

CHAPTER 7: EXCAVATIONS AT SOUTH GLENDALE

H F James & W Forbes

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The site (NF 798 143) lies at the south tip of South Uist, about 800 m to the south-east of the settlement of South Glendale and east of Bagh Mor, a sandy inlet (Figure 67 & Plate 27). Sand has accumulated against the rocky coastline and, because of the protection of a small headland, has formed a small area of fairly level machair. The site faces south to the Sound of Eriskay and the land behind rises steeply to a hill, known as Cruachan, 177 m high.

The level area is grass covered and measures 200 m east-west by 120 m north-south. Its north and east sides have suffered erosion, the north by a deeply incised stream and the east by deflation (fig 00). Grass topped sand promontories with vertical faces up to 1 m high and a single large tallard, or island of sand, have been formed on this east side, from which the sand slopes gently away towards the beach to the east. The sand has blown up the slope to the north to a height of 30 m above sea level, and is mainly grass, bracken and heather covered. Above this the hill is peat covered with heather and rough grass.

7.1.1 Archaeological features

The surface of the machair was interrupted by low banks and occasional stones broke through the grass cover. These were the remains of small circular structures, probably shielings, which have appeared and been abandoned within living memory.

At the edge of the machair erosion had formed vertical sand faces. The first metre was of clean sand below which lay deposits of dark stained sand containing pottery, shells and bone. Spread around the base of the sand cliffs on the deflation surface of the sand were large quantities of these materials. Large stones emerged from the base of the sand cliffs (see the south-east corner of fig 00).

7.1.2 Site history

A plan of the property of R G McDonald of Clanranald in 1805, marks the small machair area as 'Gorstan'. This name does not appear on the later OS maps. In 1978 cord-decorated Beaker sherds, quartz, flint tools and pumice were retrieved from a midden *circa* 30 m long and up to 0.30 m deep at NF 804 143 (Maclean *et al* 1978). A CEU team visiting the site in 1983 collected further Beaker pot sherds.



