

Excavations at La Sufricaya, Holmul Region, 2007 Field Report

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1. Introduction

1.1 Site description

La Sufricaya is a palace complex located about 1.2 km from the center of the archaeological site of Holmul in northeastern Petén, Guatemala (Figure 1). The site core consists of a 131x118 m terrace raised 3 m above the ground level (Figure 2). The only two major structures located off the terrace to the north are a small ball court and a 5 m-high pyramid mound.

The southwest area of the terrace is dominated by an 11 m-high platform known as Group 1. This platform is about 60x52 m. The top of Group 1 features six structures placed around a courtyard. Structure 1 in the northwest corner of Group 1 is the largest (23x17 m) and the tallest (3 m) of these structures. The only known access to Group 1 from the terrace floor is a stairway at the northwest corner of Structure 1.

The rest of the terrace is an open plaza with a pyramid mound of Structure 2 located in the central area of the terrace, but slightly off to the east. In addition, two low mounds were discovered in the northwest corner and near the eastern edge of the terrace. No access to the terrace has been found so far. My investigation of a possible access to the terrace from the area of the ball court did not produce clear evidence of an access stairway. Several carved and plain stelae were discovered upon the terrace and to the west of it. None of the monuments seemed to be in their original locations. Stelae 1, 2 and 4 were found near Structure 2.

There are several residential groups scattered around the site core. The evidence collected so far suggests that these groups represent the Late-Terminal Classic occupation.

1.2 Previous Archaeological Investigations at La Sufricaya

Beginning in 2001 the site of La Sufricaya has been the focus of systematic investigations by the Vanderbilt University Holmul Archaeological Project. The structures were mapped and the chronology assessed by examining looters' trenches and by doing a few test pit excavations (Estrada Belli 2002).

At the time of discovery in 2001, three looters' trenches penetrated the Structure 1 mound from its north, east and west sides. Inspection of these trenches led to the discovery of several murals within a series of buildings – Murals 1-3, 6, and 8 in Room 1 and Murals 4-5 in Room 2 (Estrada Belli 2001; Tomasic and Estrada Belli 2003). Excavations in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005 revealed a maze of 15 rooms within the same building. Structure 1 appears to be a multi-room complex with major access stairways from the north, south and probably west. The complex was created over a short period of time by

filling the space around a small courtyard with single-room buildings. Most of these buildings had walls preserved up to the vault spring. Some were decorated with murals.

Conservation and analysis of the imagery of the murals painted in Room 1 (Murals 1-3 and 6) led to the identification of several Teotihuacan-style figures and a *talud-tablero* temple. Several artifacts found on the floors or in the fill of the rooms suggested links to Central Mexico. These included fragments of coffee-bean decorated cylinder vessels, apron effigy lids, green obsidian blades from Central Mexican sources, and thin stemmed-leaf points (Estrada Belli 2004; Estrada Belli and Foley 2004; Tomasic and Estrada Belli 2003). On the other hand, the interior of Sub-13 was decorated with a mural (Mural 8) depicting Classic Maya mythological characters accompanied by hieroglyphic captions, while the graffiti scratched over the mural showed 'mexican' warriors (Estrada Belli, et al. 2006). An all-glyphic mural (Mural 7) was discovered on the wall of Sub 14 (Estrada Belli, et al. 2006).

The construction sequence of Structure 1 began with three stand-alone buildings placed on the western and eastern sides of the courtyard. Structure 1 Sub-13 in the northwestern corner of the Structure 1 platform featured a vaulted roof and its eastern wall was decorated with Mural 8 painted below a small window. Structure 1 Sub-1 and Structure 1 Room 3 were built in the northeastern corner of the platform. The western façade of Structure 1 Sub-1 was decorated with a polychrome frieze depicting quatrefoil motifs, human heads, and chevron patterns (Foley 2005). The construction continued with adding Structure 1 Sub-14 east of Structure 1 Sub-13, virtually as a back room to the existing building, followed by an adjacent open-portico room dubbed Sub-10. Another single room building known as Structure 1 Sub-3 was subsequently constructed along the northern side of the courtyard bridging the space between the corners of Structure 1 Sub-10 and Structure 1 Room 3. The interior wall of Structure 1 Sub-10 (depending on the construction sequence) was decorated with an all-glyphic Mural 7 that refers to the dedication of the building complex or its part (Tokovinine 2006d).

During a termination ritual, the interiors of the rooms were burned and filled with rubble up to the vault springs. Then, a floor was laid out on top of the former roofs to support a rectangular perishable building with a stairway ascending to it from the south. The single-episode filling of all of these rooms consistently contained material from the Early Classic Period with diagnostic artifacts similar to those of the Uaxactún ceramic phase Tzakol 3 (Smith 1955), indicating that the beginning and the end of the Structure 1 building sequence were separated by a short period of time beginning approximately in A.D. 350 and ending in A.D. 450/500.

Another Early Classic structure dubbed Structure 149 was discovered in the center of the Group 1 platform. It was found partially dismantled and incorporated into Late Classic residences, Structure 146 and 148 (Foley 2005). The investigation of these structures was undertaken in 2003.

Very little is known about Structure 2. The building was heavily looted. The looters' trench running across the west-east axis of the building was investigated by David Bell.

The profiles of the looters' trenches were drawn but no comprehensive report was produced. There is clearly more than one phase, but the structure remains undated.

A low mound to the east of Structure 2 was investigated by Jeremy Bauer who discovered a single-phase platform that probably supported a later classic perishable dwelling. No report or drawings on these excavations were published.

Structure 54 was investigated by me in 2005 (Tokovinine 2006b). It was initially identified as a small platform located in the northwestern corner of the terrace to the south of the ball court. This platform seemed to have the same orientation as the ball court and not the edge of the terrace. The excavations revealed that Structure 54 was a low T-shaped platform that had at least three construction phases. The first phase could be dated to the Early Classic, whereas the dating of the second and the third phases remained problematic. It might also be the case that the function of the structure changed. The first phase was a small platform of fine masonry decorated with a cornice. The last two phases corresponded to a larger platform of simpler masonry that could be the foundation of a perishable dwelling facing east.

The two parallel Structures (48 and 49) are located to the north of the terrace. Structure 49 is a 13x15 m mound, about 1.8 m high, oriented along the north-south (magnetic north) axis with 4° deviation to the west. Structure 48 is a similar mound some 2.5 m west of Structure 49.

During the initial mapping of the site, Ian Graham suggested that Structures 48 and 49 might have been the remains of a ball court. However, the excavation of a putative ball court playing alley undertaken by Justin Ebersole in 2002 failed to find any remains of the ball court markers, *talud* on the eastern side of Structure 48, or the surface of the playing alley itself.

I investigated the ball court in 2005 (Tokovinine 2006c). Excavations in the trenches SUF.T26 y SUF.T30 revealed that Structures 48 and 49 had sloping *talud* benches typical of ball court structures. The benches faced a narrow paved area that could be the playing surface of the ball court. The operation SUF.L17 led to a discovery of a terrace on the western side of Structure 48. There was likely no access to Structure 48 on its western side. The two most important contributions of the operation SUF.T31 were the discovery of a stair on the southern side of Structure 49 and the remains of the pavement of the playing alley. Excavations in the trench SUF.T41 confirmed the hypothesis that the southern edge of the *talud* formed a broad low step. It also became apparent that the floor of the playing alley continued as the floor of the court to the south of the ball court. The operation SUF.T32 revealed that the eastern side of Structure 49 featured a broad stairway that provided access to the platform from the most public side of the ball court.

Only one construction phase of the ball court was attested in all excavations. It seemed that the structure was abandoned shortly after its construction. The presence of some Late Classic ceramics in the overwhelmingly Early Classic sample in the topsoil and the tumble layers suggest some Late Classic activities in the area. However, no Early Classic

types were found in the fill of the structures or in the fill of the floors underneath. Therefore, Late Classic ceramics may have resulted from the re-occupation of the ball court structures. However, we found no direct evidence supporting the residential function of the building at that time. Another explanation of the presence of a few Late Classic sherds is that the ball court structures were simply quarried by the inhabitants of the nearby Late Classic residential groups (located less than a hundred meters to the north of the ball court). That would explain why so many carved stone blocks were missing from the faces of the stairs of Structure 49.

Structure 3 is an approximately 5 m high, 18x18 m square mound situated to the northeast of the terrace. It is the only temple mound in the vicinity of the Group 1 besides Structure 2. The mound is oriented along the cardinal directions.

The goal of my investigation in 2005 (Tokovinine 2006a) was to study the architecture of Structure 3 as visible in the looters' trench profile, especially the sequence of construction phases, as well as to provide ceramics and other datable remains in order to understand the chronology of the building. My research revealed that Structure 3 had two construction phases. The first phase (Early Classic) consisted of the pyramid mound built directly on top of the paleosoil and a floor on top. Subsequently, a one-room structure was built on top of the floor. The orientation of the room suggests that the structure faced south or north. The first option seemed more likely since the southern side of the structure faced the plaza. A plaster floor was laid to the east of Structure 3. Some time later, another plaster floor was laid further east. That latter floor might have been part of a low platform. The second (Late Classic) construction phase encased the pyramid mound and part of the low platform to the east and the structure on top of it. This phase was likely associated with filling of the room and placing the burial in it. Since there was no stair associated with the second phase in the SUF.L08 and SUF.T27 profiles, Structure 3 did not face east at that time.

A number of inscribed monuments were discovered at the site of La Sufricaya located some 1.2 km to the southeast of the Holmul site center. These texts were recorded and analyzed by Nikolai Grube (Grube 2003). Together with iconographic evidence from the murals found in Structure 1 at La Sufricaya (Estrada Belli and Foley 2004), the inscriptions on Stelae 5 and 6 at the same site showed that the elites in the region of Holmul were involved in the establishment of the 'new order' in Peten after A.D. 378 associated with the arrival of *Ochk'in K'awiil Kalo'mte' Sihyaj K'ahk'* and the subsequent accession of new rulers at the sites of Tikal, Uaxactun, El Peru, El Zapote, Rio Azul, and Bejucal.

An inscription on a fragment of an Early Classic stela found at the site in 2001 (Stela 6) possibly features the name of *Sihyaj K'ahk'* in connection with an incomplete Early Classic date 8.17.?.9.9, which may fall in the 10-year period between A.D. 377 and 387 and may have referred to an event roughly coeval with *Sihyaj K'ahk'*'s arrival (Grube 2003).

Two other stelae found at La Sufricaya date from the same period around A.D.400. According to Grube (Grube 2003), Stela 5 records the accession of a local lord on the 8.19.6.8.5 8 *Chichchan* 3 *Xul* date (August 6, 422). Stela 1, is a portrait of a ruler standing in profile which has much in common stylistically with Tikal Stelae 31 and 40, Xultun Stelae 12 and 20, and other pre-9.0.0.0.0 monuments in northeastern Petén (Grube 2003).

The connection between Group 1 dwellers and *Sihyaj K'ahk'* was corroborated when an all-glyphic Mural 7 was discovered (Estrada Belli, et al. 2006; Tokovinine 2006d). The inscription celebrated the dedication of the building (Structure 1) exactly one year since *Sihyaj K'ahk'*'s arrival, possibly as a kind of anniversary. *Sihyaj K'ahk'* himself might have been present at the event. The arrival event itself was described as the “coming of the lightning god (*K'awiil*) to Tikal”.

1.3 2007 Field Season Goals

The primary goal of the field season was to investigate the main stage for public performances at La Sufricaya in terms of its construction sequence and layout. My hypothesis was that the layout of the terrace did not undergo any major modifications since it was constructed and that there are no more than one or two floors across the entire terrace area. I expected that there were no substantial architecture under the terrace fill. The hypothesis implied that the courtly space at La Sufricaya was constructed as a single project where all constituent parts were meant to be interconnected following a kind of blueprint for an ideal court.

I also intended to investigate Structure 2 in terms of its relation to different phases of the terrace and in terms of the access to the top of the structure. In particular, I wondered if Structure 2 was a kind of eastern shrine of Becker's Plaza Plan 2 (Becker 2004) or a radial pyramid suited for calendar-related ceremonies. I did not discard the possibility that the function of the structure changed through time. The attribution of Structure 2 to either model was important because it might point to different rationales behind the construction of the terrace and to different modes of dividing the space of the terrace. If Structure 2 were primarily an ancestral shrine splitting the terrace space into two plazas, the public performance function of the terrace would be less likely.

The secondary goals were to look for the access to the top of the terrace and to investigate the potentially ‘non-public’ areas west, south, and east of Group 1.

1.4 Project Methods and Means

The terrace area is about 131x118 m. I wanted to divide it into 25 20x20m squares and randomly choose five for sampling (excluding the area of Group 1 and Structure 2). I would then randomly choose a 1x1 m square in each 20x20 m unit for a test pit. In addition, I would do at least four test pits – one on each side of Structure 2 along the central axis. I would do additional test pits in case there were substantial differences in

the results across the area of the terrace. If nine 1x1 test pits were enough, I would go for the secondary goals in the order mentioned above.

The ceramics retrieved from the excavation would be analyzed by Michael Callaghan who had already done a preliminary analysis of the 2004 and 2005 field season ceramic sample (Callaghan 2006). Ceramics from the terrace fill would be a sufficient dataset to establish its chronology.

2. Investigations in Structure 2

2.1 Introduction

Structure 2 is located in the middle of the main plaza of La Sufricaya (Figure 3). The rectangular mound is 6 m tall and about 20x25m at its base. It is oriented along the cardinal directions. Two plain stelae and a plain altar are located immediately to the west of Structure 2. The upper fragment of Stela 1 is also nearby, but it is likely not in its original location.

