

# Ytre Moa in Årdal

A Viking-Age Settlement Revisited

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& Jochen Komber*

West Nordic Building Customs in the  
Viking Age and Medieval Period

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# Ytre Moa in Årdal

## A Viking-Age Settlement Revisited

### ABSTRACT

One of the most famous Viking settlements in Norway is that of Ytre Moa in Årdal parish, Sogn, excavated by Egil Bakke (1926-1985) in 1964-1966. The excavation uncovered, among other things, a number of small buildings rather dissimilar to the longhouses more typical of the period. Bakka never completed a full publication of the site but summarised his results in a number of smaller articles. He also presented the site to an international audience at the Fifth Viking Congress, held in the Faroe Islands in 1965.

The apparently unique character of the Ytre Moa site has widely been referred to by various scholars since its publication. They have all, rather uncritically, accepted Bakka's interpretation of the site and used it for comparison with house structures excavated elsewhere in the Viking world.

The Ytre Moa structures have been widely referred to by various scholars. Bjørn Myhre has emphasised its uniqueness within a Norwegian Viking context (Myhre 2000, 37), while Pat Wallace has compared them with and found them "not so dissimilar to the Dublin buildings despite its thick stone walls" (Wallace 1992, 81).

It is obvious, however, that there are problems in Bakka's interpretation of the layout of his House B, and this led to a limited re-excavation on this specific structure in the summer of 2002. The excavation was carried out under the umbrella of the project "West Nordic Building Customs of the Viking Age and Medieval period". The outcome of this re-excavation supports the suspicion that there are problems with Bakka's original interpretation and on the basis of observations made during the re-excavation a tentative alternative interpretation is proposed.



Fig. 1. The location of the Ytre Moa site seen from approximately Southeast. Photo: the authors.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1964-1966 Egil Bakka, the archaeologist of the Historical Museum, University of Bergen, assisted by Arnvid Lillehammer, a student of archaeology, conducted excavations on the top of the gravel terrace Ytre Moa, in Årdal in Sogn [1]. Bakka recorded more than 25 structures in total, including 6 house structures, at least 20 presumed burial mounds, 1 standing stone (*bautasten*), and 1 inhumation grave. Of these 3 house structures (A, B and F), 2 grave mounds (3 and 4) and the inhumation grave were excavated [2]. Bakka summarised the importance of the excavated structures by stating “this is the first and most complete farmstead of the Viking Age that we know of in this country” (Bakka 1971, 149) (Figs. 1-2) [3].

Bakka used a longitudinal base from which all measurements were taken. It was basically the same method used by Jan Petersen in the 1920-1930s (Petersen 1933, 3). He did not plot in his finds nor did he inform on the depth of the postholes in his report, although the find spots are noted in the original excavation archive.

Bakka never managed to produce a full publication of his excavation [4]. He summarised and presented the results in a number of articles, which should be regarded rather as preliminary than as