Plate 27. The site at South Glendale

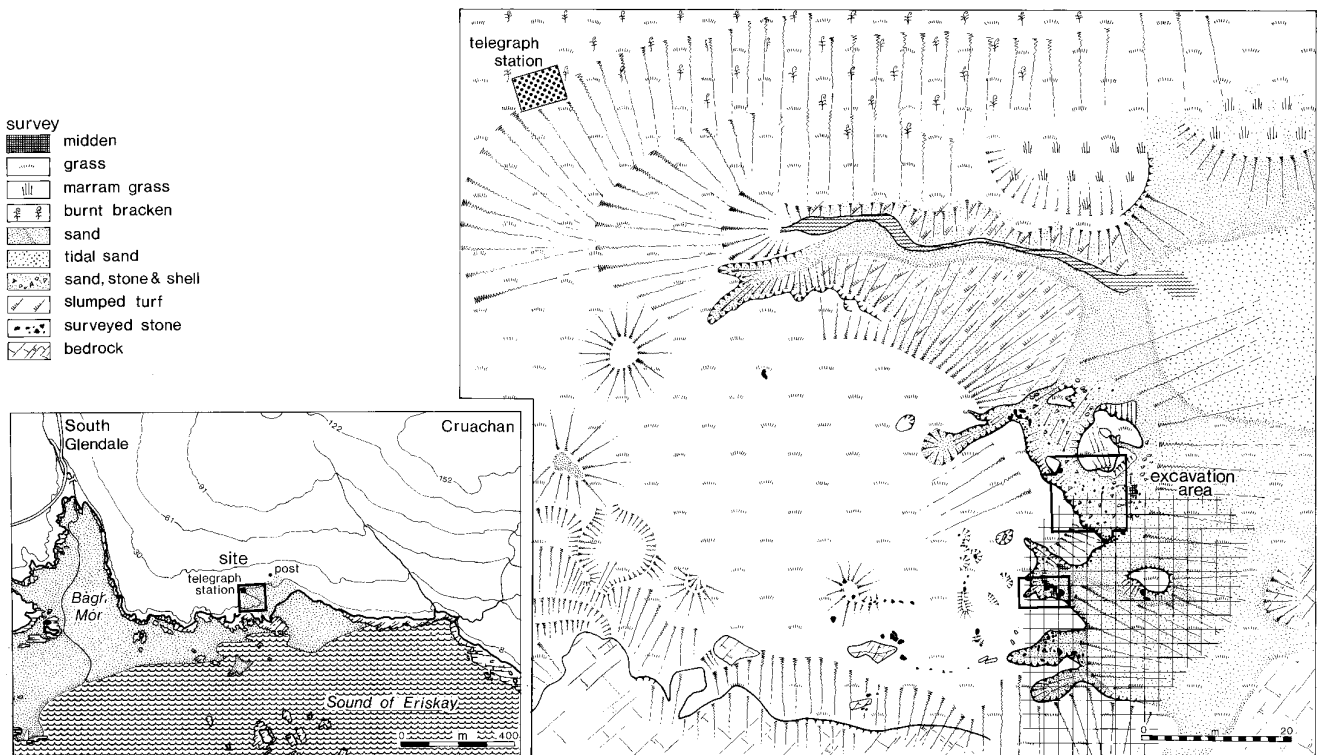


Figure 67. South Glendale: site location and survey

7.1.3 Local sites

There is a cairn, possibly chambered, 1.2 km to the west of the site at NF 8103 1434. This has a later, nineteenth century shieling inserted into its north side.

7.2 AREA I

Two areas were chosen for excavation at the eroding edge of the machair (Figure 67). The north trench measured 10 m × 10 m (Figure 68). Only 30% of the grassed surface survived in this square, at a level of 0.80 m above the eroded surface. A baulk was retained at the edge of the sand face in an attempt to protect the site from further erosion and reduce the danger of windblown sand to the excavators. The loose sand to the east of the baulk, which contained the shells, bone and pot, was cleared away. To the west of the baulk the surface was cut down to the same level through mainly grey sand with very thin layers of humic material. This material did not contain any finds in its upper levels but near the base there were shell and modern artefacts. Two large rocks outcropped within the square, in the north-east and north-west corners. Figure 69 illustrates the main layers of the site, although not all the site's layers are depicted or described in detail. Three Blocks were identified in the section.

Block I – Cultivated deposit

See table p.322

Block 1 lay immediately beneath loose grey beach sand. It had a maximum depth of 0.40 m and consisted of numerous

layers of sand which ranged in colour from pale yellow to dark brown, the textures being described as sand. There were occasional lenses of charcoal rich sand and ash.

Initially, a deep layer of dark coloured sand, [4], extended across the southern half of the area. It contained lenses of lighter and darker sand and considerable amounts of bone, pot and shell were recorded. Recorded beneath this layer was a probable hearth feature, several pits, stake-holes and ard marks. The possible hearth feature consisted of an oblong shaped area of charred black and red sand, [21], surrounded by set stones, [18], with two possible stake-holes on either side, [306] and [111]. Four flat stones, [308], extended for a distance of 0.40 m to the north. Numerous intercutting pits were seen at this level ranging from shallow scoops to pits up to 0.40 m deep, and they varied in shape from round to sub-rectangular. Their fills were generally of dark sand. Several stake-holes were seen mainly in the south of the area. There were nine ard marks recorded within this area, They were all filled with dark material except for [57] which was filled with white sand. Where the ard marks cut the pits the former were seen to be the later features. The excavator also noted the presence of individual spade-marks cut from within the midden material.

Field interpretation and conclusion

This Block was interpreted as a cultivated deposit because of the presence of spade-marks, ard marks and dark stained sand. The presence of the pits, hearth and paving stones are suggestive of settlement. The pits and stake-holes appeared to be clustered in the south and west of the area but no structures could be identified on the evidence recovered.

