Excavations at Housepit 106

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Housepit 106 was the centermost structure in a cluster of three depressions on the highest and smallest glacial terrace at Keatley Creek (This Volume, Preface, **Figs. 1 and 2**). The original dimensions of this structure are estimated to have been about 11 x 9 m from rim crest to rim crest, however the western rim of the structure has been destroyed by construction activity from HP 105. Despite this indication of sequential occupation of HP's 106 and 105, the last occupations of both structures appear contemporaneous (or even reversed in sequence) on the basis of radiocarbon dates (220 +/ 70 for HP 106, and 270 +/ 55 for HP 105). These two structures are also contemporaneous with HP 104. Characteristics that relate all three structures are their remote location high above the site in a very secluded natural feature with an abrupt mountain slope to the east as well as natural glacial embankments along the south and west edges of the terrace remnant, their contemporaneous age (except for HP 105 with an early and a late occupation), and their unusual assemblages.

Housepit 106 is also unusual in that a very large boulder forms part of the southern inside wall, while smaller boulders line the wall in the southeast and northeast. It also has an unusual angular plan shape and exhibits the most pervasive fire-reddening of sediments inside the structure of all the structures tested at Keatley Creek. In contrast to the very rich faunal and lithic assemblage in HP's 104 and 105, there was very little found in HP 106, with the exception of an unusual small meat roasting pit under the eastern rim of the structure. As discussed in more detail with HP 107,

scarce artifactual remains often characterize some types of ritual structures. The southern rims of both HP 105 and 106 were built into the natural embankment that forms the edge of the terrace overlooking the Keatley Creek ravine.

In order to determine if HP 106 had served any specialized functions, we excavated a 50 cm wide test trench from the boulder in the south rim, to the center of the housepit, as well as a perpendicular test trench from the center of the structure to the crest of the eastern rim (**Fig. 1**). There was no indication of illicit excavations having taken place in this structure prior to our investigations.

Stratigraphy: (Fig. 3)

Stratum I

This is the topmost stratum and, as in other structural depressions at the site, is represented by a fine, silty dark loam (5-10% gravel and pebbles) about 5 cm thick. This deposit thins out and becomes more pebbly towards the top of the rim deposits.

Stratum II

This deposit was difficult to interpret due to its extreme variability in color and texture. Stratigraphically, Stratum II seems like it should be composed of roof deposits that have collapsed down after housepit abandonment and burning. However, the intensely fire-reddened nature of the underlying deposit (Stratum III) in Square A, and the extremely localized fire-reddened character of Stratum II in Squares C and K, make the origins of the deposit somewhat enigmatic. In Square A, it seemed that the fire-

reddening was due to a very large, broad post-abandonment fire with some large wall boulders sliding down on top of the fire-reddened soils (Stratum III) near the walls after the burning events (**Fig. 3**) with Stratum II being deposited subsequently. Such a scenario seems incongruent with the interpretation of Stratum II and III as roof deposits. Perhaps we will have to consider the possibility of Stratum III (or part of it) as being a deposit of silt brought in to cover part of the floor before the roof collapsed. The red-brown-black patchy nature of the Stratum II/III fire-reddening in Square K may indicate that the fire-reddening had occurred prior to the excavation and subsequent deposition of soils from different locations. The nature and origin of the intensive fire-reddening will have to be determined by future excavations, since insufficient area was excavated to produce a definitive interpretation during our investigations. Stratum II deposits also varied considerably in pebble content, ranging from depleted pebbles (c. 10%) to c. 20-30% pebbles and cobbles. The texture was basically a loamy silt. This variability may reflect various locations that soil for the roof covering was obtain from, ranging from loessic deposits on Terrace II to more till-like material under the loess. A side-notched Kamloops point was recovered from Stratum II deposits in Square C.

