EXCAVATION OF A NEOLITHIC ENCLOSURE AT HELMAN TOR, LANLIVERY, CORNWALL, 1986

INTERIM REPORT

by

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Excavation of a Neolithic enclosure complex at Helman Tor, Lanlivery, Cornwall

The discovery of a neolithic hilltop village, defended by its own stone-built rampart and set within a large enclosure complex at Carn Brea, Illogan, Cornwall (SW 684408) (Mercer 1981) stimulated the discussion of likely parallel sites which could extend the unique insight this site had given into neolithic social organisation and culture (Mercer 1981, 187 et seq). The diagnostic features sought on the basis of the Carn Brea evidence required a hilltop site fortified by a massively constructed boulder wall which connected naturally unassailable 'tors' or outcrops of granite. If the parallel was to be exact then within this enceinte would be a series of artificially created terraces over an area of approximately 1 hectare. Good luck, in addition, would have furnished a number of stray finds of neolithic material on or near the site. A number of these criteria were satisfied at a number of sites but all of them were satisfied only at Helman Tor near Lostwithiel (SX 068607). "... A number of sites have been proposed (Trencrom, Roughtor, Dewerstone and, most confidently, Helman Tor) where uninvestigated parallels appear to exist, on grounds of surface morphology, with Carn Brea, and to which any extension of this enquiry might in the first instance be directed". (Mercer 1981 , 193). The intention to open up Helman Tor to increased and more formal public access led the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (England) (English Heritage) to propose an evaluative excavation. Thus a valued opportunity to explore this site arose and excavation took place between 9th and 23rd August 1986.

Helman Tor is an isolated granite massif covered in bracken and grass, c. 1km long and 0.4km wide, set within the civil parish of Lanlivery, and 4.5km WNW of Lostwithiel in the county of Cornwall. The foot of the hill stands c. 110m O.D. and its summit rises to 220m O.D. The hill forms the tip of a long spur running SSE-NNW jutting out in evenly rolling country based upon the metamorphic rocks that surround the Bodmin intrusion. The hill overlooks Red Moor to the E and N where the northernmost headwaters of the river that flows southwards to pour its white effluent into the sea at Par. The river was, at least by the early mediaeval period, found to flow among tin-bearing gravels (and the descriptive place-name Red Moor must presumably allude to this fact). Extensive stream-working followed, and persisted into the present century.

The remaining landscape of scattered ponds and meres on a river floodplain may well, admittedly by a devious and inconsequential process, reproduce that prevalent in the area in the third millennium bc. The eastern slopes of the hill today support fertile soils and a field pattern of some antiquity that has produced at least two neolithic stone axes (Harris et al 1977) - land that runs down to the floodplain of Red Moor. Today Red Moor is a Nature Reserve noted for its bird-life. On the W flank of the hill, survey conducted by CCRA has demonstrated the survival of prehistoric field systems of unknown date. The nature of these field systems with clearance piles of small stones on to large boulders might prompt comparison with the evidence for cultivation of neolithic date located on Sites B and C on the SE slopes of Carn Brea. (Johnson & Rose, 1984).

The Aims of the investigation were strictly limited. They were to establish the date, nature and cultural assignation of the site and by these three means to establish or disprove the degree of identity between Carn Brea and the enclosure on Helman Tor.

Results

The Site Survey An excellent survey of the site has been completed in 1984 by the CCRA. This survey formed the basis for detailed site inspection which was recorded in the form of a supplementary survey carried out by Edinburgh University at the scale 1:200. This detailed inspection led to the conclusion that on the gentler sloping eastern side of the summit a massive boulder wall survived of the type present on the Eastern Summit of Carn Brea. This wall stretched for 75m from the northernmost 'tor' of the hilltop to the Central Tor (1E - see plan) and then for a distance of 20m southward (2E). At the southern limit of the hilltop a massive wall fragment turns to the W and a possible major gateway may remain here at the point where the modern track approaches the hilltop from the S, just to the W of terrace T1 (see plan) (3E). On the western side of the hilltop the approach is far steeper and more broken. Unassailable granite ledges occupy the southern half of this side of the summit. Elsewhere the going is very rough on this side. Nevertheless a third wall does exist on the W side of the summit (1W and 2W) which offers a very attractive option as the western side of the summit enclosure. This wall is shown hatched on the plan (see fig 2) and is built of some great blocks particularly at its base but its

upper structure is of small rocks forming a 2m high, still vertical, face. On the inner side of the wall a well-defined ditch exists at most points. A very small-scale excavation conducted in the filling at the base of this ditch produced recent bottle glass at the bottom of the filling. There is little doubt that this wall and its accompanying ditch are relatively recent, offering a control against stock moving from one side of the tor to the other. However in its northern sector (2W) it does appear that this wall was built atop an early embankment (see cross-section A-B) which in all likelihood represents the existence of an earlier wall correspondent with the wall on the eastern flank of the summit.

Set approximately 25-40m below the break of slope from the summit on the W side there is a much dilapidated defensive line (3W-7W) which in stature and form resembles closely the defence on the E side of the summit. It too joins natural granite outcrops to form a defensive line 240m in length running N-S. This line however does not visibly form an enclosure with the eastern defences and furthermore occupable areas are restricted to the immediate summit of the hill and do not extend, visibly, down the W slope towards this defensive line. The writer is brought to wonder whether this defence represents, in the context of Helman Tor, the outer enclosure element known at Carn Brea, in terms of ramparts 1S and 1N. If this is the case the summit enclosure - defined largely by natural obstacles and the wall on the E side and its possible counterpart on the W, is c. 180m N-S by 40m E-W (an area of 9000 sq m comparing very closely to the 1 hectare of the Carn Brea Eastern Summit enclosure) while the annex to the W enclosed by the Western rampart is at least 240m N-S x c. 30m E-W (an area of 9200 sq m). This outer enclosure (if such it is) may well have continued into the present-day cultivation on the east side of the summit (thus, of course, now destroyed) and therefore may have been originally much larger.

