

19 THE EXCAVATION

19.1 Trench 1

Turf and topsoil (Context 001) were removed across the whole of Trench 1. The high numbers of finds, including Neolithic Hebridean Ware, and burnt and unburnt mammal bone, and the very thinness of this deposit (20–30mm) on the plateau area of the trench, suggests that it may have been the stabilised surface of the underlying Context 002, which was revealed on its removal.

Context 002 was a grey, gritty sand which covered all of the upper plateau area of the trench, up to the wall on the landward break of slope (Context 025; [illus 60](#)). In its southern part, adjacent to the wall, the context contained disordered sub-angular stonework of up to 400 × 400mm, which was interpreted as collapse from the wall 025. Throughout, the deposit appeared to contain little organic material, which may have been leached out due to its exposed position. It was, however, rich in finds, containing 12 pieces of worked stone, mostly quartz, but three of which were flint; 12 sherds of Neolithic Hebridean Ware; burnt and unburnt bone, a small amount of charcoal, and heat-cracked stone. The mixture of burnt and unburnt artefacts suggests that this deposit derives from a mixture of activities, including the clearance of the remains of at least one fire.

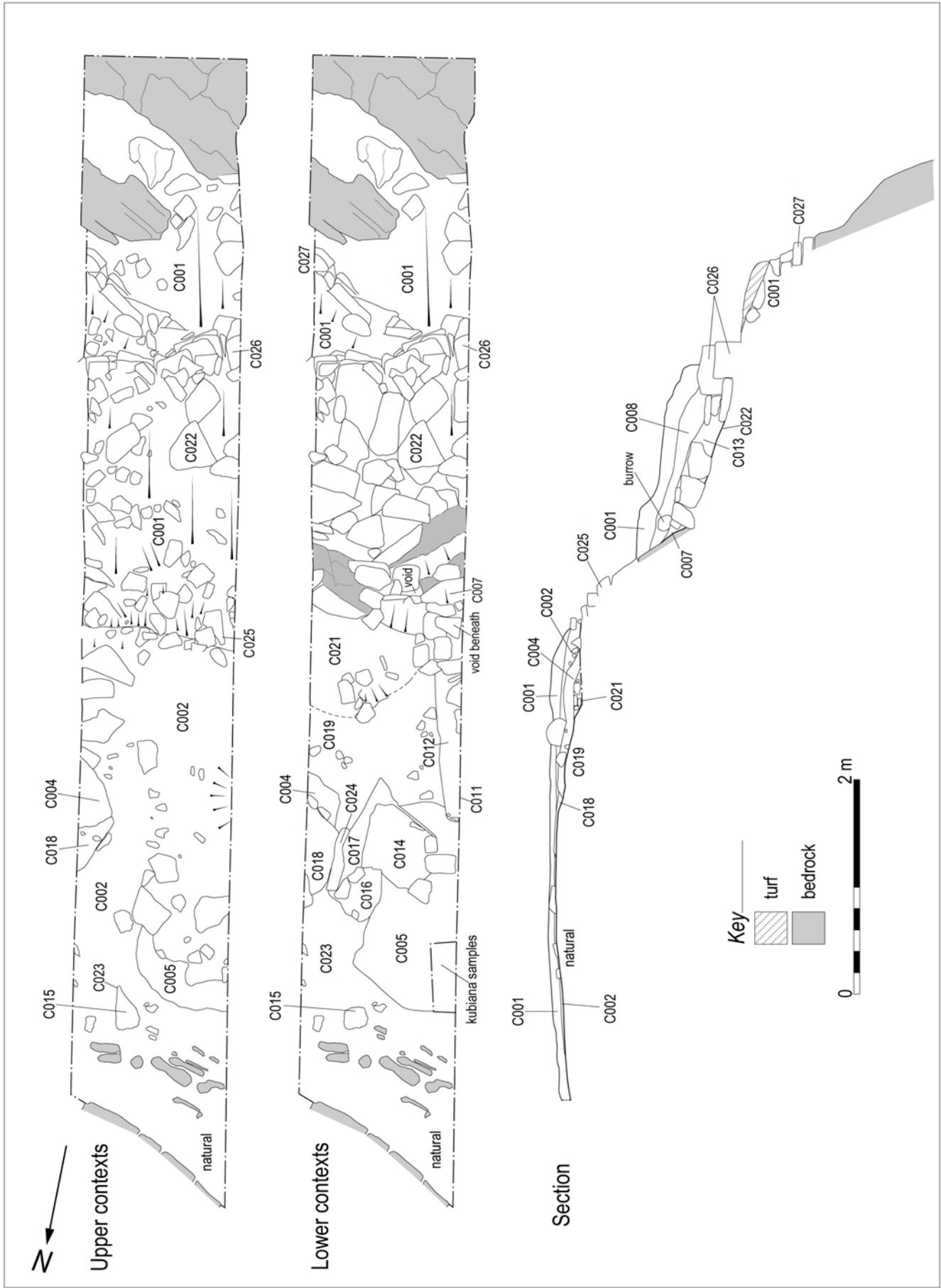
A layer of orange-brown gritty sand, Context 018, was underneath Context 002. This was similar in texture and colour to Context 005 (below), but was devoid of finds and ecofacts.

