**Project Description**      Excavation January/ February 2001

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## INTRODUCTION

Kirkdale Archaeology undertook a three week excavation at the Hilton of Cadboll chapel site ( NH 8730 7688 ), in Easter Ross for Historic Scotland during January and February 2001. This was a follow up to a 3 day excavation in 1998, which had recovered around 40 fragments of carved micaceous sandstone ( DES 1998 p. 51 ). This almost certainly comes from the famous Hilton of Cadboll stone, now in the National Museum of Scotland, one face of which has been altered to a grave slab of 1676.

The area opened ( initially 36 square metres ) was gridded into 50 cm. squares, with spoil being sieved, and carved fragments being recorded by 50 cm. square. 740 carved fragments, and 122 possibly carved fragments were recovered in this way. A 2 by 2 m. extension was added to the W. side of the trench, when it was discovered that the stump of the stone was still in- situ, a slab 140 cm. long, by 21 cm. wide, orientated N.- S. . Decoration, matching that reconstructed on the bottom panel of the surviving face, was noted on the E. side of the stump, with sand built up against this, and carving continuing down. A small cut around the W. face of the stump was filled with debris from the redressing of 1676, showing this to be an exploratory trench of this date, presumably in an ( abandoned ) attempt to remove the whole stone. This had revealed a large packing stone obscuring much of the carving, but that seen at the S. end of the stump had a greater depth of relief than the surviving side, and also continues down, showing that much of the slab remains in the ground. The stone had been cut down, clear evidence of this surviving on the top of the stump, falling to the E. It had then been redressed on the site, with piles of debris being swept off the top of the recumbent slab, and recovered to the side of where it must have lain. Larger individual fragments recovered included one with a pair of human feet, and a couple of probable serpent's heads. The smaller debris seemed to be mostly fragments of key pattern interlace, but includes some round bosses. A fragment from a ring headed cross, in a stone of different geological origin, was also recovered.

Due to the large number of fragments recovered much of the debitage, along with the stump itself, is still in the ground.

Kirkdale Archaeology were asked to undertake work at the supposed chapel site of Hilton of Cadboll ( NH 8730 7688 ), in Easter Ross, a site with a connection, of unknown antiquity, with the famous Hilton of Cadboll carved stone. This stone, a massive block of micaceous red sandstone ( RCAHMS 1999, p. 29 ), currently in the National Museum of Scotland, is classified as being a class II Pictish cross slab, datable to c. 800 A. D. . One face of it features a border of inhabited vine scroll, surrounding three panels, the upper of which contains a double disc and Z rod, a crescent and V rod and two discs, the middle panel shows a hunting scene, and the lowest panel is filled with spirals. This lowest panel is broken off, and the other side of the slab has been altered to a graveslab of 1676, commemorating Alexander Duff and his three wives. A report by M. O. H. Carver ( which Kirkdale Archaeology does not have a full

reference for ), stresses the uncertainty of where this stone originally stood, with five different possible sites being listed, although by 1811 the stone was apparently lying, with the Pictish side facing down, near the foreshore. By 1856 it was " in a shed, the wall of which was believed to have formed part of an ancient chapel ", presumed to have been the Hilton of Cadboll chapel site, where the current work was undertaken. By 1903 it had been removed to Invergordon Castle, in 1928 it went to the British Museum, and shortly thereafter it was taken to Edinburgh.

In July 1998 Kirkdale Archaeology undertook a small excavation at the W. end of the chapel site, with the aim of determining whether the stone had actually stood there. In the event no socket was located, but a deposit of c. 40 flakes from a decorated stone was found, which seems most likely to represent the 1676 redressing of the Hilton of Cadboll stone. Excavation was small scale, with an area of 6 square metres being opened, and not all of this was taken down to the level at which the debitage was encountered. Kirkdale Archaeology were therefore asked to return and recover as much of this debris as possible, a task undertaken between January and February 2001.

