

Craig-yr-Aderyn Hillfort, Snowdonia National Park: Intensive Survey



Figure 1: Looking north-east along the lowest wall, Craig-yr-Aderyn,

Undertaken as part of the MA Landscape Archaeology Course for the module Landscape Survey Project

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Location	SH6451306834
Monument Number	302862
Unitary Authority	Gwynedd (Old County: Merioneth)
Site Type	Hillfort
Period	Iron Age - Roman
Date of Preparation	2 nd June 2014

1. Introduction

An intensive survey was carried out on the remains of a hillfort of uncertain date to the south of the Snowdonia National Park on the rocky crag of Craig yr Aderyn. The fort is apparent on modern Ordnance Survey mapping although was first recorded by the OS in the 1970s. The first detailed description was of a 'camp' recorded in the *Inventory of the Ancient Monuments in Wales and Monmouthshire: VI* by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales (1921:48). A plan and description appears in Bowen & Greshams *History of Merioneth I* (1967: 142-144 – see *fig.2*) and is very much based in the traditional interpretations of hillforts at that time (see below). A 19th century (Ffoulkes. 1874) small scale excavation was carried out inside the south east corner of the outer rampart and provided finds of Roman date and is the only dating evidence available for the site.



Figure 2: Plan reproduced from Bowen and Grisham 1967:143

The survey was carried out by a group of students from the University of Sheffield over four days. The aim of the survey was to produce a detailed plan of the fort in an attempt to characterize the structures within the site and attempt to identify a sequence of construction. The survey was undertaken at a scale of 1:1000 and followed a methodology for an English Heritage level 2 survey (EH. 2007: 23). The results have been presented in ArcGIS and interpretive hachure plans have been produced (*figures 19-24*).

2. Location

Craig-yr-Aderyn or 'Birds Rock' hillfort is situated on the south-east facing saddle of the sheer Craig yr Aderyn outcrop in the south of the Snowdonia National Park (*fig. 3*). At 233m above sea level the setting

provides extensive views along the Dysynni valley towards the coast to the west and over to Cadair Idris on the east. The ramparts or walls of the structure circle around a sheer cliff along the north and parts of the west of the site making it roughly D shaped in plan. Much of the enclosed land is unsuited to occupation as it is made up of rough crags, outcrops and uneven surfaces. However it is also the only place suitable for habitation near the summit of the hill with relative ease of access.

The geology of Craig Yr Aderyn is that of the Carig Cau Formation and TyR Gawen mudstone which extends north east and forms the Cadair Idris hills on the other side of the valley (*fig 7*).



Figure 3: Location of Craig-yr-Aderyn

3. Context

Study of the Iron Age in Britain has long been dominated by settlement archaeology. Hillforts, in particular, have always been a focus of attention, with Christopher Hawkes summing them up as a product of successive Celtic invasions and as overtly defensive structures (Hawkes. 1931). Much work that has been carried out on hillforts has been centred on Southern Britain, particularly Wessex, with Wheeler's excavations of Maiden Castle (1943), and Cunliffe's work at Danebury (1983) especially significant.

Recently, British hillfort studies has moved beyond culture historical associations with particular historical

groups, or even processual interpretations that still assumed for hillforts a position at the top of the settlement tree, to looking at these large-scale enclosed sites in a more nuanced way. The work of J.D. Hill (1995, 1996), and more recently Gosden and Lock (2003, 2005) has led hillforts not to be seen as merely defensive or elite residences, but as site types that may have encompassed many more complex ritual and social functions.

Some of the earliest significant work on hillforts in Wales was carried out by A. H. A. Hogg in Caernarvonshire in the 1950s with excavations of the small drystone fort at Garn Boduan and the large, spectacularly sited fortification of Tre'r Ceiri (Hogg 1960). The absence of architectural parallels between these Welsh sites and Southern British earthwork forts led Hogg to surmise that they were 'Secondary Iron Age works', or sites built by indigenous inhabitants of the area, distinct from the 'Celtic invaders' who had been responsible for Wessex sites (*ibid*: 18). An early critique of hillforts as overtly military structures was carried out by Alcock in his synthesis of Welsh hillforts (1965). Most of the sites discussed by Alcock, such as Castell Odo on the Lleyn Peninsula and Pen Y Gaer in the Conwy valley reflect the generally northern bias of work carried out in Wales at this point. He also notes that only a very small number of hillforts were located at 250m contour or above and highlighted their role in both arable and pastoral economy, protecting herds from raiding (1965:188). Craig-ye Aderyn sits around the 235m contour line and this interpretation is worthy of consideration in reference to the site.

Excavations by Guilbert at Mol Y Gaer, Flintshire, pioneered the use of large area excavation in hillfort studies (Guilbert 1975). Guilbert's excavations revealed a significant number of post- and stake-holes representing the remains of roundhouses, a palisade and vertical timbers associated with the main rampart, and greatly influenced the intrusive investigation of hillforts in Wales and Britain as a whole (*Ibid*, 109). Recent excavations at Castell Henllys, Pembrokeshire (Mytum 2013) and Meillionydd (Waddington 2010) on the Llyn peninsula have been run as open-area community excavations, investigating large areas of the interior, the Castell Henllys excavation, in particular, establishing one of the most comprehensive

chronological sequences for a Welsh hillfort, underpinned by Radiocarbon and AMS dating. Moving beyond intrusive investigation, Driver has looked at the forts of north Ceredigion on a landscape level, examining the effect that sites such as Pen Dinas may have had on the landscape, how they may have been influenced by topography and how people may have interacted with them (Driver 2013) .