Beneath 018, Context 004, a dark grey, sandy clay covered the whole width of the trench, from wall 025 northwards for *c* 2.5m. The context contained a moderate amount of sub-angular stones of a similar size to Context 002. It was thought to be ash-rich upon excavation due to its colour and texture, although it contained little visible charcoal despite its colour.

Finds from Context 004 were concentrated in the southern lower part of the context near wall 025, and consisted of quartz flakes and pebbles, heat-cracked stone, smooth sandstone pebbles – unusual in Lewis – including one with pecking (SF39), calcined cattle bone and pottery. SF111 (Vessel 77) was Iron Age pottery, the rest of the ceramic material was Neolithic Hebridean Ware. Bulk samples were taken from both the northern and southern ends of this context. Sample 7a, from the northern end, returned a radiocarbon date (SUERC 13548/GU 15117) from birch wood (*Betula*) charcoal of 4705 ± 30 BP. Sample 7b however, from the southern half of the deposit, returned a date of 2040 ± 35 BP (SUERC 13549/GU 15118) from a charred grain of six-row barley (*Hordeum vulgare* sl.; [table 3](#)). The presence of Iron

Table 3 Radiocarbon dates

Lab code	Sample material	Lab age BP	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$	Calibrated dates	
				1-sigma	2-sigma
SUERC-13547 (GU-15116)	Charred grain: <i>Hordeum vulgare</i> sl.	2110 ± 35	-18.5 ‰	190–50 BC	350–40 BC
SUERC-13548 (GU-15117)	<i>Betula</i> charcoal	4705 ± 30	-26.2 ‰	3630–3370 BC	3630–3700 BC
SUERC-13549 (GU-15118)	Charred grain: <i>Hordeum vulgare</i> sl.	2040 ± 35	-27.3 ‰	100 BC–20 AD	170 BC–50 BC
SUERC-13550 (GU-15119)	Charred grain: Indet. cereal	2125 ± 35	-24.3 ‰	210–90 BC	350–40 BC
SUERC-13551 (GU-15120)	<i>Salix</i> charcoal	4630 ± 35	-26.7 ‰	3500–3360 BC	3520–3340 BC
SUERC-13555 (GU-15121)	<i>Betula</i> charcoal	4815 ± 35	-26.9 ‰	3650–3530 BC	3660–3520 BC
SUERC-13556 (GU-15122)	<i>Betula</i> charcoal	4570 ± 35	-26.2 ‰	3490–3120 BC	3500–3100 BC
SUERC-13557 (GU-15123)	Charred grain: <i>Hordeum vulgare</i> sl.	2125 ± 35	-23.4 ‰	210–90 BC	350–40 BC
SUERC-13558 (GU-151224)	Pot residue: Carbonised organic	4660 ± 35	-26.7 ‰	3510–3360 BC	3620–3360 BC



Illus 60 Dunasbroc Trench 1 plan showing wall 025 and Context 002



Illus 61 Flue/drain feature in Trench 1, Dunasbroc from the north. Scale 0.3m long.