## 2.0 DESCRIPTION

The Hilton of Cadboll chapel site appears today as a series of grassed over earthworks, featuring a rectangular structure orientated E.- W., some 14 m. long by 8.5 m. wide, with a pronounced internal hollow. At the W. end of this a D- shaped enclosure is visible as a surface feature, although much less pronounced than the walls of the main structure. This sits within a series of earthwork enclosures, although the presumed chapel sits at an eccentric angle, and not central to, these outer earthworks, which appear to be orientated closer to N. E.- S. W. than E.- W. . The site lies at less than 10 m. O. D. on the raised beach, below a c. 15 m. high fossil cliff line, just to the N. of the modern village of Hilton of Cadboll. Fossil dunes are visible further E. ( closer to the sea ), and the site sits on Old Red Sandstone. Although the Hilton of Cadboll stone is itself red sandstone its' geological provenance is not local, probably having been imported from further S. . A striking replica of the Hilton of Cadboll stone, carved by Barry Grove, stands today to the W. of the chapel.

Initially an area of 6 m. by 6 m. was opened up orientated on, and just external to, the W. gable wall of the chapel. Topsoil (001) was a dark grey sandy silt, with much root, and some animal disturbance throughout. It was generally only 5- 10 cm. thick, but in places reached 20 cm., and overlay (002), a loose deposit, c. 70 % stone, mostly red sandstone of all sizes, but up to 75 by 30 by 20 cm., set in a matrix of dark grey sandy silt. This deposit was not fully excavated, but where it was it proved to vary from 15- 35 cm. thick, and was again disturbed by roots and animals. A single roofslate, a small collection of bone ( probably all animal, except



for a possible fragment of human jaw ), some iron nails, and a small assemblage of post-Medieval pottery was recovered from (002). Near the E. side of the trench (002) partially overlay (005), which was not excavated, but appeared as a linear bank, made up of c. 60 % angular sandstone, set in a mixture of 60 % red sandy clay, 40 % dark grey sandy silt. This feature was some 60 cm. wide and ran N.- S. across the trench, curving to the E. at its' N. end, and apparently petering out 120 cm. from the S. limit of the excavation. (005) corresponded closely with the D- shaped " annexe " visible before excavation. Work to the E. of this bank in 1998 had located an apparent cut and fill, (004) and (003), immediately to the E. of, and cutting (005), and had failed to recover any carved fragments in this area. Work in 2001 was, therefore, restricted to the W. of this bank, only its' surface being examined, and with (003) and (004) only being seen in the section of the reopened 1998 trench.

To the W. of (005) it was hoped to excavate (002), which the 1998 excavation had shown overlay the deposit of carved stone fragments, in 50 cm. squares, with all spoil being riddled in squares in which fragments were located. This strategy was devised to allow some spatial reconstruction of the distribution of fragments, with larger individual fragments having their location plotted, and the bulk of small chips only being recorded by 50 cm. grid square. It was felt essential to riddle all spoil in order to maximise recovery of the often numerous small pieces. In the event (007), the layer of debitage, was mixed in with (002), and while it generally lay at the bottom of this deposit of rubble, overlying a relatively stone free sand layer, (006), occasional fragments were found quite high up, within (002). In fact the sole real distinction between (002) and (007) was the presence or absence of debris from the carved stone. Excavation started with those areas left unexcavated within the 1998 trench, and proceeded from here, in slots 50 cm. wide to N., S., and W., in an attempt to define the limits of (007), with the failure to recover fragments to the E. of (005) in 1998 effectively providing an Eastern limit.