2.2 Investigation and backfilling of the looters' trench SUF.L.01 (also SUF.T.44)

The looters' trench SUF.L.01 ran across the middle section of the mound of Structure 1 (Figure 3). The trench began on the western side of the mound some 2 m south of the East-West center line. It followed the steps of the stairway on the western side of the building (without cutting in) and then became a tunnel breaking into the superstructure and coming out on the eastern side (Figure 7). The eastern section of the looters' trench cut through the substructure fill all the way down to the ground level. In addition, the looters dug two pits in the center of the building searching for a tomb within the substructure. The structural integrity of the building was seriously compromised.

The tunnel and the pits in the middle of the trench were investigated in 2002 by David Bell who produced the plan and the profile drawings of that section (Figure 4, 5, 6). However, he did not explore the areas of the trench west and east of the tunnel and did not backfill anything but the pits in the center of the building. A preliminary inspection of the trench suggested that it had to be backfilled as soon as possible in order to prevent the superstructure from collapsing. Therefore, the goal of the new operation was to explore the rest of the trench, draw a complete profile, figure out the construction sequence, and then backfill the whole trench including the tunnel.

The central section of SUF.L.01

The operation began with building a retention wall reinforcing the northern side of the looters' tunnel and investigating the southern side of the tunnel that was chosen for the new profile drawing.

The lowest context visible in the southern profile of the tunnel was the fill of the substructure (SUF.L.01.25) consisting of rocks and pebbles in the matrix of marl and silt of variable consistency (Figure 9). David Bell's investigation revealed at least three construction floors within that fill (Figure 5) but no sign of an earlier building. The top of the construction fill was covered with a stucco floor about 0.03 m thick. This floor

(SUF.L.01.05) rose in two steps toward the eastern area of the substructure. The door jambs of the superstructure on top of the highest step were visible in the southern and the northern profiles of the tunnel suggesting that the superstructure faced west (Figure 4, 9). The doorjambs were preserved to 1.3 m in height. Each doorjamb (SUF.L.01.01) was about 0.4 m thick and consisted of at least eight courses of well-cut limestone blocks bound with mortar and stuccoed over. No back wall was found further east and the corresponding section of the substructure was likely missing (Figure 9). The eastern side of the mound featured the greatest accumulation of tumble. It might have been produced by the collapse of the eastern wall of the building.

The doorjambs were embedded into the fill of rough limestone blocks and marl (SUF.L.01.03). No face of that deposit was detected on the eastern side of the mound (as it likely collapsed as discussed above). There might be a face of well-cut blocks on the western side (Figure 7). To the west of the doorjambs, at a height of about 1.5 m from the middle step, the fill was capped with a layer of chert (SUF.L.01.04) and with a row of well-cut limestone blocks on top. The fill beneath the chert layer likely contained the burial that was the main target of the looters. Little can be said about the burial except that a number of objects retrieved from the looters' back dirt likely came from it and were discarded by the looters because of little commercial value (SUF.L.01.00.03.01-03; SUF.L.01.00.10.01-03).

The western section of SUF.L.01

Removing the looters' backdirt in the area of the trench west of the tunnel exposed the steps of the stairway (SUF.L.01.19; see Figure 7). Only the lowest four steps were relatively well-preserved. About five more steps could be traced based of what was left of the facing stones and the rest were gone. Based of what was left, it seemed that each step was about 0.3-0.4m high and 0.4m wide consisting of two rows of limestone blocks (0.3x0.3x0.3m) facing west and a fill of pebbles and marl to the east of the facing stones. The excavation area associated with the lowest two steps was extended two meters northward (the extension was designated SUF.T.44). This operation revealed that the stairway was at least 3.2 meters wide (Figure 9). Unfortunately, time constraints did not allow to investigate the full width of the base of the stairway.

The investigation of the base of the stairway (SUF.L.01.19) also revealed that it was placed on top of the stucco floor designated SUF.L.01.17. I did not detect any floor abutting the steps. The surface of the floor SUF.L.01.17 extended to the east, underneath the steps, as well as about 0.8 m west of the steps. The area further west was found to be heavily damaged by the roots of the nearby trees so I had to assign a distinct context number for it (SUF.L.01.16) in order to distinguish it from the preserved stucco cap (SUF.L.01.17) and the sub-floor fill (SUF.L.01.18; see Figure 7). The main criteria for the separation between the disturbed area and the intact sub-floor fill were the change in the matrix (friable brown clayish silt in the disturbed area as opposed to grey silt and marl in the undisturbed deposit) and the higher frequency of pebbles in the original sub-floor fill. The total thickness of the stucco cap and the sub-floor fill was about 0.6m.

A probe into the sub-floor fill SUF.L.01.18 revealed an earlier floor and the associated sub-floor fill designated SUF.L.01.20 located some 0.9 m below the surface level (Figure 7). The light-grey stucco cap of this floor was heavily eroded but the light-grey sub-floor fill of compact marl and gravel made it very easy to distinguish between that floor and the deposits above and below.

A small test pit further below the fill SUF.L.01.20 revealed a leveling deposit of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of loose light grey silt that I designated SUF.L.01.24. That deposit turned out to be about 0.6 m thick and rested on top of a rock outcrop (SUF.L.01.28) and a compact layer dark grey silt and clay with some gravels designated SUF.L.01.26&27 (Figure 7). Initially, I split the latter deposit into two contexts based on the frequency of gravels, but in retrospect, the distinction was not significant enough to treat the deposit as two distinct contexts. A probe into that layer of sealed and clay reached bedrock some 0.55 m further below. It turned out to be part of the outcrop exposed initially in the eastern area of the probe (Figure 7.)

The eastern section of SUF.L.01

The investigation of the eastern section began with cleaning the looters' backdirt (SUF.L.01.00) and finding out the full extent of the trench. The cleaning of the bottom of the trench exposed the intact section of the façade of Structure 2 consisting of three rows of well-cut limestone blocks facing east (Figure 7). The deposit to the west of the façade was the fill of cobbles in the matrix of light grey silt corresponding to the fill of the platform (SUF.L.01.25). The façade and the construction fill rested upon the stucco floor designated SUF.L.01.22 (Figure 7). A small probe into the construction fill confirmed that the floor extended underneath Structure 2. There was no floor abutting the façade.

The floor stucco cap was preserved only about 0.5 m east of the façade of Structure 2. The area further east was disturbed (SUF.L.01.21), but the sub-floor fill could still be traced in the profile (Figure 7). Overall, the deposit SUF.L.01.22 resembled the floor fill SUF.L.01.20 in the western section of the trench that was encountered at about the same depth – a compact fill of light grey silt and marl, albeit with higher concentration of larger pebbles (Figure 7).

A probe into the floor SUF.L.01.22 exposed a 0.6m-thick leveling deposit of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix off light grey silt designated SUF. L.01.23 that largely corresponded to a similar leveling deposit on the western side designated SUF.L.01.24 (Figure 7). Beneath that layer, I encountered a deposit of dark grey silt and clay with some gravel. I designated it SUF.L.01.29. It was nearly identical to the layer of dark grey silt and clay on the western side (SUF.L.01.26&27; see Figure 7). Some 0.2 m below the surface of the context SUF.L.01.29 the excavations reached the surface of the bedrock (Figure 7).

Reconstructing the construction sequence in SUF.L.01

The sequence begins with the deposition of the paleosol (SUF.L.01.26/27/29) on top of the bedrock (SUF.L.01.28). Some of it might be taken off unless the area of bedrock encountered in the western section of the trench was a natural outcrop above the paleosol

level. Subsequently, a leveling deposit (SUF.L.01.23 and SUF.L.01.24) was placed right on top of the paleosoil and the rock outcrop. It was followed by placing the first floor corresponding to the contexts SUF.L.01.22 in the eastern and SUF.L.01.20 in the western sections of the trench. However, the next construction episode, the placement of the second floor (SUF.L.01.18 for the fill and SUF.L.01.17 for the stucco cap), was attested only in the western section of the trench. The following would be the construction of the platform of Structure 2 on top of the floors. Given that there was no evidence of multiple phases within the platform, the most plausible reconstruction of the construction history would be that the second floor (SUF.L.01.17&18) did not cover the earlier floor all the way to the east, so that the later platform was built on top of the floor SUF.L.01.22 in the eastern section of the trench and on top of the floor SUF.L.01.17&18 in the western section of the trench. The controversy could be fully resolved only by future excavations which would expose the easternmost extent of the floor SUF.L.01.17&18 or by trenching into Structure 2. In any case, the next episode was putting a floor (SUF.L.01.05) on top of the construction fill of the platform of Structure 2. A superstructure represented by the door jamb (SUF.L.01.01) visible in the profile (Figure 7) was built on top of the floor. The superstructure was then encased into a new monolithic building (SUF.L.01.03) that featured a tomb sealed by the layer of chert (Figure 7). The massive addition to the top of the building proved to be too much of a burden for the substructure designed to support lighter walls (judging by the doorjambs) and eventually the whole eastern section of the building gave away and tumbled down. Finally, looters cut through the building and emptied the burial.

Preliminary analysis of ceramics

A preliminary examination of ceramics by Michael Callaghan identified the ceramic assemblage in the earliest construction deposit (SUF.L.01.24) as Late Preclassic. The ceramics from the second floor (SUF.L.01.18) could be attributed to the Terminal Late Preclassic. On the other hand, the ceramics from the looters' back dirt (including the remains of whole vessels which likely came from the burial associated with the second phase of the superstructure) could be attributed to the beginning of the Early Classic.

Backfilling the looters' trench

It took about a week to backfill the trench. Several retention walls were constructed within the central section (the tunnel) and in some weak spots in the western and the eastern areas of the trench. The spaces between the retention walls were filled with a mix of sifted backdirt, pebbles, and cobbles.

Conclusions

The investigation suggests that Structure 2 might be a western-facing eastern funeral shrine conforming to Becker's Plaza Plan 2. Even before the shrine was built, the plaza was likely separated into the lower area and the higher area formed by the second phase of the plaza floor. The construction of the temple closed that higher area from the east. It must have happened late in the construction sequence since no subsequent construction episode was detected in the vicinity of the temple. However, the only burial known from Structure 2 corresponds to the second phase of the building. If one assumes the function of the building did not change, then the burial associated with its first phase has not been

discovered. It is likely located in the western area of the structure that remained untouched by the looters. Overall, as in the case of previous investigations, the results suggest that the Early Classic elite occupation at La Sufricaya did not last for more than a couple of generations.

3. Investigations in the Plaza

Seven test pits were dug in different areas of the main plaza at La Sufricaya in order to investigate its construction history (Figure 3). Initially, I planned to place the test pits following a stratified random sampling scheme discussed above. However, only the two units east of Structure 2 were placed according to the original scheme. The time constraints and the results on the ground led to a change of strategy. I tried to place four units more or less along the same east-west axis, so that it would be easier to interpret the changes in the floor elevations. The fifth unit was placed between the newly-investigated area and the section of the plaza explored in 2005.

3.1 Operation SUF.T.45

The unit SUF.T.45 was a 1x1m test pit placed south-east of Structure 2 and east of Group 1 (Figure 3). The goal of the operation was to investigate the construction phases of the plaza east of Structure 2 and east of Group 1.

The first deposit encountered in the unit was 0.2-thick layer of topsoil consisting of dark brown friable silt and clay with a few pebbles (SUF.T.45.01). Further below, we came upon a deposit of grey silt and pebbles that likely represented the disturbed floor fill (SUF.T.45.02; Figure 10). Some 0.25 m below the surface of that floor, a more compact deposit of grey silt and marl with higher density of pebbles was encountered (SUF.T.45.03). The latter proved to be a leveling deposit of variable thickness placed right on top of the bedrock (Figure 10).

In summary, the construction sequence in the unit SUF.T.45 likely began with clearing the bedrock. The bedrock was not cut. Instead, a leveling deposit SUF.T.45.03 was placed on top of it and the floor fill SUF.T.45.02 followed. The topsoil accumulated on top of it after the abandonment of the site. Overall, only one construction phase was identified, just as in the case of the deposits beneath the eastern façade of Structure 2.

3.2 Operation SUF.T.46

The unit SUF.T.46 was a 1x1m test pit placed east of Structure 2 and west of the structure investigated by Jeremy Bauer (Figure 3). The goal of the operation was to investigate the construction phases of the plaza east of Structure 2.

The excavations began with removing the 0.15m-thick layer of topsoil consisting of a matrix of dark brown silt and clay with a few pebbles. A 0.1m-thick friable deposit of pebbles in the matrix of light brown silt was encountered underneath (SUF.T.46.03). Further below, the excavation revealed a more compact layer of light-grey silt and marl with higher density of pebbles (SUF.T.46.03). Further probe revealed what looked like an eroded stucco floor cap at a depth of 0.5 below the ground level (Figure 11). The

potential floor (SUF.T.46.04) turned out to be a 0.7m-thick compact deposit of silt and marl with high density of pebbles and few cobbles (Figure 11). The deposit rested on top of a compact layer of dark grey silt and clay with some pebbles, possibly the paleosoil (SUF.T.46.05). A probe further down revealed the surface of the bedrock, some 1.6m below the ground level. The upper surfaces of all deposits except the paleosoil and the bedrock had a clear slope down to north-west (Figure 11).

Overall, the construction history in the area began with the fill SUF.T.46.04 placed on top of the paleosoil. Given that the surface of the deposit was not well-preserved, it is hard to conclude with certainty whether it was a distinct plaza floor or just a leveling deposit with a construction floor. Therefore, the two deposits on top of SUF.T.46.04 (SUF.T.46.03 and SUF.T.46.02) may represent the fill of the same floor or a new phase in the plaza. The latter reconstruction would contradict the finds near the eastern edge of Structure 2 and in the unit SUF.T.45. It may well be that there was another construction episode in the area of SUF.T.46, but it was associated with the structure to the east of it and not with the entire plaza.