Whilst there is a long history of excavation, particularly in northern-most Wales and the borders, the national park presents a different picture. Crew and Musson note that 'very few of the 30 or so forts in Snowdonia have been examined on a sufficiently large scale' to understand them (1996: 15). The range of sites characterised as hillforts covers a wide array of shapes, sizes and construction methods which likely reflects the range of dates and functions they represent. It is an area which seems to reach across the generalised divisions between the characterisations of north and south wales based on settlement architecture, further confusing the issue. In commenting on the types of land use and to some extent the different functions of sites dependent upon their location, Cunliffe broadly categorises two zones: a mountainous central zone most suited to pastoral activities and a northern and southern periphery where climate and soils combine to create conditions conducive to mixed farming (2005: 299). Harding notes that at higher altitudes in places such as Wales and Scotland, seasonal occupation is most likely due to harsher conditions than can be found on, for example southern British sites of the same altitude (2012: 201).

Whilst typically considered as solely Iron Age monuments, continued use or reuse of some sites is recorded up until the Early Medieval Period (Crew and Musson. 1996:15). In considering this, Harding finds that in regions where the impact of Romanisation was marginal, continuing occupation, or reoccupation could not be seen as surprising (2012: 159), however he concedes that evidence substantiating Dark Age dates has proved problematic (ibid: 163).

Craig-yr-Aderyn hillfort is situated to the north of an unusual concentration of forts (Crew and Musson. 1996: 16) centred on the Tywyn area which were recorded during a systematic aerial photographic survey (*fig 8*).

4. Methodology

The survey was carried out over four days by a team of three students. A primary walkover survey was used to first establish the extent of the site and to broadly characterise the nature of its features and to see if it was possible to identify any relationships.

In the main, the intensive survey was carried out using a Leica GPS 1200 series differential GPS and base station (situated on the highest point) corrected by a mobile phone signal and Leica Smartnet for real time corrections to the data. Two control points near the base of the fort were then established using the corrected roving GPS with centimetre accuracy. These control points were used for the total station survey (Leica Viva TS12 robotic total station) of the reworked features along the lower wall. The dual methodology was employed to overcome signal difficulties with the GPS at the base of the fort and due to time constraints.

The survey was carried out at 1:1000. Considering that 1mm on the plan represents 1m on the ground, it was decided that readings taken approximately every 5m during the enclosure survey with extra readings taken to catch any detailing would be more than sufficient. Profiles of the entrances and across the ramparts were also taken in order to help define the overall layout of the fort and to illustrate the nature of the entrances.

The data was downloaded using Leica GeoOffice software and converted into shapefiles for use in GIS. The GPS and total station detail was imported into Esri ArcGIS 10.1 alongside an on-site drawing. This drawing was based on the GPS data and then measured detail was added to ensure the full character of the features was recorded. The survey data in combination with the site drawing was then traced to form a hachure plan. The plan was interpreted alongside aerial photographs, site photographs and records. It has been presented using 2m LiDAR data from the environment agency and contour mapping to provide an indication of the terrain on which the fort sits. The scale of the fort made it difficult to find finely detailed contour data at an appropriate scale.

5. Survey Results

5.1. Description

Craig-yr-Aderyn is a multivallate hilltop enclosure (*figure 4*) with at least two phases of construction. Primarily the site is enclosed by a series of walls, however shaping or enhancement of the natural contours of the hill has been used to great effect in some places. The fort has one elaborate entrance in the outer rampart and a less imposing entrance into the inner enclosure. The interior is relatively lacking in any indication of occupation however reworking or reuse of the site, perhaps on a temporary basis, is evident.



Figure 4: Aerial photograph of Craig-yr-Aderyn hillfort. RCAHMW photograph no.C821277

5.2. Ramparts and Walls

The construction of the walls and ramparts are not uniform suggesting at least two periods of enclosure identified through the morphology alone.

The inner ramparts take the form of a dry stone wall along what has been interpreted to be a natural rock outcrop rather than an earthwork (*figure 5*), although Bowen and Gresham suggest it is a high earthen bank (1967: 143). The wall, roughly L shaped in plan is c.54m along its north- south orientation and runs c.87m along its east-west extent and encloses an area of 0.6ha. There is a large area of scree spread to the western end of the rampart masking any features for almost 40m and becomes visible again as a very subtle feature for another 15m. The wall itself is no longer standing but there is a slight bank along the edge of the

contour upon which it is clear to see the line of the wall (*figure 9*). The line of the wall seems to extend to the point where terrain would be very difficult to navigate.

The ramparts forming the eastern enclosed area are in much better condition than its inner counterparts and enclose a total area of 1.6ha. With regards to the amount of stone rubble and tumble, it is likely that it was also a much bigger structure, but again the naturally rough topography has also been employed to render the structure more physically imposing than the walls alone. Again L shaped in plan, these drystone walls show in one or two places some evidence of facing and there is clear core material exposed in some parts(*figure 10*). These walls extend right to the precipice of the sheer north cliff and render the monument impassable from anywhere but the entrance. The short east-west section measures 23m whilst the section curving from the entrance to the northern precipice is c.116m in length.

There are a third set of features which are constructed slightly differently again, following the base of the slope on which the site sits. Running east-west there is a stone wall which sits parallel to the inner ramparts curving around the hill of which 119m are visible (*figure 12*). This has been extensively robbed in order to build small huts or pens but is visible by the large earth-fast stones that mark the former line of the wall. Parts of this wall stand to 60cm in height although this tends to be in places where they form the walls of a later shelter. This outer wall joins the north-south stone feature which creates a potential gateway passage c. 21m long. Whilst there are a few earth- fast stones along the correct orientation, there are not enough to state with certainty that there was a stone lined corridor leading up to the approach of the entrance.