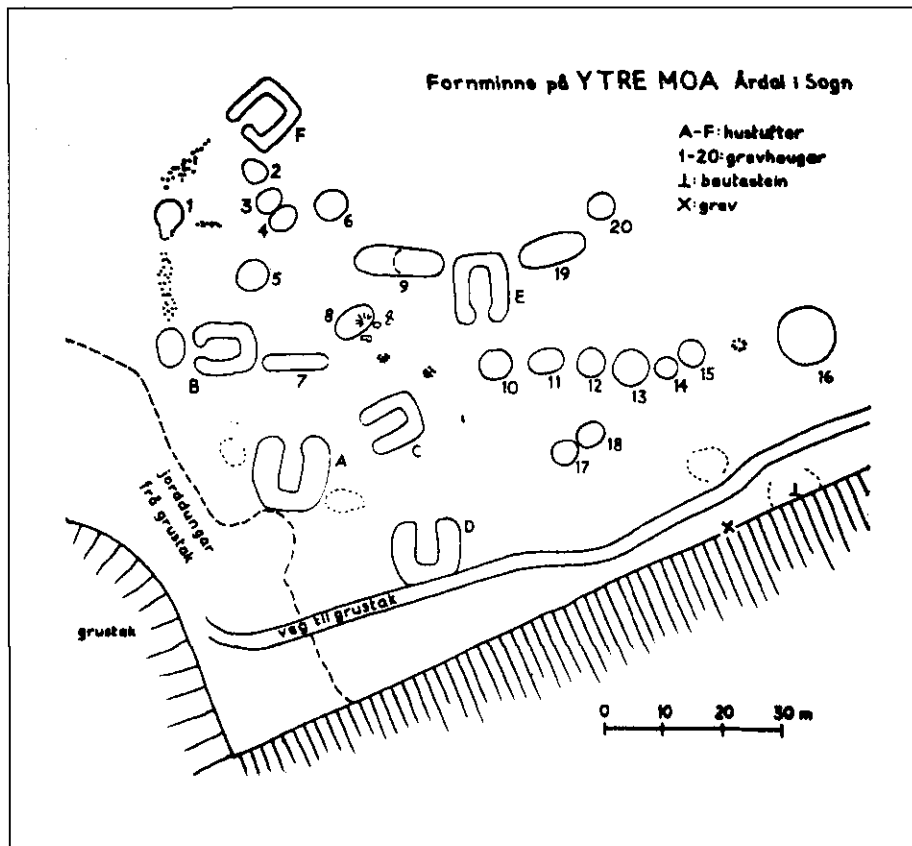


Fig. 2. The last plan of the Ytre Moa site, published by Bakka. After Bakka 1971.

as full publications (Bakka 1965; 1968; 1971; 1976). Of these the one from 1965, published in Norwegian (with an English summary) in the journal *Viking*, is the most substantial, although it for obvious reasons does not contain the results of the investigations in 1965 and 1966. These are presented, also in Norwegian, in the article from 1971. Of special importance is the fact that Bakka presented Ytre Moa at the Fifth Viking Congress in Tórshavn, Faroe Islands, in 1965, thereby bringing the Ytre Moa site to the attention of more international fora. The English summary in the article in *Viking* was reproduced in the proceedings of the Viking Congress (Bakka 1968). It is unfortunate that the reporting of further results is less widely known – as this must cast some doubt on the interpretation published in *Viking*. For example, “Somme av dei steinsamlingane som vart registrerte under torva, kan ikkje lenger med visse reknas for gravhaugar” (Lillehammer 1971, 20), and “Somme av dei fornminna som før gravinga vart sett på som gravhaugar, synest i dag å måtte tolkast som rydningsrøysar eller deler av steingardar” (Lillehammer 1971, 21).

A few years ago Kari C. Larsen, a student of archaeology at University of Bergen, reassessed the excavation at Ytre Moa and its results. Her work, however, does not include a critical review of Bakka’s excavation methods or his recordings (Larsen 1995).

## THE 2002 RE-EXCAVATION

The re-investigation of the lay-out of House B at Ytre Moa was conducted during the period May 2nd-4th 2002 as part of the research programme *West Nordic Building Customs in the Viking Age and Medieval Period*, funded by the Nordic Research Council for the Humanities. The excavation was carried out by Howell Roberts of the Archaeological Institute of Iceland (Fornleifastofnun Íslands), Jochen Komber of the Archaeological Museum (Arkeologisk Museum) of Stavanger and Steffen Stummann Hansen of the Danish Polar Center (Dansk Polarcenter).

The purpose of the re-excavation was to establish if the postholes recorded inside the walls of House B had been part of a bigger building underlying the walls ascribed to House B by Bakka. Permission for the project was kindly granted by the Historisk Museum in Bergen.

At our arrival to the site the structures were covered by a dense vegetation of birch shrubs and trees, which had to be cut down before excavation could begin. After this had been done a grid system was laid out, with respect to the lay-out of House B, and two trial trenches established outside the eastern gable end of House B in order to investigate if the two lines of postholes uncovered inside this structure by Bakka continued further to the east, indicating a possible longhouse oriented east-west (Figs. 3-4).

Before leaving the site the grid system was anchored with four wooden pigs with blue top, placed in the coordinates 100E/100N, 115E/100N, 120E/100N, and 130E/100N respectively. The level was anchored in one of the wooden posts in the fence along the edge of the quarry and south of the excavation area. 1.8 m above ground level a nail was placed in the post and the following text written: "Fix YMA 2002".