In sum, the <u>enceinte</u> of massively built, boulder-constructed wall at Helman Tor is only certainly present on the eastern side of the summit of the hill and at the southern extremity. On the western side there is the possibility of a former defensive line on the NW part of the summit (line 2W). A second line of defence down the slope on the W side is comparable with the E line of defence and may represent a secondary enclosure associated with the summit enclosure.

The area of approaching 1 hectare enclosed on the summit has a series of well-defined platforms and 'areas suitable for occupation' set upon it. Nineteen were recorded during survey conducted in 1986. These vary in size from 20x10m to 8 x 4m and a number are at least partly defined by built-walling (T2, T11, T15, T16). One of these terraces (Terrace 16) set against the massive boulder-built wall on the eastern side of the summit, was selected for excavation.

The Excavation (see figs 3-6)

After complete stripping of the terrace of its superincumbent vegetation the outline of the site became very clear indeed. The terrace was well-defined with a clear bank of upcast material on its rearward side, a wall-face crowned by a massive slab at its S end and, of course, the massive boulder-built wall on its forward (eastern) edge. To the north the terrace sloped into a shallow depression created, possibly, by an entrance-way (whether original or later - or both - is uncertain) through the massive boulder-built enclosure wall. The excavation was sited so as to avoid the depressed area at the N end of the terrace and to include the whole S end of the terrace. It was hoped that excavation of this apparently well-defined unit would enable understanding to be achieved of a complete entity of the prehistoric occupation of the site.

The stripping of the turf on the terrace produced virtually no finds of recent date and indeed the evidence of ground survey seemed to confirm that very little recent activity had taken place on the site other than a limited amount of quarrying for stone, by drill-splitting of granite boulders, on the eastern extremity of the summit (and, indeed, the wall-construction on the western side of the summit referred to above). In this the site stands in stark contrast to Carn Brea where recent activity had been intense and had led to major disturbance of the archaeological deposits. Below the turf was a layer of dark brown crumbly loamy soil, gritty in texture by virtue of its high content of quartzite grits and with decayed lumps of granite occurring occasionally (Layer 2). This layer masked the entire site other than at its westernmost extremity where the removal of turf revealed weathered slip from the embankment to the rear of the terrace (see section fig. 6) (Layer 5) - an orange/brown loamy soil with small

stones. Artefacts of neolithic date began to occur in very small numbers within Layer 2 - although hardly at all in Layer 5. Bracken root action had penetrated these layers very thoroughly and indeed into the layer below (Layer 3). Layer 3, lying beneath Layer 2 and overlying the forward edge of the Layer 5 slippage from the rearward terrace embankment, was a layer of soil creep derived, presumably, from contexts further up the slopes of the hill. It was a grey/orange loamy soil with high quartzite grit content as befitted its ultimate derivation from rotted granite. It too produced relatively few artefacts of prehistoric origin, but its excavation led to the definition of an area of black loamy soil, crumbly in texture and colour that had been altered patchily by the immediate presence of the fallen granite rocks of the wall. Indeed the texture was frequently more cement-like than soil-like requiring the most vigorous manual treatment for its removal. Nevertheless the vigour of this treatment had to be adjusted to the fact that this Layer 6 material began to produce large quantities of neolithic cultural debris. This area of black loamy soil was defined on its western margin by the natural rabb surface Layer 4 which appeared directly beneath Layer 3 and Layer 5 further up the slope. Removal of the tumbled wall debris from its surface revealed variegated blocks of soil (e.g. Layer 10) reflecting the quite unusual condition of soil formation prevailing in compacted granite tumble.

The Layer 6 material proved to be deposited as the upper layer within a quite clear hollow - often with very steep sides, dug into the rabb behind the massive boulder-constructed enclosure wall. This hollow varied from 4 - 2.5m in width and was up to .50m in depth. Its filling was variegated through its length and depth with quite clear episodes of weathering. Nevertheless to a large extent the filling appeared to be composed of discrete deposits of organic material forming four principal horizons (Layers 6, 7, 8 and 9). Layer 6 had upon its upper surface a thin crust (invisible in section) of orange material reflecting its status as a trampled surface with the orange Layer 4 in close proximity. It produced a very substantial quantity of neolithic artefactual material in unweathered and unabraded condition. It is likely that features occurred within this surface but its mottled surface and its dark black soft-textured matrix made it impossible to trace these other than in a tiny minority of instances - mostly on the

western edge of the deposit where the immediately underlying rabb facilitated immediate registration. Layer 7 - lighter in colour - a green/grey loamy soil produced very few finds of neolithic material and only at the base of the hollow in Layers 8 and 9 did material begin to occur again in quantity. In these basal layers pottery, in particular, was found in very good condition on two occasions whole, or nearly whole, pots being impacted on to the natural surface.

The whole of the material filling this hollow was removed archaeologically by layer and in half metre squares in order to facilitate distributional analysis of artefacts within the deposits. The whole appearance and 'feel' of the deposit was however of midden debris discharged into the hollow and building up against and sealing the facing slabs of the massive boulder-built wall on its inner side. This stratigraphical relationship must present the primary evidence for the date of the enclosure wall in that once the wall had been built deposits containing absolutely fresh, and frequently impacted, neolithic material had been thrown up against it.

