

Excavations in Goldsland Wood, Wenvoe, Vale of Glamorgan 2005-2007

Draft Interim Report

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Introduction

Goldsland Wood is an area of deciduous woodland in the parish of Wenvoe on the Vale of Glamorgan. The wood grows on a low limestone ridge running approximately east-west for 2.5 km. Crossing the east end of the ridge are two steep-sided and narrow valleys running north to south: Cwm Slatter and Cwm George. Between 2005 and 2007 the Goldsland Caves Research Project investigated deposits outside small caves and rock-shelters in both these valleys (figure 1). At Wolf Cave (Site A, NGR ST 1108 7182) in Cwm Slatter and George Rock Shelter (Site G, NGR ST 1121 7151) in Cwm George disarticulated human remains associated with Neolithic pottery and some worked stone were discovered. At Site B (NGR ST 1105 7179) in Cwm Slatter there were lithics and Early Bronze Age pottery associated with animal bone. Radiocarbon dates on human bone show Early Neolithic activity at George Rock Shelter and Early Bronze Age and early medieval activity at Wolf Cave.

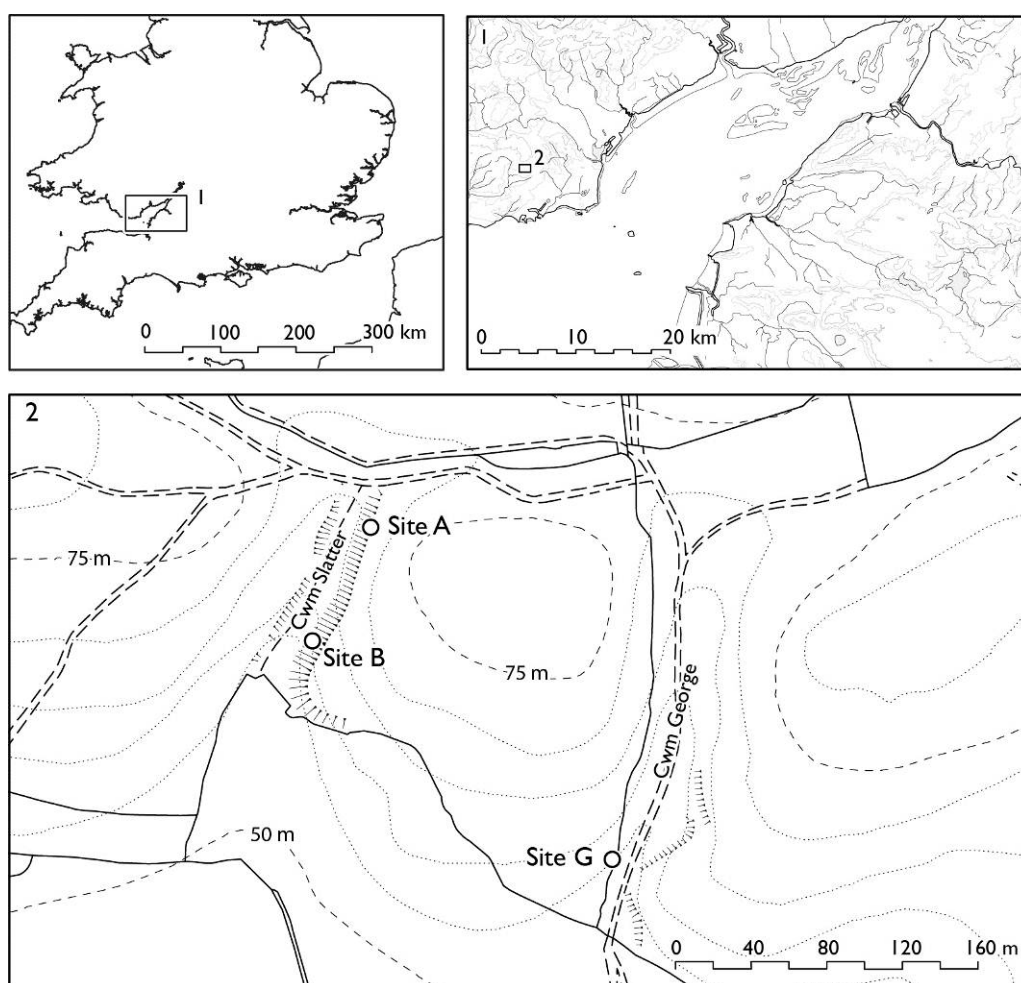


Figure 1: location map and detail of excavated areas in Goldsland Wood

With a very few exceptions, all the archaeological deposits at Goldsland seem to be the result of prehistoric people carrying out ritual activities in an unaltered natural setting – particularly in the limestone scree deposits within and just outside caves. These scree deposits, whether they formed quickly or slowly in geological terms, would generally have changed very slowly during individual human life-spans. The

sedimentary events at Goldsland comprise a few large-scale, long-term events with relatively diffuse boundaries.

