

PONTEFRACT AND DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

and

DARRINGTON SOCIETY

**EXCAVATIONS NEAR
THORPE AUDLIN**

1982



**DS
&
P&DAS**

by Eric Houlder

with contributions from

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DARRINGTON SOCIETY

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EXCAVATIONS BETWEEN THORPE AUDLIN AND WENTBRIDGE

1. Background

Though the Roman occupation of York and the North officially dates from A.D.71, it is certain that there were Roman incursions into our area before that date. When the Ninth Legion finally left Lincoln to build a new fortress at York, there was already an established route between the two places running due north to the Humber, and then following a broad, sweeping curve via Malton and into York from the east. Though more direct on the map, this route has the major obstacle of the Humber crossing to negotiate. As a result, as soon as the Legion was established in York, a new route via Bawtry, Doncaster, Castleford and Tadcaster was pioneered.

The new line crosses several rivers and doubt is often expressed that it would be more convenient than the previous one. It must be remembered, however, that the Don, the Aire and the Wharfe were not the deepened, often navigable channels we see today, but more likely wide, shallow expanses which were easily fordable for most of the year. What the smaller rivers (like the Went) were like is something which the present project will hopefully clarify.

The Roman North Road

Most Roman roads in Britain are now known as the result of two hundred years of research. The late Ivan D. Margary classified them all and 'our' road is Number 28b. It was probably begun in A.D.71 and remained in use until late Saxon times - say the 9th or 10th century. Stretches of it are still in use, but the present A.1, or slight diversions from it, appear to have come into use just before the Norman conquest. 28b seems to have originated as an alternative to the Humber Ferry, but road widening in Roman times (as proved in the present excavations), implies that it became the main route to the north.

The line of the road

28b leaves the Roman road from Lincoln to the Humber at North Carlton. It crosses the Idle at Bawtry and the Don at Doncaster. Near Barnsdale Bar it can be seen as a low embankment to the west of the dual carriageway. It follows the A.639 in a series of straight alignments, as far as Thorpe Audlin Crossroads. At this point it appears to continue in a straight line, whilst the modern road swings west, then east and finally resumes its alignment. It is clear that the Roman road runs several yards to the east of the A.639 from the crossroads for at least half a mile. At East Hardwick the Roman line swings west (left) along the lane and then under fields towards the bottom of Castlesyke Hill. It passes through Purston, part of

Featherstone, Glasshoughton and Castleford. North of Castleford it underlies the straight stretch of road which still runs due north towards Aberford. Here it begins a wide curve to the east, passing through Tadcaster into York.

Brief History of the Road

28b would assume a greater importance after Hadrian's Wall became the Northern Frontier of the Empire c.123 A.D. In the absence of positive dating evidence for the widening of the road, it is sensible to assume that this would be done to take account of the greater volume of traffic following the stabilization of the frontier. Personalities like Hadrian, Septimius Severus, Constantine the Great and Theodosius have used this road and ridden, or been carried, along it.

Previous Research

During his lifetime, Ivan Margary claimed to have travelled along every Roman road mentioned in his book.¹ These are so extensive that he could only give cursory attention to local details in any area, with the result that much more work is required on all the Roman roads.

28b has been 'sectioned' in several places in the last quarter century. During the 1950's Ackworth School cut a section at Barnsdale Bar, but there are no records of the results of the dig. In₂ 1959 M. Thackrah cut a section at Nut Hill, Aberford, which showed a single ditch to the west, as at Wentbridge. The road surface was again revealed in Castleford in several places during the early 1970's, as a result of excavations by the West Yorkshire County Unit. It was largely composed of magnesian limestone rubble in layers.

The 1982 Excavations

The site excavated is located south of the River Went, and east of the present A.639, and is entirely in the field centred on Grid Reference S.E.47541665. Grateful acknowledgment is here made to the farmer, Mr. E. Robinson, for his permission to carry out field-work and excavations, and to Mr. C. Clayburn for kindly filling in the excavated areas.

During the early part of 1982, Mr. Don Barrett of Townville discovered Romano-British sherds and coins in the field. In consultation with the two local Societies, the Darrington Society and the Pontefract Archaeological Society, it was decided to carry out exploratory excavations during the Autumn. The aims of the work were to section the Roman road, determine the exact site and nature of the Went crossing, and determine the nature of any other Romano-British features.

Accordingly, three areas were initially opened. Site one proved to be abortive, but sites 'A' and 'B' both went some way to achieving the aims of the excavation.

AREA 'A'

Initial probing indicated that the Roman road ran to the east of the A.639. To test this, a thirty foot by five foot trench, subsequently extended at each end by eight feet, was cut. Agricultural activity here had destroyed the Roman surface, but the road construction was revealed in section. On the west side a ditch three feet deep had been dug, narrowing towards the bottom in the usual Roman military fashion. The road had originally been eighteen feet wide in layers of sandstone, but had subsequently been extended to thirty feet. A soft area just off the agger had had to be filled to achieve this, and in the fill was found a quern of Rhineland lava of a typical Roman army pattern. Abutting onto this extension from the east was an area of well-worn stonework which may have formed part of the road surface, or may have been part of the floor of a workshop area.

A small extension of this eastern excavation to the south produced one post-hole and a fibula (brooch) of the second century. Two Roman levels were apparent to the east of the road, both containing pottery from late first to late second century, including parts of an amphora with writing on and a large portion of a Samian-ware bowl - Dragendorf Type 37.