Trench 1 measured 5 x 2 meters. The section showed a top layer of leaves of c. 7 cm in thickness (Layer 1), superimposing a dark brownish layer with sandy silt (Layer 1). Many roots of the trees penetrated this layer, which had a thickness of 15-20 cm. It is interpreted as topsoil. Below Layer 1 was a humified layer of fine-grained sandy silt, with 25-40 % of it being stones (Layer 2). The layer had a thickness of c. 10 cm and the colour was brown to brown-greyish. In a few places lenses of a greasier, greyish material and a more compact character could be observed. This layer may represent the last remnants of a washed out habitation layer, having suffered from the impact of the possible removal of the northern wall. This layer superimposed the subsoil (Layer 3), which consisted of coarse yellow grey sand and fine gravel. Two postholes (1-2) were recorded in Trench 1.

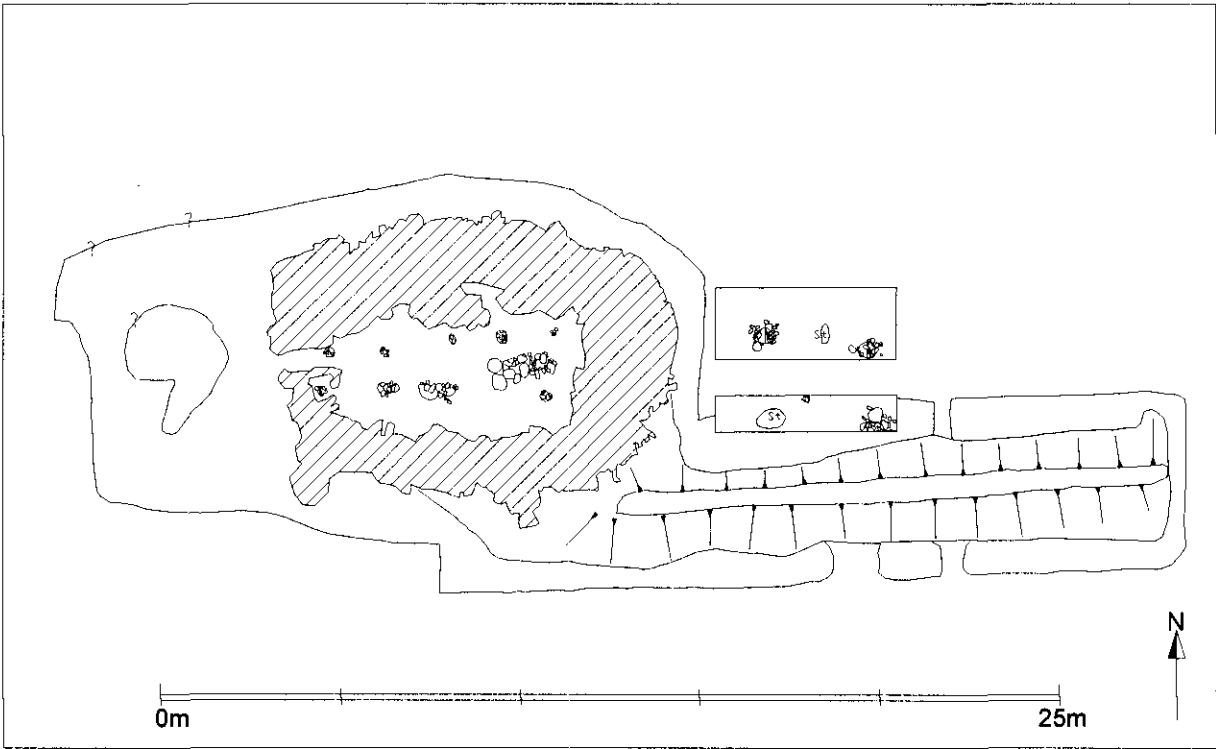


Fig. 3. Plan of site with trenches indicated.