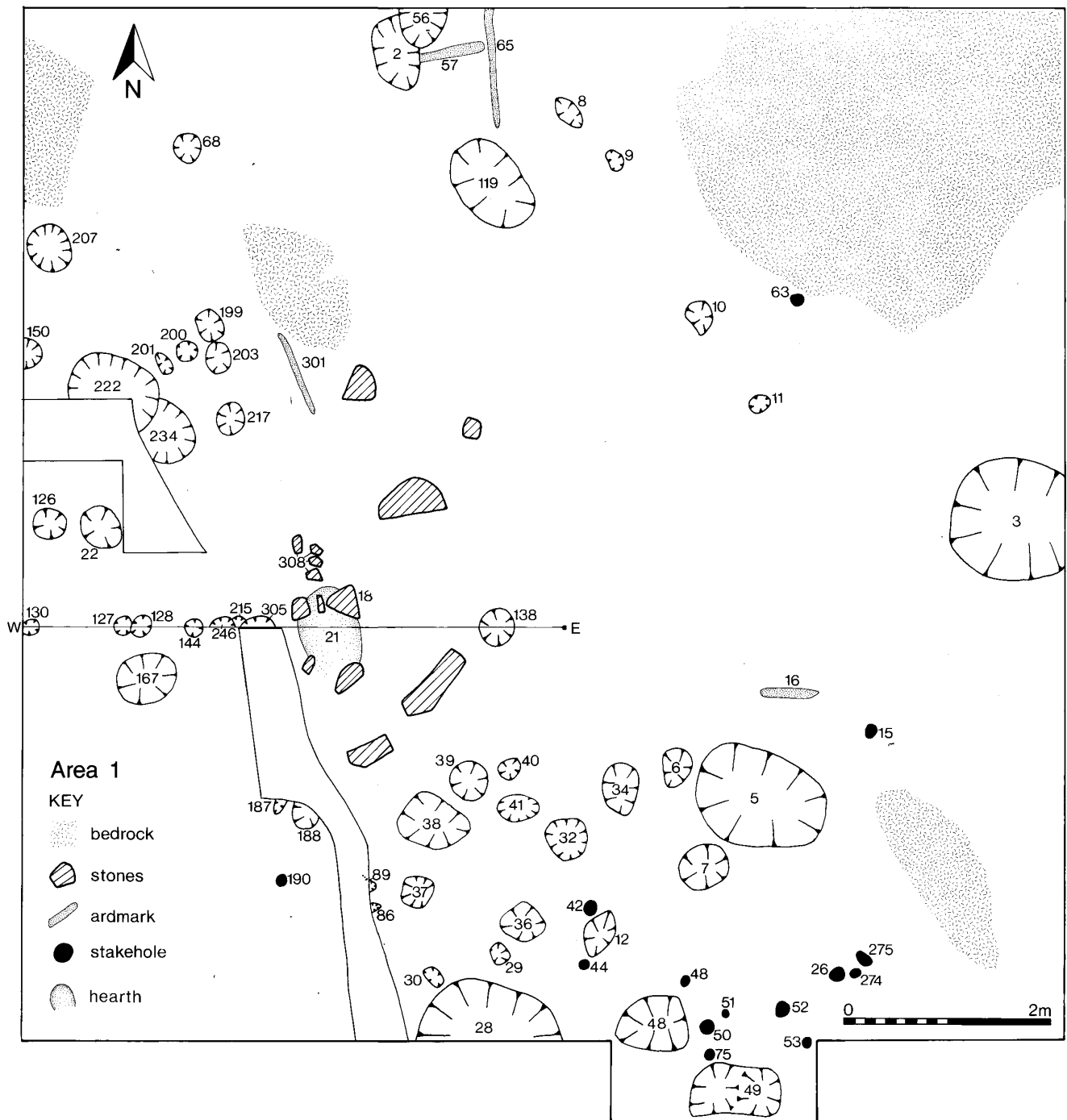


Figure 68. Area 1: plan

Block 2 – Windblown sand

See table p.322

Block 2 lay beneath Block 1. It consisted of two extensive layers one of grey sand with dark mottles, [92], and a yellow sand, [20], above it. They lay to a depth of between 0.05–0.40 m. Except for a piece of pottery and a stone in one of the mottled patches ([103]) within [92] there were no finds.