AREA 'B'

Area 'B' consisted of two thirty by five foot trenches separated by a three foot baulk, extending from the hedge on the west side of the field eastwards across the road. This was excavated to the level of the final road surface in order to obtain a complete transect of the road and whatever was associated with it to the west. Reference to the plan photographs and section will qualify the following description of the features from west to east:-

- a. The footings of a wall.
- b. An ore-roasting hearth with the destruction debris of the wall overlying it.
- c. The road ditch, silted up and with destruction debris mixed with R.B. pottery and glass in its upper level.
- d. An area of soft clay with hoof-prints still impressed into it.
- e. A hard iron-pan sloping from 'd' up to the edge of the carriageway.

- f. The west cambered edge of the carriageway in good condition, of compacted magnesian limestone.
- g. The surface-paving of the carriageway in generally good condition, of sandstone slabs
- h. The eastern part of the carriageway in generally poor condition. Some surface paving survives, and some compacted Magnesian limestone rubble, but in general ploughing has destroyed this part of the road. As yet, it is difficult to detect any subsequent widening, though the angle of the western camber suggests that the original width of the road was about eighteen feet.
- i. Part of the upper jaw of a horse. There is some evidence for the ritual burial of horse-skulls beneath this road³ but this example is so close to the surface that it more likely originated as domestic rubbish.

Fieldwalking

Since the conclusion of the excavation, volunteers have walked the field and others in the area. The excavation field has yielded pottery from first to fourth centuries, whilst the field to the west has produced similar pottery, fragments of roof tiles, box tiles and querns.

Conclusions and Analysis

It is evident that at the site in question Roman road 28b passed through an industrial area. The ore-roasting hearth has parallels at other sites, and probably made use of the low-grade iron ore found locally. The wall footings found in site 'B' may have belonged to a building, most of which is inaccessible beneath the modern road.

At both sites only a west ditch was found and, as the land falls away steeply on the east side, a ditch here would be superfluous. However, excavations have not extended far to the east, so no definite conclusions can be drawn until more work is done in this area.

The excavation has elucidated the road construction used here. It has proved that there was habitation and industrial activity during the first and second centuries. It has shown that the settlement was of reasonable status (amphorae, samian ware and good quality jewellery, not common features of the peasant communities of the period) and, above all, it has pointed out the necessity for further excavation work.

The fieldwalking suggests that later Roman levels have been destroyed by agriculture, a not uncommon

phenomenon. It also points strongly to the fact that here are the remains of a substantial settlement, possibly even a staging post or a small town.

In conclusion, none of the results would have been possible without the active help of the volunteers, most of whom had no previous experience of archaeology. Many have become skilled trowellers and would be an asset to any excavation. This is largely due to the help and example of the veteran diggers who made available their skills learned on sites all over Britain. My thanks to all.

E. Houlder
February 1983.

Footnotes

1. Margary I.D. Roman Roads in Britain. John Baker 1967
2. Thackrah M. Excavation of the Roman Ridge, Nut Hill, Hazelwood, Near Aberford, Y.A.J.
Part 165, 1967
3. Thackrah M. Op. Cit.

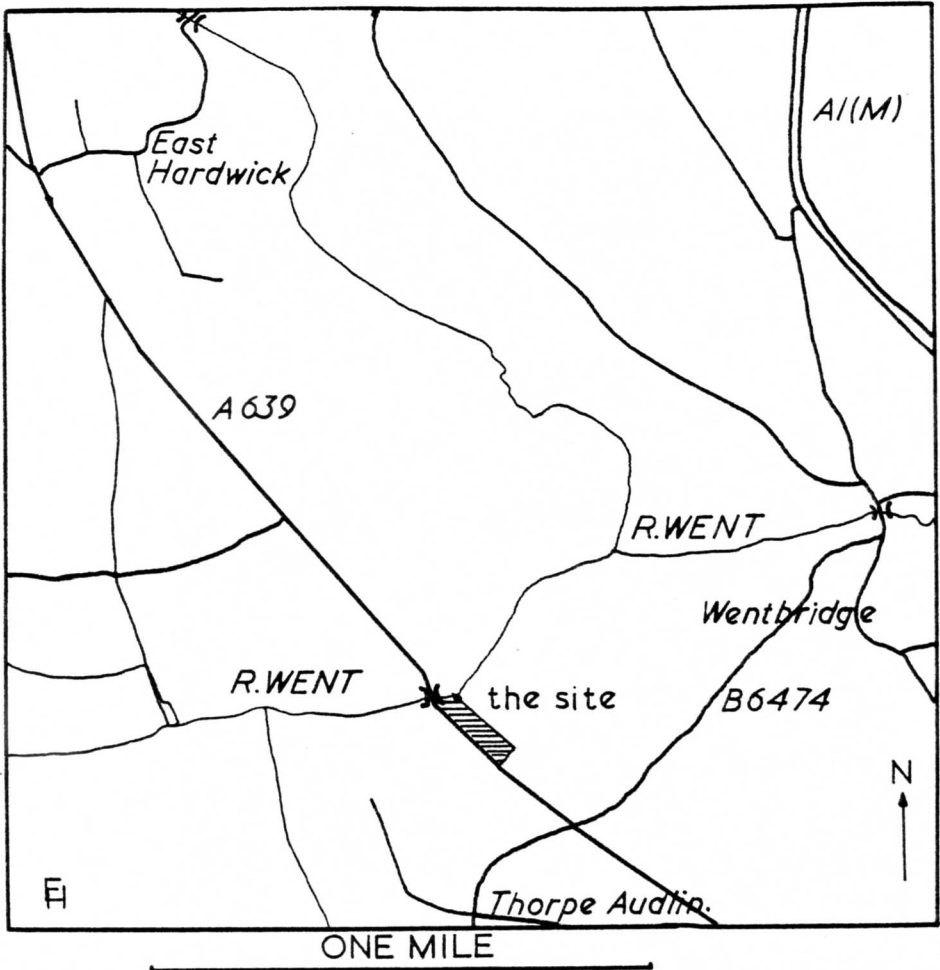


FIG. 1
Map Showing the Location
of the Site



PLATE 1 – Aerial Photograph of the Site from the North East.