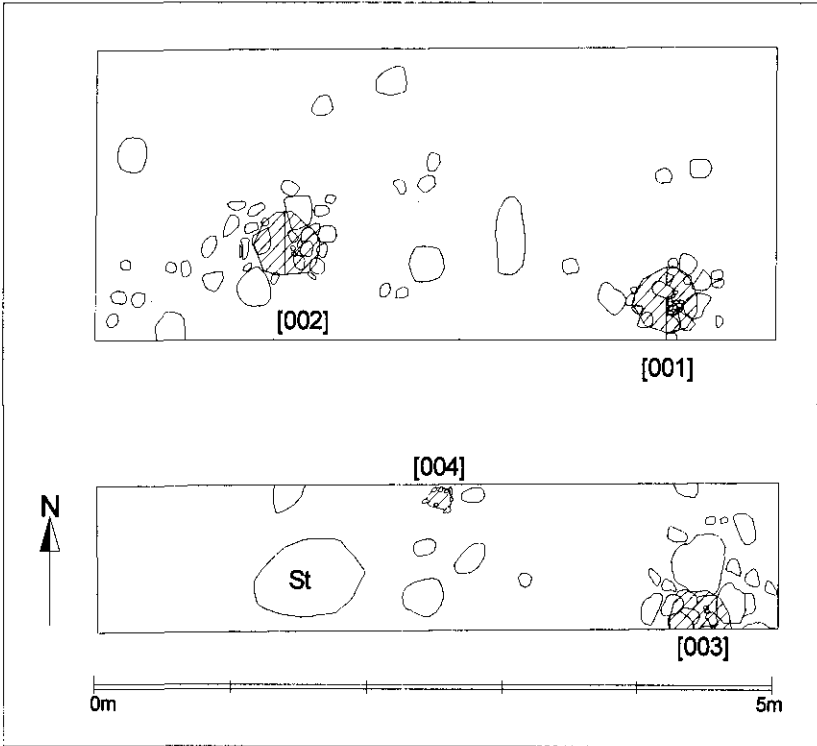


Fig. 4. Trenches in detail with postholes indicated.

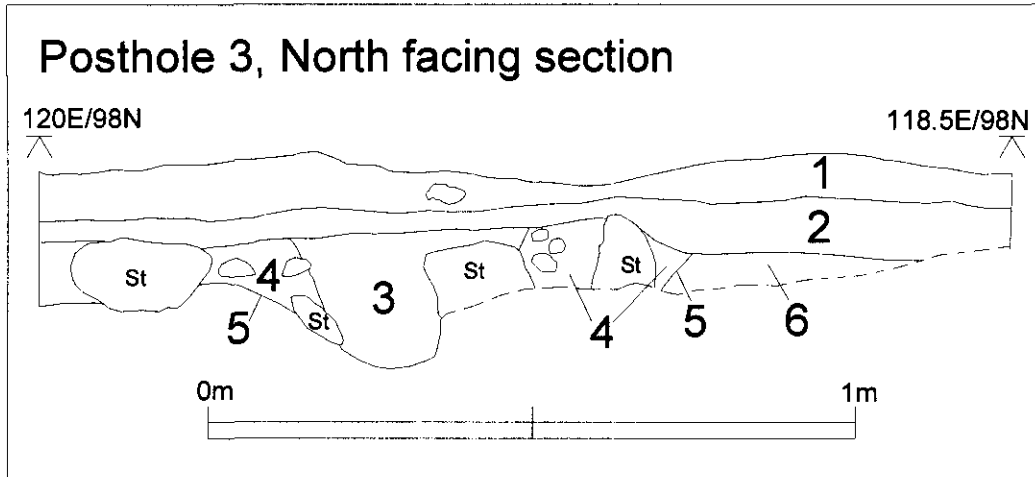


Fig. 5. Section of Posthole 3. Layer 2: dark brownish layer with sandy silt, superimposed by a layer of leaves; 3: Post pipe fill. Fine dark brown sandy silt with occasional root action; 4: dark, red brown silty sand and gravel; 5: Coarse yellow grey sand and fine gravel.

Posthole 1 (Fig. 4) had a diameter of c. 50 cm and a depth of c. 25 cm. It was furnished with a layer of small stones along the sides and in the bottom. A N-S section was established through the feature and its eastern half excavated. The fill consisted of grey-brownish sand with charcoal particles and small stones.