The base of the hollow revealed either rabb (layer 4) or bedrock granite. A few stake-hole type features occurred driven into the rabb but these followed no interpretable pattern and furthermore were in one instance (F's 127 and 128) seen in fortuitous section to have penetrated from high up in the midden material (from Layer 6 although whether from the surface of the layer was unclear). Such were the subtleties of colouring and the variegated nature of these deposits that such minimal features were impossible to trace in plan within the Layer 6 - midden complex. Large post-hole features would however have been traceable and none were visible except on the very westernmost margins of the midden. Set upon the surface of Layer 4 (orange natural rabb) to the W of the midden filled hollow was a veritable plethora of earth-fast features - post and stake-holes, hearths and pits accompanied by a much worn and eroded remnant occupation layer. A number of the larger post-holes were stone-packed and exhibited a very distinctive blue-black burnt filling and the writer felt that without doubt these would have been seen and isolated within the hollow to the immediate west. Indeed some features of this type were isolated (F 32, 44, 72 100).

Despite the possible loss of a probably small number of stake-hole type features unrecognised within the Layer 6-9 midden deposit the writer feels that the retrieved post-hole pattern which is clearly defined on both its N W and S extremities does represent one complete entity of recurrent structural activity. The total area of that activity (defined perhaps by Fs 10, 17, 24 and 100) is some 3.2m x 5.5m (17.6 sq m) in a disposition that is broadly rectangular. Clearly the disposition of features is one reflecting multiple replacement probably over a considerable period of time. Analysis of the feature pattern can be undertaken upon the basis of two criteria - differential feature filling and differential form. On the basis of form it is possible to distinguish narrow cylindrical 'stake-hole' features from larger cup-shaped post-pit types. The stake-hole features do seem to present two principal linear arrangements, one NNW-SSE (Fs 122-118, 96-87, 81, 65, 64, 55-52) and one E-W (Fs 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 31). A further E-W arrangement of stake holes may exist to the S (Fs 64, 65, 67, 68, 70, 71). This may suggest the existence of one integral structure (corners F56, F15, F31, F71), aligned E-W 2.5m x 2m in size. The NNW-SSE stake alignment could even be seen as leading to the centre of its S wall. This suggestion (and it is no more) may be borne out by an analysis of feature filling (see below).

The disposition of large post-pits, which may indicate a rather different form of structure, is a good deal more puzzling and apart from noting the concentration of such features in the centre of the terrace (Fs 57, 58, 59, 61-63, 66, 72, 79, 80) - where they coincide with the surviving extent of occupation surface little more can be confidently suggested.

An analysis of the filling content of the features suggests a two-fold division into those with burnt filling and those without. If the burnt fillings were to represent one phase of destruction then these features, separated from their companions might reflect one integral structure. The outcome of this exercise is to be seen in fig. 5 and, while offering little enough comfort, does produce a relatively restricted distribution in terms of the whole pattern and one which coincides to a marked extent with the two E-W alignments of stake-holes indicated above. Little more, the writer feels, can confidently be said. Even in its informality and

lack of cohesion these structural remains parallel exactly the situation retrieved on Site D and Site K at Carn Brea and in all likelihood reflect multiple replacement of shelters which perhaps lacked formal layout, over a considerable period of time.

Two pit-hearths containing substantial quantities of charcoal were recognised; F60 set within the defined occupation surface close to the concentration of post-pits and F104 cut through the surface of the midden filling the hollow (Layer 6) and thus post-dating the total levelling of the hollow behind the boulder-constructed wall. F83 was a relatively shallow rather amorphous depression c. 30cms deep containing a few flint fragments and little else.

One structure there is on the terrace which is clear in its outline and, significantly perhaps, it must be one of the latest. At the very southermost end of the terrace, built against the wall defining the terrace-limit, was a tiny enclosure defined by a slot packed with upright granite slabs that had served as wedges to support upright timber posts of slender stature. The enclosure is 2.5m x 0.75m aligned E-W with a floor carefully paved with flat well-worn slabs. The palisade slot had been inserted through the surface of the Layer 6 midden deposit and therefore this structure relates to a period when the midden filling of the hollow behind the enclosure wall was complete. Accumulation of deposits, however, continued abutting against it - deposits which were later to be perforated by the digging of a pit (F111) which contained within its basal layers an impacted neolithic vessel. The structure is thus late in the sequence of activity on the terrace but is also clearly neolithic in date. But for the relationship established with F111 this might have remained in doubt as the filling of this tiny enclosure was a clean brown/yellow soil which contained no artefacts whatever and which directly underlay Layers 2 and 3 at this point and furthermore no artefacts of any date were located upon the paved floor. The absolutely clean state of this structure (by contrast with the considerable scatter of artefactual debris universally present elsewhere on the site) may well speak volumes as to its function. Sadly these volumes remain undecipherable to the archaeologist. The scale of structure and its construction does recall the so-called 'wicket entrance' (later filled with midden debris)

on Site K at Carn Brea.