PLATE 2 - Site 1 in Background and Site "A" in Foreground

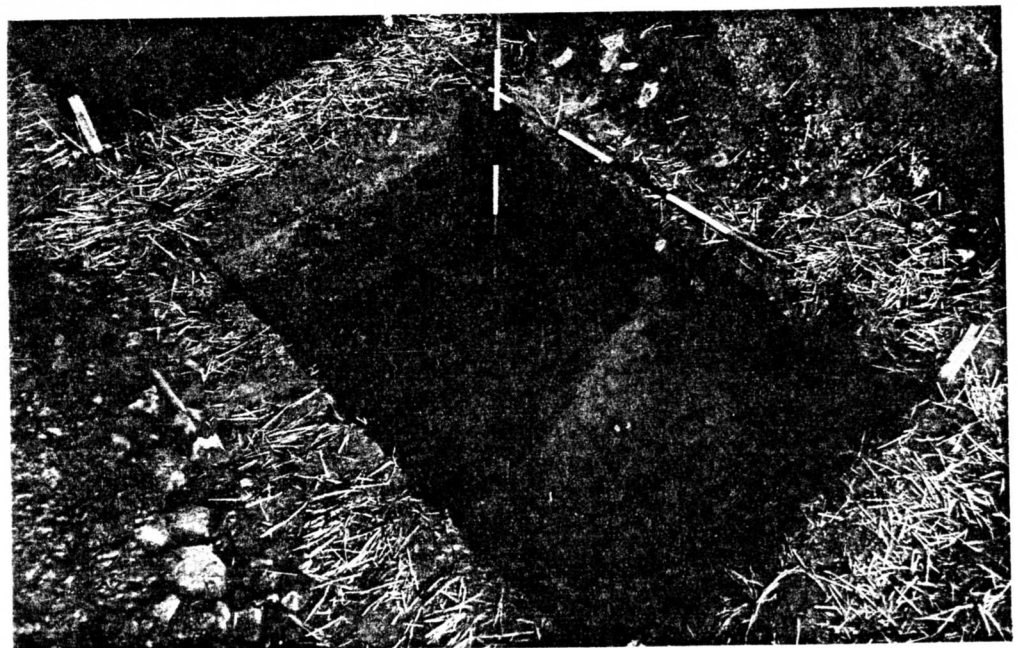


PLATE 3 - The West Ditch Site "A"