Around the eastern side gentle contours have been flattened to create a 10m wide platform (*figure 11*), and are slightly cut into to create a small ditch. Whilst the ditch is not large enough to serve any real defensive function, it does give the appearance to outsiders of trivallate defences.



Figure 5: View of Craig-yr-Aderyn showing inner rampart of rocky outcrop (middle-ground), outermost wall with structures and stone lined passage and entrance on the left

5.3. Entrances

The site has two roughly aligned entrances, one through each set of ramparts. The entrance to the inner enclosure (*figure 13*) is oriented due east and is likely quarried through the rocky outcrop forming the inner bank creating a c1.5m high gap. It is cut wider than the bank, potentially indicative of some form of former corridor.

The entrance to the outer enclosure is much more elaborate (*figure 6*) and on a more imposing scale using the natural outcrop to form the deep eastern walls of the gateway corridor, 21m in length. This structure is enhanced by a flat terrace, likely created by smoothing the contours of the hill to a platform and cutting of a small ditch below. This offers the appearance of trivallate defences upon the approach. It is worth noting that there is only one easily accessible approach to the site and the natural topography channels individuals towards the entranceway. The western walls of the corridor are much smaller in scale and were likely robbed in places to make some of the later structures and walkers cairns along the outer wall. The path narrows towards the top and there is what has been interpreted as in situ facing stones at the top.

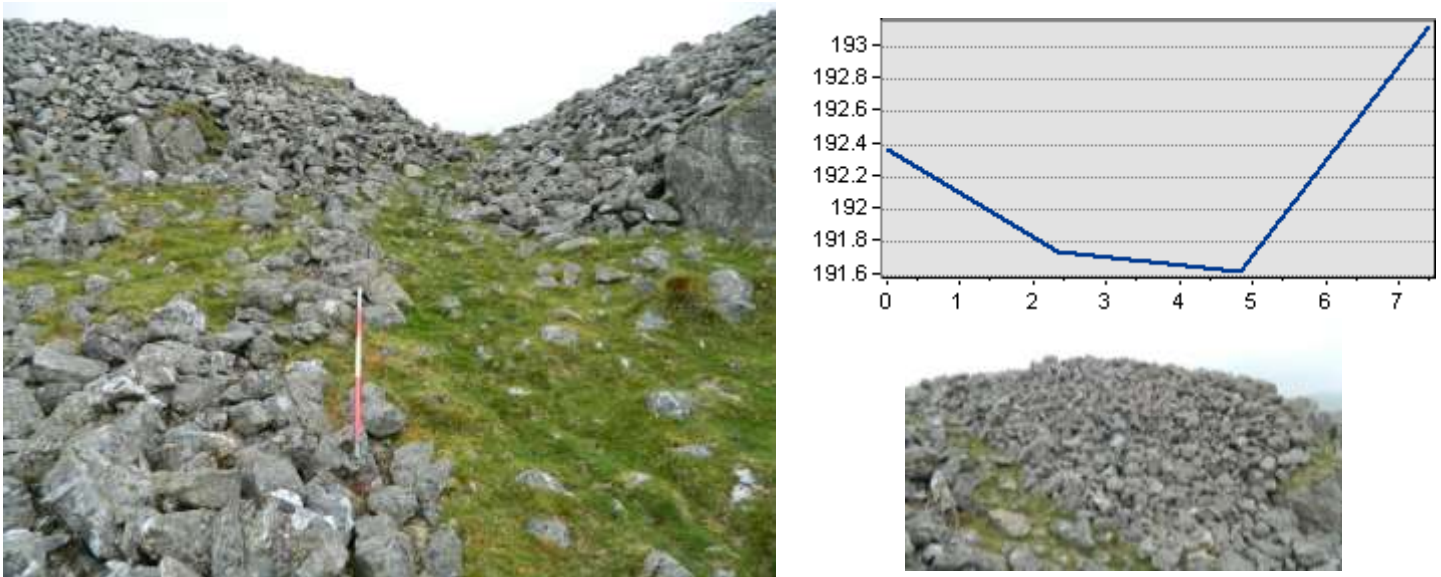


Figure 6: (left) stone lined corridor to outer rampart entrance facing north, (top right) profile of the entrance, east to west, measured in metres, (bottom right) stone tumble on the east flank of the c4m high entrance passage

5.4. Interior

There are relatively few areas flat enough to have been suited to any kind of structures within the enclosed spaces. Within the inner enclosure there is an area of approximately 40x 20 meters which may be suited to occupation. The outer enclosure has a small flat terrace along the inner turn by the entrance which may also be suited to structures but there is much later disturbance with the creation of two rounded structures and 19th century excavations. There is no evidence of any kind of house platforms or hut circles.

Within the inner fort there are two patches with ephemeral linear earth-fast stones (*figure 14*) which could tentatively be interpreted as some form of earlier structure, although, these are unlikely to be associated with the date of the fort construction. This is due to their angular nature however there is not enough information to base a more detailed interpretation.

5.5. Modifications and Reuse

The outer wall running along the base of the hill the fort encloses has been heavily modified and a series of 6 structures is clearly visible. These structures are constructed from the wall material itself as the line of the former wall is visible as a series of indentations on the ground. Under the collapse of one of the structures, thick iron bars were noted suggesting a much later date. The most substantial of the structures sits just to the south of the wall (*figure 17*), which has been redirected to lead out to it potentially suggesting that the space between the inside of the wall and the base of the slope as used to pen animals.

Within the fort proper a semi-circular and a circular structure were constructed. The interior of the latter was around 50cm deep (*figure 15*). These have also been interpreted as later modifications, as the semi-circular structure, in particular, which is banked up against the rampart clearly uses rampart material.