Age pottery suggests an Iron Age date for this and the overlying deposits, confirmed by the date from the charred grain.

The removal of Context 004 on the plateau revealed a complex group of sealed deposits and probable features, not all of which we had time to fully investigate. **Illus 60** shows Contexts 005, 011, 012, 014, 015, 016, 017, 019, 020, 021 and 023 all within this area, north of wall 025.

In the centre of the plateau, Context 014, a compact, light coloured, yellow-orangey-brown sandy clay, was at first very difficult to distinguish from Context 005 to the north, but a sondage revealed that it covered part of Context 005 with a thin lens. The main part of Context 014 lay to the south of Context 005. Context 014 appeared to be burnt only on its northern edge, and contained three flagstones, fragments of charcoal and a piece of burnt (rather than fired) clay, as well as a single piece of calcined indeterminate mammal bone, birch, heather and spruce/larch charcoal, and six-row barley. It was interpreted as a possible floor surface during excavation due to its compact nature. A single charred grain of naked six-row barley (*Hordeum vulgare* sl.) from within the context returned a radiocarbon date of 2125 ± 35 BP (SUERC 13557/GU 15123), confirming an Iron Age date for its deposition (**table 3**).

Context 024 was virtually identical to 014 on its surface and is thought to be the eastern extent of the

context, separated by features 016 (possible pit) and 017 (linear feature, V-shaped in plan). Nearby was Context 018, a patch of red, gritty sand. All of these contexts remain un-excavated, and their stratigraphic relationships are therefore unconfirmed.

Linear feature 011, also sealed by Context 004, ran from (just) under Context 014 in the centre of the plateau, to Context 025, the uppermost part of the wall, where it had a (collapsed) termination that seemed to have been built into the wall. It was 150mm deep, but was shallower towards its northern end, and was 1.8m long. Unfortunately, only one side of the feature was present in the trench, so its width is unknown. The excavated eastern side had a flat bottom with gently sloping sides, except at its termination at Context 025, where rectangular slabs had been placed to create a solid vertical side and base (**illus 61**). The cut was filled with Context 012, a dark-grey sand containing a small proportion of clay, several flat slabs towards the south end, as well as charcoal of heather, spruce/larch and unburnt cattle bone. This is the only excavated context that contained exclusively unburnt bone. The slabs appear to have originally covered the feature as a drain might be covered, and to have collapsed inwards. The slab in the base of Context 011 at its termination at wall 025 covered a second void beneath (**illus 61**), but time did not allow for further investigation. A third void, again covered with what appeared to be a lintel, could be seen in wall 025, c 200mm below the base of feature 011, and yet another similar feature was found in Context 026, the next wall down the slope (see below) (**illus 62**).

Feature 011/012 cut Contexts 019 and 021 (below). The stratigraphic relationship between the feature and wall 025 is unresolved; the stonework of the termination of 011 seemed to be an integral part of the wall, but it equally might have been built (later) into the wall after activity on the plateau had already begun.

To the south of 024, Context 004 overlay Contexts 019 and 021, both unexcavated. Context 019 was a brown-grey, gritty sand, and above and to the south of it (**illus 60**), Context 021 was a grey-brown mottled silty sand, containing stones c 10mm in size. Context 021 might originally have been turf, its mottled colouring being similar to deposits experienced when excavating ancient turf banks. It lay immediately north of wall 025, the uppermost wall, which appeared to form an edge to the deposit. However, given the relationship noted above between feature 011/012 and wall 025, it is possible that 019 and 021 may have been present before any activity took place on the site, and may represent the original ground surface. Further excavation would be necessary to resolve this issue.