Excavation methodologies at Goldsland were designed to recover as much information as possible about the spatial relationships of the artefacts. All artefacts and faunal remains were given individual small finds numbers and their position was recorded in three dimensions. All deposits were dry-sieved through a 5 mm mesh and any artefacts or faunal remains recovered were recorded by metre square and given an elevation to the nearest 0.05 m. A sample of each deposit was also wet-sieved through a 1 mm mesh and finds from these samples were recorded to the nearest 0.25 m². The only exceptions to this procedure were topsoil contexts, when only 50% of the deposit was sieved, and context 1002/1007 at site G, which was entirely wet-sieved.

Wolf Cave (Site A)

Wolf Cave is situated on the north-east side of Cwm Slatter, relatively high up the valley wall at 70.50 m OD. The cave entrance faces west. When excavation began Wolf Cave was almost completely filled with sediment. In 2005 and 2006 a 4.5 m by 3.0 m cutting was established through the scree deposits outside the rock face. Finally, during 2007, a central section of this external area and a section, 3 m by 1 m in size, of the deposits inside the cave were both excavated to the level of the bedrock (figure 2). All of the scree layers recorded at Site A formed naturally.

The sequence is described from the top of the deposits downwards (see figure 3). The uppermost layer, context 100, was a topsoil, actively forming at the top of context 101 and comprising a loose black silty loam with many medium to small angular limestone fragments. The layer was relatively shallow, at no point deeper than 0.35 m, and covered the whole of the area excavated. Finds from layer 100 included large quantities of relatively modern animal bone. There were four adult human teeth, three incisors (A42, A124 and A132) and a molar (A41), from the base of this layer. During pre-excavation clearing a single flake from a polished flint artefact (A1) was discovered in the upcast from a badger set around 3.0 m south of the cave. There was also a single flint flake (A72) from within the topsoil.

The scree beneath the topsoil, context 101, was up to 0.42 m in thickness. It was made up of medium to large angular limestone fragments. The clasts within the scree were all in direct contact with one another (clast-supported), some airholes still persisted on excavation, but most of the interstices had become filled with a dark reddish brown silty clay. Most of the finds from this context were faunal remains from a Holocene assemblage of animal species, including at least two wolf (*Canis lupus*) bones. There were twelve human teeth from this layer: five incisors (A19, A197, A232, A397 and A471); two premolars (A50, A495); two adult molars (A475a, A475b) and one deciduous molar (A215); and one adult (A469) and one deciduous canine (A315). Two human teeth from this context were radiocarbon dated. A397 gave a result of 1391 +/- 29 BP (OxA-X- 2423-16), which calibrates to between 605 and 671 calAD at 95.4% probability. A19 dated to 3781 +/- 38 BP (OxA-X-2423-15), between 2341 and 2043 calBC at 95.4% probability. Both these dates had very low collagen yields which is the reason they have been given OxA-X laboratory numbers and they should be regarded with caution. There was also a sherd (A198) and three

fragments (A445, A474 and A509) of early Neolithic pottery. The only worked stone find from this layer was a single flint flake (A409).