Stratum III

This deposit is generally indistinguishable from Stratum II, except in Square B, and perhaps in other squares that are close to the inner walls, where it seems to have a more gravelly, roof-like character. In Square A, the top of Stratum III is a 10 cm thick band of very reddened silty clay soil indicating a fairly large and intense fire that took place (near the wall boulder) before the deposition of Stratum II. Clear lenses of charcoal occur

within it as well as at its base in some places. These seem to be from burned roof elements. Stratum III seems particularly distinctive in Subsquare 9 of Square A where a large boulder sits on top of Stratum III indicating that it is a distinct depositional event that has been rubified. The bottom Stratum III deposits are not as reddened and appear to represent typical roof gravel and silt deposits that occur more as distinct dumps than is usually the case.

Stratum IV

This is typical, very black loamy floor deposit with many charcoal fragments but few pebbles (<5%) in some places such as near the south wall, but varying to black/tan/reddened mottled gravelly loams with up to 30% pebbles near the center area of the structure. In some areas (e.g., Sq. A, Ssq. 2), it seems very clear that loessic silts have been brought in and deposited on the floor. Both the thin lenses (c. 3 cm maximum thickness) and the color and texture distinctiveness of the basic floor deposits near the walls attest to this practice. As in some other small housepits, there were mound-like occurrences of distinctive sediments associated with the floor near some of the walls in HP 106, notably in Squares H and K. Some of these dumps are typically highly organic and "punky" while others are composed of tan silts. I interpret these as "wall dumps" probably placed under benches. However, why they were placed there and what they consisted of, or what their origins were remains problematical.

Stratum V

This deposit appears to be a loessic loam that accumulated over Feature 4 (see below and **Figs. 3 and 5**) and was stable long enough for a slight dark organic discoloration to develop in its upper 5 cm. A number of

well-preserved bones were found in the top of this deposit. The excavation of HP 106 subsequently cut through Stratum V. As is typical of surface loesses at the site, pebbles and cobbles are under 10%.

Stratum VI

This stratum is essentially rim material composed of redeposited till, overlying Stratum V on top of the structure walls. There is little discoloration or artifact occurrence in this stratum.

Features:

Feature 1

This feature appears to be a meat roasting pit about 60 cm in diameter that was dug about 20 cm into the surface of the roof deposits. It is clearly a post-collapse feature. Highly fragmented bone is concentrated at about 10 cm below surface and is in some places clearly overlain by pine bark slabs. A deer and a medium sized mammal seem to be represented in the bone remains, but there are no fish remains, few lithics, and only about 20 fire-cracked rocks. There appears to be a loose arrangement of rocks around the roasting pit. This feature must date to the Protohistoric or perhaps even Historic Period.

Feature 2

The thick and intensely fire-reddened sediments of Stratum III in Squares A and B were initially thought to represent a major hearth. However, subsequent excavation indicated that burning associated with this event may have spread over a considerable portion of the collapsed interior

of HP 106, or that there may have been a series of fires over the Stratum III surface creating palimpsests of fire-reddening. The most intense reddening seems to occur in Squares A and B immediately in front of the large boulder in the south interior wall of HP 106 (**Fig. 3**). The intensely fire-reddened sediments extend underneath a second boulder, indicating that it was probably moved or slid to its present location after the intense fires had burned in this location. Little cultural material was associated with the reddened deposits. The extent and intensity of these fires is unique at Keatley Creek, and their interpretation, like their stratigraphic position and significance is problematical. Given the evidence for widespread burning in Stratum III and II, it is perhaps questionable as to whether this occurrence should be properly termed a "feature."

Feature 3

This is a pit feature approximately 50 cm in diameter and 27 cm deep. It has a curious location, beginning right underneath the edge of a boulder in Stratum II on the east, and is situated right beneath a large surface boulder in the wall to the south (**Fig. 4**). This pit was also clearly cut through the intensely rubified deposits of Stratum III in Square A that underlay these boulders. Thus, it is not a pit associated with the original occupation floor, but was excavated after the roof had collapsed, after the intense fire had burned on Stratum III, and after the boulder in Stratum II came to rest in its present position. The position of this feature in relation to the very large boulder in the south wall seems significant, however, it is not clear what that significance was. The fill of this feature was very punky, similar to post-mold, as though it was filled with organic material that had decayed. Charcoal occurred in the bottom and cobbles with large pebbles

filled the southern half of the bottom of this pit (**Fig. 4**). It is difficult to interpret the nature of this pit, but its unusual character and placement may be related to ritual activities, as is the case with several other features on Terrace 2.