A preliminary analysis of the ceramics from the unit did not clarify the matter. All the materials correspond to the Late Preclassic assemblage with a possible exception of an Early Classic ring base fragments in SUF.T.46.03.

3.3 Operation SUF.T.61

The unit SUF.T.61 initiated as a 1x1m test pit placed 45 m west of Structure 2 and north of Group 1 (Figure 3). The goal of the operation was to investigate the construction phases of the plaza in that area. The unit was subsequently expanded to a 1x4m area but only a section of it was excavated down to the bedrock level.

The excavation began with probing into the topsoil layer of dark brown silt and clay with a few pebbles. Some 0.2m below the surface, a new deposit (SUF.T.61.02) of light brown friable silt with some pebbles was identified (Figure 12). Further below, at a depth of 0.3-0.4m below the surface level, two distinct deposits were encountered (Figure 12). The eastern area of the trench featured a friable layer of pebbles in the matrix of grey silt and marl (SUF.T.61.03). This deposit was placed to the east of a compact fill of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of white marl (SUF.T.63.04). A probe into the layer of grey silt and pebbles (SUF.T.61.03) exposed a stucco floor that also ran under the fill of pebbles and cobbles described above (SUF.T.61.04). The stucco cap of the floor (SUF.T.61.05) was some 1.4m below the ground level and the floor surface was sloping down in the north-western direction. The stucco cap was about 0.06m thick and the subfloor fill consisted of pebbles and cobbles in the loose matrix of light grey silt. The removal of the subfloor fill exposed a new deposit (SUF.T.61.06) at a depth of 1.9m below the ground level (Figure 12). It consisted of a layer of dark silt and clay with some pebbles and could be interpreted as paleosoil. A probe further down reached the surface of the bedrock showing sharp inclination towards the east (Figure 12).

In summary, the construction sequence in the area of unit SUF.T.61 began with placing the floor SUF.T.61.05 on top of the paleosoil and bedrock. This construction episode was

flowed by the deposition of two distinct fills adjacent to each other, SUF.T.61.03 and SUF.T.64.04. Given that the fill SUF.T.64.04 is more compact, it was likely placed first in order to provide some kind of structural backbone to the fill of the plaza. Both fills were clearly part of the same construction episode. The plaza floor would cap those two sub-floor fills. However that floor cap was eroded and became what we identified as the deposit SUF.T.61.02. Subsequently, the layer of topsoil (SUF.T.61.01) accumulated above the eroded floor.

A preliminary analysis of ceramics from the unit suggests that the construction phases dated back to the Terminal Preclassic – beginning of the Early Classic period. The fill of the first plaza floor (SUF.T.61.05) contained Late-Terminal Preclassic assemblage. On the other hand, the sample from the fill of the second phase (SUF.T.61.03) also included few Early Classic sherds (like an Aguila ring base fragment).

3.4 Operation SUF.T.63

The 1x1m unit was placed 15m west of the excavation SUF.T.61 (Figure 3). The goal of the excavation was to explore the plaza further west and find out if the construction sequence in that area were the same as in the center of the plaza.

The excavation began with cleaning and removing the 0.2m-thick layer of topsoil consisting of dark brown silt and clay with some pebbles (SUF.T.63.01). Further below, a lighter deposit of silt and higher density of pebbles (SUF.T.63.02) was encountered (Figure 13). The latter context turned out to be only 0.3m deep. A compact deposit of pebbles and some cobbles in the matrix of grey silt and marl (SUF.T.63.03) was discovered some 0.5m below the surface level (Figure 13). It was 1.1m thick and was located on top of the leveled bedrock surface (SUF.T.63.04). We also located what might be an edge of a retention wall or a deposit with higher density of cobbles in the western section of the trench (Figure 13), but time constraints did not permit further investigation.

In contrast to the situation in the unit SUF.T.61, only one construction episode was identified in the area of the test pit SUF.T.63 – a plaza floor SUF.T.63.03 placed on top of the bedrock. It might be that the earlier construction episode detected in SUF.T.61 corresponded to the leveled bedrock surface in SUF.T.63, but such interpretation would require further investigation in the area between the two units.

3.5 Operation SUF.T.65

The 1x1m unit was placed between the excavations SUF.T.61 and SUF.T.63 (Figure 3). The goal of the excavation was to resolve the discrepancy in construction phases between the two units.

The excavation began with cleaning and removing the 0.1m-thick layer of topsoil consisting of dark brown silt and clay with some pebbles (SUF.T.65.01). Further below, a 0.3m-deep lighter deposit of silt and higher density of pebbles (SUF.T.65.02) was encountered (Figure 14). Further excavation revealed two distinct contexts (Figure 14). The southern area of the trench was occupied by a retention wall of pebbles and cobbles built without mortar (SUF.T.65.04). The wall was 1m tall and at least 0.5m wide

although we did not establish its full width. The wall was abutted by a friable deposit of pebbles in the matrix of grey silt (SUF.T.65.03). Both the wall and the silt-and-pebble fill were located on top of the light grey stucco floor (SUF.T.65.05) found some 1.5m below the surface level (Figure 14). A small probe was made into the floor to confirm that there was a sub-floor fill.

A comparison of the depth of different deposits in the units SUF.T.61, SUF.T.63, and SUF.T.65 suggested that the floor designated SUF.T.65.05 was located at mid-depth between the leveled bedrock surface in SUF.T.65 and the earliest floor in SUF.T.61 (SUF.T.61.05; see Figure 15). Therefore, the floors SUF.T.65.05, SUF.T.61.05, and the leveled bedrock in SUF.T.63 likely represented the same construction phase. The plaza floor would gradually descend westwards, possible as one or two steps. Therefore, the construction sequence in SUF.T.65 would resemble the situation in SUF.T.61. The floor SUF.T.65.05 was likely placed on top of the paleosoil or bedrock. That episode was followed by the construction of the retention wall SUF.T.65.04 and the placement of the fill SUF.T.65.03 to the north of it. The stucco cap and sub-floor fill above the two deposits eroded away and became the deposit designated SUF.T.65.02. Finally, the topsoil accumulated over the eroded floor.

3.6 Operation SUF.T.64

The unit SUF.T.64 was a 1x1m test pit placed 20 m north of Group 1 and 20 m west of Structure 2 (Figure 3). The goal of the operation was to investigate the construction phases of the plaza in that area.

The excavation began with probing into the topsoil layer of dark brown silt and clay with a few pebbles. Some 0.2m below the surface, a new deposit (SUF.T.64.02) of light brown friable silt with pebbles and cobbles was identified (Figure 16). Further below, at a depth of 0.5m below the surface level the excavation exposed a more compact layer with high density of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of light grey silt and marl (SUF.T.64.03). A probe into the layer revealed a stucco floor underneath (Figure 16). The light grey stucco cap of the floor (SUF.T.64.04) was 1m below the ground level and the floor surface was sloping down to the west. The hard stucco cap was about 0.06m thick and the sub-floor fill consisted of pebbles and cobbles in the friable matrix of light grey silt. The removal of the subfloor fill exposed a new deposit (SUF.T.64.05) at a depth of 1.5m below the ground level (Figure 16). It consisted of a layer of dark silt and clay with some pebbles and could be interpreted as paleosoil.

In summary, the construction sequence in the area of unit SUF.T.64 began with placing the floor SUF.T.64.04 on top of the paleosoil (SUF.T.64.05). This construction episode was followed by the deposition of the fill SUF.T.64.03. The plaza floor would cap that sub-floor fill. However, the floor was eroded and became what we identified as the deposit SUF.T.64.02. Subsequently, the layer of topsoil (SUF.T.64.01) accumulated above the eroded floor.

A preliminary analysis of ceramics from the unit suggests that the construction phases dated back to the Late Preclassic period. Overall, the construction sequence closely

resembles the results obtained in the units to the west and to the east of SUF.T.64. The only discrepancy is the difference in height between the surfaces of the floor SUF.T.64.04 and a potentially corresponding floor in front of Group 1 (SUF.T.48.06). More excavations would clarify the issue, but the most plausible explanation was that there were additional steps somewhere in the 20m span between the exposed area in front of Group 1 and the unit SUF.T.64.

3.6 Operation SUF.T.66

The 1x1m unit was placed between SUF.T.63 and the trench SUF.T.38 dug during the 2005 field season (Figure 3). The goal of the new excavation was to relate the construction phases of the plaza in the two earlier units.

The excavation began with cleaning and removing the 0.1m-thick layer of topsoil consisting of dark brown silt and clay with some pebbles (SUF.T.66.01). Further below, a 0.25m-deep lighter deposit of silt and higher density of pebbles (SUF.T.66.02) was encountered (Figure 17). The removal of that deposit revealed an eroded floor (SUF.T.66.03). Its stucco cap was preserved only in some areas of the excavation. The associated sub-floor fill of pebbles in the matrix of grey silt and marl was 0.35m deep (Figure 17). At a depth of 0.8m below the surface level, another candidate for the eroded floor surface was discovered (Figure 17). The floor cap was preserved only in the southern section of the trench but the sub-floor fill (SUF.T.66.04) was different from SUF.T.66.03. It consisted of pebbles and large cobbles in the matrix of light grey silt. The excavation was abandoned at this point because of time constraints.

In summary, there were at least two construction phases corresponding to the contexts SUF.T.66.04 and SUF.T.66.03. Both deposits could be part of the same construction episode. Nevertheless, their depth and relative position resembled the two plaza floors uncovered in the trench SUF.T.38 (Tokovinine 2006b:Fig.7). The deposit SUF.T.66.02 might represent the accumulation of tumble because of the erosion of the floor and the movement of tumble from the higher area of the plaza to the south or it might correspond to another construction phase of the plaza. In any scenario, the topsoil SUF.T.66.01 would be the last deposit.

3.7 Operation SUF.T.67

The goal of the excavation was to investigate what looked like a 50x8m accession ramp or remains of a stairway on the northern edge of the plaza (Figure 2). In order to achieve this objective, a 7x0.6 m trench was dug across the middle section of the feature (Figure 3).

The excavation began with cleaning and removing the 0.1m-deep layer of topsoil, a friable deposit of dark brown silt and clay with few pebbles (Figure 18). The removal of the topsoil exposed a deposit of light brown silt with higher density of pebbles designated SUF.T.67.02 (Figure 18). The remains of a stairway (SUF.T.67.03) were encountered below. The excavation exposed five steps varying 0.8-1.4m in width and 0.3-0.4m in height (Figure 18). The northern face of each step was formed by large well-cut limestone blocks (0.4x0.5x0.3m). The stucco caps of the steps were also partially

preserved. The excavations also revealed a deposit of tumble (SUF.T.67.04) further north (Figure 18), but there was not time to investigate it further. It was likely an accumulation of tumble on top of a step that we did not expose.

In summary, the excavation allowed identifying the ramp-like feature on the northern side of the plaza as a stairway, possibly the main access stairway to the plaza. It was also possible to reconstruct the layout of the steps. No probe into the steps was made, so our knowledge about the sequence of deposition events is limited to the construction of the stairway (SUF.T.67.01), the accumulation of tumble (SUF.T.67.04 and SUF.T.67.02), and the formation of the topsoil (SUF.T.67.01).

4. Investigations of the North Stairway of Group 1

The stairway on the northern side of Group 1 was initially identified during the investigation of the looters' trench in 2002. However, the dimensions and the layout of the stairway remained unknown. One of the updated goals of the 2007 field season was to fill that gap in our knowledge of the monumental architecture at La Sufricaya.

4.1 Operation SUF.T.47

The unit SUF.T.47 was placed at the base of the northern slope of the Group 1 mound as an extension of the looters' trench where the stairway was detected (Figure 2). The 2x2m unit was subsequently expanded in order to locate the western corner of the stairway and explore the floor in front of it (Figure 3).

The excavation began with removing the fill of the base of the looters area. It became apparent that the trench had to be expanded in order to locate the base of the stairway. Therefore, we proceeded with cleaning and removing the topsoil level over a larger area around the looters' trench. Below the topsoil, the excavators came upon a layer of tumble consisting of pebbles and cobbles as well as few carved blocks (0.2x0.3x0.4) in the matrix of light-grey silt.

Further excavation exposed the two lowest steps of the stairway and the stretch of floor to the north of it (Figure 19, 20). The excavation revealed 5m of the face of the lowest step (from its western corner to the east). The step (SUF.T.47.04) was about 0.5m high and 0.8m wide. The northern face of the step was formed by two courses of well-cut limestone blocks (0.4x0.3x0.3m) bound with mortar. The top and the northern face of the step appeared to have been stuccoed, although the stucco layer was heavily damaged. The second step of the stairway was nearly identical to the first one.

The floor that abutted the stairway was designated SUF.T.47.03. It could be traced no more than 3-4m north of the stairway. It was totally gone further north. The root cuts in the floor permitted to see that it was just a cap of stucco 0.04-0.06m in thickness. Another floor (SUF.T.47.05), also abutting the steps of the stairway, could be seen underneath. The stucco surface of the latter floor was preserved further north of the stairway and the investigation of the floor surface clearly showed that the floor corresponded to the present surface of the plaza (Figure 20).

In addition, the investigation revealed a line of stones some 2.5 north of the steps that appeared to be aligned with them. That feature was designated SUF.T.47.06 (Figure 19, 20). Given that the intersection of the steps and the floor SUF.T.47.05 had been investigated in the other unit (SUF.T.48) it was already known that the floor and the steps were part of the same construction phase.

In summary, the construction sequence of the investigated deposits in the unit SUF.T.47 began with the stairway SUF.T.47.04 and the floor SUF.T.47.05 to the north of it. Subsequently, another floor abutting the steps (SUF.T.47.03) was placed on top of the floor SUF.T.47.05. The last known construction episode was the associated with the line of stones SUF.T.47.06 to the north of the steps. Subsequently, the area was left to the accumulation of tumble (SUF.T.47.02) and the formation of the topsoil (SUF.T.47.01).