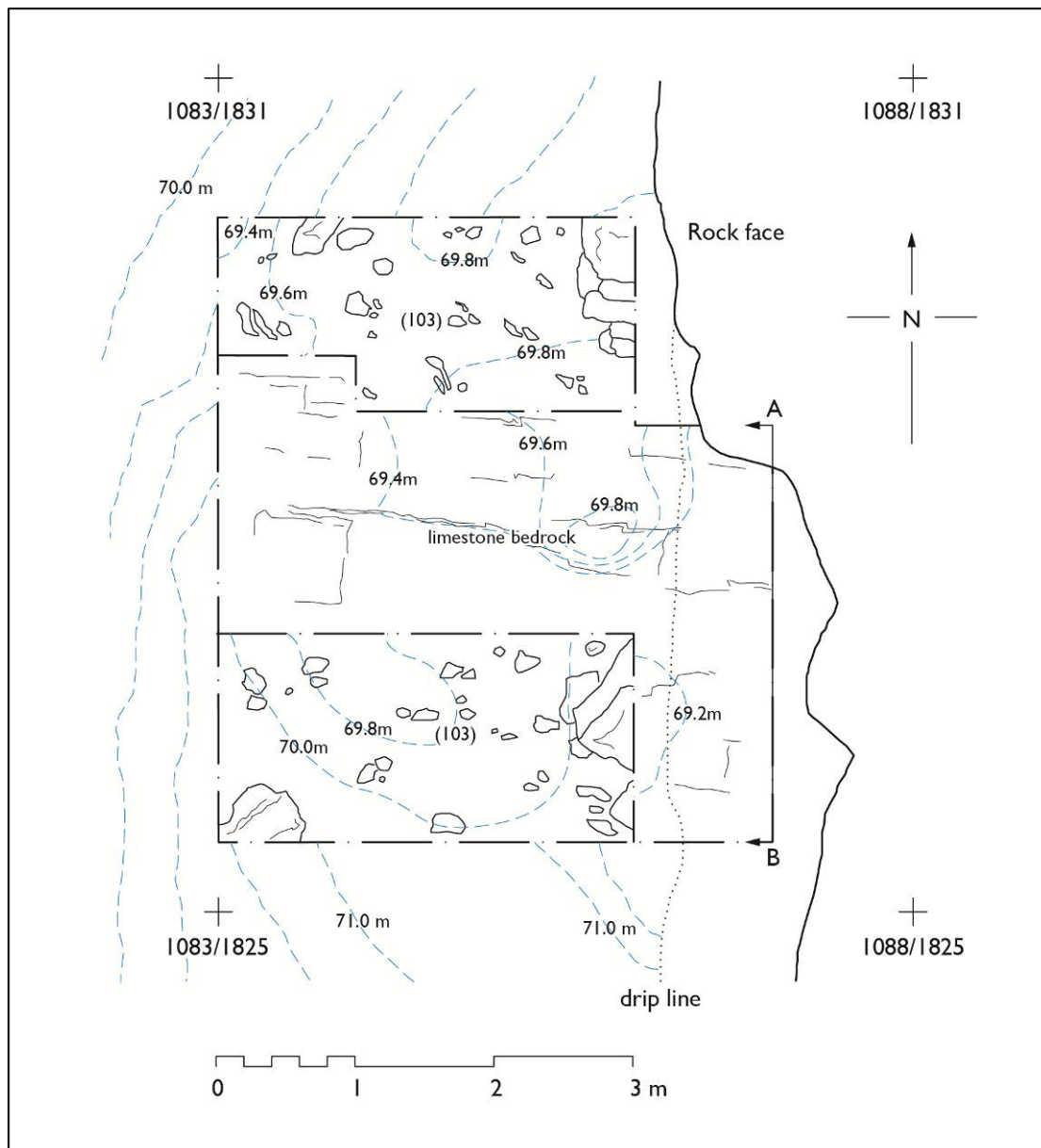


Figure 2: plan of excavated areas at Wolf Cave at the end of the 2007 season. Contours above ordnance datum at 0.2 m intervals.

Beneath this layer was context 102, a loose brown silty clay, which contained moderate quantities of small angular limestone fragments. This layer extended over the whole of the excavated area, and was particularly evident towards the south, where it was up to 0.5 m thick. Within context 102, a lens of manganese stained fine granular clay with slightly larger clasts was recorded as context 105. There were no finds in the excavated portion of context 105. Finds from context 102 included animal bone, a human lower right incisor (A236), sherds of Early Neolithic pottery (A194, A238 and A240), including two rim sherds, and a fragment of a narrowblade microlith tip (A57) in flint. Most of the finds came from the upper part of layer 102, close to the interface with the layer above.

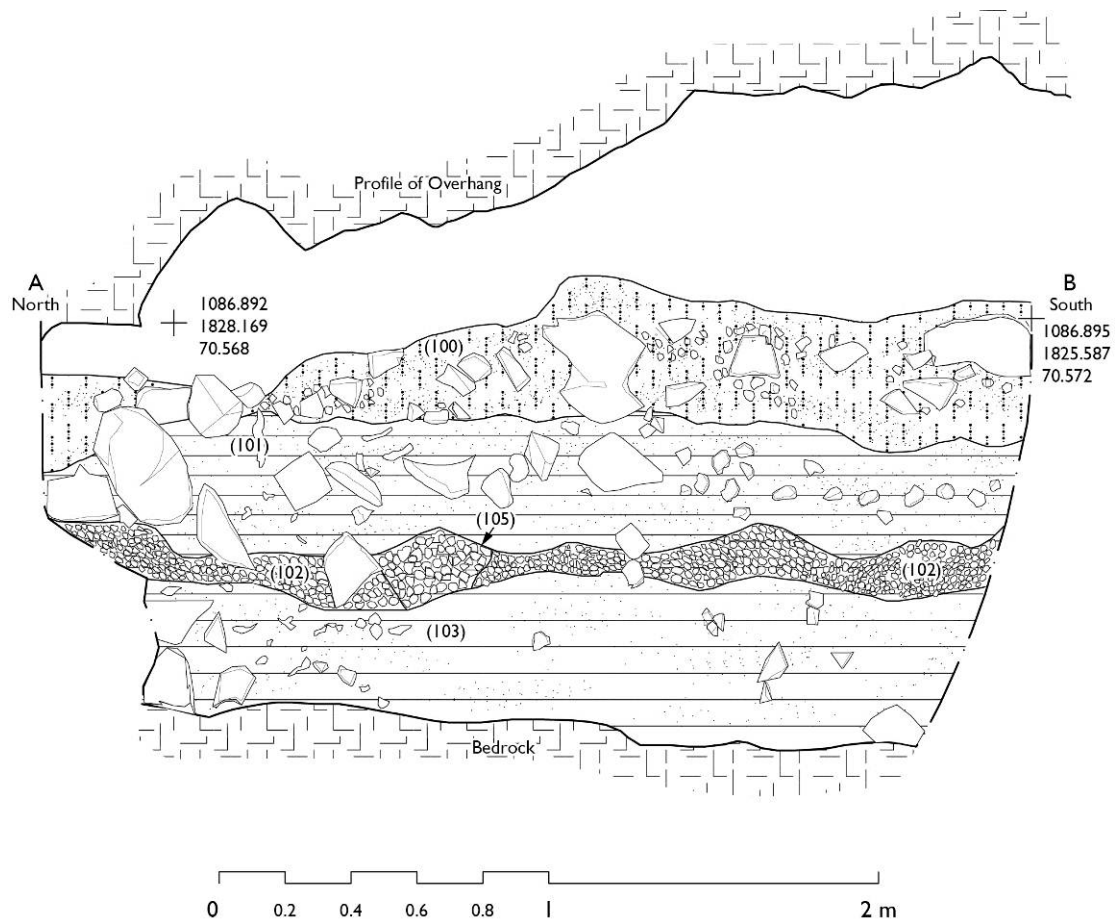


Figure 3: West facing Section, within the cave mouth, through the deposits filling Wolf Cave