Interpretation The whole evidence from the cutting excavated at Helman Tor, at all points, would suggest that the first stage of activity on the site was the excavation of a shallow (up to .50m deep) hollow along the line followed by the enclosure wall and the immediate construction of the boulder enclosure wall on its forward (outer) edge. At this point on the circuit the wall exhibited relatively few 'standers' (even in fallen state) but appears to have comprised, for at least its lower courses, coursed blocks (thus differing from the wall on the E side of Eastern Summit at Carn Brea). The extent and depth of collapsed rubble beyond the outer face of the wall would suggest that the wall stood, in antiquity, to a height of 2m+, (as was the case at Carn Brea). The excavation of the hollow (exactly paralleled on Site J and on Site A1 at Carn Brea) almost certainly served some purpose in conjunction with the wall construction. It may be suggested that this purpose was a two-fold one:-

a) to furnish a level platform upon which to found a stable wall structure, and

b) to serve as a quarry for rabb with which to fill the interstices of the wall to enhance its stability - providing a 'soft-set' for each boulder offered up into the construction. Such a method is exactly reflected in the method of construction of many Cornish hedges in the more recent past.

Once the wall was complete occupation commenced immediately on the interior and the hollow lying behind the wall began to be filled with midden debris. The existence of a good deal of impacted pottery including two almost complete vessels alongside a number of stake holes found dug into the floor of the hollow suggests that initially the area may have been the scene of some degree of activity but that after this initial activity the virtually sterile Layers 7 and 8 representing, presumably, a mass of organic material, indicate the use of the hollow at a receptacle for organic debris. A pollen column at 10cm intervals was extracted from these layers and has been analysed. It contains no pollen and only the most abraded macro-botanical materials. Erosion and abrasion and microbe action appears to have put paid to this source of evidence.

During this period of the accumulation of organic debris occupation appears to have extended on to the surface of the midden which ultimately levelled the hollow behind the wall and gave rise to the trampled surface of Layer 6 and its high artefact yield. It is to this last phase of activity and those preceding it that the structural remains on the terrace to the W of the hollow and encroaching on to the surface of the midden relate. The excavator believes that these structural traces represent a whole unit of activity as they are contained on both S and W by obstacles and appear to run out to the N. To the E, over the midden deposit, slight features represented only by relatively faint discoloration and change of texture (stake-holes) may have been missed during excavation due to the nature of the available soil matrix but substantial features are it is felt unlikely to have eluded attention.

Two pit-type hearths (closely comparable to those located on the terraces A1, K and J at Carn Brea) relate to the latest pahse of activity on the terrace. Both produced enough charcoal to yield good carbon dates which should theoretically furnish termini ante quem for the construction of the enclosure wall and the succession of occupation activity.

C14 Samples 348 Neolithic occupation layer
314/646 F1 Hearth on midden deposit
420 from midden deposit
689 F164 Charcoal in feature cut through midden deposit
641/656/7 F60 Hearth on terrace rabb surface

Associated with these hearths was an abundant scatter of post- and stake-holes representing more than one structure erected upon the terrace through time. Although as has been suggested it is felt that this group of structural features is well-defined so as to represent a whole structure in its various phases it is extremely difficult to disentangle any clear pattern that would facilitate the reconstruction of any one structure's form. The filling of the features fell broadly under two heads

1) a brown soil fill
2) a black charcoal fill

It seemed possible that the charcoal-filled features might represent the

destruction catastrophically of one phase of structure and that therefore a selection of features so filled would provide a feature pattern in use at one moment in time. While a plot of such features (see fig 5) does clearly show spatial concentration to the N end of the excavated area, it cannot be said to yield any convincing structural pattern that would allow reconstruction of house form. It would seem as though, as at Carn Brea (with the single exception of Site A1) erosion, multiple replacement and destruction have led to the evidence for structures being, while quite definite, unspecific as to form and nature.

There is no hint as to the reason for the desertion of the site at Helman Tor after the relatively lengthy occupation that had subsisted there. Leaf-shaped arrowheads were located on the site -mostly broken and often of very fine manufacture. However, in proportional terms the nine located (in very crude terms 0.16 per sq m) compare as a low yield when set against the 1.0 arrowhead per sq m on Carn Brea Site A1 and the 0.63 arrowheads per sq m on Carn Brea Site J (the lowest yielding site at Carn Brea). In other words the number of arrow heads at Helman Tor would appear to be less by anything between a factor of 6 and 10. This, to the excavator, would seem to substantiate the explanation of an unusual and catastrophic occurrence to explain the high number of arrow-heads at Carn Brea and indeed would seem to suggest that such a catastrophe was not visited upon the site at Helman Tor.

Doubtless the detailed examination of pottery and lithic materials from Helman Tor will add further enriched texture to the comparisons that can be drawn between Carn Brea and Helman Tor. It is indeed fortunate that the quantity of artefactual material recovered from the terrace excavated at Helman Tor is sufficient to allow meaningful comparison between the assemblages to be made.

In summary, the excavation at Helman Tor has demonstrated that Carn Brea is no longer to be regarded as a unique site. The degree of identity between the two sites is, in the excavators view, so great as to elevate the two sites to sub-cultural status with the likelihood of other sites (of which another, Carn Galver, has been recently located in West Penwith)

expanding the picture so far created. Yet already within this greater identity subtle points of contrast informing us of the complexity of inter-site relations in the neolithic period, are becoming apparent. Helman Tor as the second known and demonstrated site of the group must now assume the mantle of a monument of national, and indeed international, importance.