4.2 Operation SUF.T.48

The unit SUF.T.48 was placed at the base of the northern slope of the Group 1 mound 10m east of the unit SUF.T.47 (Figure 2). The initial goal of the operation was to find out if the stairway extended that far to the east. The 2x1m unit was subsequently expanded in order to investigate the construction phases in central section of the stairway (Figure 3). The largest trench extension was given a separate trench number (SUF.T.60), but only the topsoil and the tumble deposits from that area were assigned the context numbers beginning with SUF.T.60 (SUF.T.60.01 for the topsoil and SUF.T.60.02 for the tumble). The rest of the contexts encountered in the extension were already known in the unit SUF.T.48 and were assigned old context numbers.

The operation began with cleaning and removing the topsoil (SUF.T.48.01), a dark-brown deposit of silt and clay with some pebbles and cobbles. Below the topsoil, the excavators came upon a layer of tumble consisting of pebbles and cobbles as well as few carved blocks (0.2x0.3x0.4) in the matrix of light-grey/light-brown silt. Further below, the excavation revealed the two lowest steps of the stairway (SUF.T.48.04) and the stucco floor (SUF.T.48.07) to the north of it (Figure 21, 23). The layout, orientation, and masonry of the steps were identical to those discovered in the unit SUF.T.47. Moreover, the steps in SUF.T.48 and SUF. T.47 were located along the same line (Figure 3). Therefore, the steps belonged to the same architectural feature.

Nevertheless, the excavation also exposed the eastern wall of what looked like another staircase built on top of the steps discussed above (Figure 23). The unit was expanded to explore the new feature (designated SUF.T.48.05), which turned out to be a 3.6–wide stairway with the same orientation built in front of a section of the stairway SUF.T.48.04. It was on top of the floor SUF.T.48.07 abutting the stairway SUF.T.48.05 (Figure 21), so it corresponded to a later construction phase. Seven steps of the stairway SUF.T.48.05 were exposed (Figure 21, 22). Most steps were 0.2-0.3m high and 0.3m wide (except a wider section after the third step). The northern face of each step consisted of one row of limestone blocks (0.6x0.3x0.3m and smaller) on a ‘cushion’ of pebbles and mortar. In comparison with the stairway SUF.T.48.03, the steps of the later phase were much smaller.

In addition to the stairway, a line of stones running east-west was located on either side of the stairway SUF.T.48.05 (Figure 23). It was designated SUF.T.48.09. It appeared similar to the line of stones found in the unit SUF.T.48 (SUF.T.47.06; see Figure 19).

The floor SUF.T.48.07 was the same 0.06m-thick stucco cap as in the unit SUF.T.47. It was completely eroded 0.6m north of the stairway SUF.T.48.05 exposing the floor underneath. The latter was designated SUF.T.48.08. However, some 1.6m north of the steps, the cap of that floor was also gone and the sub-floor fill appeared to be disturbed by tree roots (Figure 21, 23). Therefore, the fill further north received a distinct context number (SUF.T.48.03).

A probe into the disturbed area of the floor fill exposed yet another stucco floor some 0.5m below the ground level (Figure 21). The new floor was designated SUF.T.48.06. In order to investigate the relationship between that floor and the steps SUF.T.48.04, a narrow test pit was dug following the surface of the floor all the way to the base of the steps (Figure 21, 24). It turned out that the steps SUF.T.48.04 and the floor SUF.T.48.08 (the one immediately above the floor SUF.T.48.06) were part of the same construction phase because the steps were placed on top of the sub-floor fill of SUF.T.48.08 while its stucco cap abutted the face of the lowest step (Figure 21).

However, the situation with the floor SUF.T.48.06 remained inconclusive because it appeared to have been cut some 2.4m north of the steps SUF.T.48.04 (Figure 21, 24). If there ever was an architectural feature associated with the floor SUF.T.48.06, it was apparently destroyed or cut in order to place the fill for the floor SUF.T.48.08 and the steps SUF.T.48.05. On the other hand, the floor SUF.T.48.08 seemed to correspond to the first phase of the plaza floor uncovered in the test pits north of the stairway. The only problem with that interpretation would be the difference in elevation between the sections of the same suggesting that there might be an extra step somewhere between the northern edge of the unit SUF.T.48 and the nearest test pit SUF.T.64 (Figure 3).

A probe into the middle section of the stairway SUF.T.48.05 revealed another set of steps (SUF.T.48.11) abutted by the floor SUF.T.48.07 (Figure 21, 22, 24). The two exposed steps were 0.35m high and 0.4m wide, lower and narrower than the steps of the stair SUF.T.48.04 but higher and wider than the steps of the stair SUF.T.48.05. A subsequent probe into SUF.T.48.07 confirmed that the new set of steps was part of the same construction phase as the steps SUF.T.48.04 (Figure 21, 22). Therefore, the first phase of the stairway also featured a middle section with smaller steps presumably designated for preferential access to the top of Group 1. Given that the earlier midsection (SUF.T.48.11) was apparently encased within the latter phase (SUF.T.48.05), the width of the earlier midsection was likely smaller than 3.6m.

In summary, the construction sequence in the unit SUF.T.48 began with the floor SUF.T.48.06. Subsequently, the southern section of the floor was cut. Then the steps SUF.T.48.04 (SUF.T.48.11 for the mid-section) and the floor SUF.T.48.08 were placed on top of the floor SUF.T.48.06. A re-plastering event followed: a 0.06m-thick stucco layer SUF.T.48.07 was added to the north of the steps and on top of the earlier floor

SUF.T.48.06. That episode was followed by the construction of the new midsection of the stairway (SUF.T.48.05). A wall of stoned was subsequently added on either side (SUF.T.48.09). Finally, a layer of tumble (SUF.T.48.02 and SUF.T.60.02) covered the architectural features, whereas the northern section of the floors SUF.T.48.07 and SUF.T.48.08 became eroded (resulting in SUF.T.48.03). The topsoil (SUF.T.48.01) formed over the tumble.

A preliminary analysis of the ceramics in the sub-floor fill of SUF.T.48.08 identified the sample from that context as Late Preclassic. However, it would not necessarily mean that the stairway was built in Late Preclassic. The construction likely happened before the occupants of La Sufricaya produced copious amounts of Early Classic and could incorporate such materials into any construction fill. In other words, the plaza floors and the steps of Group 1 were the first major architectural features at the site. On the other hand, the ceramic sample of the second phase of the stairway (SUF.T.48.05) contained a mix of Early Classic and Late Preclassic sherds.

4.3 Operation SUF.T.50

The unit SUF.T.50 was placed at the base of the northern slope of the Group 1 mound 6m east of the unit SUF.T.48 (Figure 2, 3). The initial goal of the operation was to find out if the stairway extended that far to the east. The 2x1m unit was subsequently expanded eastwards in order to locate the eastern corner of the stairway (Figure 3).

The operation began with cleaning and removing the topsoil (SUF.T.50.01), a dark-brown deposit of silt and clay with some pebbles. Below the topsoil, we came upon a 0.6m-thick layer of tumble consisting of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of light-grey silt (SUF.T.50.02; Figure 26). Further below, the excavation exposed the two lowest steps of the stairway (SUF.T.50.03) and the light-grey stucco floor (SUF.T.50.04) to the north of it (Figure 25, 26). The lowest step was 0.5m high and 0.8m wide. The northern face of either step was made of two rows of limestone blocks (0.3x0.3x0.2 to 0.3x0.3x0.8) placed in a fill of mortar and pebbles. The north face and the top of the steps were covered with stucco.

The layout, orientation, and masonry of the steps were identical to those discovered in the units SUF.T.47 (SUF.T.47.04) and SUF.T.48 (SUF.T.48.04). Moreover, the steps in SUF.T.48 and SUF.T.47 were located along the same line as the steps SUF.T.50 (Figure 3). Therefore, the steps likely belonged to the same architectural feature. The floor SUF.T.50.04 was identical to the 0.6m-thick stucco cap as in the units SUF.T.47 (SUF.T.47.03) and SUF.T.48 (SUF.T.48.07). In addition, an outcrop of bedrock was incorporated into the eastern corner of the lowest step of the stairway (Figure 25, 26).

In summary, the construction sequence in the unit began with the steps SUF.T.50.03 followed by the floor (SUF.T.50.04) abutting the steps, the accumulation of tumble (SUF.T.50.02) and the formation of the topsoil layer. The excavation reached the goal of locating the eastern corner of the stairway. The full width of the feature could be established: the stair was 24.5m wide.

4.4 Operation SUF.T.53

The unit SUF.T.53 was placed at the base of the northern slope of the Group 1 mound 5m east of the unit SUF.T.50 (Figure 2, 3). The goal of the operation SUF.T.53 was to find out if the stairway extended that far to the east. At the time, it was not known that the corner of the stairway was just a meter to the west of the original 1x2 area of SUF.T.50.

The operation began with cleaning and removing the topsoil (SUF.T.53.01), a dark-brown deposit of silt and clay with some pebbles. Below the topsoil, we came upon a 0.7m-thick layer of tumble consisting of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of light-brown silt (SUF.T.53.02; Figure 27). Further below, the excavation exposed a compact fill (SUF.T.50.03) consisting of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of light-grey marl (Figure 27). Initially, the latter deposit was not distinguished from the tumble layer because the change in color, texture, and consistency seemed to be gradual. However, a re-examination of the profile of the trench suggested that it might be better to separate that deposit from the tumble. Finally, at a depth of 1.4m below the surface, the excavations exposed the leveled bedrock surface (Figure 27).

In summary, the construction history in the area likely began with cleaning and leveling of the bedrock (SUF.T.53.04). It was followed by placing a compact fill of marl and pebbles (SUF.T.53.03). Eventually, the tumble and the topsoil accumulated on top of it.

It was also important that the elevation of the bedrock surface corresponded to the level of the floor SUF.T.48.06, whereas the top of the fill SUF.T.53.03 would correspond to the surface of the floor SUF.T.48.08. Therefore, the same two construction phases of the plaza were attested in either unit.

4.5 Operation SUF.T.54

The unit SUF.T.54 was placed at the base of the northern slope of the Group 1 mound between the units SUF.T.50 and SUF.T.53 (Figure 2, 3). The goal of the operation SUF.T.54 was to find out if the stairway extended that far to the east. At the time, it was not known that the corner of the stairway was just a meter to the west of the original 1x2 area of SUF.T.50.

The operation began with cleaning and removing the topsoil (SUF.T.54.01), a dark-brown deposit of silt and clay with some pebbles. Below the topsoil, we came upon a 0.5m-thick layer of tumble consisting of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of light-brown silt (SUF.T.54.02; Figure 28).

Further below, the excavation exposed two distinct deposits (Figure 28). The southern area of the trench was characterized by a compact fill consisting of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of light-grey marl (SUF.T.54.04). The northern area of the trench below the tumble deposit featured a light-grey stucco floor (SUF.T.54.03). We investigated the intersection between the two deposits and it appeared that the fill of pebbles and marl (SUF.54.04) was placed on top of the already existing floor SUF.T.54.03. Therefore, we removed part of the fill and found out that it was placed on top of the rock outcrop

(SUF.T.54.05) located 0.5m below the surface level. The floor SUF.T.54.03 abutted the outcrop (Figure 28).

In summary, the construction sequence in the unit began with the floor SUF.T.54.03 abutting the rock outcrop. Subsequently, the fill SUF.T.54.04 was placed over the outcrop and part of the floor. It remained unclear whether the fill was part of an architectural feature (a kind of platform without a face) or just an accumulation of tumble. In any case, a less compact layer of tumble accumulated on top of SUF.T.54.03 and SUF.T.54.04 followed by the formation of the topsoil.

4.6 Operation SUF.T.62

The unit SUF.T.62 was placed on top of Group 1, near its northern edge, about 5m south of the unit SUF.T.48 and 2m to the east of Structure 1 (Figure 2). The area featured a looters' trench that was investigated and backfilled by John Tomasic in 2002. The 2002 operation revealed that there was a platform on the northern edge of Group 1. However, only the southern face of the platform was explored. Therefore the goal of the excavation in 2007 was to find the interface between the northern face of the platform and the stairway uncovered in the units SUF.T.47/48/50 as well as to explore the area south of the platform. Most of the investigation was confined to removing the thin (0.4-0.1m) tumble layer and exploring the latest construction phase.

The operation began with locating and cleaning the 2002 excavation unit. A 1.2x2.4m area of that trench was exposed including the southern face of the platform (SUF.T.62.06) and the earliest floor (SUF.T.65.05) to the south of it (Figure 29). Subsequently, a 0.6x6m extension was laid out to the south of the 2002 unit and an identical extension was placed to the north of it (Figure 29). In the southern extension, the removal of the tumble layer (SUF.T.62.02) initially exposed a 0.06m-thick stucco floor (SUF.T.62.08) that would eventually cap the platform and the area to the south of it. However, that floor was preserved only about a meter to the north of the southern edge of the extension unit. An eroded floor of the platform itself was found further north (SUF.T.62.09). That floor was going underneath the floor SUF.T.62.08. Since either floor was heavily eroded, the fill of the platform consisting of marl and pebbles (SUF.T.62.07) was also exposed.

The northern face of the platform (SUF.T.62.10) was discovered 2.3m to the north of the southern edge of the extension (Figure 29). It consisted of two rows of rough limestone blocks (0.15x0.2x0.3m) placed in the fill of mortar and pebbles. The stucco floor SUF.T.62.12 abutted the face of the platform from the north. Most of the stucco cap of the floor was gone and the investigation further north revealed an increasingly eroded surface of the subfloor fill SUF.T.62.11 (Figure 29).