The Limestone bedrock showed typical fluvial rounding with no evidence of the extensive frost-shattering that might have taken place had the rock been exposed during parts of the later Devensian. The bedrock was covered by context 103, a brown silty clay which contained many crushed and very angular limestone fragments. Context 103 was 0.50 m thick at its deepest point. There were very few finds from context 103: nine shattered chunks of patinated flint (A248, A274, A278, A288, A289, A292, A293, A294 and A309); a single sherd (A259) and nine small fragments of Early Neolithic pottery; and nine small vertebrate bones (A242, A247, A255, A262, A537, A538, A539, A540 and A541).

Site B

Site B is located on the east side of Cwm Slatter, towards the southern end of the valley and close to its floor (NGR ST 1105 7179, 59.00 m OD). As at site A there was an apparent talus deposit beneath a limestone cliff, in this case associated with at least three cave openings. Immediately outside the cave-openings (to the west of the rock-face) is a relatively level platform, further westwards the surface slopes steeply to the valley floor. During 2005 a 6.0 m by 5.0 m cutting was laid out over both the platform and slope, with the long axis parallel to the rock-face. Bedrock was discovered around 0.45 m below the modern surface over most of this cutting, the deposits above the surface being of relatively modern date. In the northern part of

the 2005 trench a deeper sequence was preserved and in 2006 the excavated area was extended to the north 2.0 m by 4.0 m to investigate these deposits (see figure 4).