The trench to the N., along the 102.00 Easting line, produced a low density of worked stone for the first two squares, the next square had only 1 possible fragment, and the last three squares, taking this slot up to the N. edge of the section, had none. The slot to the S., along the 101.00 Easting line, produced often massive densities at its' N. end, with the square whose S. W. coordinate was 101.00 / 102.00, for example, producing 170 carved fragments, and 17 possibly carved pieces. The Southernmost meter ( 2 grid squares ) produced no fragments, and this trench then turned E., to run along the side of the trench, for another 1.5 m. ( 3 squares ), again turning up nothing. The Western arm of this excavation, running along the 103.00 Northing line, ran right up to the W. limit of the trench without ceasing to produce a small, but consistent, scatter of dressed pieces. At the extreme W. end of this slot, while cleaning up the section, the stump of a stone, decorated on the side towards the trench ( E. face ), was discovered. A 2 m. by 2m. extension, centred on this stone, was added to the W. of the trench, and the remaining grid squares obscuring its' E. face were excavated. This revealed that (008) ( the stump ) was a slab of sandstone 140 cm. long, by 21 cm. wide, orientated roughly N.- S. . The top of this stump showed clear chisel marks along its' E. side, while the

W. side of it was raised in a ridge some 6 cm. higher than the E. Some 15 cm. in height was revealed of the E. face, showing carving that could be matched up with the lower ( replica ) part of the surviving face, thin parts of this decoration having come detached, and apparently slid down the side of the stone, leaving them propped up against the E. face of (008). Decoration clearly continued down below this, but (006), the horizon which all the fragments lay above, was built up against this face, showing that the erection of this stump belonged to an earlier stratigraphic horizon. Excavation of 2 grid squares at the N. end of (008) produced a small number of fragments, and revealed a possible packing stone against the N. end of the stump. Excavation at the S. end of (008) produced a more complex situation, with a cut (009) starting at the S. end of the stump, and diving down quite steeply to the W. . This cut was only partially revealed ( excavating grid squares 99.50 / 102.00 and 99.50 / 102.50, along the W. face of the stump, and partially excavating 99.00 / 102.5 ), but was found to be filled with (007), incorporating a number of large fragments. This cut revealed much of the W. face of (008), but a single large slab ( measuring 100 cm. long, by 5 cm. thick, by at least 40 cm. high ), placed up against the W. face of the stump, presumably as packing, obscured all but the Southernmost 35 cm. of the stump. This packing stone continued down, below the bottom of cut (009), but further decoration could be seen on (008), beyond this stone, including interlace of differing thicknesses, and the apparent beginning of a panel, all executed in greater relief than the surviving face, and likewise continuing down into the ground. A 50 cm. wide strip against the W. face of this stone was left unexcavated as a baulk ( along the 103.00 Easting line ), although some of the grid square directly against the stone ( 99.50 / 103.00 ) was excavated to produce a sample, during which a further 7 carved fragments were recovered from this square.

While any comments made at the moment can only be provisional, with the site only partially excavated, and the large amount of debitage recovered only cursorily examined, some pertinent observations should be made. The origin of the mass of rubble within (002) is surely best explained as the collapse of the W. gable, with its' sandy silt matrix representing wind blown sand and bioturbation. The single roof slate recovered ( along with another from the 1998 excavation, from the same context ), along with the iron nails representing further parts of this superstructure. It is to be regretted that the whole of this deposit could not be removed, as it does represent late collapse, but the often high densities of worked stone fragments from (007) slowed the whole process of excavation. The bank (005), with its' distinctive pinkish- red clay, unique to this context, which underlay (002) could be the base of a relatively flimsy structure- quite possibly the shed in which the Hilton of Cadboll stone was kept in 1856 ( see above ), but only further excavation in this area could confirm or deny this. Likewise the cut and fill (003) and (004), identified in the 1998 excavation are of unknown date ( although apparently cutting (005) ) or function.