6. Discussion

In looking at the structure of the fort, it is clear that there was more than one phase of construction due to the state of survival of the walls and the way in which they appear to be constructed. The most straightforward interpretation is that the inner enclosure is earlier in date than the outer eastern extension and associated corridor, platform terrace and ditch (*figure 21*). This interpretation is based on the fact that the inner enclosure is of a smaller area and that the layout of the outer walls respects the form of the inner walls. The short east-west section below the inner rampart is considered as the same period of construction as the main outer rampart wall due to its morphology, both showing evidence of small rubble core material and larger reveted or facing stones, and the positioning of the entrance. The platform and terrace have also been interpreted as part of the same period of construction as they appear to create part of the imposing image of the gateway. The outer wall may well have been constructed at this time. If we are to interpret the stones lining the likely corridor as *in situ* then it is most likely to have been of the same date although the structures and cairns dotted around the area account for the loss of stone.

This is not to say the only likely interpretation, there are examples, such as Ranachan Hill, Kintyre (RCAHMS 1971), where an inner enclosure of later date makes use of earlier defences. It could also be considered that the inner enclosure is more designed to divide space, potentially by functions rather than due to different periods of construction. There is little to no indication of the nature of the fort, the social organisation of those who occupied it or the economy it was based on.

The construction of the fort makes the greatest possible use of the natural contours in order to build, what would have been an imposing structure (*figures 19& 20*). Even today Craig-yr-Aderyn can be seen from a great distance, for example traces of its walls can be seen from Castell-y-Bere (*figure 18*).

The population occupying the fort at any one time would not have been large. Based on the assumption that the site was occupied in its entirety at one point in its history, there is very little area which is suited for building any kind of structure (*figure 21*), domestic or otherwise, suggesting a relatively small community used the site at any one time. By using the sheer cliffs and the towering outcrops, the structure is far more dominant in the landscape than the footprint of the physical structures implies. However with the amount of remaining stonework and the enhancement of the contours and terraces would have still taken considerable effort compared to the likely manpower resource. Further interpretations could potentially draw out questions of social networks between neighbouring groups.

Whilst there is no evidence of any platforms or hut circles, it would be unwise to interpret a lack of evidence as evidence of absence. Returning to Alcock's (1965:188) interpretations of higher elevated sites being related to a more pastoral economy and Harding's discussions of the harsh environments for sites in such locations there could be a strong argument for an interpretation of seasonal occupation.

7. Appendices

7.1. Bibliography

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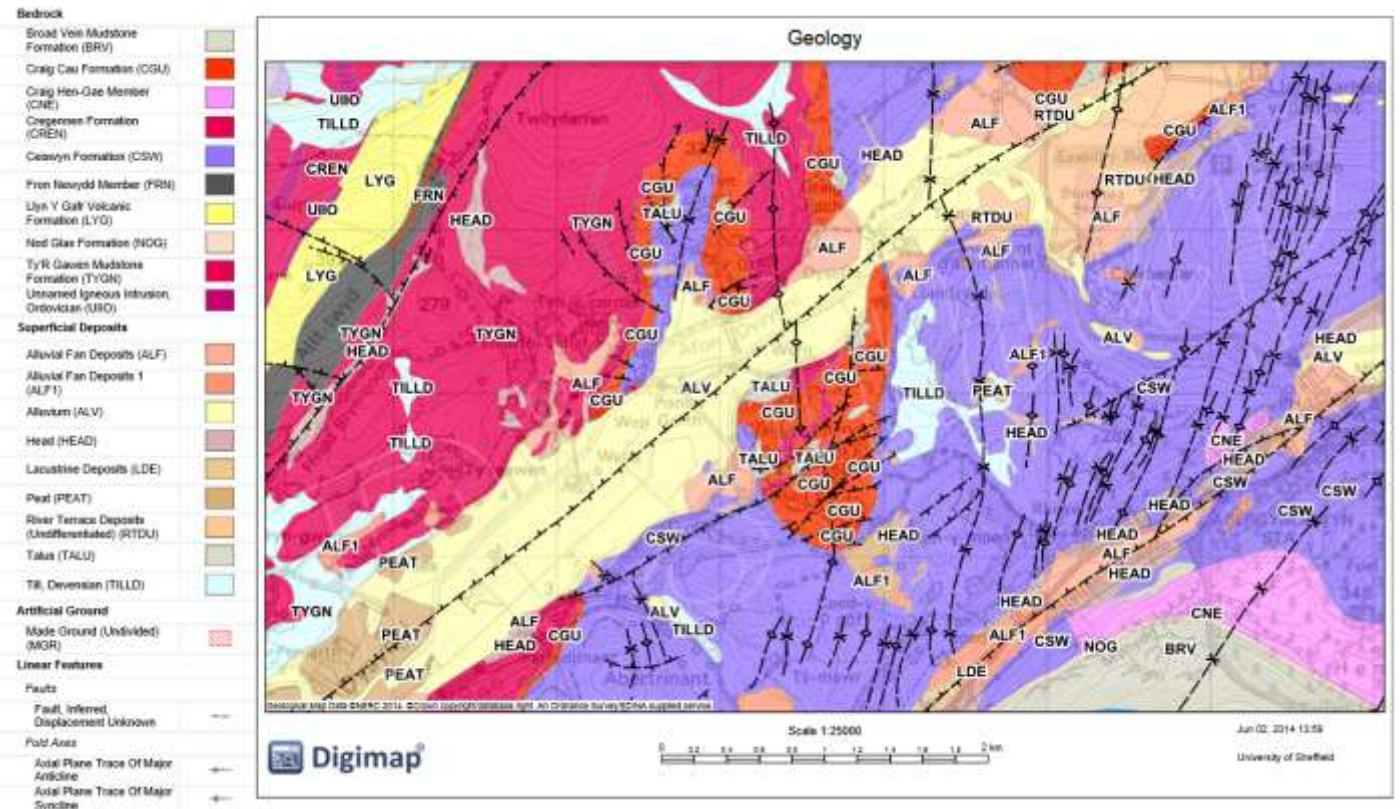