In the north of the trench, Context 005, a brownish-orange gritty-sand, was indistinguishable from the natural subsoil in composition and, when a small sondage was excavated, there was no discernible horizon in section. It covered approximately a quarter of the area of the plateau and contained a



Illus 62 Flue / drains beneath wall 025 / 026, Dunasbroc from the east. Scales 2m long.

few finds: four pieces of burnt and calcined animal bone from its upper surface – one from cattle, the rest indeterminate, as well as the carbonised remains of birch, spruce/larch, naked six-row barley and the only grain of emmer wheat from the site (see [Appendices 6 and 7](#)). A radiocarbon sample taken from an indeterminate cereal grain from this context provided a date of 2125 ± 35 cal BP (SUERC 13550/GU 15119; [table 3](#)).

The major visible difference between Context 005 and the natural subsoil was in colour, the natural being yellowy-brown. It had been thought possible that Context 005 was originally natural subsoil, burnt in situ and chemically changed by heat, but the micromorphology report ([Appendix 8, illus 63](#)) verified that, although Context 005 had been strongly heated from above and was very similar to the subsoil, it had been anthropogenically deposited and moreover, probably contained more than one depositional episode. It was also noted that despite the evidence for heating, the context was clean and lacked fuel residues, which suggested that the upper surface of the deposit was regularly cleaned after burning. The finds mentioned above came exclusively from the top 20mm of the context, and it is

possible that this was also the case for the botanical material, but this material was not sampled for soil micromorphology.

A small posthole Context 023 ([illus 64](#)) was found in the northern part of the trench where it had been dug into the natural subsoil. It contained three small but vertically placed packing stones around the edge of the cut, and was filled with Context 015, a dark brown, silty clay, but no finds. Posthole 023 had vertical sides and a rounded bottom, and was 170mm in diameter and 100mm in depth. It is possible that this posthole was truncated. Charcoal of the birch (*Betula*) species found within its fill returned a radiocarbon age of 4570 ± 35 BP (SUERC 13556/GU 15122).

Wall 025 is constructed in dry-stone masonry, exclusively from rough slabs of Lewisian gneiss of the same colour and texture as that of the stack itself. Each stone was no larger than 400mm in length or width, and 200mm in thickness, but generally they were smaller and not big enough to provide the foundations for a substantial wall. The wall was not free-standing but was positioned to fit into or against the natural bedrock outcrop around the edge of the plateau. The wall seems to