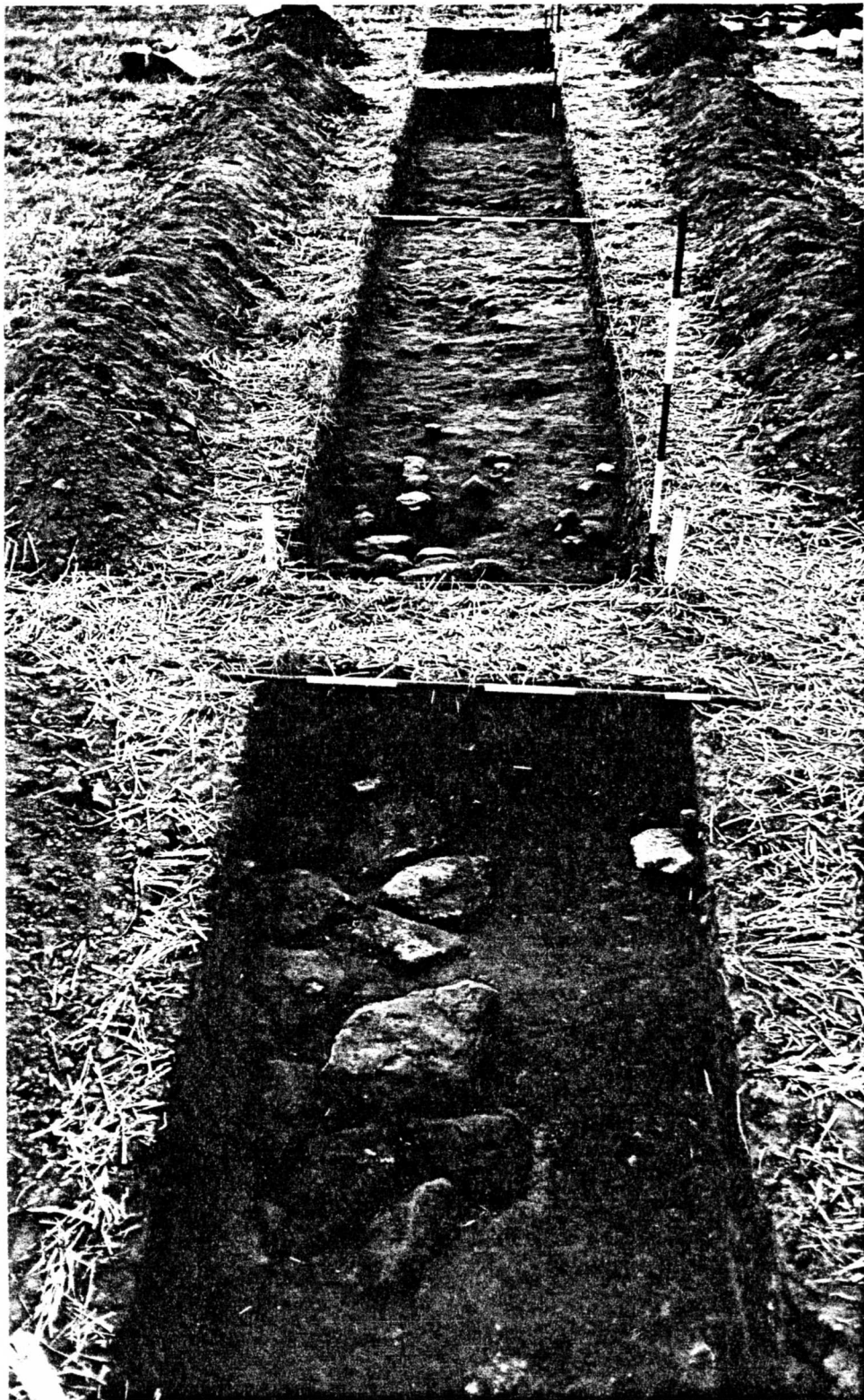


PLATE 4 – Site 'A' from the East Showing Foreground Construction and