Posthole 2 (Fig. 4) had a diameter of c. 40 cm and a depth of c. 10-15 cm. A N-S section was put through the feature and its western part excavated. The hole seems to have been stone-lined. The fill consisted of a humified sandy material with a few minor stones and charcoal particles.

Trench 2 measured 5 x 1 meters and showed the same stratification as in Trench 1. Two postholes (3-4) and a presumed stone (S) support for a roof-supporting post were noted.

Posthole 3 (Fig. 4) had a diameter of c. 30 cm. An E-W section was established and the northern half of the feature excavated (Fig. 5). The depth was c. 20 cm and it seems likely that there has been a stone-packed support for a post. The fill consisted of dark, red-brown silty sand and gravel. The imprint of the post could be identified and this post pipe fill consisted of fine-grained dark, sandy silt (Fig. 5).

A smaller possible posthole – Posthole 4 – was not excavated (Fig. 4). It was neither aligned with nor of a similar character to the excavated features. A large flat slab, however, was identified at the place where a possible partner to Posthole 2 should be. This slab may have served as a post-

pad or platform for a wooden roof-supporting post. Such an interpretation, for obvious reasons, can of course only be tentative.

## CONCLUSION AND FURTHER PERSPECTIVES

The investigation conducted at Ytre Moa revealed that there is clear evidence of activity, in the form of postholes, outside the eastern gable-end of Bakka's House B. These postholes, although not entirely convincing, could potentially fit with the curved line of the two rows of holes of roof-supporting posts inside the house as published by Bakka.

The identification of four post-settings outside the eastern gable end of House B should be seen in context of the two lines each of five postholes excavated by Bakka and interpreted by him in the context of the surrounding walls forming the layout of his House B. The four post-settings identified and partly excavated in 2002 could form part of two lines of roof-supporting posts in a proper longhouse of Late Iron or Viking Age type.

If so this would also allow a re-interpretation of the dubious Structure 7, which Bakka interpreted as a burial mound. It was obvious that Bakka had tried to establish an interpretation of this structure through some excavation. He seems to have cleaned the two longer faces of the structures, but left the top of it untouched. Furthermore, he had excavated on either sides of the structure, which can clearly be seen in the way he has left the site. The interpretation of this structure as a burial mound seems rather unlikely. It should be noted that according to Bakka's site-plan Structure 7 is separated from House B. At our visit there was no evidence of the two structures being separate. The structure appears slightly convex in shape.

Instead it is suggested that the Structure 7 might represent the preserved parts of the southern wall of a longhouse, oriented approximately E-W, and comprising the 14 postholes so far identified (Fig. 6).

Contrary to such an interpretation is the fact that the postholes outside the gable-end (Postholes 1-4) seem to be somewhat different in character to the postholes recorded inside the house. Furthermore, if they form part of the same structure one would expect the appearance of a floor-layer also outside the gable-end of Bakka's House B. No clear evidence of such, however, was found.