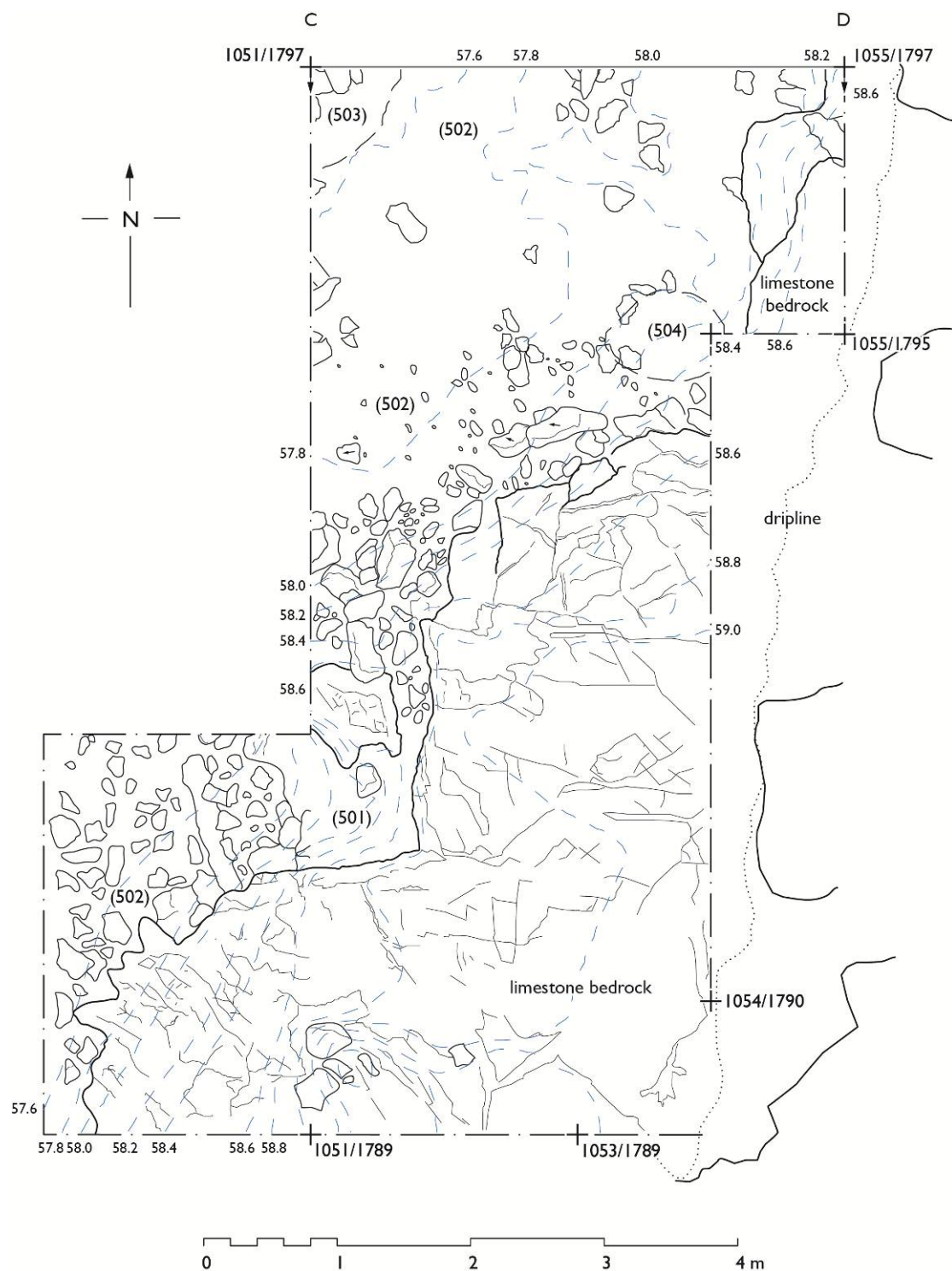


Figure 4: plan of excavated areas at site B at the end of the 2006 season. Contours above ordnance datum at 0.2 m intervals.

The topsoil at site B (context 500) was a friable very dark grey silty clay loam containing moderate amounts of small and medium angular limestone fragments. The

topsoil was up to 0.3 m thick on the platform outside the cave openings, but tailed off very markedly on the steepest part of the slope. With the exception of a single flint flake (B1), all the finds from context 500 were animal bone fragments.



Figure 5: South facing section through the deposits at site B

Beneath the topsoil in the north western part of the cutting was context 503, a stone free area of friable brown silty loam with very few small limestone fragments. Context 503 was the most recent of a series of sediments and screes outside the cave entrances. Most of the finds from this context were animal bone, including a cut-marked cattle bone (B300) which was found wedged upright in a gap in the deposit along with a large chunk of degraded flowstone (B301) at around 1051.25 m E / 1796.57 m N.

Stratigraphically beneath context 503 was context 501; a friable brown clayey silt with linear clusters of small, medium and large angular limestone fragments clearly visible in section. This deposit also varied in depth, being up to 0.45 m thick on the platform and tailing off to between 0.2 and 0.3 m on the slope. The vast majority of the finds from context 501 were faunal remains, there were also seven pieces of corroded stalagmitic flowstone (B84, B85, B89, B127, B155, B222 and B243). There was a single sherd of prehistoric pottery (B191) and three pieces of worked stone (B231, B232 and B235). There were also several iron objects and a clay pipe stem fragment from the upper part of the scree.

Between context 501 and the limestone bedrock was context 502; a friable brown silty clay loam with plentiful large angular limestone fragments. This layer appears to be a scree which formed relatively rapidly, the deposit is matrix supported but the clasts are large and very angular. Apart from faunal material, of which there were only eight fragments, there were four pieces of corroded flowstone from context 502 (B330, B343, B344 and B350). B330 was a particularly substantial fragment of a stalagmite boss.

Around 1054 m E / 1795 m N there was an area of mid orange-brown sandy loam with some small limestone fragments, context 504 (see figure 4). This was first seen

as a circular patch on the surface of context 502 and, upon excavation, proved to be a lens of slightly different composition within this layer. It is possible that it is the remains of an ancient animal burrow. All the finds from this area were animal bone with the exception of two further pieces of corroded flowstone (B313 and B320).

George Rock Shelter (Site G)

George Rock Shelter is low down on the south-west side of Cwm George at 56.20 m OD. The limestone outcrop in this area faces east and at two points overhangs to form rock-shelters up to 1 m deep. An area 6 m long and up to 4 m wide was opened along the front of the rock-shelter (see figure 6).

Over the whole of Site G was a topsoil layer, context 1000, a loose black silty loam with some small angular limestone fragments. This layer varied between 0.24 and 0.34 m in thickness. Finds from context 1000 included relatively modern faunal remains, metalwork and pottery. There were also two small fragments of human bone and eight human teeth: two right pre-molars (G61 and G68), three left incisors (G156, G157 and G1100) and three right incisors (G65, G761 and G1106). There was a single sherd of hand-built pottery from this layer (G71). This sherd is from the rim of bowl with a carination below the neck.

At the southern end of the trench, close to the rock wall and beneath the overhang, was a steep-sided sub-rectangular flat-based pit 1.80 m long and 2.50 m wide by 0.80 m deep. This feature was context 1010 (see figure 7). The fill of this pit, context 1009, was a friable dark reddish brown silty loam containing many large and small angular limestone fragments. The pit contained material from many different periods, including three sherds of Roman pottery (G265, G413 and G657), a fragment of the catch-plate of an iron brooch (G353) and large quantities of animal bone. There were 75 separate finds of disarticulated human bone. One of these bones (G1301) from a partially articulated human foot near the top of the pit was radiocarbon dated: giving a result of 125 +/- 24 BP (OxA-20967). This would calibrate to between 1680 and 1939 calAD at 95.4% probability. There was also one piece of cremated bone (G1338), six human teeth (G632, G662, G664, G678, G679 and G1306) from at least four different individuals and a flint Early Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead (G437).