Remains of Road Surface in the Middle Distance

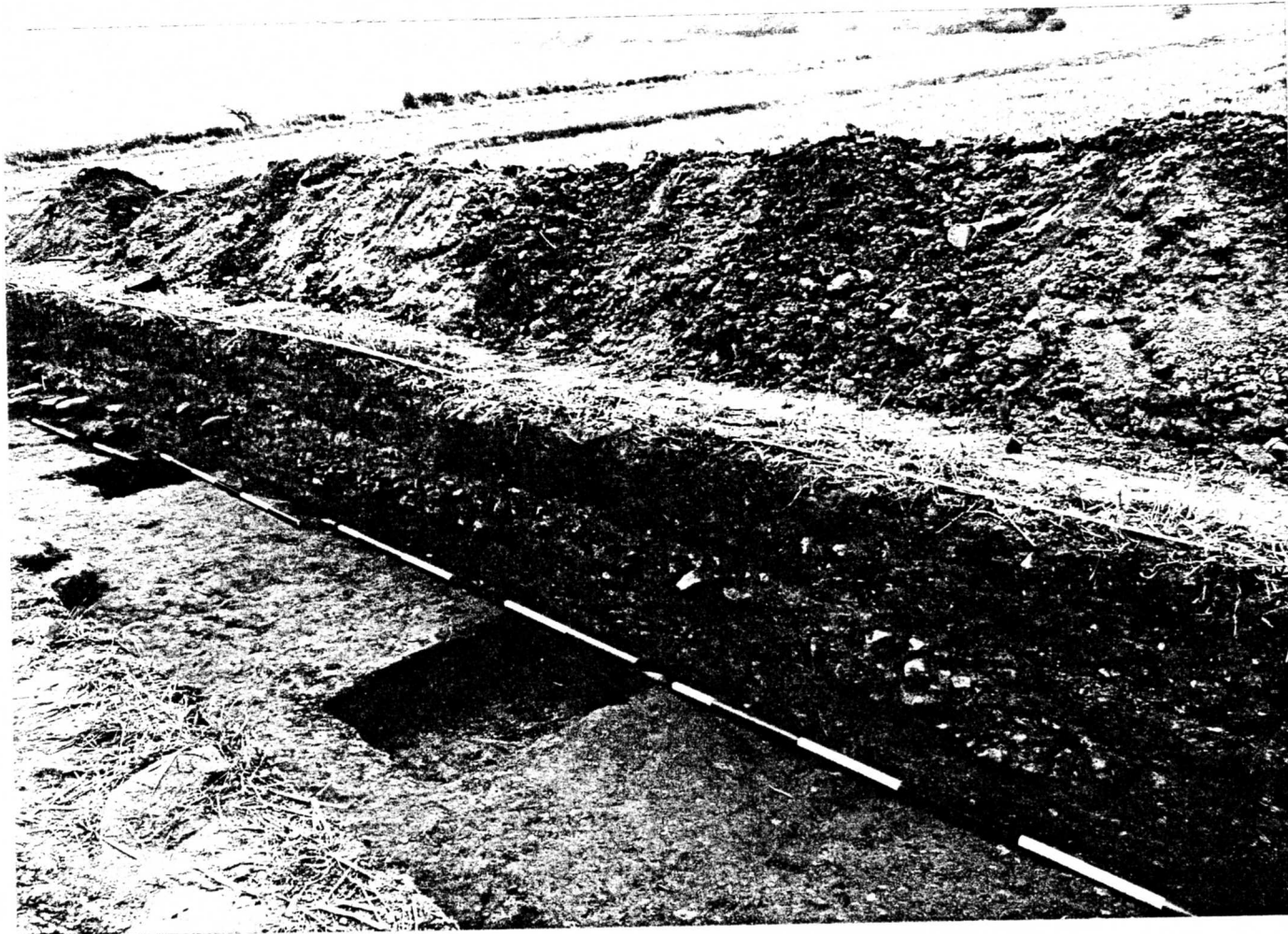
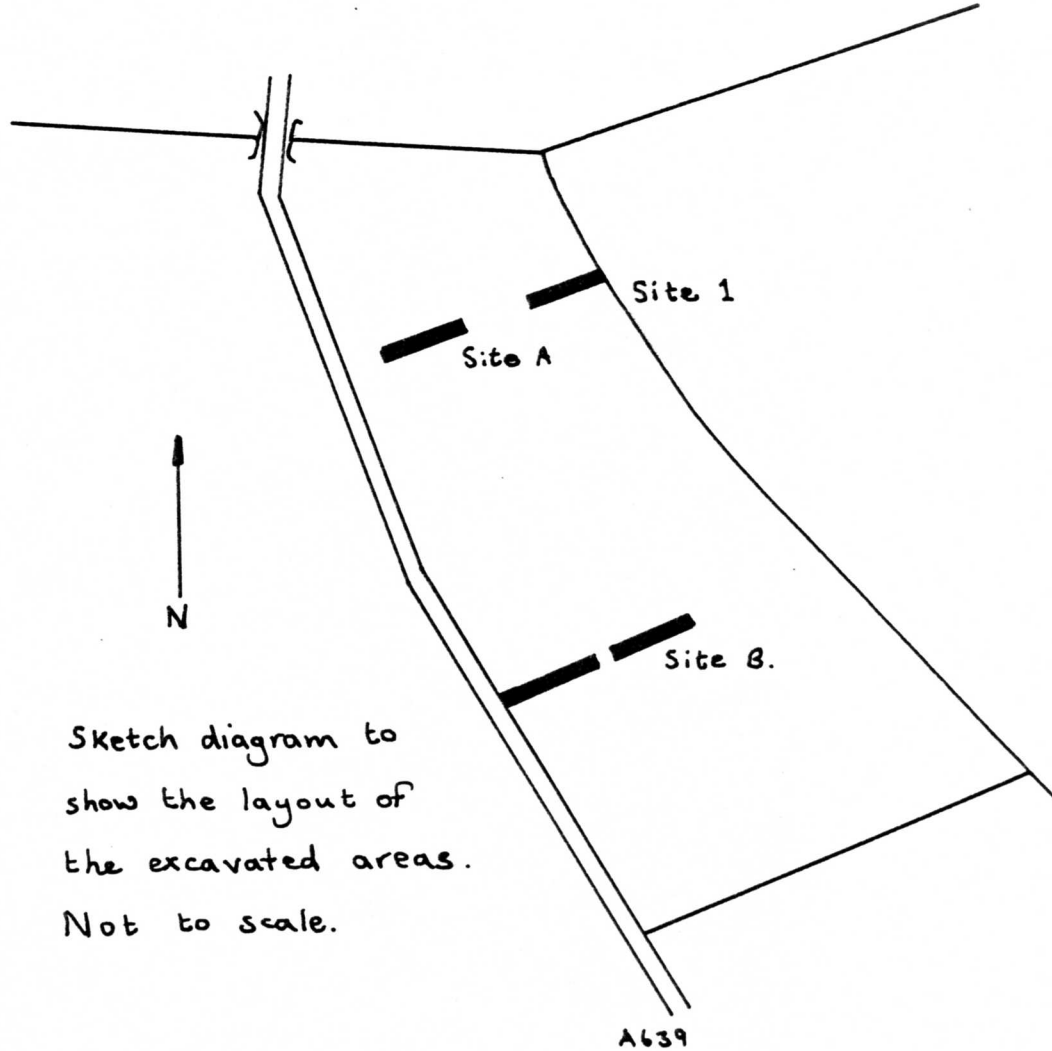