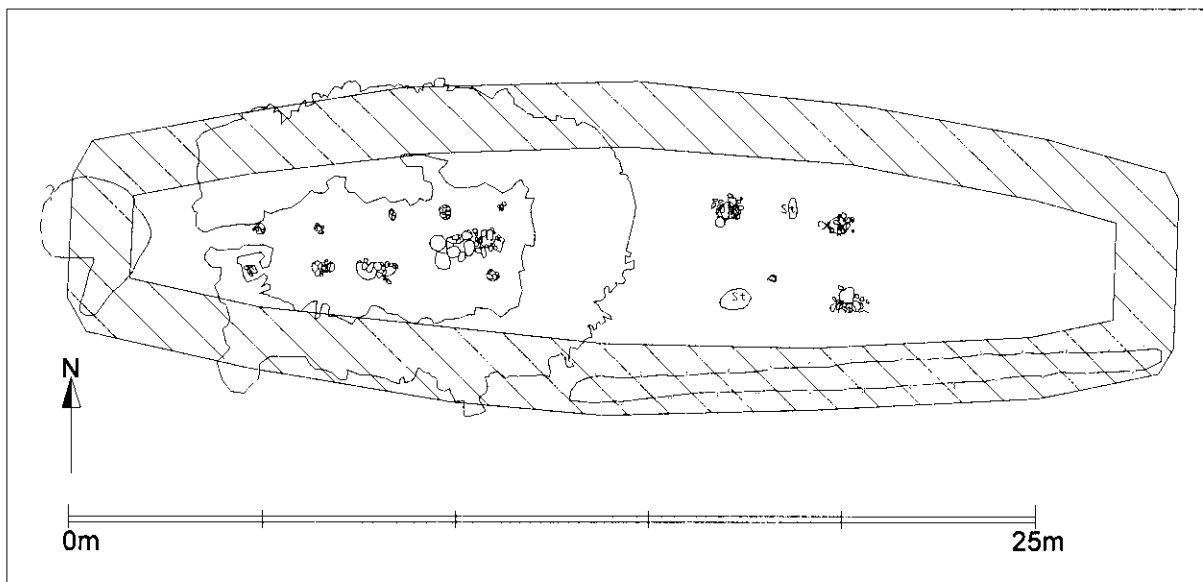


Fig. 6. Suggested re-interpretation of the site.

Thus, the re-excavation does not yet permit a secure re-interpretation of the site. It does, however, indicate that there are more features in this area, not detected by Bakka at the time of his excavation.

The archaeology of Ytre Moa certainly appears both more complex and less secure than has been widely accepted. If one also accepts that many of the “gravemounds” are insecure, and might rather represent the remaining fragments of various field boundaries, then both the nature and chronological extent of the site require major re-assessment.

While the limitations of the re-excavation conducted in 2002 only allow a tentative re-interpretation, they do indicate the need for further excavations to address the uncertainties that are now quite apparent.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We first of all want to acknowledge the Historical Museum, University of Bergen, for permission to re-excavate the site and for their support. Furthermore, we want to thank the Archaeological Museum in Stavanger for placing the necessary equipment at our disposal, Ståle Furnes, the county archaeologist of Sognefjord, for working with us during the re-excavation., and the Årdal Kommune for providing us with non-woven geotextile (“terram”) to cover the excavated areas

with. Finally, our sincere thanks to the Nordic Research Council for the Humanities (NOS-H) who provided the funding for this project.

Copenhagen, Reykjavík, Stavanger – February 2003

Steffen Stummann Hansen

Howell Roberts

Jochen Komber

## NOTES

1. Bakka excavated at Ytre Moa July 20th-August 8th 1964.
2. Report by Bakka dated October 30th 1964. Historisk Museum Universitetet i Bergen, Journal 026307.
3. Translated by the authors from Norwegian “det er det fyrste og meist heilskapte gardsanlegg fra vikingtida ein hittil kjenner i landet”.
4. For an obituary and a bibliography of Bakka’s archaeological works see Müller-Wille 1986 (reprinted in Müller-Wille 1993).

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J følge Man Høgestøl har  
AMS ikke funnet noen slides.  
21/01-04  
Sigrun Kaland

## PHOTO – FILM 1

Colour slides (100 ASA)

1. Overview of landscape facing NNW. 01.05.2002
2. Overview of landscape facing NNW. 01.05.2002
3. Overview of landscape facing NNW. 01.05.2002
4. Tuft B pre excavation facing E. 02.05.2002.
5. Detail of Tuft B pre excavation facing E. 02.05.2002.
6. Trench pre excavation facing WSW. 02.05.2002.
7. Detail of trench pre excavation facing WSW. 02.05.2002.
8. Working situation. 02.05.2002.
9. Working situation. 02.05.2002.
10. Working situation. 02.05.2002.
11. Trench 2 facing W. 03.05.2002.
12. Trench 2 facing W. 03.05.2002.
13. Trench 2 facing W. 03.05.2002.
14. Trench 2 facing W. 03.05.2002.
15. Trench 2 facing W. 03.05.2002.
16. Trench 2 facing E. 03.05.2002.
17. Trench 2 facing E. 03.05.2002.
18. Trench 1 facing W. 03.05.2002.
19. Trench 1 facing W. 03.05.2002.
20. Trench 1 facing E. 03.05.2002.
21. Trench 1 facing E. 03.05.2002.
22. Trench 1, Posthole 1 – vertical. 04.05.2002.
23. Trench 1, Posthole 1 – vertical. 04.05.2002.
24. Trench 2, Posthole 3 facing W. 04.05.2002.
25. Trench 2, Posthole 3 facing W. 04.05.2002.
26. Trench 2, Posthole 4 facing N. 04.05.2002.
27. Trench 2, Posthole 4 facing N. 04.05.2002.
28. Trench 1, Posthole 2 facing N. 04.05.2002.