About 2m north of the platform, the excavations revealed a series of steps (SUF.T.63.13) descending towards the plaza below. That was likely the upper part of the monumental stairway located in the units SUF.T.47/48/50. Given the location of the unit SUF.T.62, the steps were part of the middle section of the stairway characterized by lower and narrower steps. Each step uncovered in SUF.T.62 (except the topmost one that was likely

damaged by erosion) was about 0.3m wide and 0.3m high and was built of two rows of limestone blocks (0.15x0.2x0.1m to 0.2x0.3x0.5m) in the fill of pebbles and mortar (Figure 29).

The first deposit encountered after the removal of tumble in the southern extension of the unit SUF.T.62 was the stucco floor designated SUF.T.62.19 (Figure 29). Some 0.3m south of the edge of the extension unit, the excavation exposed the face of a low step (SUF.T.62.14) rising 0.1m above the level of the floor SUF.T.62.19 (Figure 29). The floor (SUF.T.62.16) to the south of the step extended over 5m all the way to the southern edge of the extension unit. Some 0.3 m south of the step SUF.T.62.14, a 0.14m-high wall built of just one course of limestone blocks was found on top of the floor SUF.T.62.16 (Figure 29). The wall had no southern face and was at least 0.4m wide.

A 1x0.6m probe into the floor SUF.T.62.16 revealed that it was only 0.15m thick. Another stucco floor designated SUF.T.62.17 was found below. Its removal exposed yet another stucco floor (SUF.T.62.18) some 0.3m below the surface of the floor SUF.T.62.16. Unfortunately, no diagnostic sherds were retrieved from that probe.

In summary, the construction sequence in the area of the unit SUF.T.62 began with the construction of the platform (SUF.T.62.06/07/10). The floors to the south (SUF.T.62.05) and to the north (SUF.T.62.11/12) of the platform were part of the same construction phase because they all shared the same construction fill. The stairway steps (SUF.T.62.13) further north were part of the same construction episode. The surface of the platform was capped with the floor SUF.T.62.09. The next stage in the construction sequence consisted of several re-plastering/filling events south of the platform, the first one being represented by the floors SUF.T.62.04/18 and the second corresponding to the floors SUF.T.62.03/17. Subsequently, the platform and the area to the south were capped with the floors SUF.T.62.08 and SUF.T.62.16 with a low step (SUF.T.62.14) in the middle. The final construction episode in the area was the placement of a low wall (SUF.T.62.15) on top of the floor SUF.T.62.16. After the abandonment of the site, the tumble and the topsoil accumulated on top of the earlier deposits.

5. Investigations west of Structure 1/Group 1

One of the updated goals of the 2007 field season was to explore the western slope of the Group 1 mound, immediately to the west of Room 13, one of the most elaborate halls of the Structure 1 complex. The initial hypothesis was that Room 13 might have public functions and therefore, one might find a formal access to that room from the plaza to the west of Group 1.

5.1 Operation SUF.T.49

The 1x4m unit SUF.T.49 was placed more or less in the center of the western slope of Group 1 (Figure 2). The goal of the operation was to find out if there was an access to the top Group 1. If there were an access, the operation would investigate the nature of that access and the area to the west of it.

The operation began with cleaning and removing the topsoil (SUF.T.49.01), a dark-brown deposit of silt and clay with some pebbles. Below the topsoil, we came upon a 0.6m-thick layer of tumble consisting of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of light-brown silt (SUF.T.49.02; Figure 30). The deposit contained high concentration of the Late Classic ceramics. Therefore, the area was likely used as a midden by the Late Classic residents of Group 1.

The removal of the tumble layer exposed three stairway steps facing west (SUF.T.49.03). The western faces of the steps consisted of two rows of rough limestone blocks (0.2x0.3x0.3m) in the fill of marl and pebbles (Figure 30). Each step was about 0.3m tall, the lowest being 0.4m-wide and the other two – 1m-wide. The steps were associated with the floor SUF.T.49.04 to the north (Figure 30). The floor did not abut the steps. Rather, the steps and the floor were part of the same feature. The floor was made out a mix of compact marl and pebbles and was highly eroded at the time of the discovery. It was only 0.1m thick and was placed directly on top of the bedrock surface (SUF.T.49.05) that appeared only marginally leveled (Figure 30). The ceramics sample retrieved from the floor suggested that it was constructed in the Early Classic period.

In summary, the construction sequence in the area of the unit SUF.T.49 began with the placement of the floor SUF.T.49.04 and the steps SUF.T.49.03 on top of the cleaned bedrock. That episode likely happened in the Early Classic. During the Late Classic, the area saw the accumulation of the tumble from the platform wall and the trash from the platform residents. The low quality of the steps and the associated floor suggested that the area did not have public functions and served as a kind of backyard for Structure 1.

5.2 Operation SUF.T.52

The 1x5m unit SUF.T.52 was placed more or less in front of the central doorway of Room 13 on the western slope of Group 1 (Figure 2). The goal of the operation was to find out if there was an access to the room from the base of the Group 1 platform.

The operation began with cleaning and removing the topsoil (SUF.T.52.01), a dark-brown deposit of silt and clay with some pebbles. Below the topsoil, we came upon a 0.6m-thick layer of tumble consisting of pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of light-grey silt and ash (SUF.T.52.02; Figure 32). The deposit contained high concentration of the Late Classic ceramics. Therefore, the area was likely used as a midden by the Late Classic residents of Group 1.

The removal of the tumble/midden layer exposed the corner of a partially collapsed architectural feature (SUF.T.52.03) that could be interpreted as a stairway or as a platform at least 1.2m-high (Figure 31, 32). The stairway interpretation seemed more likely because the collapse of the platform would have produced more tumble, whereas in the case of SUF.T.52.03, there was virtually no tumble west of the face of the feature. Assuming that SUF.52.03 was a stairway, only the lowest 0.3-0.4m-high step remained in situ. The faces of the three following steps were literally torn apart by the tree roots and their layout could only be guessed based on the distribution of the tumble (Figure 31, 32). Each step was likely 0.3m tall and 0.4m wide. The facing stones are rough limestone

blocks in the fill of marl and pebbled. Overall, just as the steps found in the unit SUF.T.49, the stairway was a far cry from the monumental steps on the northern side of Group 1.

There was a flat area, at least 1.8m wide, to the east of the fourth step. A crude floor of pebbles and grey marl (SUF.T52.04) abutted the steps from the north (Figure 31, 32). The floor did not cover the area north of the north-western corner of the stairway and a darker deposit (SUF.52.06) was visible in that area (Figure 32).

Given that the corner of the stairway SUF.T.52.03 was so poorly preserved, I decided to remove it completely in order to investigate the earlier deposits. The overwhelmingly Early Classic ceramic sample from the construction fill of SUF.T.52.03 (pebbles and cobbles in the matrix of light-grey silt) suggested that it was constructed during that period, although it was not always possible to distinguish between the SUF.T.52.03 and the tumble/midden above resulting in few Late Classic sherds attributed to SUF.T.52.03.

The removal of SUF.T.52.03 and part of SUF.T.52.04 exposed the underlying compact deposit of pebbles and grey marl designated SUF.T.52.05 (Figure 32). The deposit contained high concentration of ceramics, all dating to the Early Classic period. A probe into that layer in the eastern section of the trench exposed a 0.1m-thick lens of ash, dark-grey marl, and charcoal fragments (SUF.T.52.07) with an incredible concentration of Early Classic sherds (Figure 32). That deposit was located 1.8m below the surface level. Its removal revealed a lighter deposit of marl (SUF.T.52.08/09) with less ash, fewer charcoal fragments and lower concentration of ceramics (Figure 32). There could be no doubt that the deposits SUF.T.52.07-09 represented an Early Classic midden sealed by an Early Classic construction episode. It was the first Early Classic midden found at La Sufricaya. The removal of the midden deposits and the section of the construction fill SUF.T.52.05 further west exposed the surface of the bedrock (SUF.T.52.10) that appeared to be slightly leveled (Figure 32).

In summary, the construction sequence in the area of the unit SUF.T.52 began with the deposition of the midden (SUF.T.52.07-09) on top of the bedrock in the western section of the trench. It was followed by the placement of the foundation deposit SUF.T.52.05 and by the construction of the steps (SUF.T.52.03) presumably leading to the top of the Group 1 platform. A crude floor SUF.T.52.04 was placed to the west of the steps. The area was turned into a midden once again in the Late Classic, while the steps began to fall apart. Finally, the topsoil formed on top of the tumble, although the destruction of the steps by the tree roots apparently continued.

Overall, the excavations suggested that there might be an access to Group 1 from the west. However, the area seemed to have been a kind of backyard for the residents of Group 1 and not the main or the 'public' access to Structure 1.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Main components of the public architecture at La Sufricaya

Thanks to the investigations in 2005 and 2007, we can identify three main areas within the core of La Sufricaya. The main criteria for a typology of spaces at the site are monumentality (volume and complexity of architecture) and access or restriction of access to each area. It is worth noting that the builders of La Sufricaya skillfully used the natural topography of the area in creating a sequence of increasingly monumental and restricted spaces.

The plaza in the northern area of the site likely functioned as the main entrance point. It is the lowest section of La Sufricaya. It was open to the north and to the east. The western area seems to have been bounded by natural topography. There are two monumental buildings in the area – Structure 3 and the ball court. After the second construction phase, the area of the ball court was lower than the rest of the plaza.

The access to the second area of the site, the main plaza, was restricted by the ramp and channeled to the monumental stairway on its northern side. The stairway limited and directed the movement of potential visitors. Moreover, it organized the visual perception of the main ceremonial space as it unfolded before the eyes of those who would walk up the steps. Those entering the plaza would have to face the platform of the palace, the focal point of the area. If the visitors turned left upon reaching the center of the plaza, they would face east, the funeral temple, and the monuments in front of it.

If we project the arrangement of Mesoamerican maps onto the spatial organization of the site, the movement of the visitors from north to south was also the movement from left to right, the direction of great symbolic significance, especially in the context of migration and foundation stories.

The northern façade of the palace platform (Group 1) served a two-fold function. First, the monumental stairway with tall and broad steps and the open platform on the top provided the focal point, the stage for the public performances. Second, the narrow stairway in the middle of those monumental steps offered a restricted access to the platform of the palace itself. The third area of the site, Group 1, was markedly separated from the spaces destined for large-scale public activities. The insistence on separation was apparent in the location of the main palace complex: on the north-western corner of the platform, turned 180 degrees away from the plaza. Nothing in the palace could be seen from the plaza below; nothing in the plaza below was worth seeing from the palace. The visitor who climbed up the narrow access stairway would have to walk around the palace complex in order to enter its main courtyard.

One may wonder if the main palace complex was meant to be a place for large receptions. Anywhere in the area east and north of it, there might be a structure destined for that purpose. At least two large postholes were found immediately south of the platform on top of the stairway, although it remained unclear if those features represented a colonnaded hall that the visitors to Group 1 would have to walk through after stepping

down from the platform. In line with the insistence on separation between the main plaza and Group 1, that hall would be largely hidden from the view of those at the base of the stairway.

The investigations also shed some light on the non-public areas to the west of the palace. Just around the corner from the imposing palace façade and the main stairway, there were stairs built of rough limestone blocks, crude floors (or just barely leveled bedrock surface) and piles of trash. That was likely not the face of the palace that the visitors were supposed to see.

6.2 Construction phases and chronology

One of the main goals of the field season was to reconstruct the construction phases of the public spaces at the site. The results suggest that the complex was built in two main stages (Figure 33). The first stage saw the construction of the main plaza, likely in its full extent, although part of its surface was the leveled living rock of the hill itself.

Interestingly enough, we did not find evidence of any building unambiguously associated with that phase. My guess would be that, if there were any structures, they were buried within Group 1. Structure 3 is the only building constructed on top of the paleosoil, so it may be associated with the first phase. However, the building is located way to the north-east of the lower plaza and its relationship to the ‘master sequence’ is unclear. Structure 2 and the eastern ball court structure rest on top of both construction phases. Nevertheless, in the absence of any evidence of multiple phases within the bulk of either structure, the most plausible explanation would be that either building was placed at the edges of the spaces defined by the second construction stage of the plazas.

The second construction stage apparently covered a smaller area of the site. However, it created a much more dramatic setting, raising the main plaza and adding the monumental stairway to the north of it, differentiating the spaces within the lower and the main plazas, adding what we know as the platform of Group 1. Following that phase, we see the emergence of all the attributes of a political center at La Sufricaya: a palace, a ball court, carved monuments, and finally a funeral shrine.

There were no major modifications after that phase. If Structure 2 originated as a funeral shrine, only one more burial was placed into it. The ball court was never repaired or modified. The floors in front of the ball court and in front of the Group 1 main stairway were re-plastered once. Some time after that, the central section of the stairway was expanded. No re-plastering followed. The floor to the south of the platform on top of the northern stairway of Group 1 was re-plastered twice before the whole area was sealed about the same time when the palace was terminated.

The preliminary ceramics analysis has offered some insights in the chronology of the construction phases. All ceramics retrieved from the Phase 1 plaza contexts is Late Preclassic. Same is largely true for Phase 2 plaza and Group 1 platform fill, although there were few Early Classic sherds in some contexts. However, no Late Preclassic midden was found at the site. There is nothing but paleosoil and/or bedrock underneath the Phase 1 plaza. The only known midden, all the *buildings*, and the last modification of

the Group 1 main stairway midsection contain Early Classic ceramics. The Early Classic ceramics from these contexts features exquisite serving vessels. In my opinion, the data suggest that the elite occupation at La Sufricaya begins with the construction of the plazas and that the beginning of the elite occupation coincides perfectly with the introduction of the Early Classic ceramics. Needless to say, the historical context of the emergence of La Sufricaya as a political center (see the introduction) makes this Late Preclassic – Early Classic transition all the way more intriguing.