The pit was cut through context 1004, a layer of reddish brown friable silt which contained many small to medium angular limestone fragments. Context 1004 was more than 5.20 m long, 1.50 m wide and up to 0.50 m deep. The lower part of the deposit contained well-preserved disarticulated and partially articulated human bone: 31 separate finds in total. There were 39 fragments of cremated bone from the layer and 14 human teeth from at least five different individuals. An upper right incisor was radiocarbon dated: giving a result of 5083 +/- 38 BP (OxA-X-2424-44). There were problems with the collagen yield for this date which means it should be regarded with slight caution. It calibrates to between 3966 and 3792 calBC at 95.4% probability. There were also 10 flint flakes from this layer; including two burnt pieces (G81 and G117) and a denticulated blade made on a flake from a polished artefact (G84). A single fragment from a polished bone pin came from the upper part of this layer (G110). Animal bone was also found in context 1004.

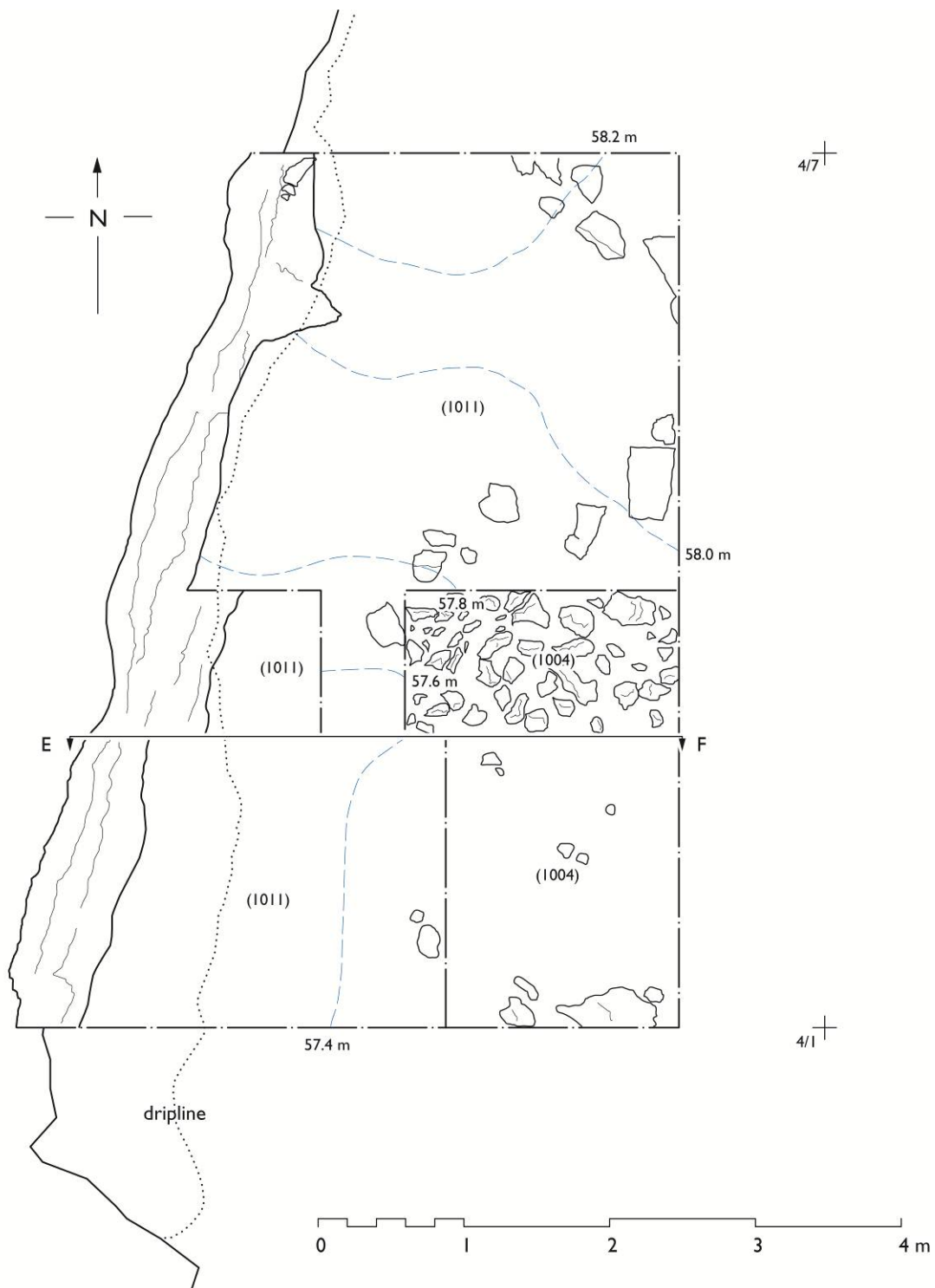


Figure 6: Excavated area at Site G, George Rock Shelter, at the end of the 2007 season. Contours at 0.2 m interval above site datum.