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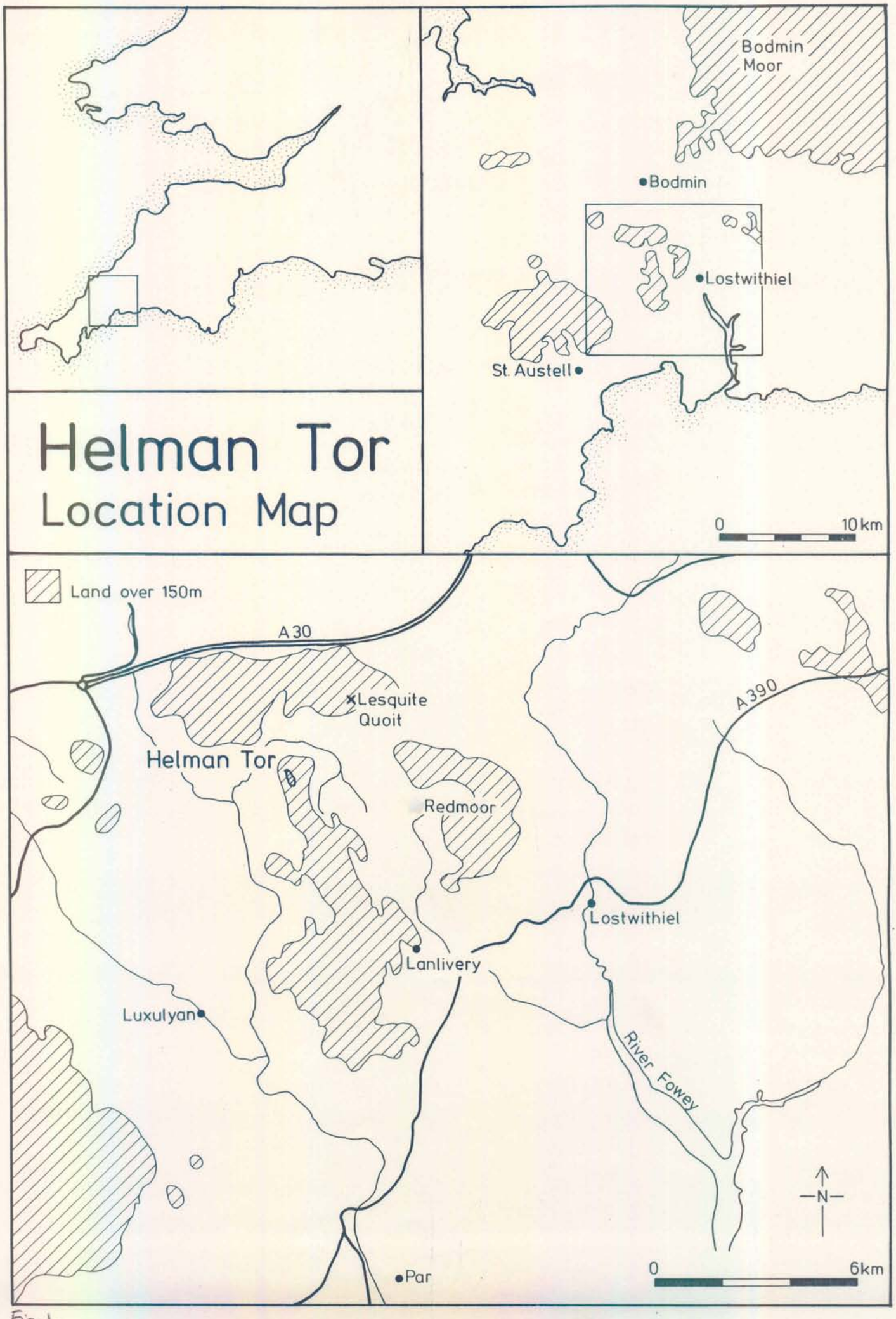
FIGURES



Helman Tor
Location Map

Fig. 1.