Feature 4

In extending our test trench from the center of HP 106 to the eastern rim, I encountered the partial remains of a roasting pit under the eastern rim in Square K. The roasting pit was overlain by loess in which some organic soil development had occurred (manifested as slight darkening in the upper 5 cm of the deposit, referred to as Stratum V) before being buried by rim material from HP 106 in the form of redeposited till (Stratum VI). Prehistorically, the excavation of the floor for HP 106 had cut into part of the roasting pit, and thus part of the roasting pit was exposed in the wall of HP 106 (**Fig. 5**). It is clear that this roasting pit (Feature 4) clearly antedates the construction of HP 106, perhaps by some considerable time given the slight soil development on the sediments overlying this feature.

The bottom of the feature consisted of dark, re-deposited, charcoal-rich sediments with some large cobbles having been thrown in the top fill. As is typical of meat roasting pits, the charcoal-rich bottom layer contained significant numbers of artiodactyl bones (ribs, radius-ulna, astragalus, phalanges, metapodials, thin bone) and significant kinds of lithic tools. A small generic biface was recovered near the pit wall at 85 cm BD, while a completely unique and very finely made crescent-shaped, or sickle shaped, biface was excavated from the very bottom and center of the roasting pit, lying almost perfectly horizontally, as though it had been placed there on purpose as an offering (**Fig. 5**; see also Vol. II, Chap 13, Fig. 5; Vol. III, Chap

1, Fig. 5**)**. We have not had the resources to date this feature. It probably dates from a period prior to the Kamloops Horizon.

Artifacts

The pre-housepit occurrence of the very unusual crescent-shaped biface just mentioned is completely unique in Northwest prehistory. Given this uniqueness and the unusual nature of Terrace 2 remains and geomorphology, it seems appropriate to suggest that this biface may well have had a ritual significance, especially since it seems to have been an offering. Other than this, the HP 106 floor is remarkable for its paucity of any types of artifacts, faunal or lithic. This makes the few items that do occur in these deposits all the more remarkable given their unusual nature. Aside from the crescent-shaped biface, one well-retouched scraper was found in Stratum II, while debitage flakes occurred sporadically also. Faunal material was sparse but included a number of deer elements and salmon bones plus a remarkable antler wedge that was found buried vertically close to a post hole. A small slit trench almost 20 cm deep had been dug into the till under the floor of Subsquare 5 in Square B and the antler wedge deliberately stuck into this hole (**Fig. 3**). The hole was seemingly dug expressly to bury the antler wedge. The top seems to have been exposed when the structure was burned, since the top of the antler is burned. This is yet another possible indication of ritual behavior.

Construction

Some burned roof beams associated with pine bark and conifer needles occurred in various places within our test trenches indicating that

this structure should provide good architectural information if excavated more extensively. One of the two major post holes that were excavated contained the burned remains of a post with several rocks wedged around its base and in the sides of the post hole as packing. The other post hole contained only dirt.

From the carbonized remains of roof elements on the floor/roof contact, it seemed apparent that many of the roof elements were actually split poles or planks. The recurrent thinness of the charred remains together with their width indicated that some of the roofing elements had been split or planked. This procedure was not noted in earlier housepit remains at the site, indicating that this splitting or planking roofing technique may have been developed late in the Kamloops Horizon. This may also represent a labor intensive roofing technique that was only used for special or high status structures. Conifer needles occur frequently in the floor deposits of HP 104 and 106, especially near the walls and overlying bark laying on burned beams. Extensive coverings of fir boughs on large parts of floors may have also been a status or ritual characteristic of these structures.