Probable limits to (007) have been identified to N. and S., suggesting a spread some 3 m. wide, with an apparent E. limit being discovered in 1998, although the likelihood of small fragments bouncing further must be borne in mind. No limit was found to the W., but the identification of (008), the stump of the Hilton of Cadboll stone, and the fact that it seems to have been felled, and fallen to the E., indicates that the bulk of the debris should be to the E. of (008). The cut, (009), against the W. face of (008) was filled with (007), and as it was cut through soft sand, and couldn't have survived in this state for long, this presumably represents an exploratory excavation in 1676 in an attempt to remove the whole slab, an attempt abandoned when the size of the stone was realised. The stone was then cut down, with clear chisel marks along the E. face, and a raised ridge along the W., where the whole stone snapped and fell. Some 20- 30 cm. is missing between the stump in the ground, and the slab in the museum, the large fragments recovered from within cut (009) are likely to be chunks of this, testament to the violence of the fall of the stone. The recovery of large numbers of small fragments to the S. of where the fallen stone must have lain shows that it must have been refaced *in situ*, with the detached fragments simply being swept off the stone, and left where they fell. If the Hilton of Cadboll stone proves to be typical the missing face should have a large cross on it, as opposed to the surviving " pagan " side, in which case it is interesting that it may have been an explicitly Christian device that was removed in 1676. As the relief that can be seen on the missing side on the stump in the ground is more raised off its' background than that of the surviving side it may simply be that this was the easier side to deface ( B. Grove pers. comm. ), indicating that no interest was shown in the slab at all at this time, beyond its' convenient size and shape.

The stump itself, (008), is orientated N.- S., with the surviving face pointing E., and measures 140 cm. long, by 21 cm. wide- indicating that little of the slab was removed in 1676, merely the carving. If a cross was present on the unknown face ( see above ) then this slab is unlikely to be *in situ*, as we would expect the cross to face E. ( I. Henderson pers. comm. ). Little can be seen of the E. face, as (006), the ( unexcavated ) layer of sand with some mortar evident within it, has built up against it, however it would seem that the right hand corner ( as it is faced ) of the lowest panel, filled with spirals, is present, a panel reconstructed in both the National Museum of Scotland, and Barry Grove's replica on the site. More of the W. face can be seen, exposed in cut (009), but much of it has sheered off, with this damage stopping just above a large ( 120 cm. long, 5 cm. thick ) slab placed directly against the W. face, presumably as packing. This packing must predate 1676, as cut (009) has partially exposed it, but the slab continues down below this, however as it obscures some of the carving, it cannot be original- either the stone has been erected again, or, possibly this slab was slid against it when it was already standing, perhaps to counter balance the wind blown sand against the E. face. If the stone is not *in situ*, but was re-erected, possibly in the Middle Ages, it may be that the Hilton of Cadboll stone once stood at the top of the fossil cliff line, where it would be far more prominent ( especially from out at sea ), a location picked for the Shandwick stone ( RCAHMS 1999, p. 33 ), a cross slab less than 3 k. m. to the S. W. of the site ( NH 8555 7471 ), with one face remarkably similar to the surviving Hilton of Cadboll face. In this context the suggestion in Carver's report that the stone may originally have stood at Cadboll Castle, 1 k. m. to the N. N. E., and on the top of the cliff line is interesting.

The decoration which can be seen on the W. face, all of which is at the S. end of the stump, features thick interlaced bodies ( serpents ? ) along the right hand edge, with some finer interlace inside this, and, just visible, is the top right hand corner of a panel, disappearing behind the packing stone, and into the ground. As noted above the relief seems to be greater on this side than that on the surviving side- although not as great a difference as, for example, on the 2 sides of the Shandwick stone. Large fragments recovered near the stump included a piece with a pair of human feet, and the lower part of a robe on it, as well as a couple of probable serpent's heads. Much key pattern interlace was recovered, generally in small fragments, a design which only appears in a small area inside the crescent on the surviving face, this could conceivably make up the body of a large cross. Although it is possible that the surviving face was not as extensively carved as the missing face, this seems unlikely, so the possibility that there is a fourth decorated panel still buried in the ground, to go with the 3 that are already known, should be borne in mind.