Field interpretation and conclusion

This Block was interpreted as windblown sand because of the general lack of anthropogenic materials and light colour. The single potsherd was of a significantly different type to that found in the midden in Block 1, suggesting that there was a break in the chronology between the two Blocks.

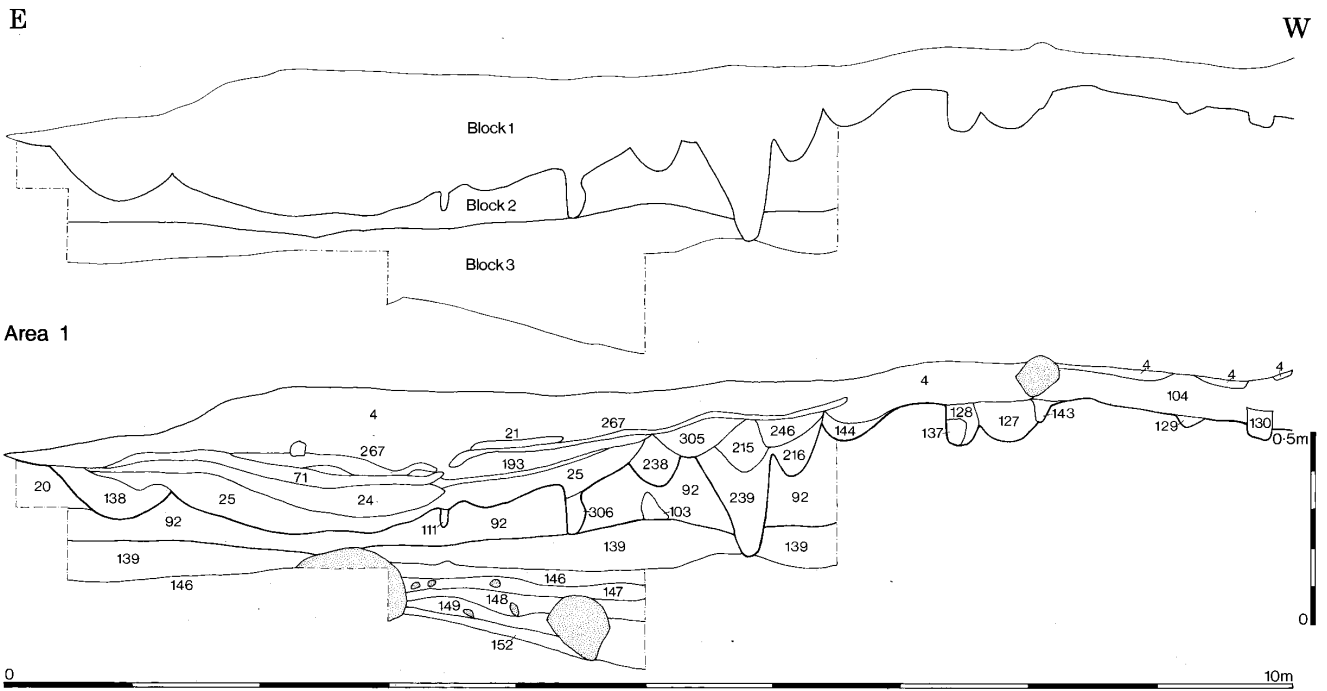


Figure 69. Area 1: section

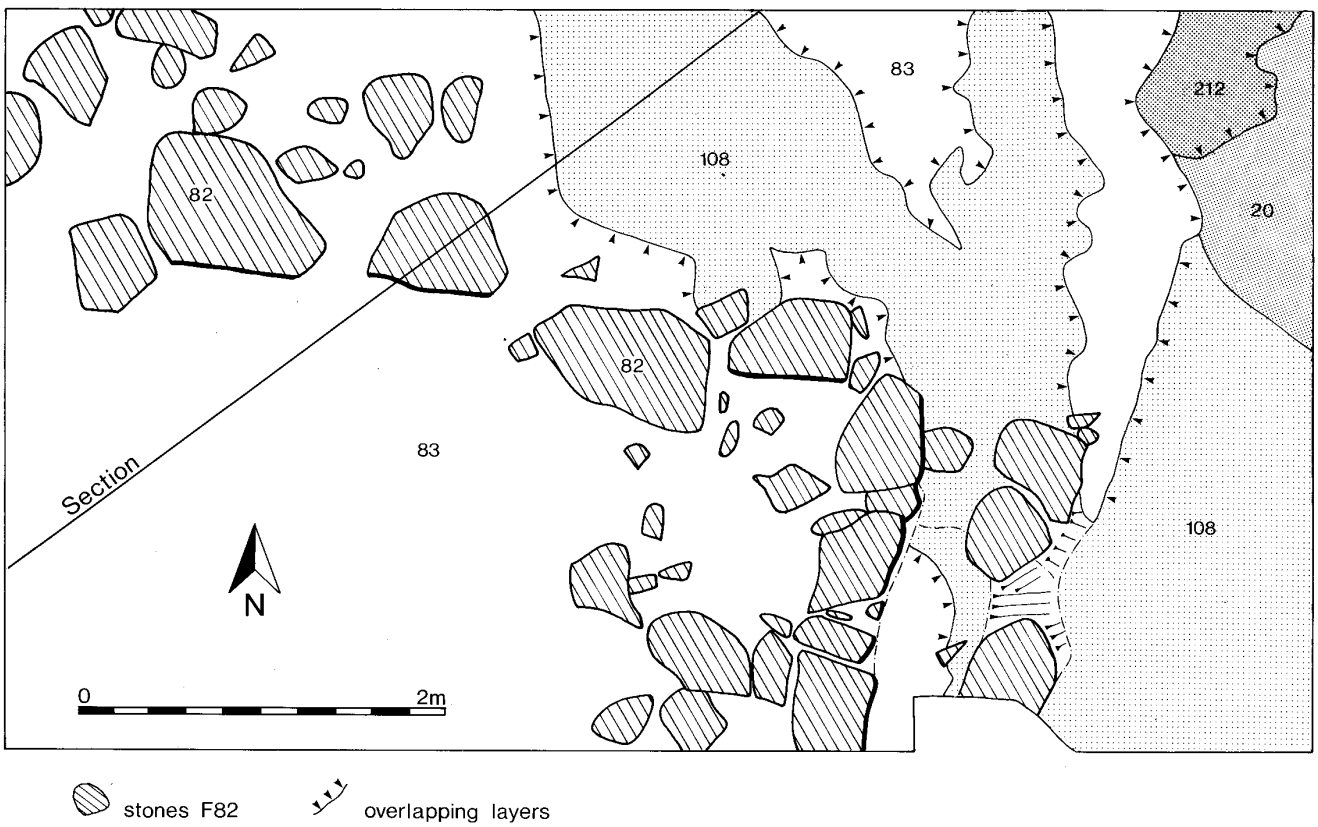


Figure 70. Area 2: plan

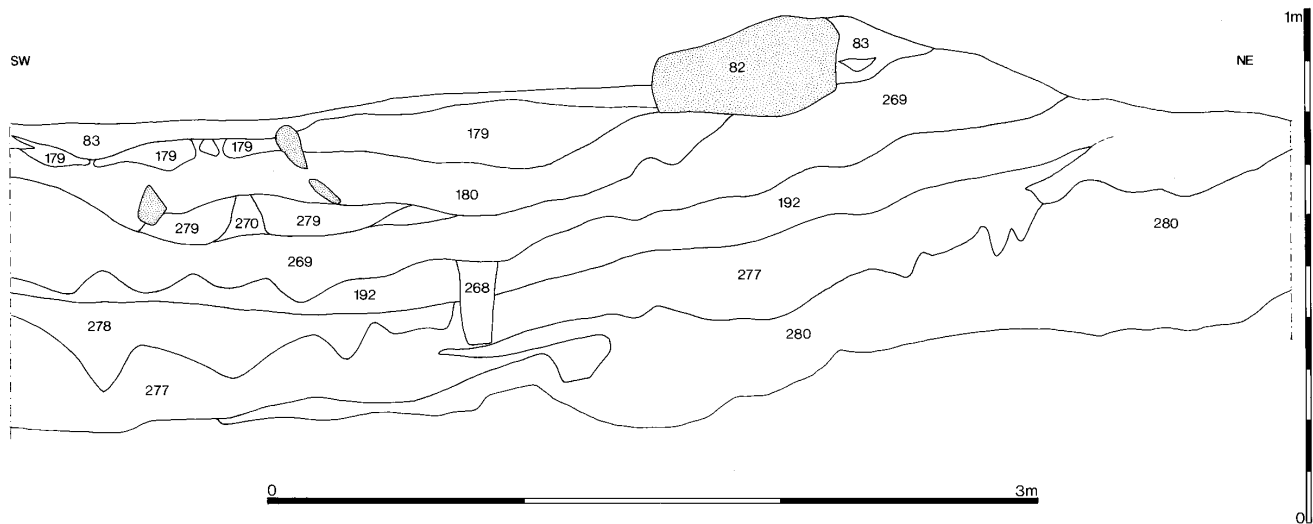


Figure 71. Area 2: section

Block 3 – Natural deposit

See table p.323

Block 3 lay beneath Block 2 and above the bedrock. It had a maximum depth of 0.40 m. The layers consisted of dark grey sand [139], below which was a black layer, [146], then a layer of small stones in a gritty soil, [147], a dark brown gritty layer, [148], a light brown sand and clay, [149], and finally a layer of brown clay, [152].

Field interpretation and conclusion

This Block was interpreted as a natural deposit.

7.3 AREA 2 – POST-MEDIEVAL BYRE STRUCTURE

* ^{14}C date 540 ± 50 bp (GU-2159) from layer [108] (Limpet & razor).

* ^{14}C date 550 ± 50 bp (GU-2160) from layer [212] (Limpet & cockle).