Helman Tor
Location Map

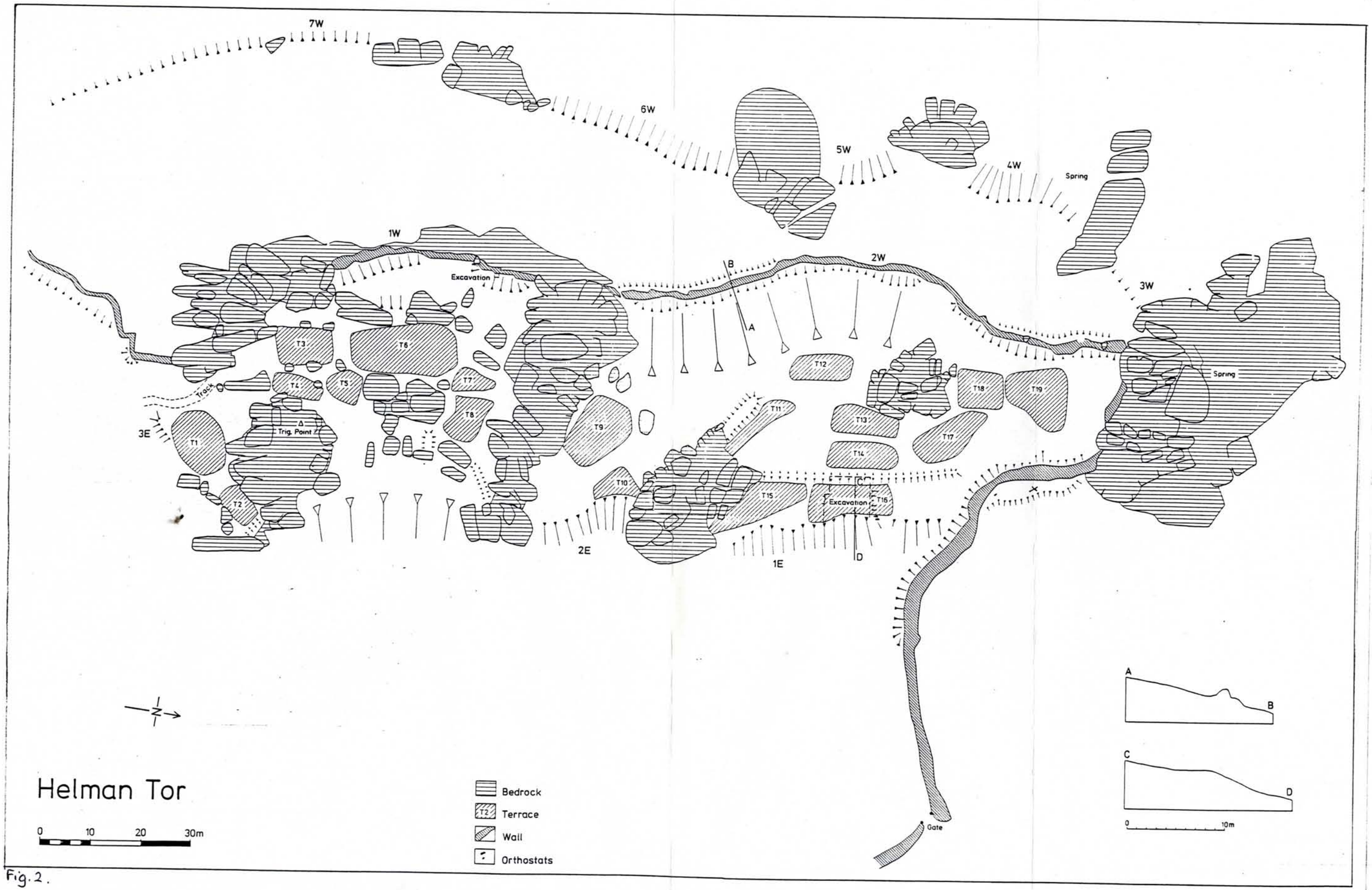

7W
6W
5W
4W
Spring
1W
Excavation
B
2W
3W
A
T3
T6
T12
T4
T5
T7
T18
T19
Track
Spring
T11
T8
T13
3E
Trig. Point
T1
T9
T17
T14
T10
C
T15
Excavation
T16
T2
2E
1E
D
Gate
A
B
C
D
0
10m
N
Helman Tor
0
10
20
30m
Bedrock
T2
Terrace
Wall
Orthostats

Fig. 2.

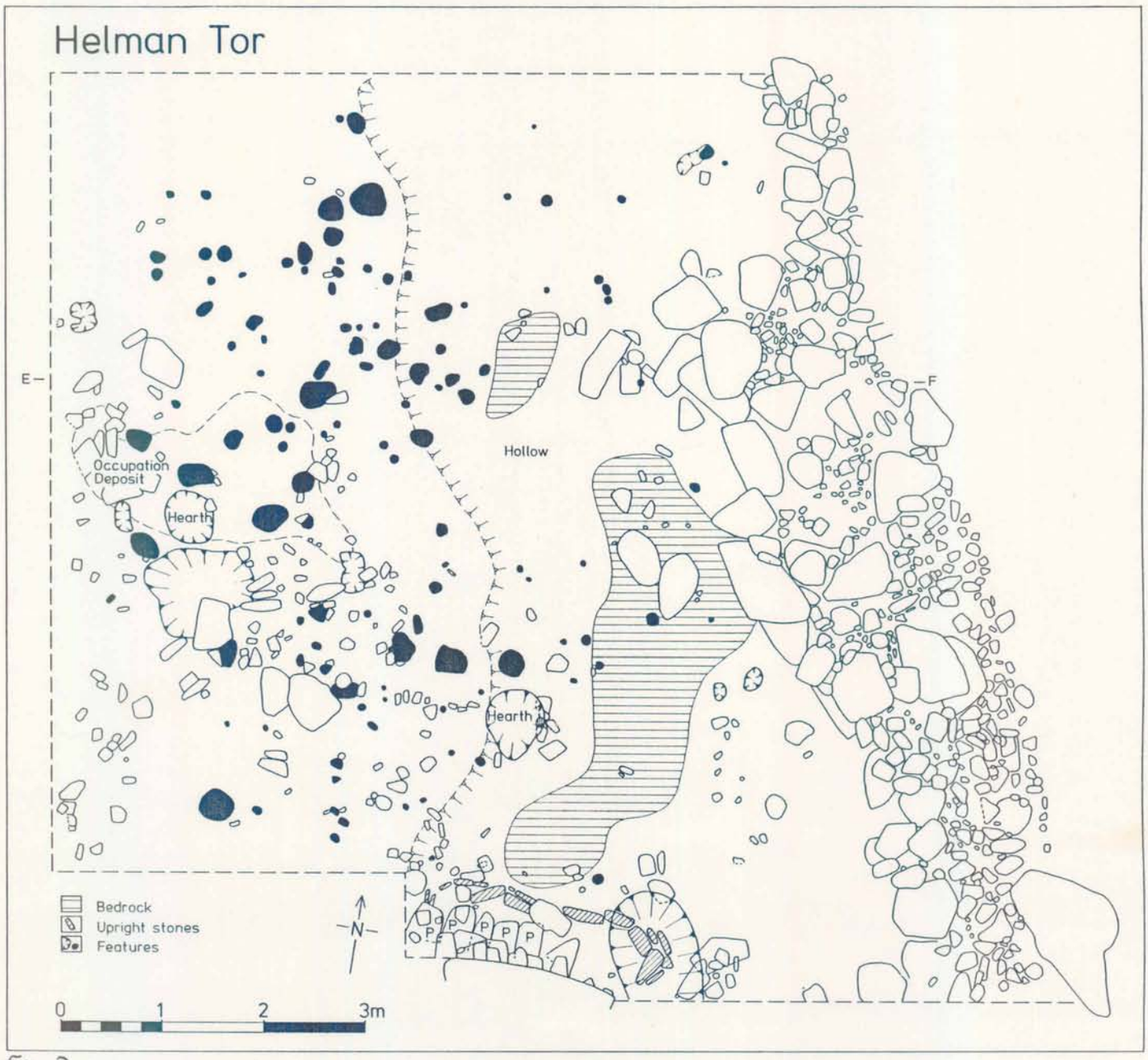

Helman Tor
E
F
Occupation Deposit
Hearth
Hollow
Hearth
Bedrock
Upright stones
Features
N
0
1
2
3m

Fig. 3.