29. Trench 1, Posthole 2 facing N. 04.05.2002.
30. Trench 1, section in Posthole 2 facing W. 04.05.2002.
31. Trench 1, section in Posthole 2 facing W. 04.05.2002.
32. Trench 1, section in Posthole 1 facing W. 04.05.2002.
33. Trench 1, section in Posthole 1 facing W. 04.05.2002.
34. Trench 2, section in Posthole 3 facing S. 04.05.2002.
35. Trench 2, section in Posthole 3 facing S. 04.05.2002.
36. Landscape. 04.05.2002.

Leica 2827



L\_282701.tif



L\_282702.tif



L\_282703.tif



L\_282704.tif



L\_282705.tif



L\_282706.tif



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L\_282710.tif



L\_282711.tif



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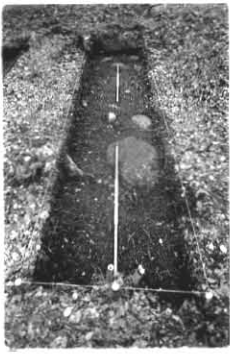
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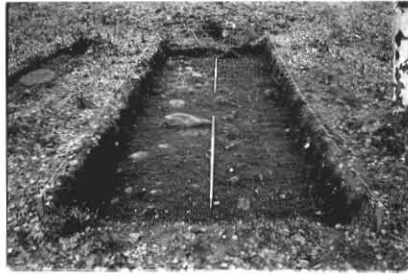
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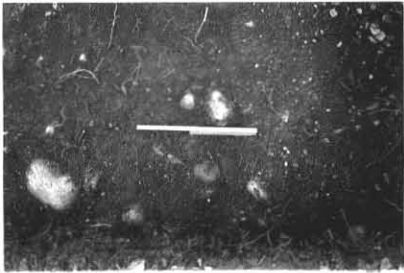
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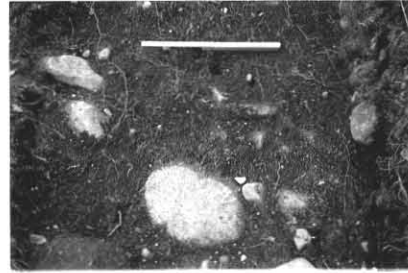
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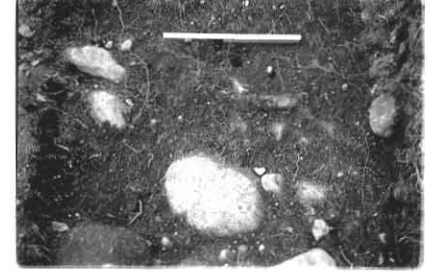
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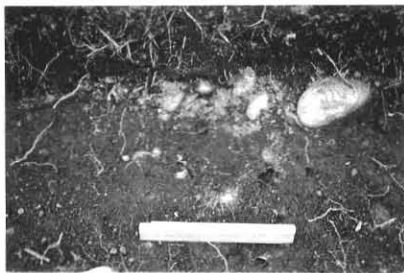
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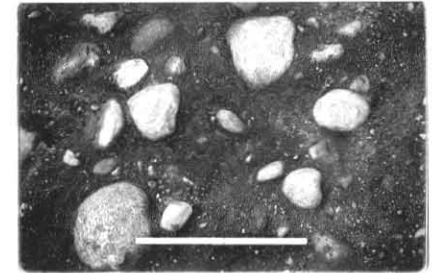
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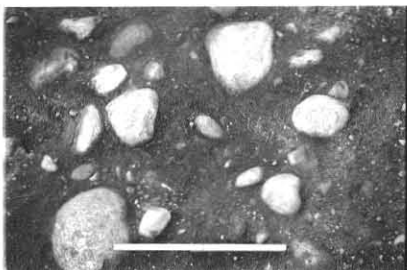
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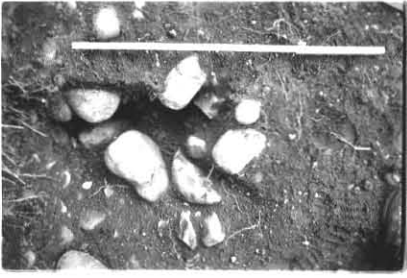