Summary and Conclusions

Housepit 106 is certainly one of the most unusual structures that were tested or excavated at Keatley Creek. It was situated on Terrace 2, a remote and secluded location high above the main part of the site. Other unusual structures and features occurred on Terrace 2 (HP's 104 and 105, as well as Feature 4 of HP 106). There was very little artifactual material associated with the structure except for an antler wedge buried vertically in the floor. In contrast, the contemporaneous occupations of HP's 104 and 105 contained abundant faunal and/or lithic remains. The housepit depression

of HP 106 may have been intensively burned after abandonment and roof-collapse which would make the interpretation of Stratum II as roof deposit problematical. The intensely reddened parts of the Stratum III silt deposits may have been placed on the floor and fired before the roof collapsed, but further excavation is necessary to determine this.

Under the rim of HP 106, a very unique crescent-shaped biface was left in the bottom of a roasting pit dug into the loess surface well before the construction of HP 106. There are other occurrences of bifaces having been deposited in the bottom of meat roasting pits on the Plateau. Rousseau et al. (1991) describe an instance of two bifaces at the bottom of a meat roasting pit at Oregon Jack Creek dating to 3,000 BP, and Peacock (In Press) excavated a similar occurrence near Kamloops. Thus, there is a pattern to this occurrence, and this type of behavior is difficult to interpret in terms other than those of ritual.

Similarly, the occurrence of bones placed vertically in living floors is an unusual type of behavior. At Keatley Creek (and perhaps for the entire Plateau), the only other occurrence of such behavior was in HP 105, where long bone pieces were thrust vertically into and through the occupation floor (See HP 105). Similar occurrences from other complex hunter/gatherers are documented from elsewhere in the world. These occurrences were particularly notable in the Salle du Fond in the Grotte d'Enlene in southern France where their unusual frequency (60 cases) was clearly associated with ritual contexts and behaviors (Begouen et al. 1993). In the Spanish Upper Paleolithic deposits of El Juyo, Freeman and Echegaray (1981:6) also found antler segments placed vertically in a deposit they identified as a ritual offering. These observations lend support to the idea that the vertically placed bone and antler pieces in HP's 105 and 106 may

also have had some kind of ritual significance. The paucity of artifactual material in HP 106 also seems consistent with its use as a ritual meeting place. Elsewhere in the world, structures that are interpreted as ritual in nature are almost devoid of artifactual remains or food remains (Flannery 1976:334-5; Muir 1999:79-81; personal communication; B Hayden, Fieldnotes from Laos), or alternatively, they may be filled with unusual amounts of feasting debris and broken or lost prestige items from the performances that accompany feasts. However, frequently, the most holy places have no feasting remains. Feasting often takes place in adjacent areas or structures. Housepit 106 also provides some of the clearest evidence for the covering of structure floors with layers of fine silts. Grant Keddie (personal communication) reported similar silt floor coverings being used in the Interior for special dance structures in order to provide more comfortable floors (Vol. II, Chap. 1, p. 21). It is certainly an extra effort to cover floors in this fashion and one might expect such a special feature only in high status or ritual structures, which seems to be the case at Keatley Creek.

Thus, while the excavation of HP 106 has been limited, I feel there are reasonable grounds for arguing that it may well have been a specialized ritual structure, placed in a remote location during Proto-historic times, but continuing a long tradition of using the Terrace 2 natural enclosure as a sacred space, much like the remote sacred enclosures used by transegalitarian communities in the Highlands of New Guinea (Hampton 1999).

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Figures

Figure 1. The surface plan of HP 106 showing its relationship to HP 105 (to the left) and the designation of excavation squares. Large rocks occurring on the surface are also indicated.