Figure 7: Geology map of Craig yr Aderyn and part of the Dysynni valley

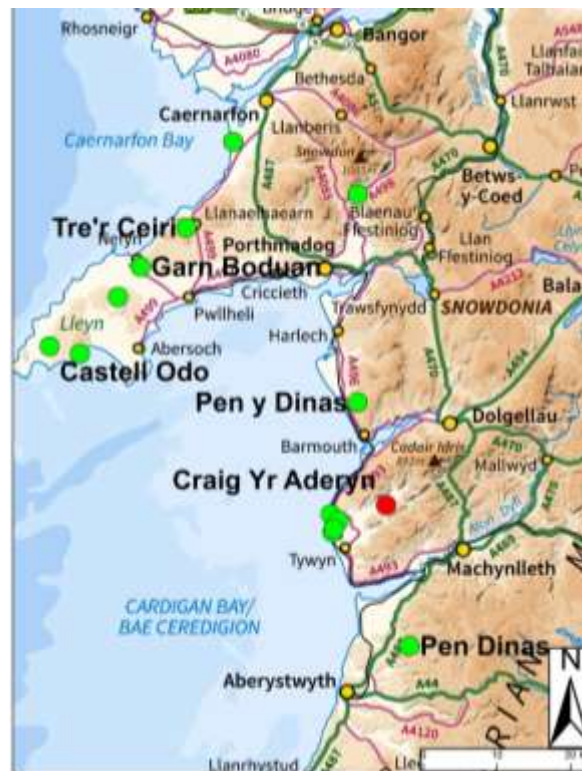


Figure 8: Distribution map of forts in the area



Figure 9: East-west inner rampart facing west showing slight banked base or wall line



Figure 10: East-west section of outer rampart showing exposed core material and entrance on the far left



Figure 11: Platform at the base of the entrance passage creating trivallate appearance, dotted line marking the edge of platform. Taken from the top of the inner rampart facing south



Figure 12: View along outer wall showing some of the structures and redirecting of the wall line



Figure 13: Entrance to inner enclosure with walker's cairn in foreground



Figure 14: Potential feature made of three lines of linear stones oriented north south, facing north



Figure 15: Circular and semi-circular structures at the top of the entrance within the outer ramparts



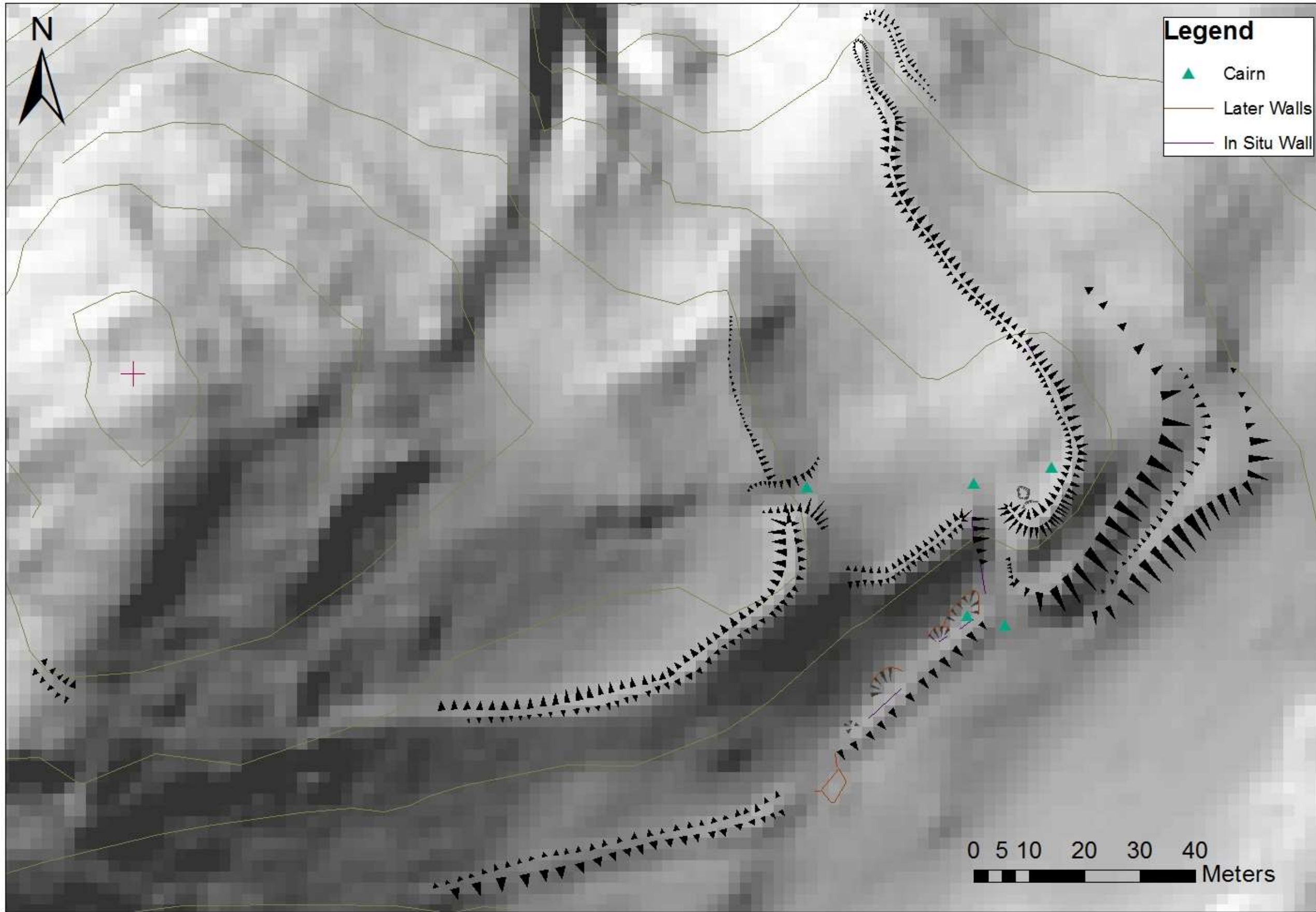
Figure 16: Structure which uses the inner face of the outer wall. By the size of the basal stones they are in situ and likely original wall