The southern trench measured $7 \text{ m} \times 4 \text{ m}$ (Figure 70). It was examined because of the presence of midden material and stones emerging from the base of a low sand cliff.

The midden layers were beneath 0.40 m of clean sand. A trench was dug through the midden deposits and stonework. These deposits were not divided into Blocks because of the absence of discernible episodes within them (Figure 71).

The aligned stones formed a right-angled corner of a probable rectangular ruined structure. The walls were of rough unmortared stones, [82], a single course high except for small stones beneath part of the east wall. The east wall measured 2.3 m and the north wall was exposed for 5 m. The walls were double skinned, the outer wall being the more ruined, separated by a space of *circa* 0.30

m. A black organic layer, [83], covered and surrounded the wall stones.

A black organic layer, [180], was found within and slightly beneath the wall stones. It contained modern artefacts including an iron kettle and a cloth-covered brass button.

The layers beneath the stone structure sloped gently to the south and consist of alternating stained and clean sand layers. Near the base of the section was a layer of brown sand, [277], at the base of which were cultivation ridges. This material also contained an iron object. Below layer [277] was a layer of black organic material. The total depth of the floor levels and stained sand beneath was *circa* 0.70 m. Beneath this was clean white sand.

Field interpretation

This area was interpreted as the corner of a medieval or post-medieval rectangular structure, probably a byre from the presence of the black organic deposit found within it. Pre-dating the structure were layers of midden and cultivated deposits.

Archaeological interpretation

Layer [108], a dark coloured sand, lay outside the structure defined by the wall [82] but beneath the rubble from this structure and beneath layer [83] which covers and surrounds the stones. Layer [212], a brown sand, lay beneath [108], separated from it by a single layer [211]. Both layers overlay yellow sand interpreted in the field as the same layer as [20] in Area 1.

Conclusion

The excavated remains represent a post-medieval byre, built over midden-site layers, some of which have been cultivated.