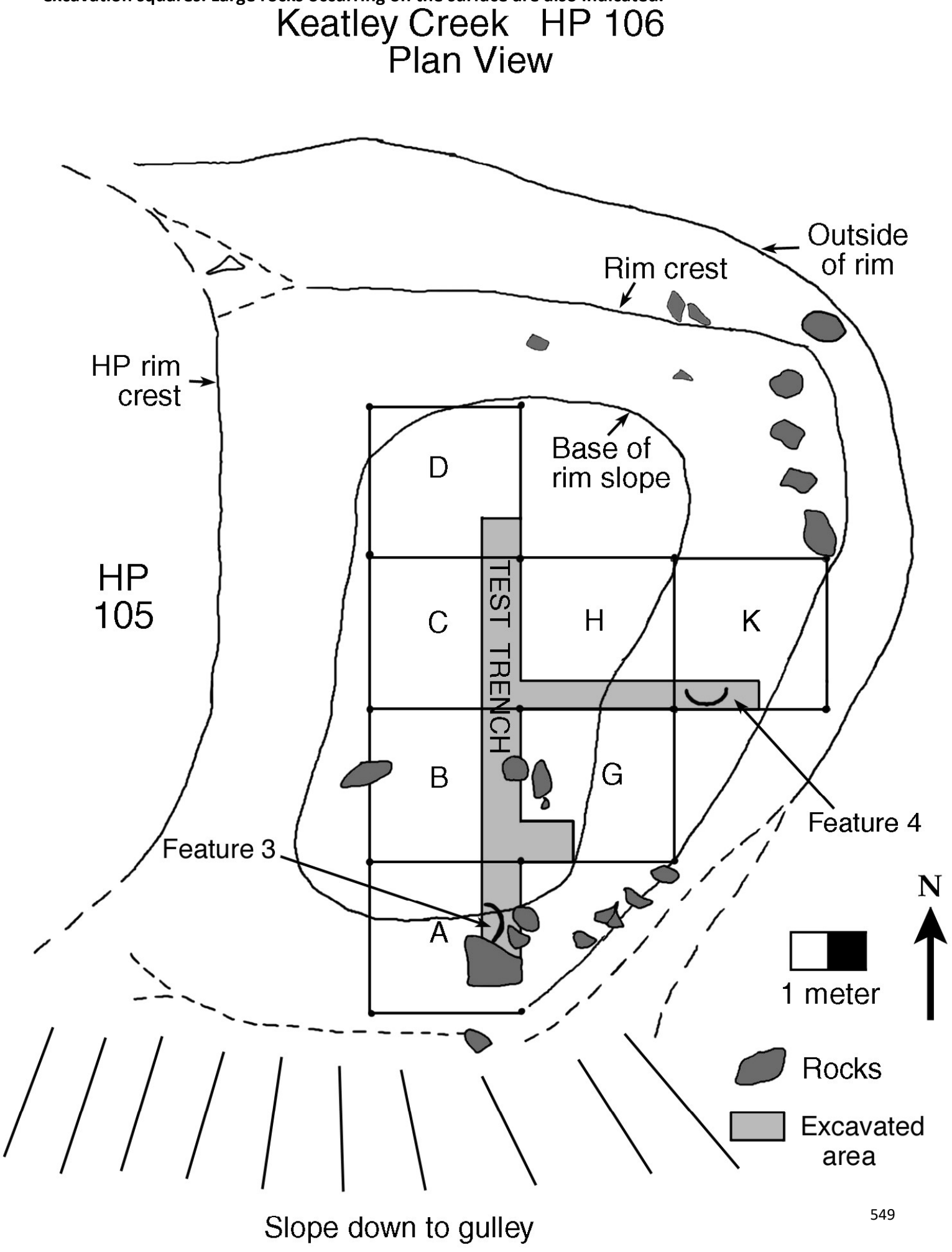


Figure 2. Floor plan of the test trench excavations in HP 106.