Figure 17: Structure to the exterior of the outer wall. The large boulder in the centre and the stones to the right follow the original orientation of the wall. the stones in the right hand corner show the redirected route.

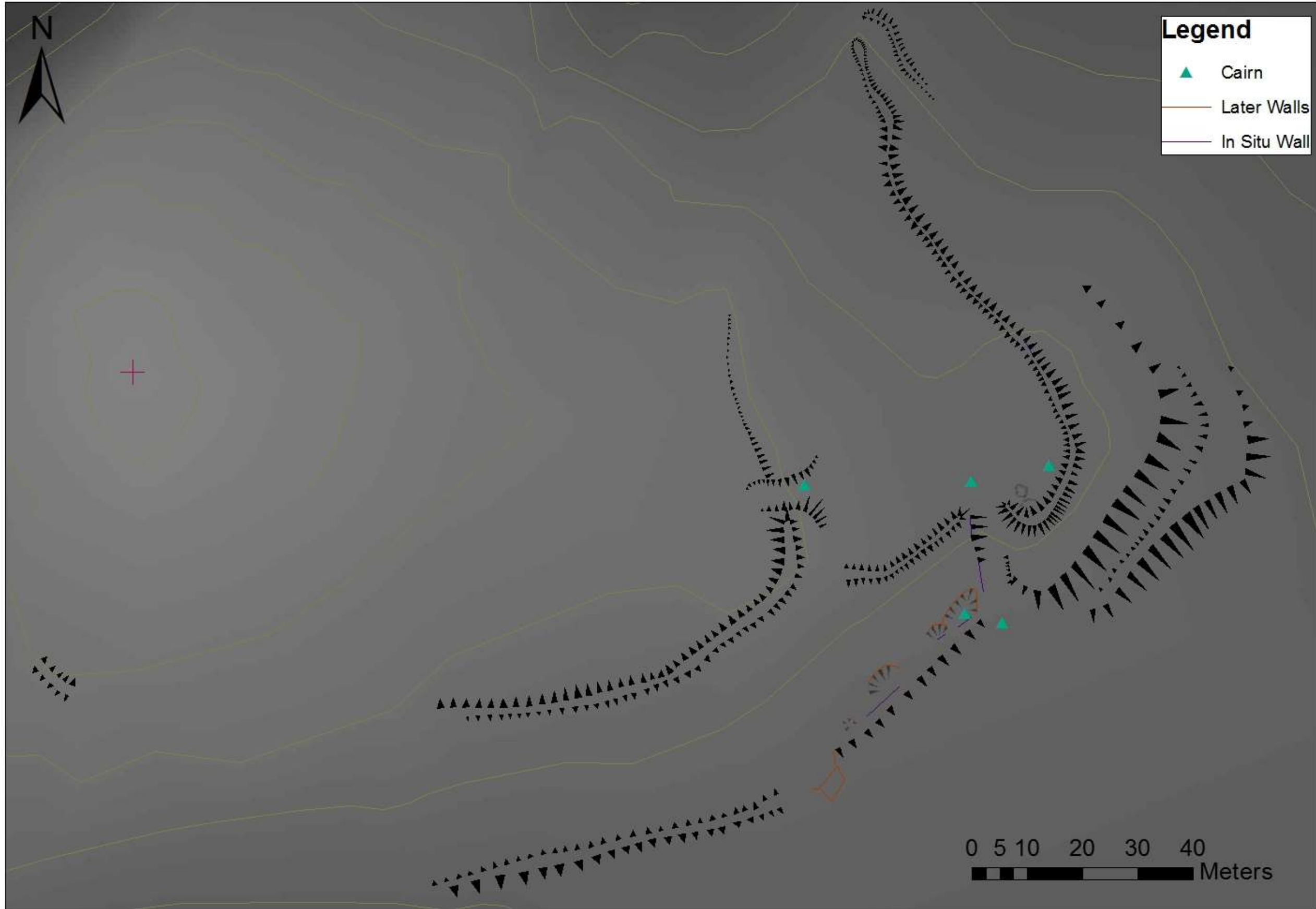


Figure 18: Looking west from Castell-y-Bere to Craig-yr-Aderyn



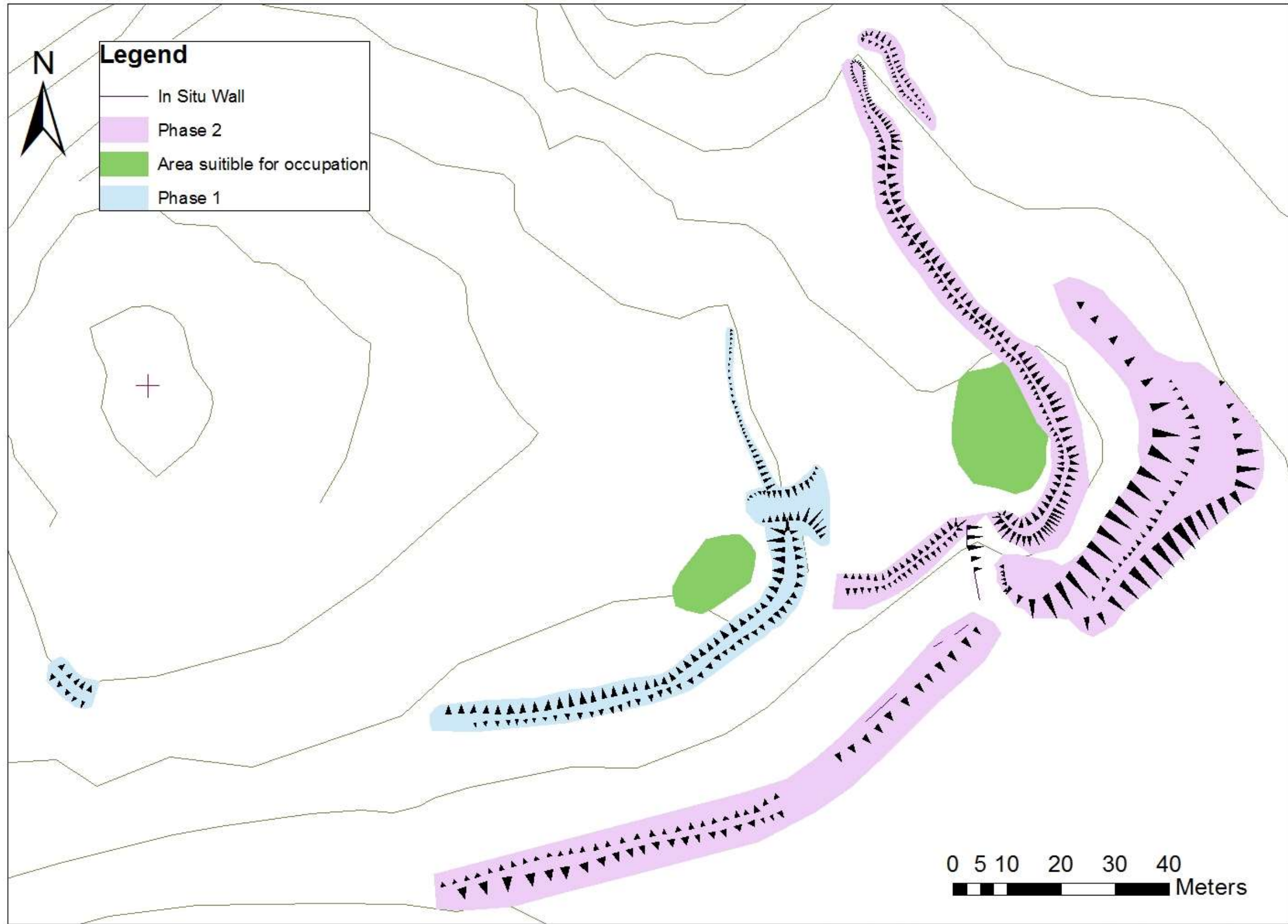
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Figure 19: Plan of site overlying 2m LiDAR data, and displaying