Beneath this layer, running along the full excavated width of the rock shelter and extending around 1.2 m from the rock face, was a layer of white, granular tufa and limestone fragments, up to 0.75 m deep at the rock wall. This layer was given two different context numbers on site, 1002 and 1007, as it was originally encountered in separate patches on either side of a temporary baulk. Finds within 1002/1007 were of varied date: at the base of the deposit there was a cluster of diagnostically Late

Mesolithic flintwork, including a narrowblade microlith (G1087) and two points (G1116 and G1149). There were 41 pieces of cremated bone, some identifiable as human, from within the layer as a whole. Unburnt fragmentary human bone was present throughout the layer, there were 53 separate finds in total, with the best preserved pieces occurring near the top of the layer. A human bone fragment (G1326) from towards the base of the layer was radiocarbon dated with a result of 4929 +/- 33 BP (OxA-20968). This would calibrate to between 3774 and 3649 calBC at 95.4% probability. There were ten human teeth from at least four different individuals: six incisors (G348, G392, G394, G854, G928 and G1397), three molars (G1406b, G1406c and G1449) and a single pre-molar (G1406a). The layer also contained ten sherds of Neolithic pottery and three flint flakes, including a burnt flake from a Neolithic flint axe (G1258). In addition there were many pieces of animal bone, including the fragmented remains of what appeared to be a complete cattle skull (G832), on the top of the layer at around 1.92 m E and 6.37 m N.

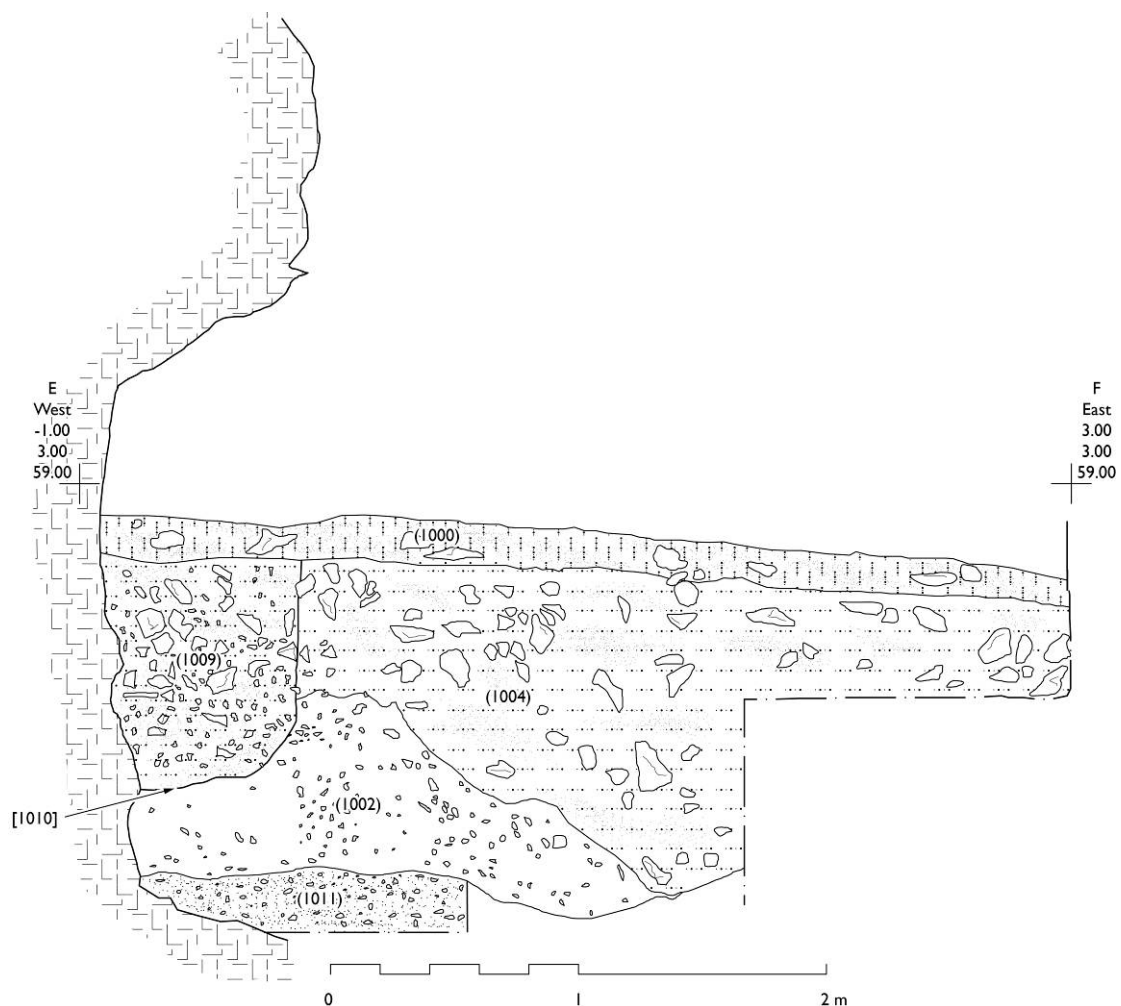


Figure 7: south facing section through the deposits at George Rock Shelter

Beneath context 1002/1007 a small sondage close to the rock wall was excavated to the level of the underlying bedrock. Above the bedrock was context 1011, a layer of limestone scree 0.4 m thick. The rock fragments within the scree were angular and between 20 and 50 mm in length. They were in direct contact with one another – indicating relatively rapidly formed ‘clast-supported’ scree and the gaps between the

clasts had filled with fine gravel and grit. A single flint flake (G1633) and a fragment of cremated bone (G1634) were found in the small area of context 1011 that was completely excavated.