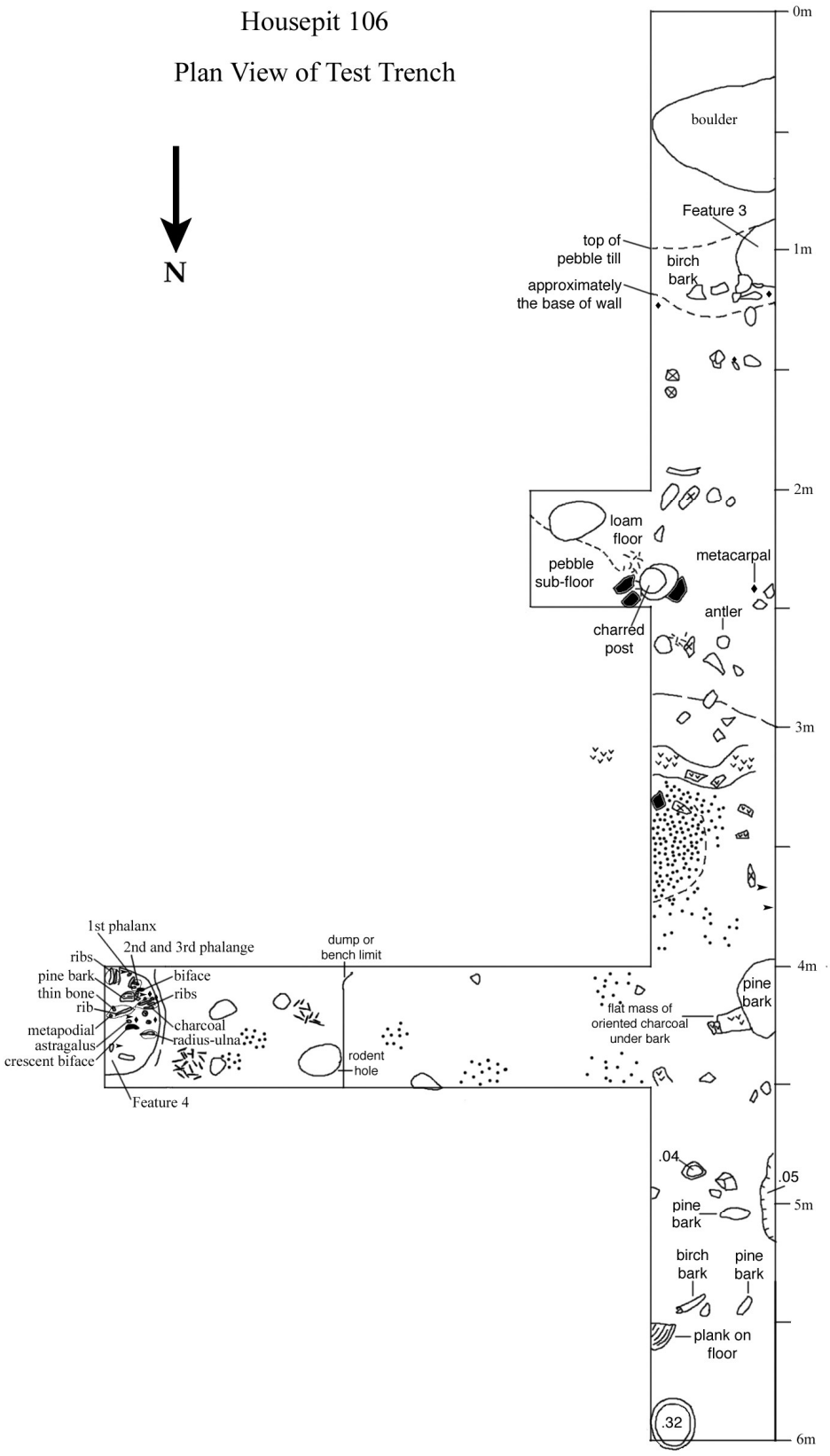


Figure 3. Stratigraphic cross-sections of the test trench strata in HP 106.