PLATE 5 - Site "A" Section Through Road.



PLATE 6 - Site "A" - The Rhine Land Lava Quern



Sketch diagram to
show the layout of
the excavated areas.
Not to scale.

FIG 2



PLATE 7 - Lunch - break!

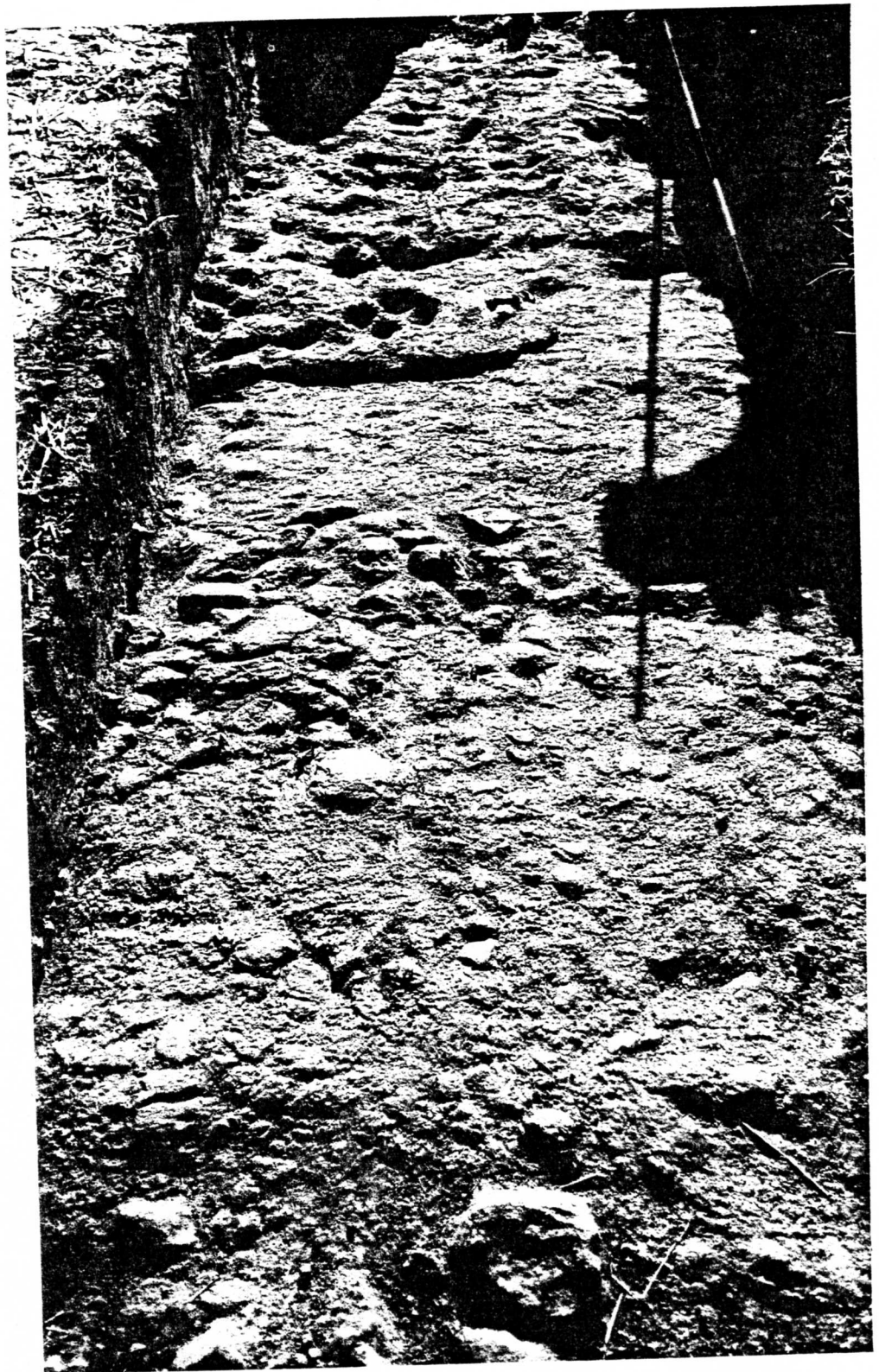


PLATE 8 - Site 'B' West Edge of Carriageway and Romano-British Hoof-prints.



PLATE 9 - Site "B", Eastern End of Road Looking West.

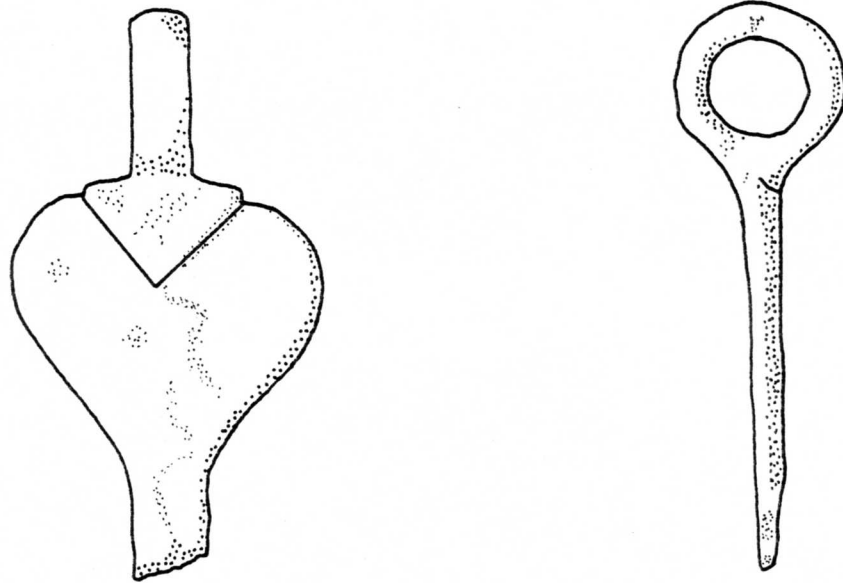
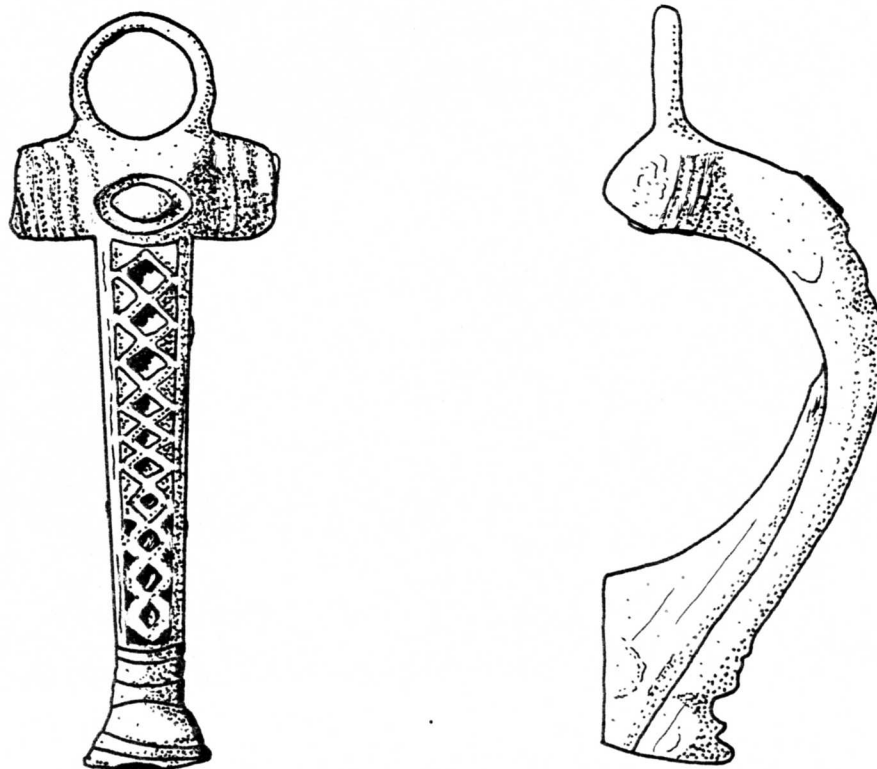
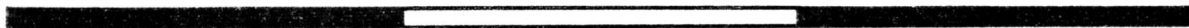


FIG 3 — Site "B" - Bronze Object, Possible Broken Brooch.