6.3 Unanswered questions

One the most important remaining question with respect to the elite occupation at La Sufricaya is the question about its beginning. The first phase of the lower and the middle plazas remains something of a mystery. What was the function of these spaces when there was no palace around? Quite possibly, the first version of the palace is buried within the platform of Group 1. It is also possible that the ruler who presided over the dramatic emergence of La Sufricaya as a political center rests in the still undisturbed tomb within the platform of Structure 2. The areas east and south of Group 1 may contain middens from the earliest elite residences. In my opinion, any future research at the site should target the platform of Group 1, Structure 2, and the areas to the east and south of Group 1 as the most important clues to our understanding of the earliest pages in the history of the site.

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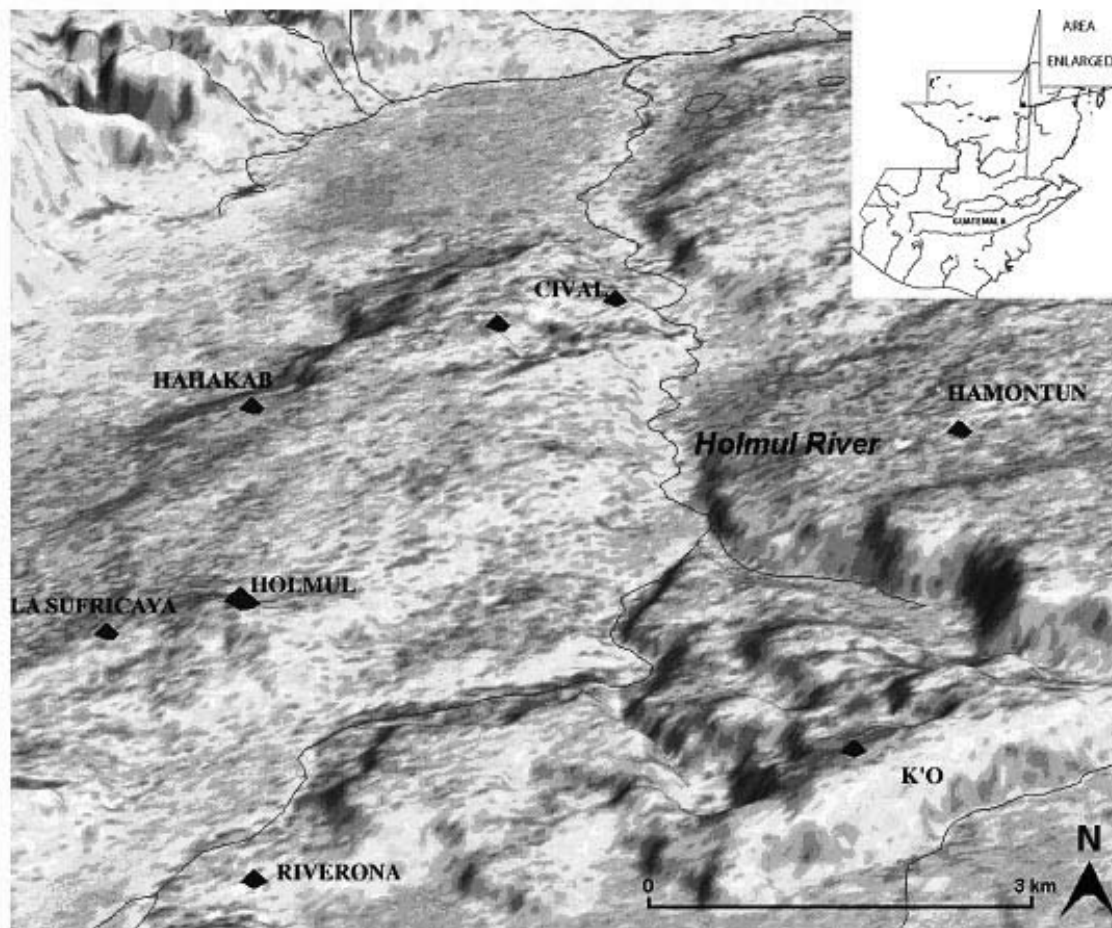


Figure 1: Location of La Sufricaya in the Holmul region

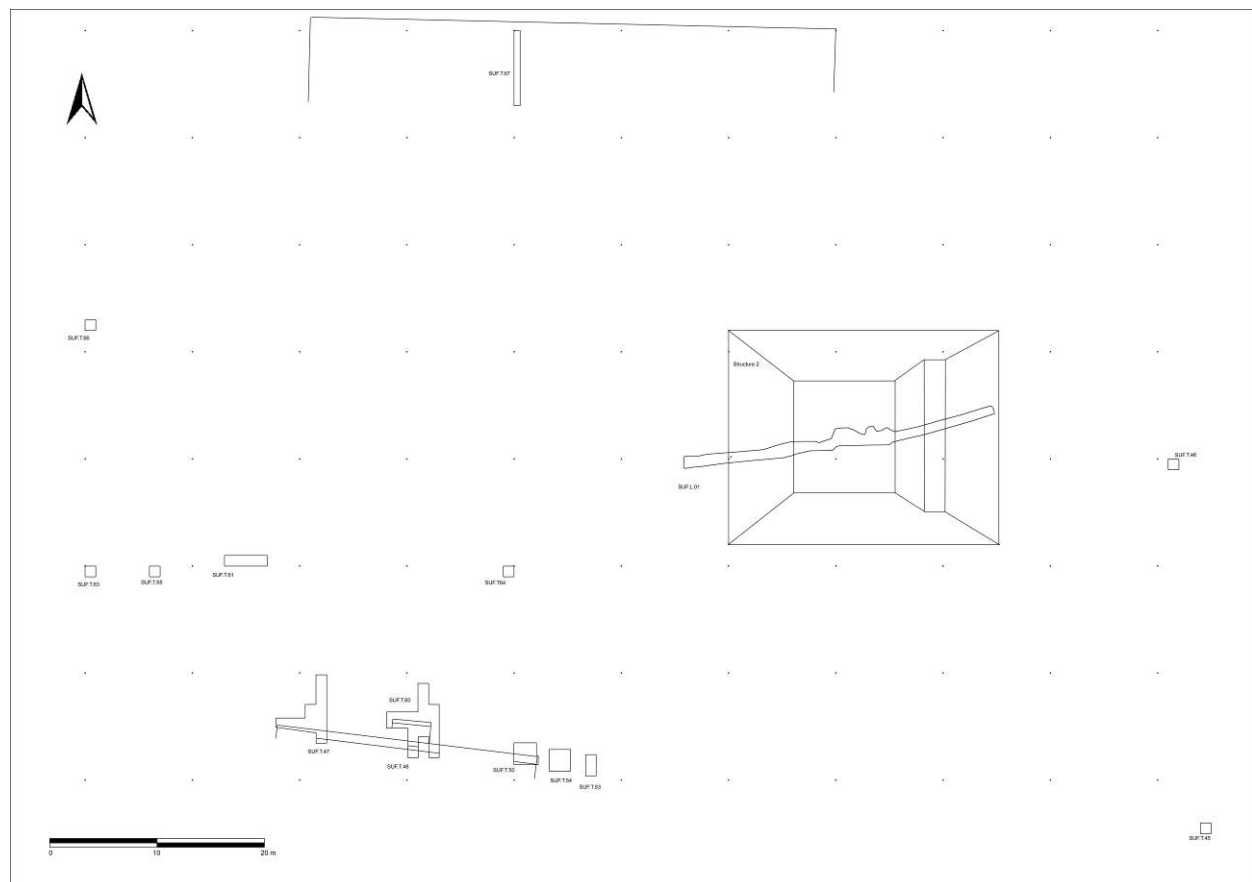


Figure 3: 2007 field season excavations: a close-up

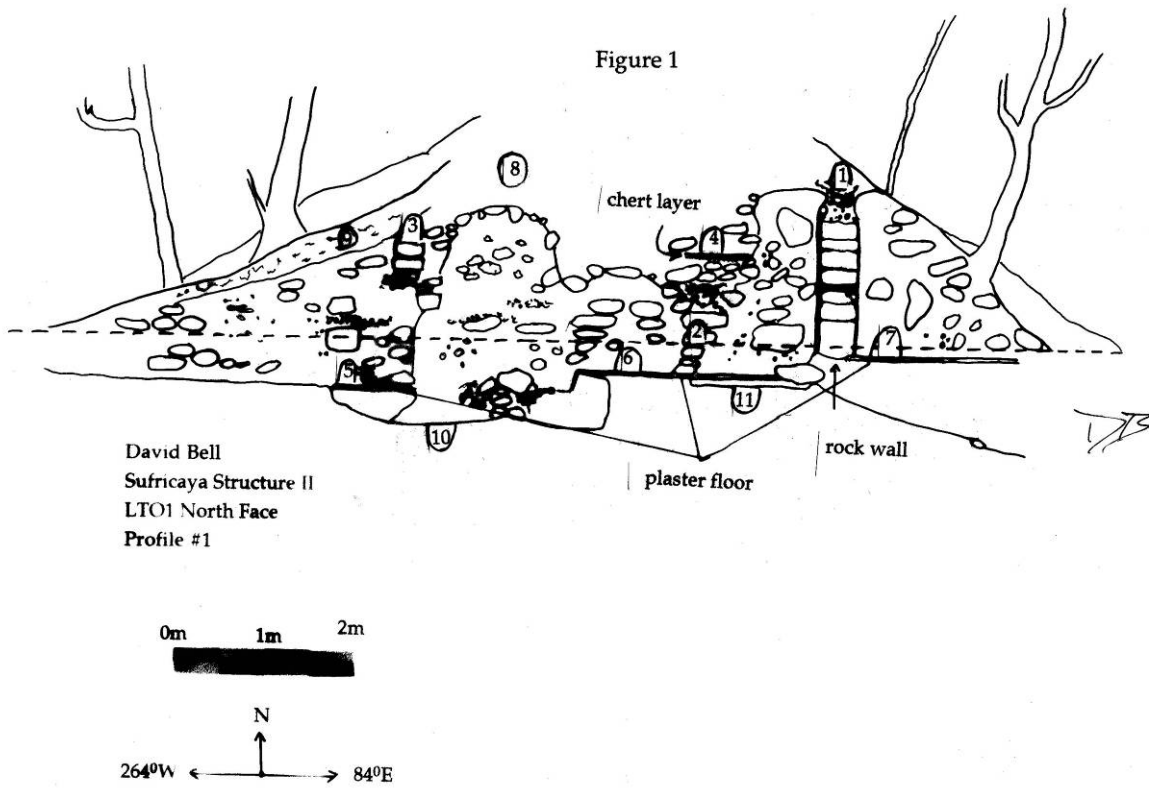


Figure 4: Structure 2, SUF.L.01, central section, superstructure, northern profile (David Bell 2002)

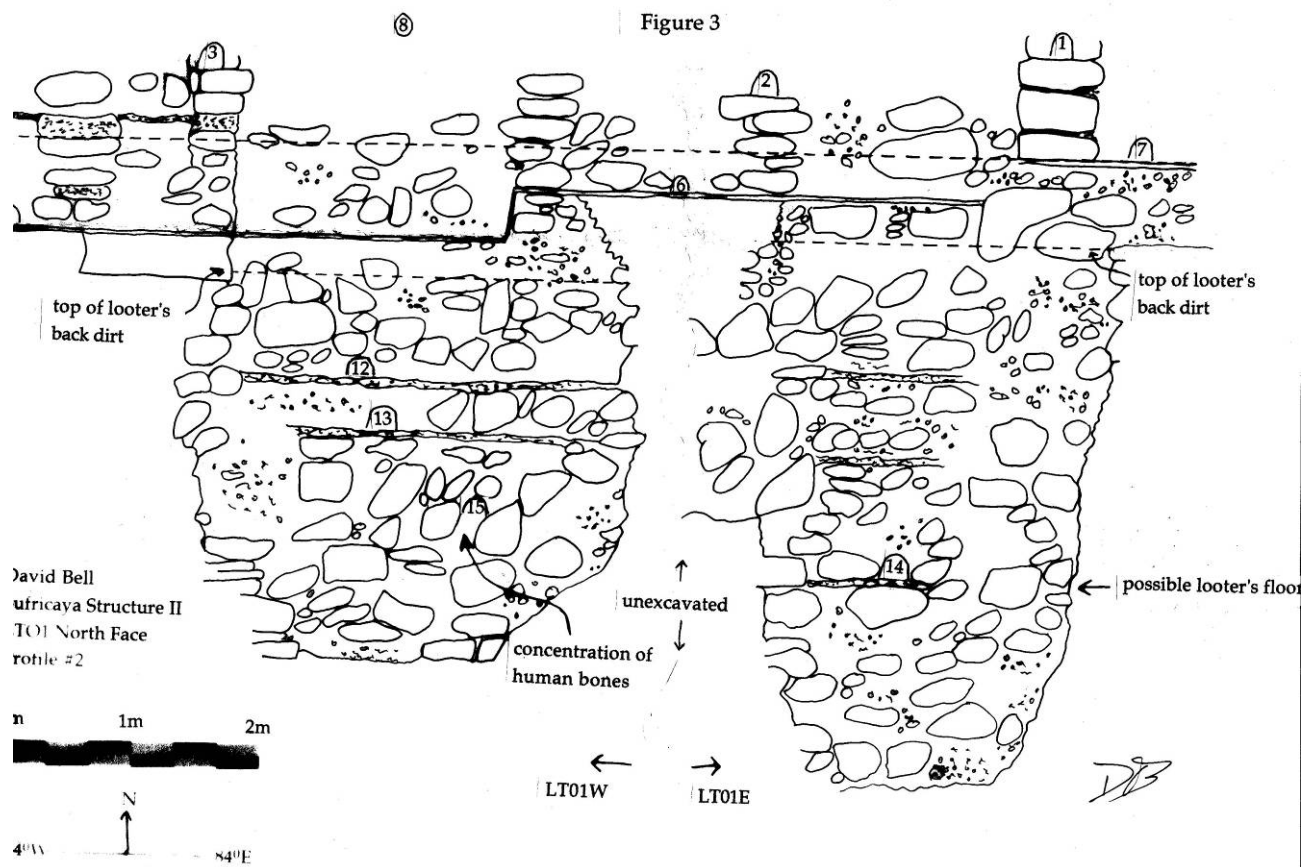


Figure 5: Structure 2, SUF.L.01, central section, substructure, northern profile, (David Bell 2002)