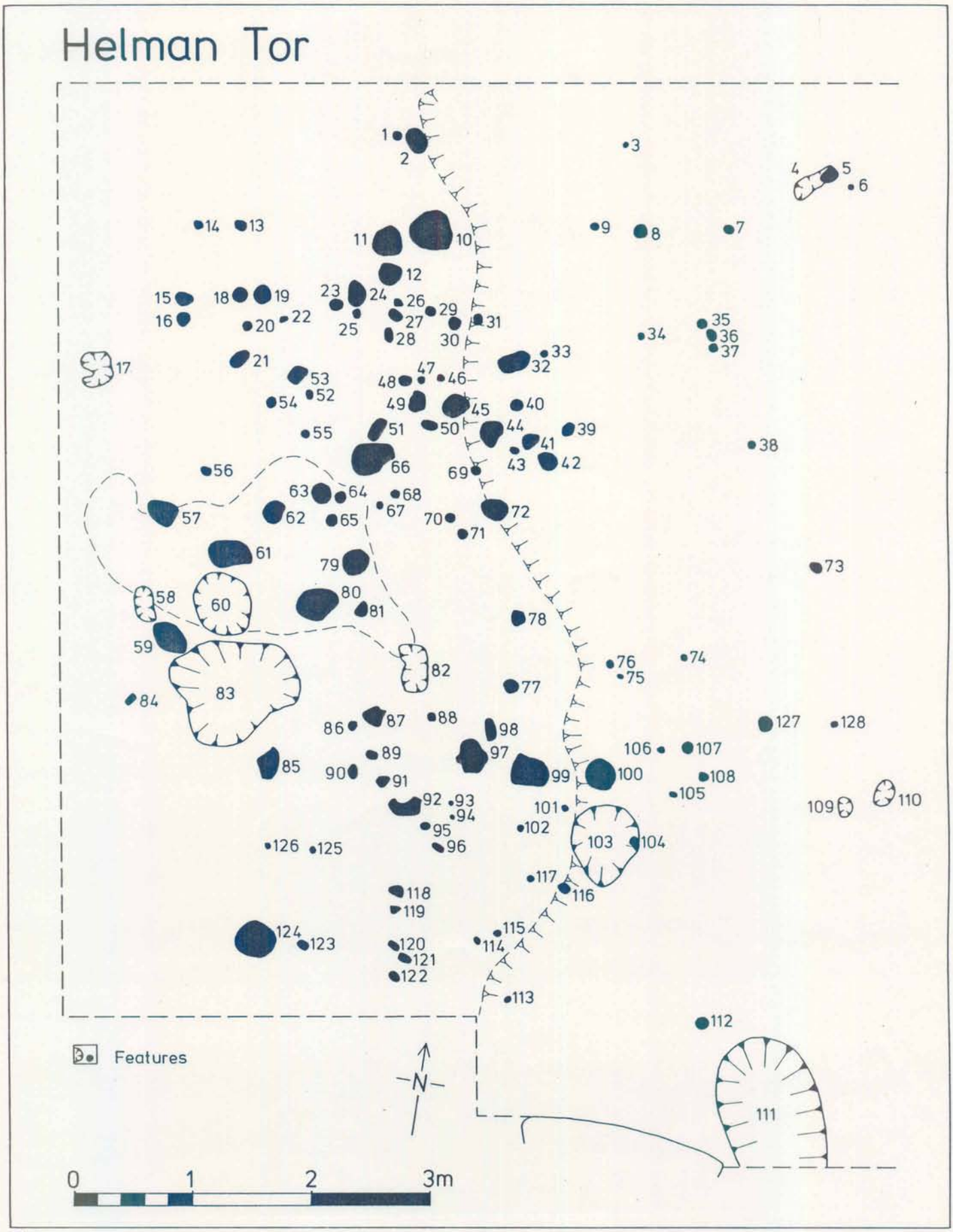


Fig. 4.