Provisional Interpretations

Wolf Cave

Wolf Cave can never have been particularly large; the lowest sediments are practically sterile and probably formed in the late Pleistocene and early Holocene periods. The earliest human presence at the cave is represented by the broken microlith tip from context 102, dating to the late Mesolithic, by which time the cave was already too small to be used as a living shelter.



Figure 8: the probable Neolithic surface exposed at Wolf Cave – showing the small size of the Neolithic cave

The pottery is very similar to earlier Neolithic sherds from chambered cairns in south and east Wales; particularly vessel 3 from Ty Isaf (Grimes 1939, 126); vessel 1 from Parc le Breos Cwm (Whittle & Wysocki 1998, 168) and vessel 4 from the nearby cairn of Tinkinswood (Ward 1916, 243). All the sherds from site A seem to have belonged to a single vessel and the relatively unweathered condition of the sherds suggests that it was probably intact when it was placed outside the cave. The link with pottery from chambered cairns would suggest this took place at a date around 3700 to 3600 BC.

Despite the low collagen yields, the radiocarbon dates from Wolf Cave show that there are episodes of burial at the cave in both the Early Bronze Age and the early medieval period. Analysis of the teeth shows a minimum number of four individuals for the site as a whole. Therefore human activity at Wolf Cave seems to have been occasional and long lasting. Small traces of different kinds of activities have been left at different dates. The lithic evidence shows both a Late Mesolithic and Neolithic presence. The pottery is entirely Early Neolithic and the burial activity is later still: with one dated event in the Early Bronze Age and another in the 7th century AD.

Site B

It is possible that the whole of Cwm Slatter was originally a much larger cave system and that the valley was formed when this system collapsed at some point during the Pleistocene. This would explain the presence of corroded and fragmented flowstone fragments in some of the contexts at site B. However, both the faunal and artefactual evidence indicates that the excavated deposits formed during the Holocene period. The banding of the limestone fragments present in this layer indicates that it is colluvial material. The Early Bronze Age pottery from low down in the context demonstrates a gradual build-up from at least 2000 BC.



Figure 9: Site B at the end of the 2005 season from the west, showing the large sheet of limestone bedrock outside the cave entrances.

The apparent cave entrances at site B can never have been particularly large, in all cases they are blocked by a large flat sheet of bedrock across the eastern part of the cutting. The only definitely prehistoric activity detected on site B were the sherd of

Early Bronze Age pottery and two flint flakes recovered from context 501. The flakes are likely to be Neolithic in date but at this stage there is no evidence of the more substantial deposition seen at the other sites investigated. The placed deposit of cut-marked bone and limestone from context 503 is more intriguing and may represent prehistoric ritual activity, further study of the finds from this context will be necessary before any definite conclusions can be reached.

George Rock Shelter

The presence of a cluster of Mesolithic flintwork towards the base of the deposit suggests another long history of deposition at this site. The tufa deposit 1002/1007 is also intriguing. Neolithic human remains are associated with tufa producing deposits at other sites in Britain (Leach 2008, 51). Aside from Goldsland, there are seven published and dated sites: Chelm's Coombe; Flint Jack's Cave; Totty Pot (all Somerset); Nanna's Cave; Ogof-y-Benglog (both on Caldy Island); Cave Ha 3 and Thaw Head Cave (both North Yorkshire). Leach (2008, 51) draws on work on historical petrifying springs to suggest that the properties of tufa were regarded as particularly auspicious because of its abilities to preserve bodies.



Figure 10: The tufa deposit 1002 in section at George Rock Shelter with the later cut feature, context 1010, clearly visible beside the rock wall and truncating the tufa and overlying scree.

There is clear evidence of Neolithic ritual activity at site G. It is probable that this was taking place in an unaltered natural feature, in this case the rock-shelter. The artefactual evidence, particularly the leaf-shaped arrowhead and the denticulate

blade, would suggest dates between 3800 and 2400 BC for this activity. However the Neolithic radiocarbon dates from George Rock Shelter would suggest that the deposition of human remains is primarily an Early Neolithic practice. Radiocarbon dated Neolithic human remains from other caves in Britain are predominantly, but not exclusively, Early Neolithic in date (Chamberlain 1996).

There is one clearly artificial feature at George Rock Shelter which is the large pit, context 1010. Although this contains a large amount of residual prehistoric and later material its true date is almost certainly given by the radiocarbon result on human bone which indicates a burial sometime in the last four centuries.

Further Research Questions

Long timespans and different kinds of evidence with different dates are not unusual in Holocene cave archaeology. In order to address research questions about taphonomy, burial and ritual practice at the caves further research is needed to be able to accurately distinguish human and animal remains of different dates from one another. The Goldsland Caves have preserved evidence for burial and ritual practice over a wide range of time periods. The main focus of future research will be understanding the different types of practice going on at different times and address the questions of memory and commemoration which led to the caves being foci for deposition over such long time periods.

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