Illus 63 (above) Sampling using Kubiena tins for micromorphological analysis

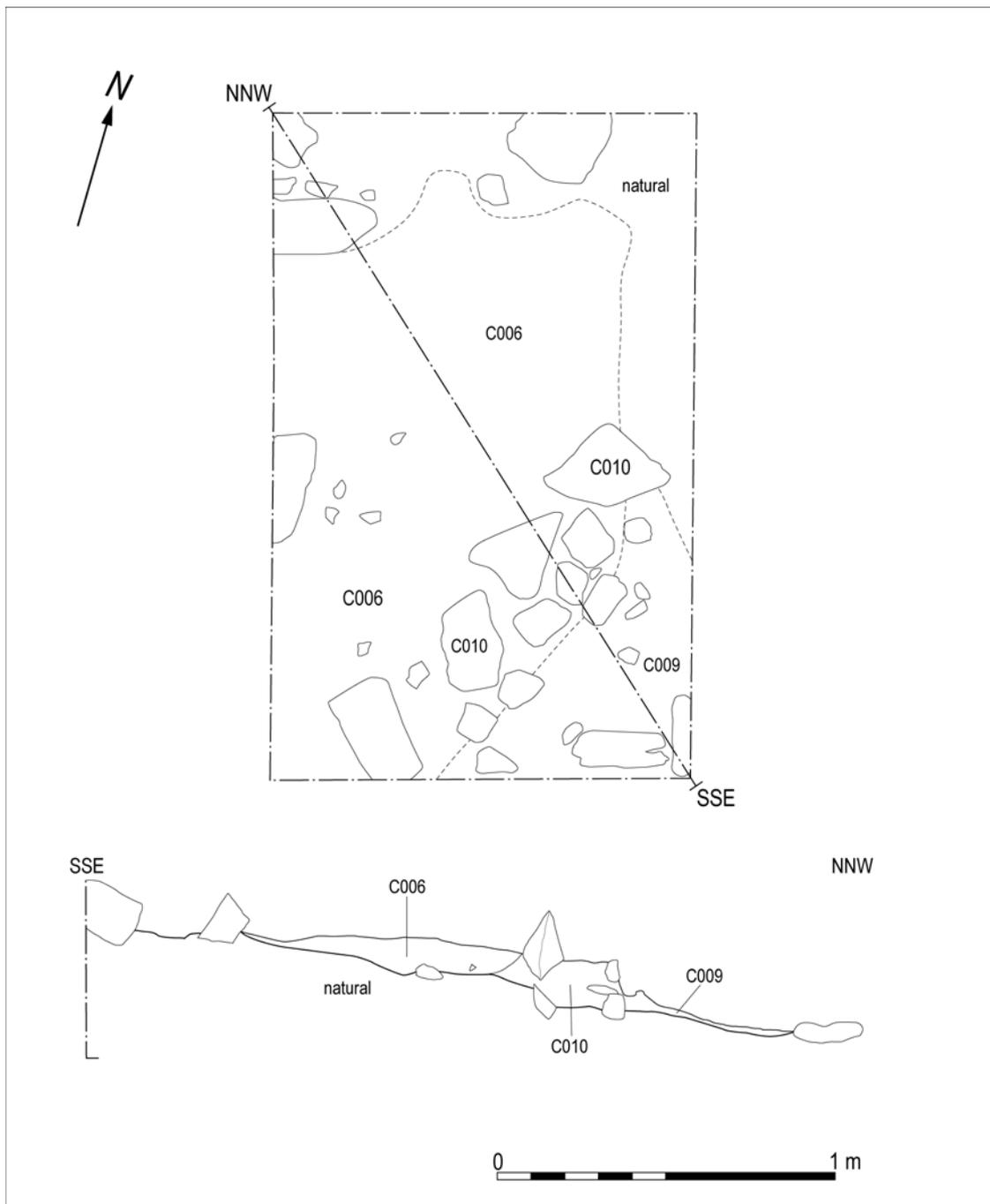
Illus 64 (right) Posthole 015/023 in Trench 1, Dunasbroc from the west. Scale 0.3m long.

bridge a natural gully at the edge of the plateau, which would otherwise have cut a V-shape into its sub-circular plan. This gully may have extended all the way down the side of the stack, as it reappeared beneath the lower wall, Context 026 (illus 62).

Context 007, a burnt, reddish-brown silty clay, had collected between the small ledges of wall 025. Although unexcavated, Context 007 was related to the uppermost southern deposits down-slope, where it was found to lie underneath Contexts 008 and then 013 (both interpreted as uppermost layers of collapse, see illus 60 for section drawing) and topsoil.

Below the break of slope, between walls 025 and 026, a number of deposits had accumulated (illus 60). The topsoil here was much deeper than elsewhere on the stack (up to 400mm), no doubt because it had accumulated against wall 026. Immediately beneath the topsoil was Context 008, a reddish-brown, silty





Illus 65 Trench 2 plan and section, Dunasbroc

clay with charcoal, containing the lithics of quartz, flint and the local gneiss, burnt bone, fire-cracked stone, and both Iron Age (SF160) and Neolithic (SF183) pottery.

Below 008, Context 013 was a yellowish-brown, sandy silt, with occasional tumbled stone slabs of around 200–300 × 200–300 × 100mm, as well as charred heather and spruce/larch remains. The size of the stone slabs suggested that they might have derived from wall 025 and come to rest here due to the ledge created by the lower wall, Context 026. Both of these contexts (008 and 013) were contaminated by burrowing animals and contained relatively few finds.