One of the grid squares just to the E. of the stump ( 100.00 / 103.00 ) produced a fragment of what appears to be a ring headed cross, carved in a different kind of stone from the Hilton of Cadboll slab itself. While this could be part of a Medieval sculpture ( either a grave marker, or perhaps built into the chapel itself ) there is no reason why it shouldn't date to the first millennium A. D. ( I. Henderson pers. comm. ). The recovery of a fragment from a different sculpture is unexpected, and there may be more pieces of this, or even from other worked stones, within the mass of smaller debris recovered.



As the site was left the stump, (008), is still in the ground, and the recovery of debitage from redressing the stone is incomplete. The retrieval of further fragments from (007) is, archaeologically speaking, a fairly straight forward process. The 1676 date of this horizon presumably post- dates the abandonment of the chapel, meaning that further pieces of the stone could be recovered without compromising the archaeological integrity of the site. The only real difficulty here is in the time consuming method of recovery, with excavation in awkward sized squares, and the need to sieve the soil. This would seem to be an worthy exercise, as there is no point in recovering only some of the fragments. The stump of the stone is a different question. An unknown height of stone survives in the ground, with an unknown depth of deposits built up against it, of unknown complexity. Any excavation would also have to be on a reasonable scale, to do justice to the archaeological deposits around the stump. The stone itself is not under any threat, mostly being buried in sand, and those parts exposed during the current exercise were covered over ( first the stump was wrapped in " bubble wrap ", then sheeting was placed down and covered in clean beach sand, then all this was backfilled ). However the unexpected presence of the stump is likely to provide the best clues for the reconstruction of the missing face. Not only do large areas of carving survive here, but also this gives a relationship between elements of the known and the unknown sides, meaning that the recovery of (008) would be highly desirable.

#### 4.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| DES         | Discovery and Excavation in Scotland, Edinburgh.            |
| RCAHMS 1999 | Pictish Symbol Stones, an illustrated Gazetteer, Edinburgh. |

Context no.	Description
[001]	TOPSOIL. Dark grey sandy silt, generally 5-10 cm thick, but up to 20 cm
[002]	RUBBLE. Loose deposit, c. 70 % stone ( mostly sandstone ), set in a dark grey sandy silt.
[003]	FILL OF (004). Feature only seen in section of reopened 1998 trench.
[004]	N.- S. LINEAR CUT. See (003).
[005]	STONE AND CLAY BANK. Unexcavated, but ran N.- S. across most of trench. C. 60 % stone, in a matrix of 60 % red sandy clay, 40 % dark grey sandy silt.
[006]	SAND BELOW (007). Unexcavated, but a silty sand with much shell and coarse white shelly mortar throughout.
[007]	LAYER OF DEBITAGE. Variable deposit, usually identical to (002), distinguishable only by presence of fragments of carved stone. Filled cut (009) to W. of (008), where it was up to 25 cm thick, elsewhere less than 10 cm thick.
[008]	STUMP OF STONE. Slab of sandstone, orientated N.- S., 140 cm long, 21 cms thick, bottom not seen. Decorated on both sides, only c. 15 cm of E. face seen, which appears to match surviving face of Hilton of Cadboll stone. W. face exposed for 55 cm in cut (009), but most of the decoration obscured by a packing stone. Decoration continues down into the ground on both faces.
[009]	CUT AGAINST W. SIDE OF (008). Only partially exposed, but E. edge formed by (008), S. edge fairly steep, maximum depth in area excavated 25 cm