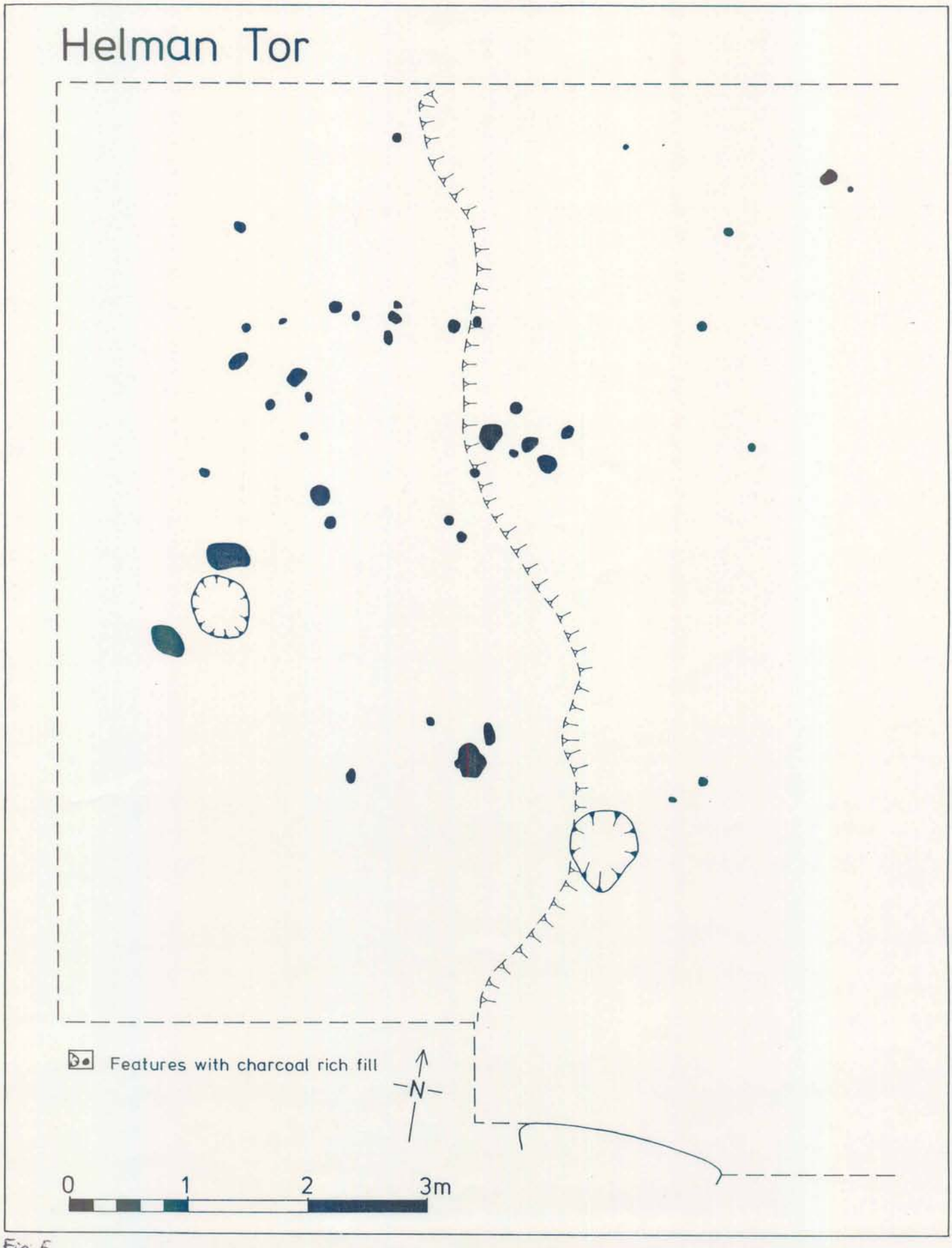


Fig. 5.

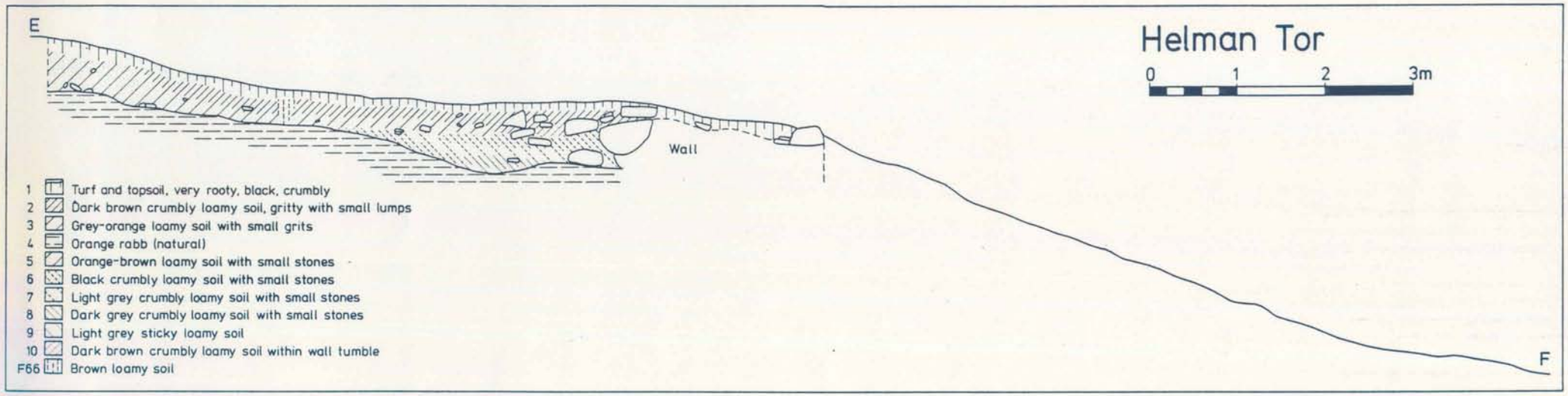

E
Helman Tor
0
1
2
3m
Wall
F
1 Turf and topsoil, very rooty, black, crumbly
2 Dark brown crumbly loamy soil, gritty with small lumps
3 Grey-orange loamy soil with small grits
4 Orange rabb (natural)
5 Orange-brown loamy soil with small stones
6 Black crumbly loamy soil with small stones
7 Light grey crumbly loamy soil with small stones
8 Dark grey crumbly loamy soil with small stones
9 Light grey sticky loamy soil
10 Dark brown crumbly loamy soil within wall tumble
F66 Brown loamy soil

Fig. 6.

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