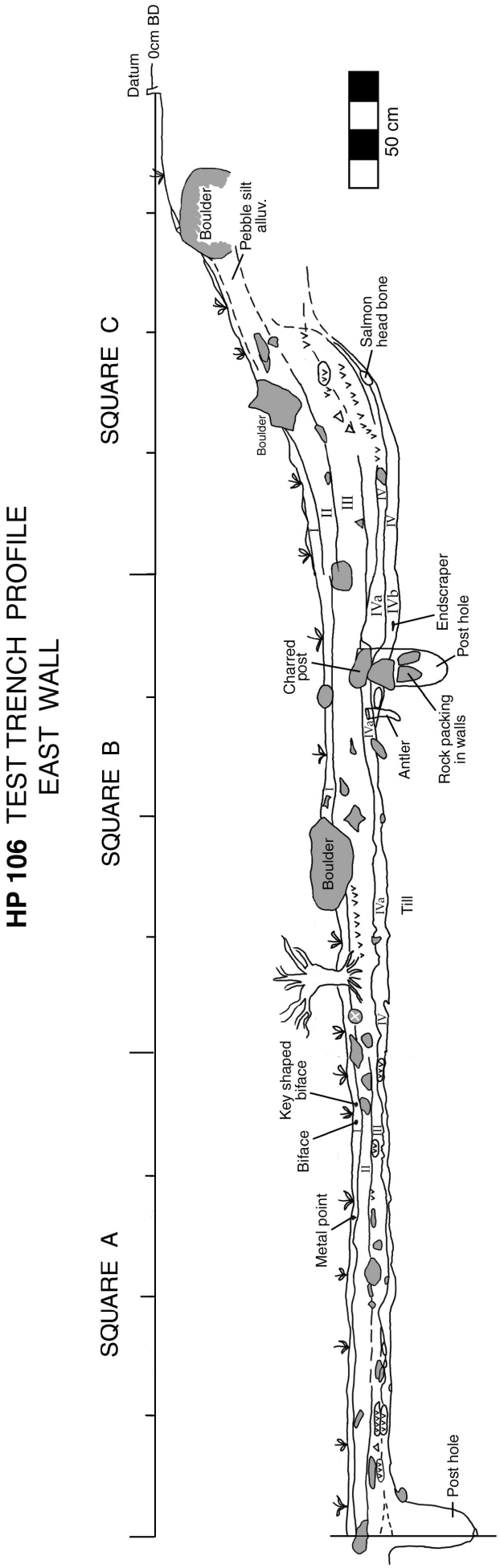
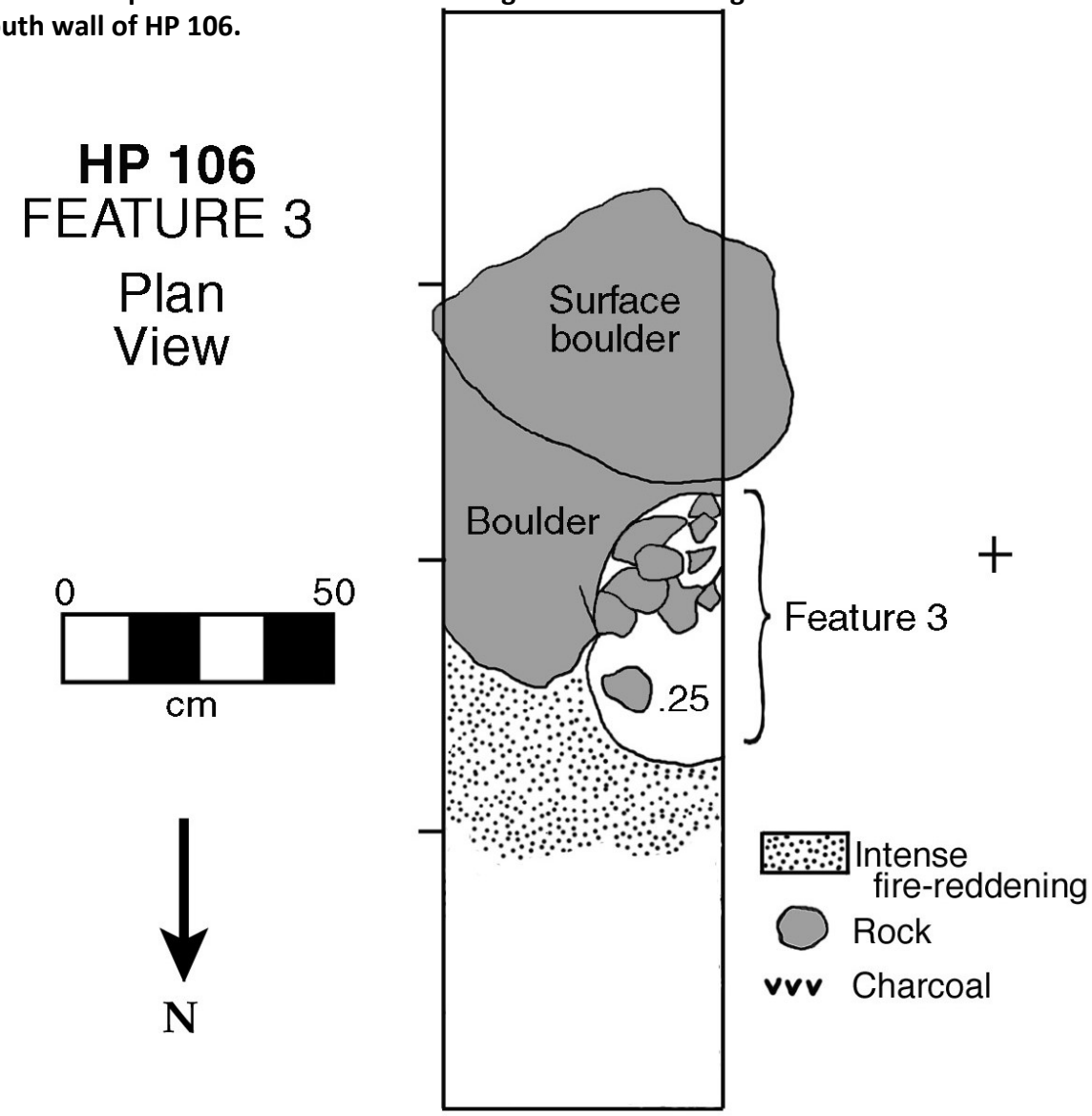