Context 022 lay beneath 013, but remained unexcavated due to lack of time. It was clear from cleaning that Context 022 was mostly tumbled stonework of consistently larger (400 × 400mm) roughly square blocks of locally sourced Lewisian gneiss. It was thought possible that these derived from Context 026, which has similar-sized and -shaped blocks that could have collapsed inwards or to the north.

Wall 026 was of a much higher quality construction than wall 025 and survived to at least three courses running NE/SW, rising as it rounded the contour of the stack, with another wall, Context 027, directly underneath it heading off at 45°, or due E/W. Wall 026 created a 2m-wide platform, which ascended as

it rounded the contour of the stack, heading in an anti-clockwise direction towards the plateau, where a possible junction of the two could be detected. The lowest wall (027) was noticed as continuing along the contour for 1–2m beyond the trench edge before terminating at a bedrock outcrop.

Wall 026 was also constructed of dry-stone masonry, although the blocks and slabs of stone were larger than elsewhere. Its slabs were up to 0.6m length/width and 0.2m thick and predominated in the lower courses, whilst square blocks of *c* 400 × 400mm were found above. Wall 027 beneath this was constructed of similarly-sized stones as wall 025, although unlike wall 025 it was very well constructed of four to five courses, and seemed to function as a structural support for wall 026. At the base of wall 026, just above wall 027, there was another void with a covering lintel and supporting sides (*illus 62*), very similar to those described in 025.

19.2 Trench 2

After removal of the topsoil and turf Context 001, the western part of Trench 2 was found to have an even covering of Context 003, a dark, brown-yellow, sandy grit very similar to Context 002 in Trench 1. Context 003 contained a patinated flint blade, a quartz flake and chunk, unburnt sheep/goat and cattle bones and the burnt remains of birch, heather and willow. The apparent depletion of organic material in the context may be the result of weathering. The finds show the same mixture of burnt and unburnt material as was typical of Trench 1.

Underlying Context 003 was Context 006, an even, dark, grey-brown, silty clay covering most of the trench, which contained the majority of the finds recovered from the site. These included a broken leaf-shaped arrowhead of imported flint (SF100), flint blades and flakes, both burnt and unburnt,

quartz blades and flakes, a banded siliceous flake (SF48), large amounts of Neolithic Hebridean Ware, burnt and unburnt animal bone, as well as birch, hazel, willow and heather charcoal. The context was excavated in spits of 30mm depth. Two radiocarbon samples were taken from the top and the bottom of Context 006. Radiocarbon sample 006, a charred grain of naked six-row barley from the upper part of the context returned a date of 2110 ± 35 BP (SUERC 13547/GU 15116), whereas sample 008, taken from willow charcoal in the base of the context, returned a date of 4630 ± 35 BP (SUERC 13551/GU 15120), however, no contextual change could be discerned within the deposit. A pot sherd uncovered midway through excavating Context 006 (SF146) had carbonised organic residue remaining within it, which returned a radiocarbon date of 4660 ± 35 BP (SUERC 13558/GU 15124; *table 3*).

Beneath Context 006 was Context 010, a rough revetment down-slope of the bulk of Context 006, and underlying it (*illus 65*). It had a matrix of brown clayey sand, which also contained finds: a quartz flake (SF172), Neolithic Hebridean Ware (eg SF174), and Iron Age pottery (SF175), and birch, willow and heather charcoal. Unusually, it contained no animal bone. A radiocarbon date from Context 010 returned a date of 4815 ± 35 BP (SUERC 13555/GU15121; *table 3*), although the Iron Age pottery would suggest that this date, as noted above, represents material that was re-deposited in the Iron Age.

A further context, 009, an orange-brown, sandy clay, was discovered underlying revetment 010 and continuing down slope (*illus 65*). The upper part of Context 006 had slumped or washed down over Context 009 and 010. Context 009 contained three quartz flakes, one of which was patinated (SF179), and birch, hazel and heather charcoal. All of these deposits directly overlay Context 020, a light-grey sandy clay, which contained birch, heather and willow charcoal. This context was very similar to Context 005 in Trench 1.