David Bell
Sufricaya Structure II
LTO1 Plan #1

Figure 2

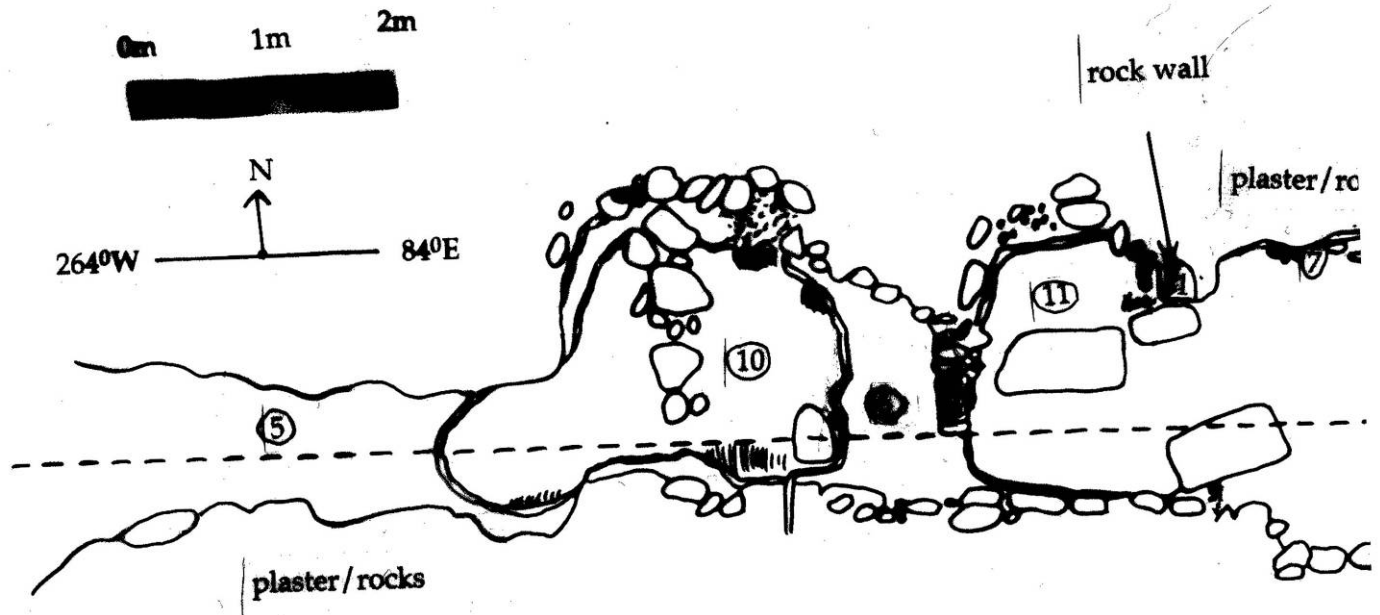


Figure 6: Structure 2, SUF.L.01, central section, plan view (David Bell 2002)

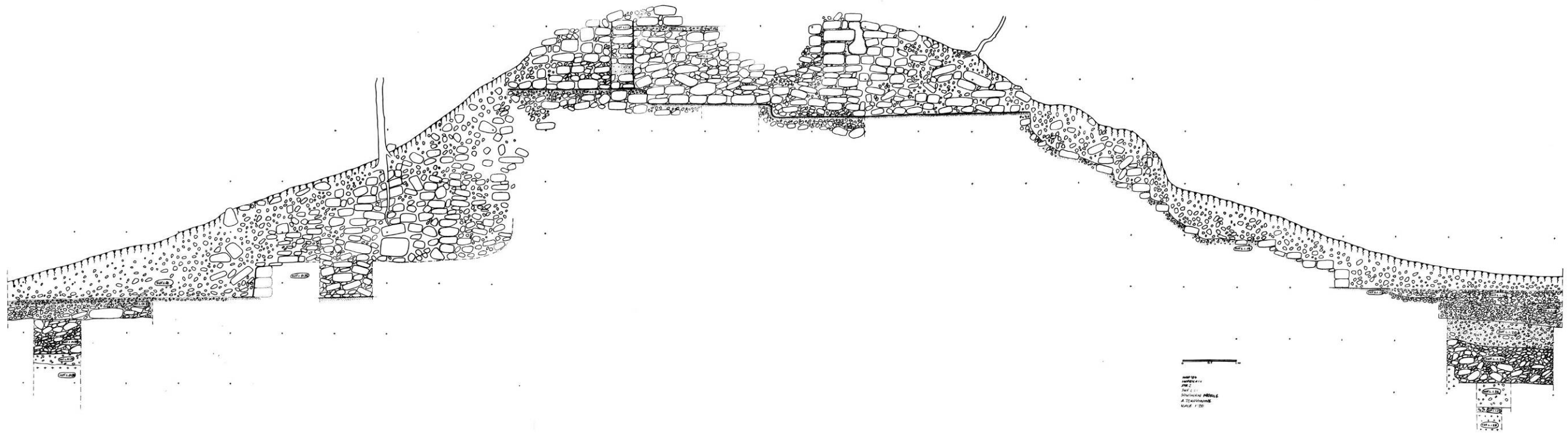


Figure 7: Structure 2, SUF.L.01, southern profile

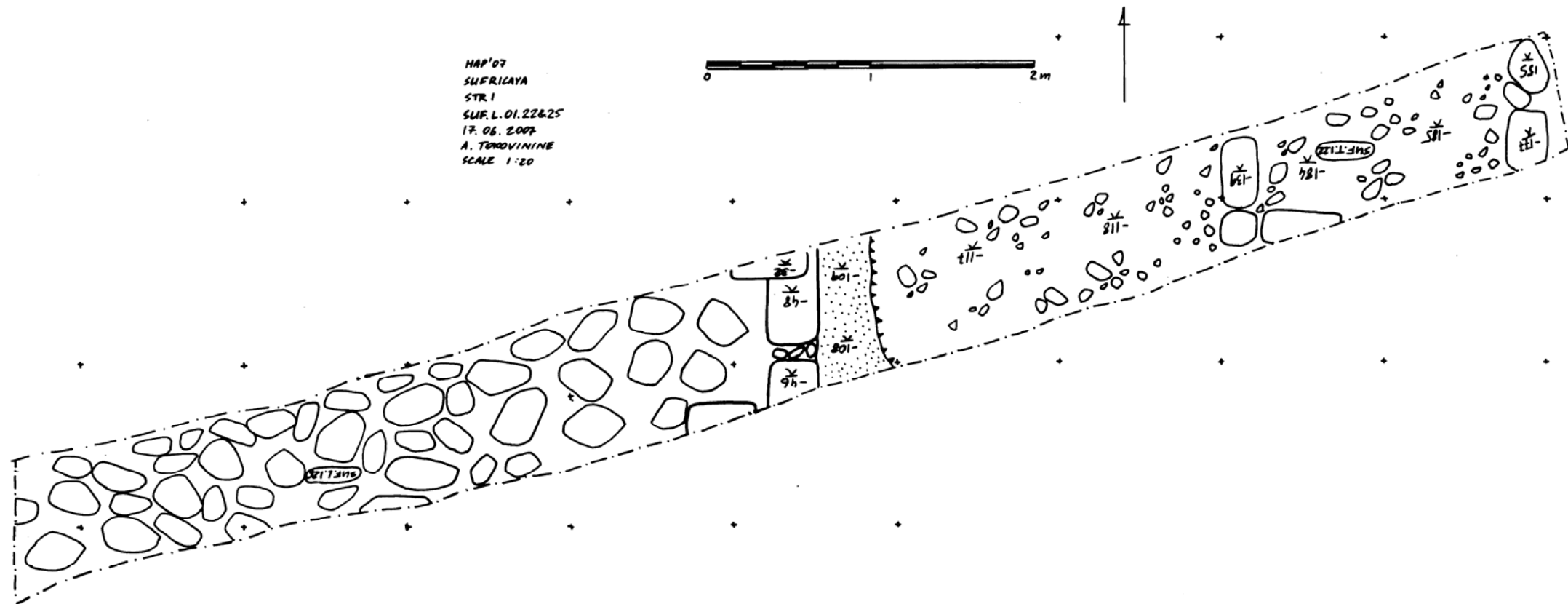


Figure 8: Structure 2, SUF.L.01, eastern section, plan view

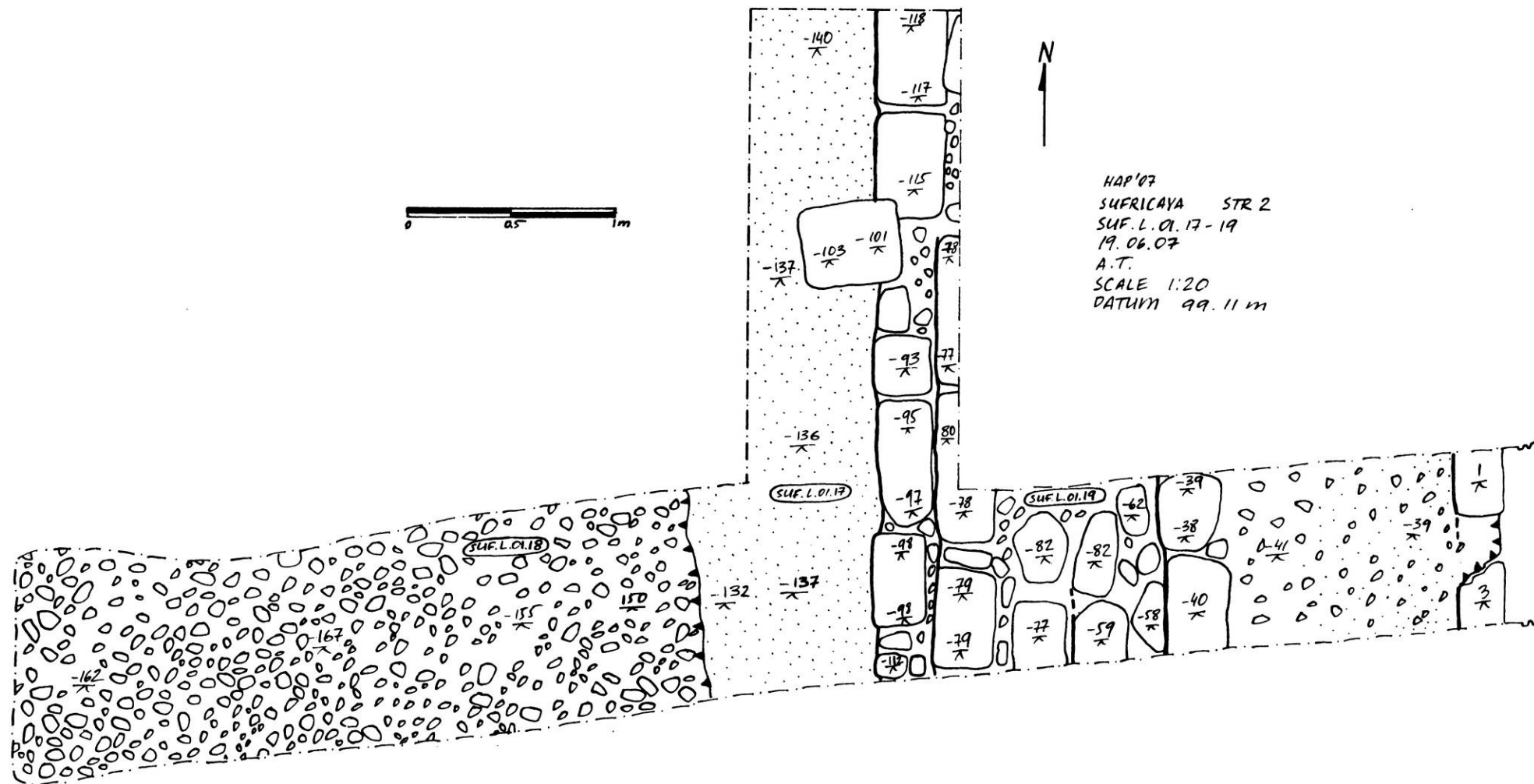
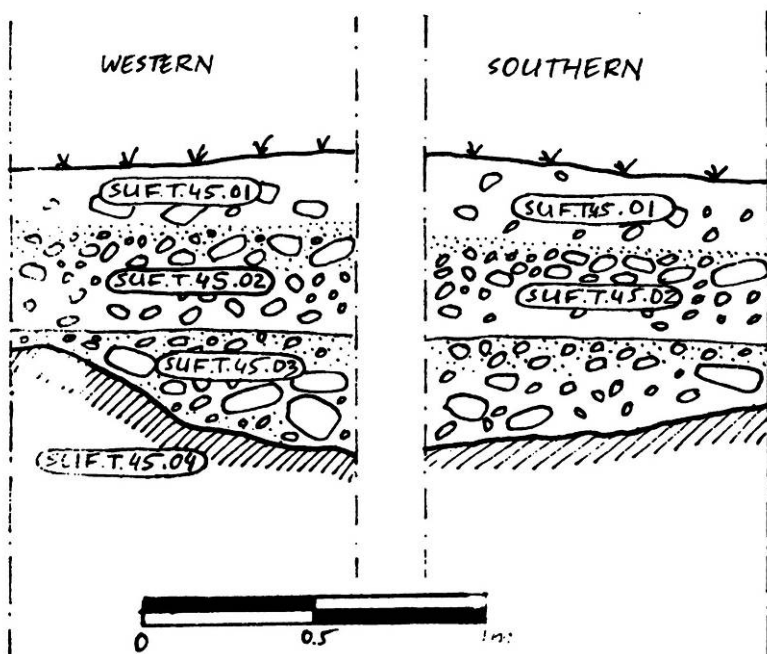
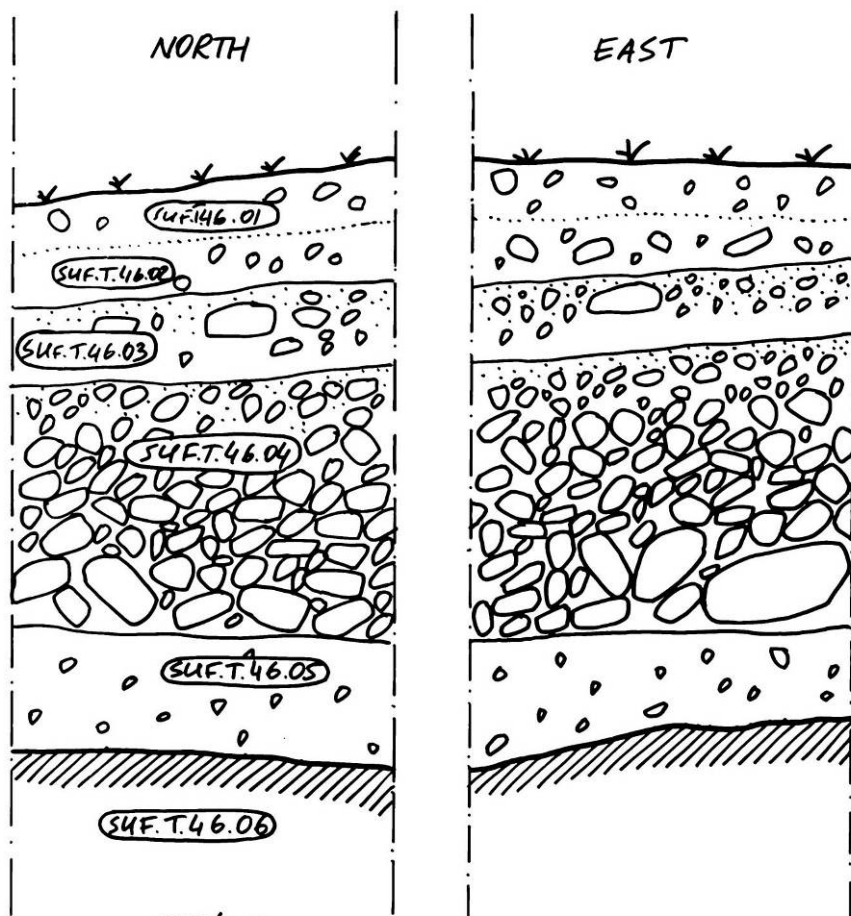