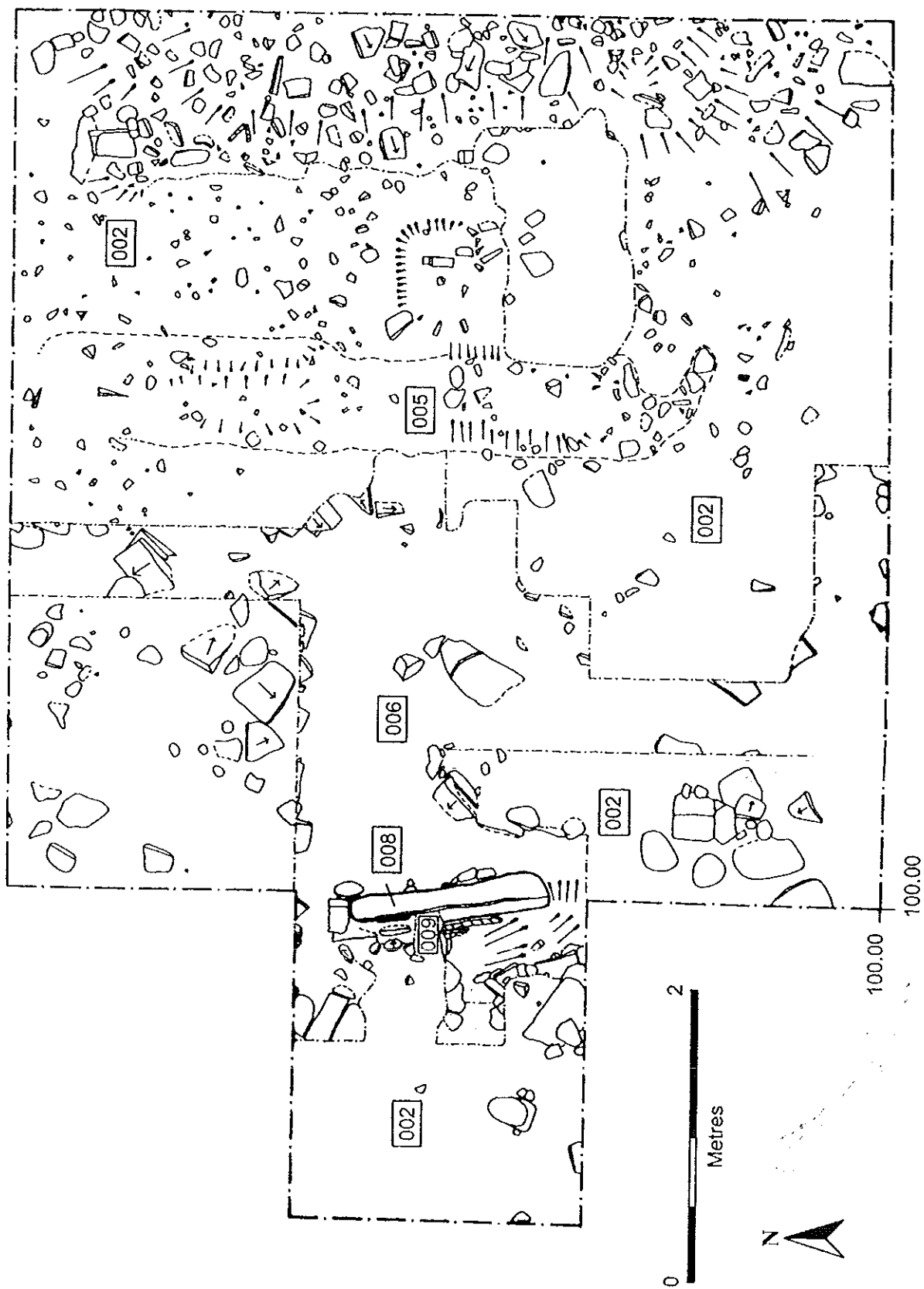
## APPENDIX 2 : LIST OF DRAWINGS

No.	Type	Description	Scale
1	Plan	Trench 1, after removal of (001), showing (002)	1 : 20
2	Plan	Trench 2, after removal of (001), showing (002)	1 : 20
3	Section	Section across stone (008)	1 : 10
4	Plan	Trenches 1 and 2, as finished 09 / 02 / 01	1 : 20