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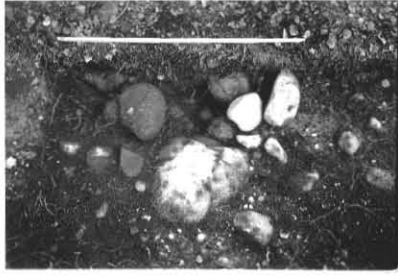


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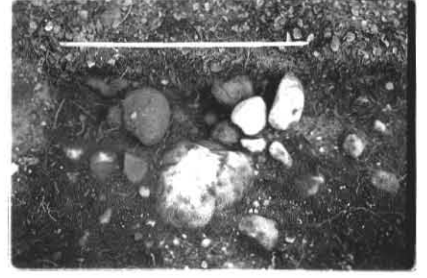




L\_282733.tif



L\_282734.tif



L\_282735.tif



L\_282736.tif

## PHOTO – FILM 2

Black & White 2 (100 ASA)

1. Overview of landscape facing NNW. 01.05.2002
2. Overview of landscape facing NNW. 01.05.2002
3. Overview of landscape facing NNW. 01.05.2002
4. Tuft B pre excavation facing E.02.05.2002.
5. Detail of Tuft B pre excavation facing E.02.05.2002.
6. Trench area pre excavation facing WSW. 02.05.2002.
7. Detail of trench area pre excavation facing WSW. 02.05.2002.
8. Working situation. 02.05.2002.
9. Working situation. 02.05.2002.
10. Working situation. 02.05.2002.
11. Working situation. 02.05.2002.
12. Trench 1 facing W. 03.05.2002.
13. Trench 2 facing W. 03.05.2002.
14. Trench 2 facing W. 03.05.2002.
15. Trench 2 facing E. 03.05.2002.
16. Trench 2 facing E. 03.05.2002.
17. Trench 1 facing W. 03.05.2002.
18. Trench 1 facing W. 03.05.2002.
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20. Trench 1 facing E. 03.05.2002.
21. Trench 1 facing E. 03.05.2002.
22. Trench 1, Posthole 1 – vertical. 04.05.2002.
23. Trench 1, Posthole 1 – vertical. 04.05.2002.
24. Trench 2, Posthole 3 facing W. 04.05.2002.
25. Trench 2, Posthole 3 facing W. 04.05.2002.
26. Trench 2, Posthole 4 facing N. 04.05.2002.
27. Trench 2, Posthole 4 facing N. 04.05.2002.

28. Trench 1, Posthole 2 facing N. 04.05.2002.
29. Trench 1, Posthole 2 facing N. 04.05.2002.
30. Trench 1, section in Posthole 2 facing W. 04.05.2002.
31. Trench 1, section in Posthole 2 facing W. 04.05.2002.
32. Trench 1, section in Posthole 1 facing W. 04.05.2002.
33. Trench 1, section in Posthole 1 facing W. 04.05.2002.
34. Trench 2, section in Posthole 3 facing S. 04.05.2002.
35. Trench 2, section in Posthole 3 facing S. 04.05.2002.
36. Landscape. 04.05.2002.

## PLANS

1. Plan of Tuft B as left by Bakka. Scale 1:50.
2. Horizontal plan with Trenches 1-2 and preserved structures. Scale 1:50.
3. Horizontal plan of Trenches 1-2. Scale 1:20.
4. Vertical plan of Posthole 1, Trench 1. Scale 1:10.
5. Horizontal plan and section of Posthole 3, Trench 2. 1:10.
6. Vertical plan of Posthole 2, Trench 1. Scale 1:10.
7. Profile, Trench 1. Scale 1:20.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SAMPLES

1. Soil from Posthole 1 (1.2 litre)
2. Soil from Posthole 2 (2.4 litres)
3. Soil from Posthole 3 (0.6 litre)