contours. Map shows the structure of the fort as it stands, including later reworking of the lower walls. The LiDAR data shows the uneven nature of the ground and combined with the contour data, it is possible to see how the structure of the fort is dependent upon the topography



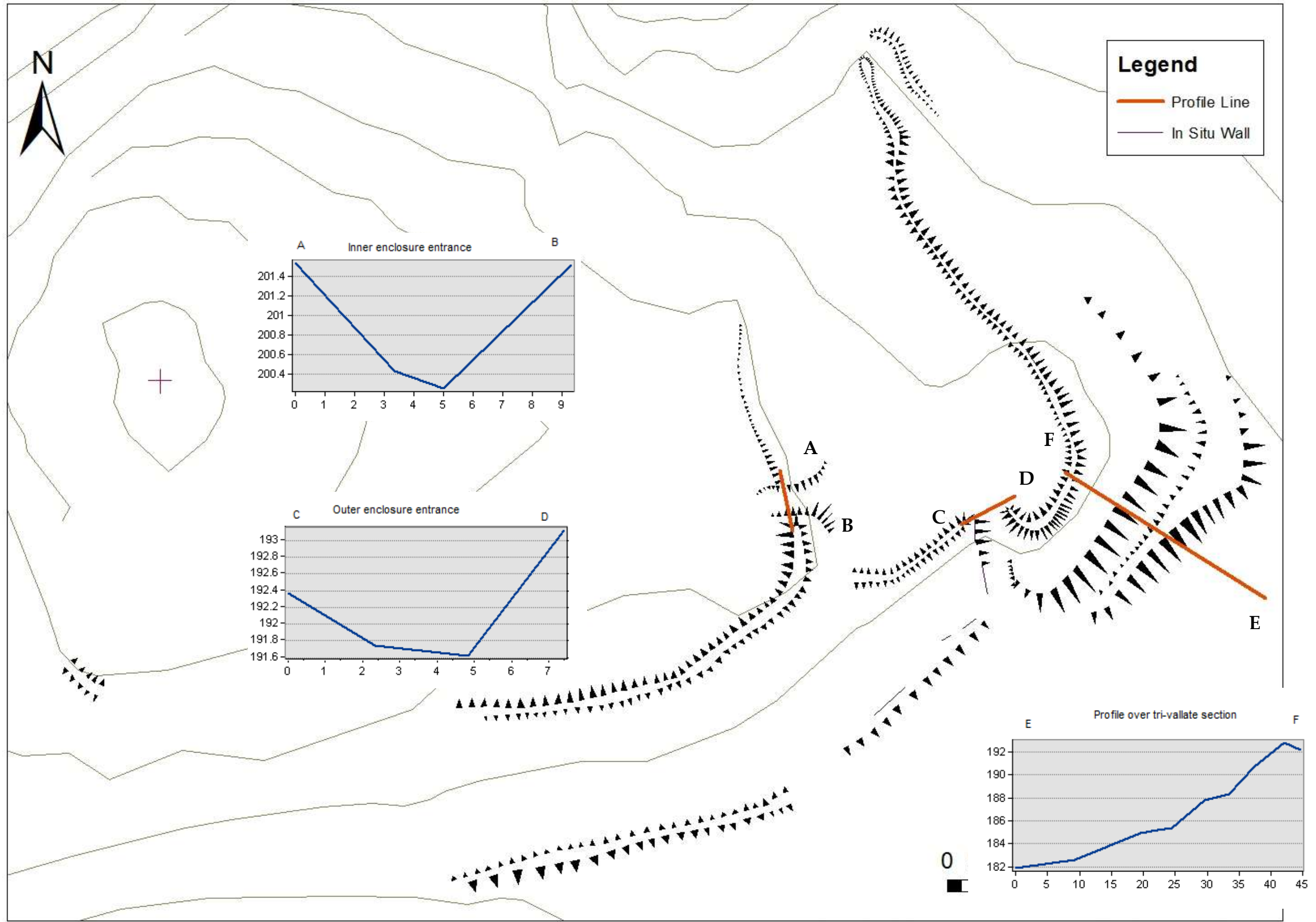
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Figure 20: The DEM shows the gradation of the topography and the contours upon which the fort is based