Grid Square	Carved Fragments	Uncarved Fragments	Possibly Carved Fragments	TOTALS
1	3	0	0	3
2	192	898	16	1106
3	130	843	25	998
4	4	34	2	40
5	6	234	1	241
6	39	424	0	463
7	5	309	2	316
8	13	316	3	332
9	14	216	6	236
10	2	261	5	268
11	0	36	0	36
12	0	142	3	145
13	21	222	1	244
14	174	813	17	1004
15	39	565	10	614
16	3	331	0	334
17	0	23	0	23
18	65	496	17	578
19	2	76	0	78
20	0	1	0	1
21	7	103	8	118
22	3	148	0	151
23	12	82	1	95
24	0	0	0	0
25	0	0	0	0
26	0	0	0	0
27	0	0	0	0
28	0	0	0	0
29	0	0	0	0
30	0	0	0	0
31	0	186	2	188
32	0	162	3	165
Unstratified	3	0	0	3
TOTALS	737	6921	122	7780

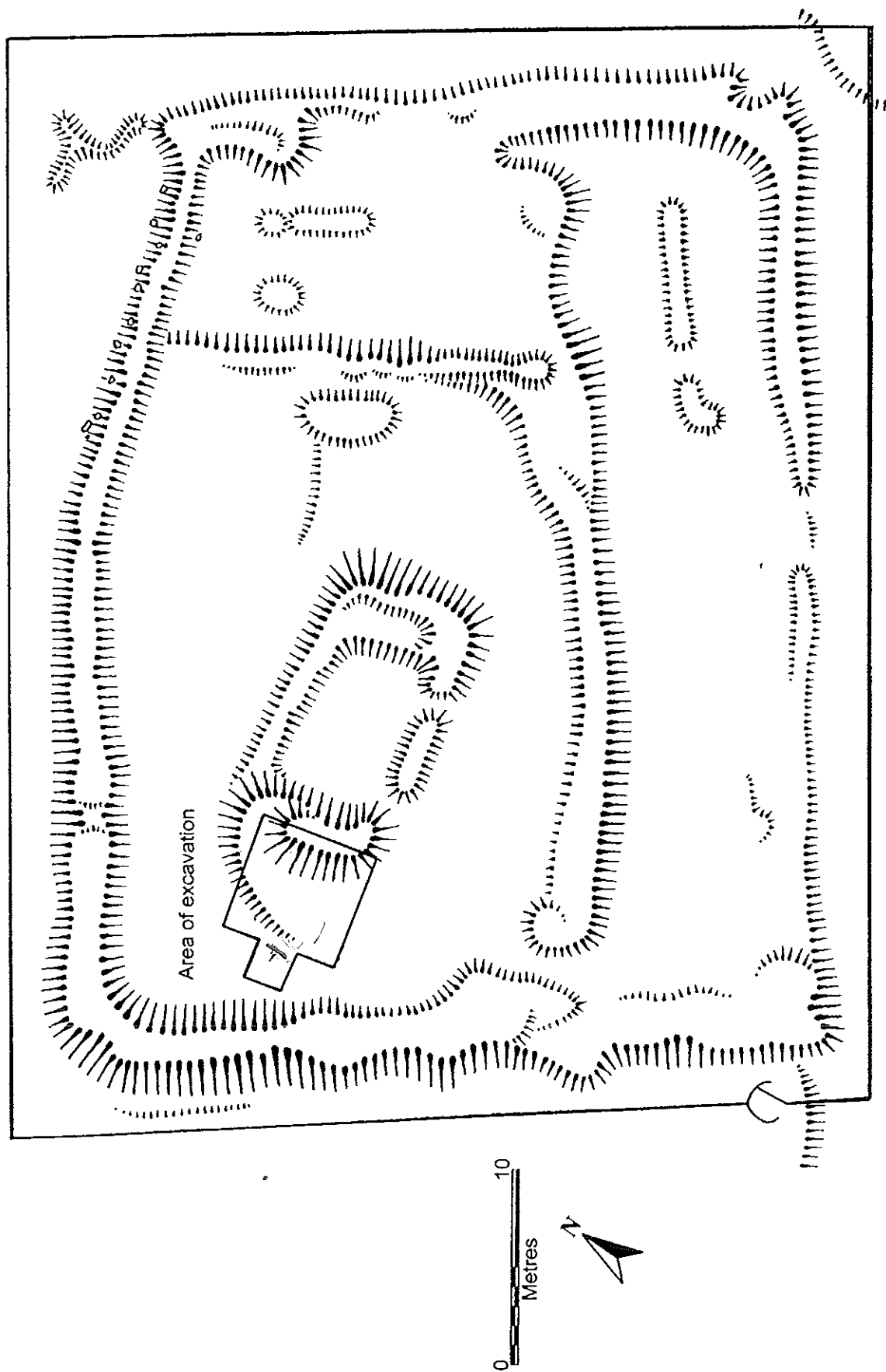


Illus 1 : Trench 1, after removal of 001, showing 002

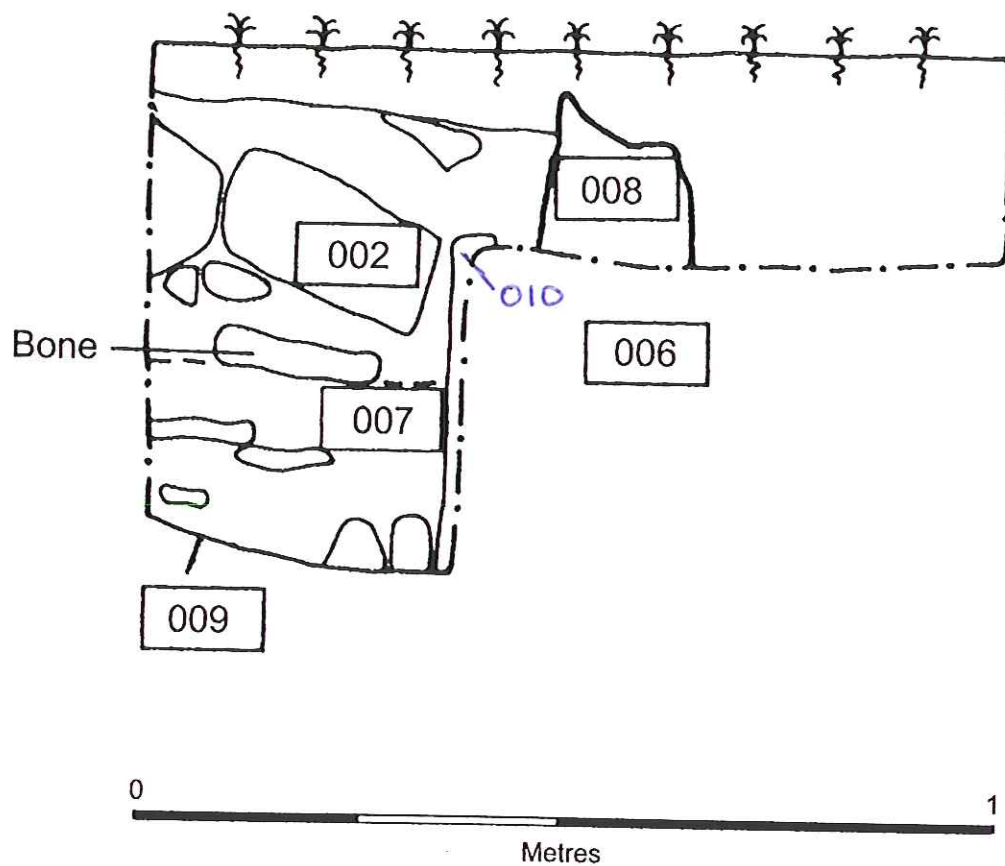


Illus 2 : Trench 2, after removal of 001, showing 002





Illus 3 : Hachure plan of the Chapel site (based on RCAHMS measured survey - Crown Copyright), showing area of excavation



Illus 4 : South facing section, showing location of stone 008