FIG 4 - Site "A" - Bronze Fibula, Mid to Late Second Century.



INCHES



EH

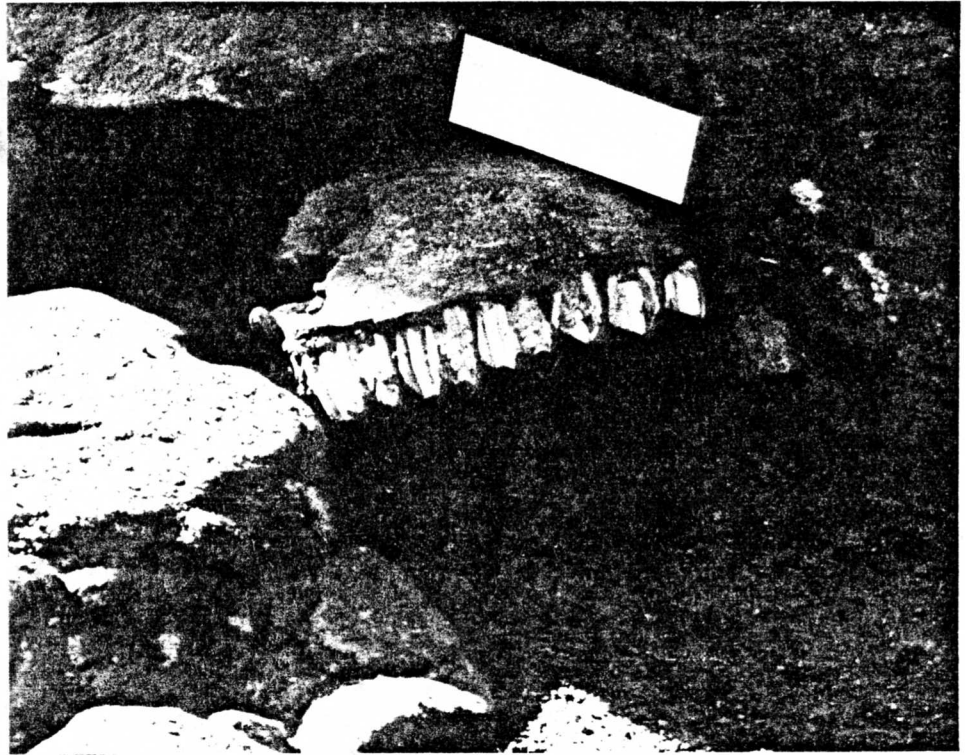


PLATE 11 - Site "B" The Horse - Jaw with worn Surface - Stone in Situ.