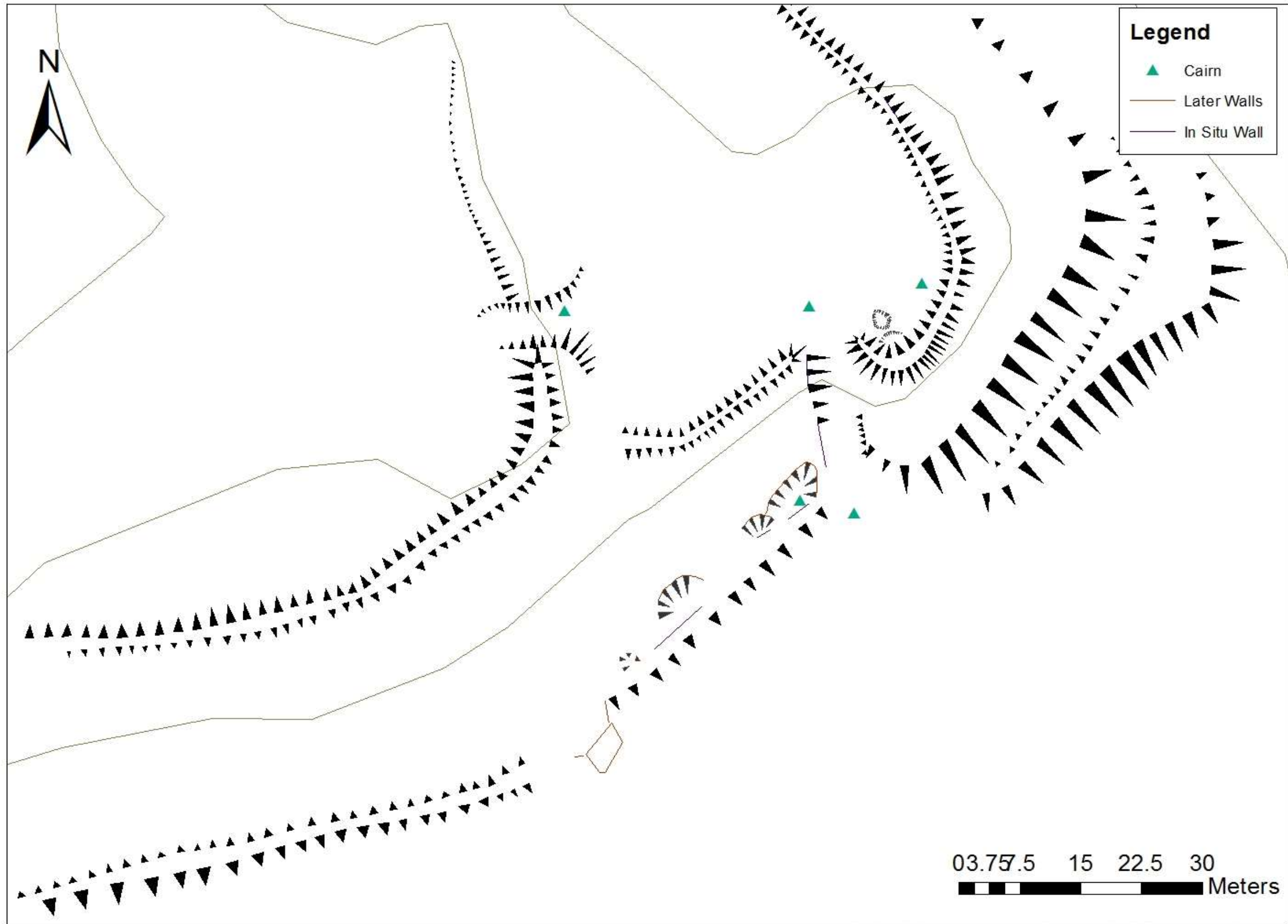
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Figure 21: Plan of fort showing likely phasing and areas suitable for occupation



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Figure 22: Profiles across the entrances and the ditch, platform and outer rampart. Scale is m on x axis and m above sea level on the y axis



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Figure 23: Plans of the later structures at 1:250