Figure 4. Feature 3 in Square A situated under the large boulder forming part of the south wall of HP 106.



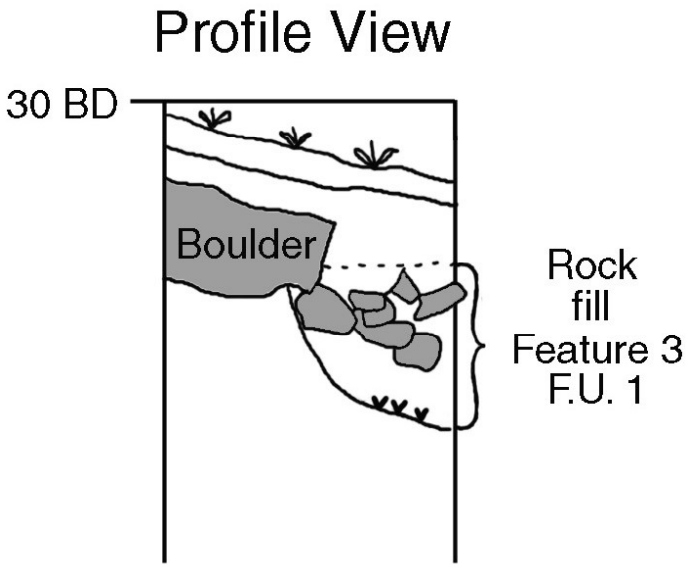


Figure 5. Feature 4 in Square K showing both plan view and the crosssection of this meat roasting pit situated under the rim of HP 106 and thus predating its construction.