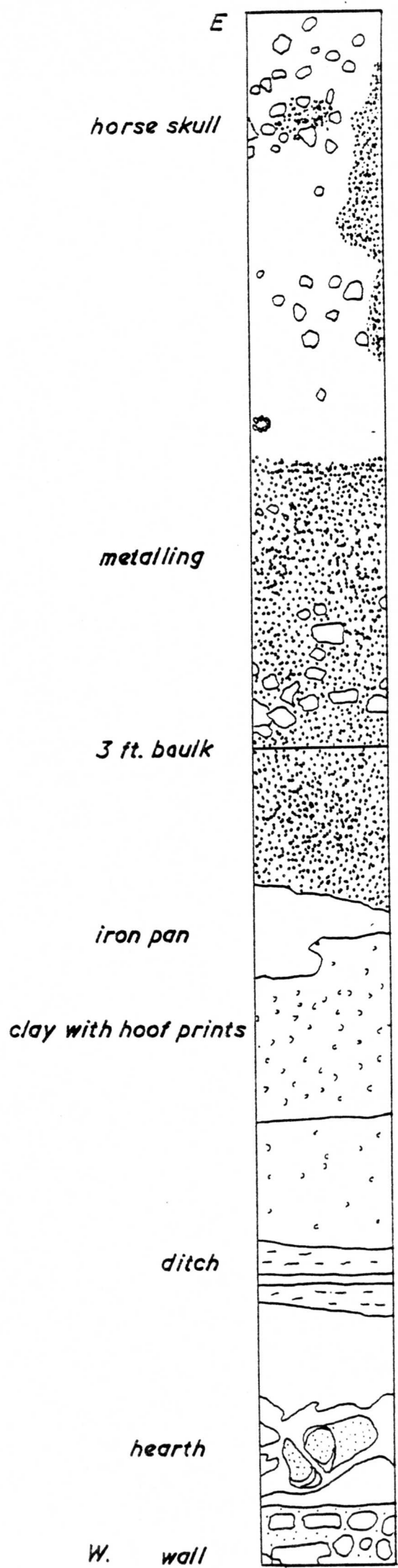


FIG 5 - Site B. Transect at First Roman Level

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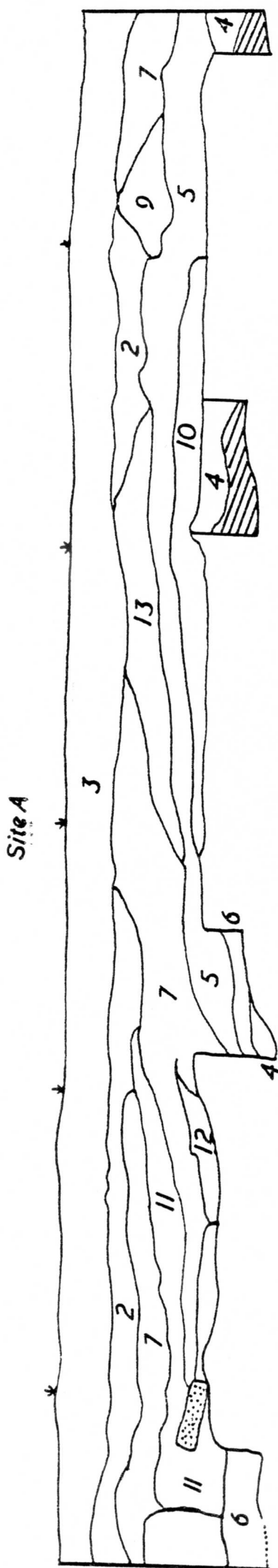
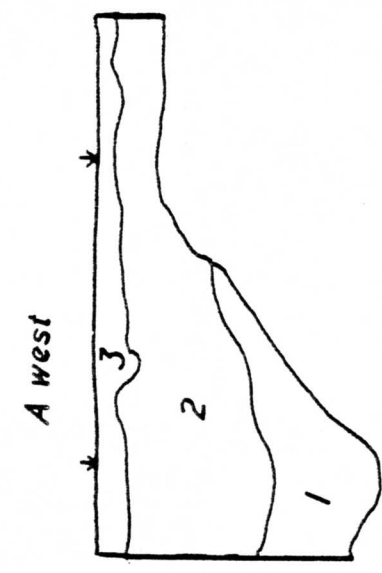
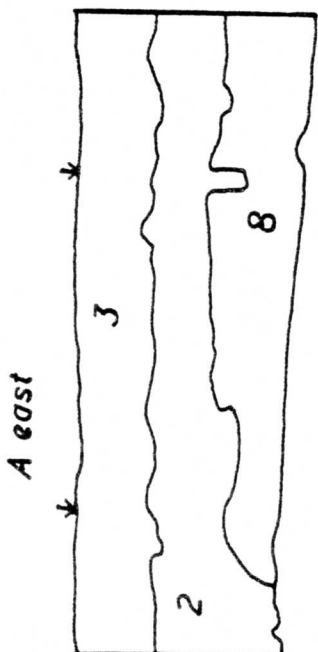
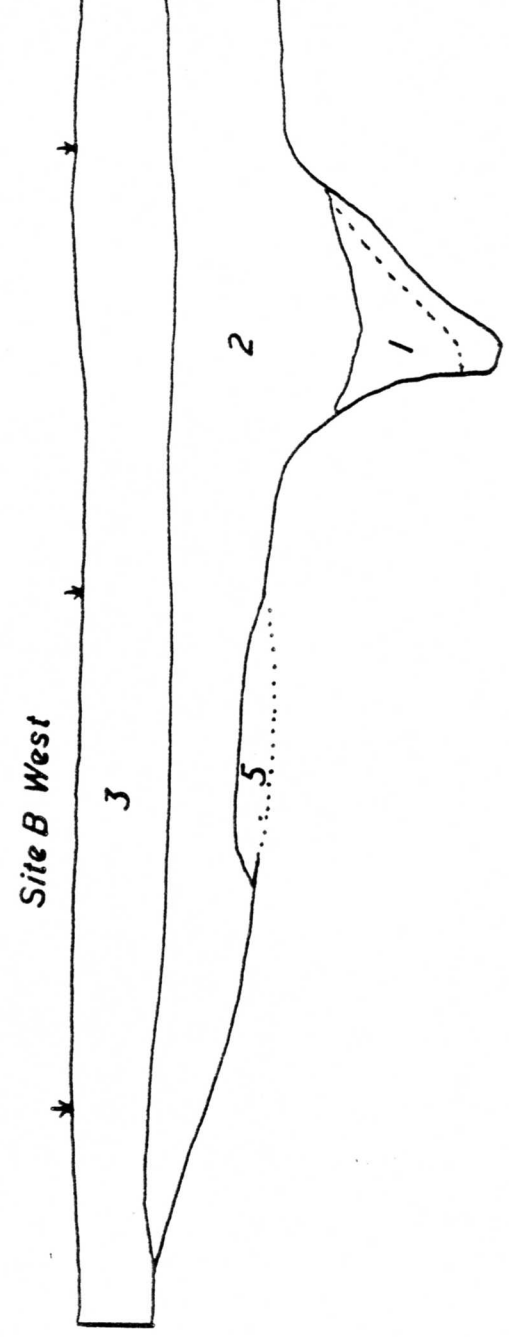


FIG 6
SCHMATIC SECTIONS

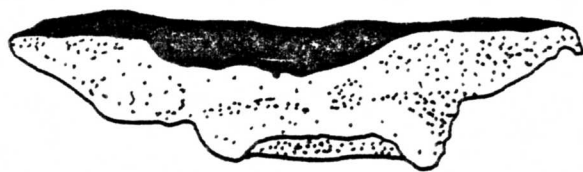


5 feet.



1. Greyish-brown stony earth.
 2. Reddish brown earth.
 3. Plough soil.
 4. Yellow clay.
 5. Yellow sandy matrix.
 6. Blue clay.
 7. Rammed sandstone rubble.
 8. Grey & Yellow mottled sandy clay.
 9. Cobbles in crushed sandstone.
 10. Orange matrix.
 11. Yellow brown matrix.
 12. Rammed limestone.
 13. Rammed sandstone.
- Natural

IRON OBJECT FROM EAST LIP OF DITCH, SITE B,



F