Figure 9: Structure 2, SUF.L.01, western section, plan view



HAP'07
 SUFRICAYA
 SUF.T.45.
 WESTERN SOUTHERN
 PROFILE.
 13.06.07
 A.T.

Figure 10: SUF.T.45 profile



HAP' 07
 SUFRICAYA
 SUF.T.46.
 NORTH AND EAST
 PROFILE
 24.06.07.
 A.T.
 SCALE 1:20



Figure 11: SUF.T.46 profile

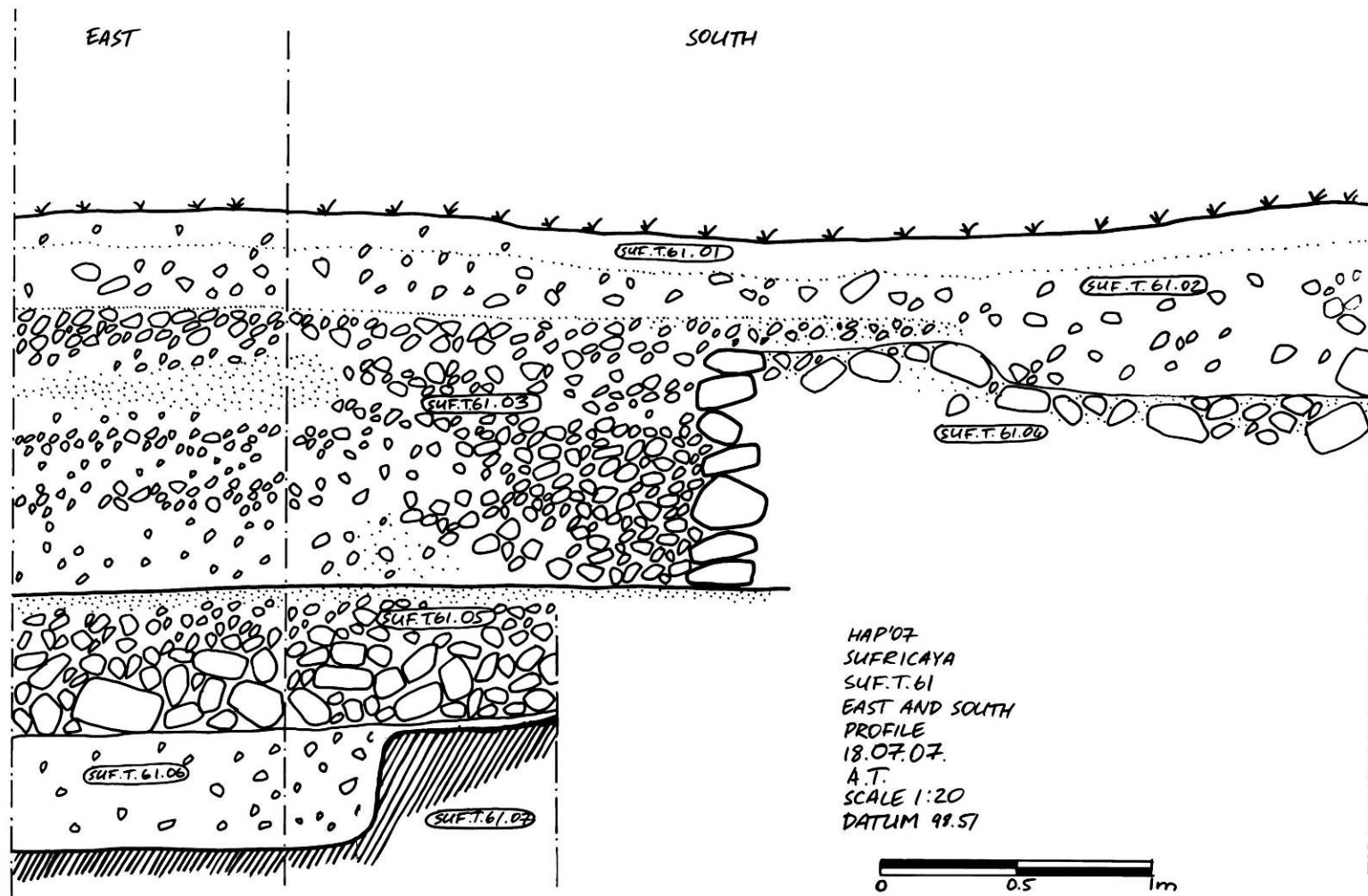


Figure 12: SUF.T.61 profile

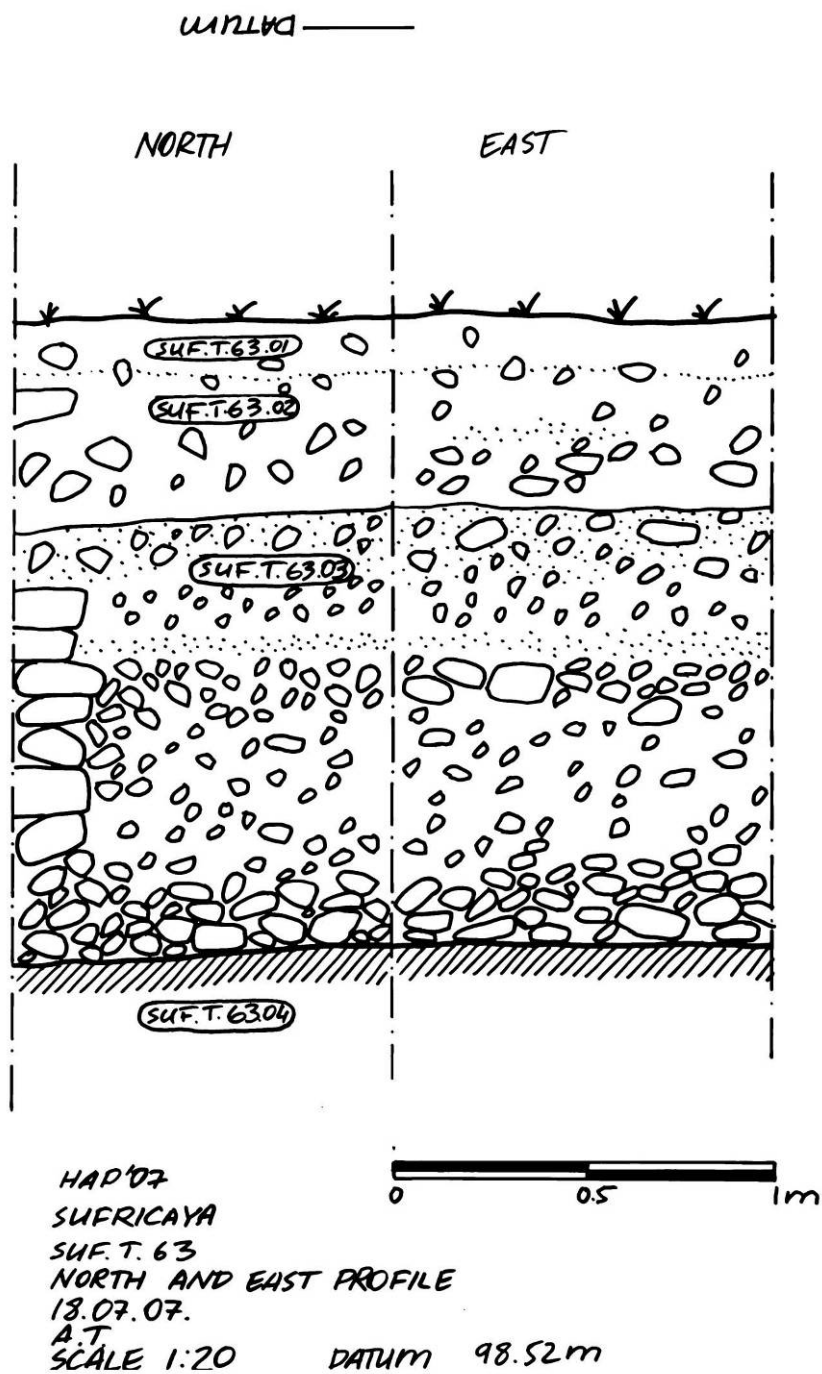


Figure 13: SUF.T.63 profile

— DATUM

HAP'07
SUFRICAYA
SUF.T.65.
WEST AND NORTH
PROFILE
18.7.7.
A.T.
DATUM 98.52 m

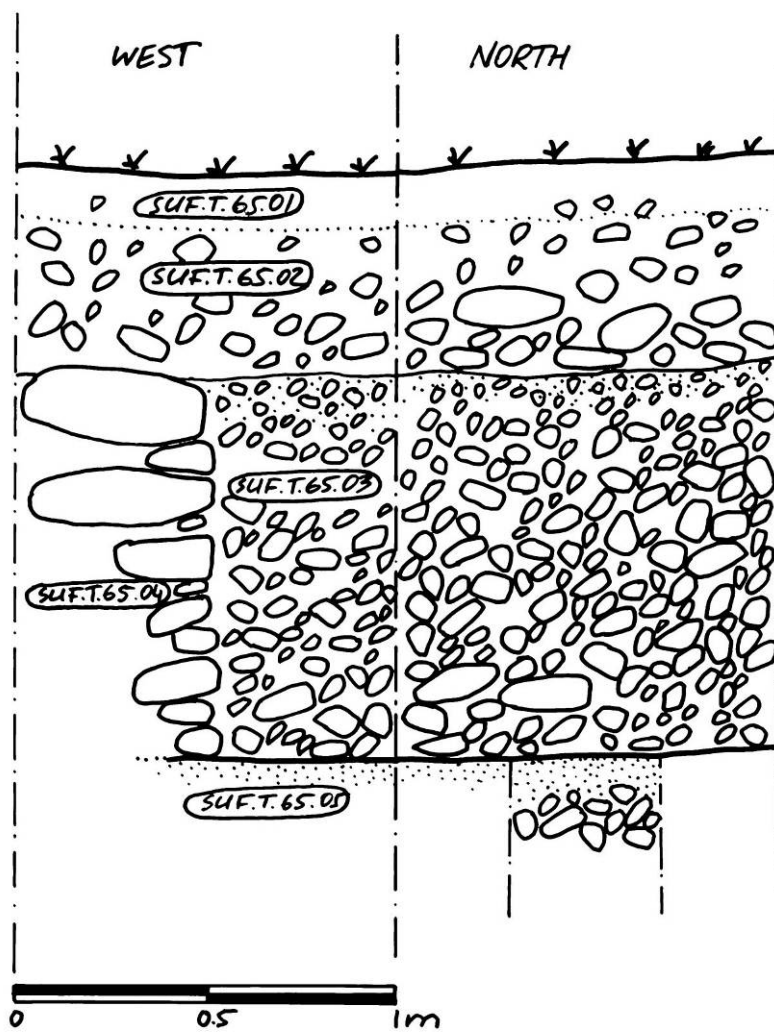


Figure 14: SUF.T.65 profile

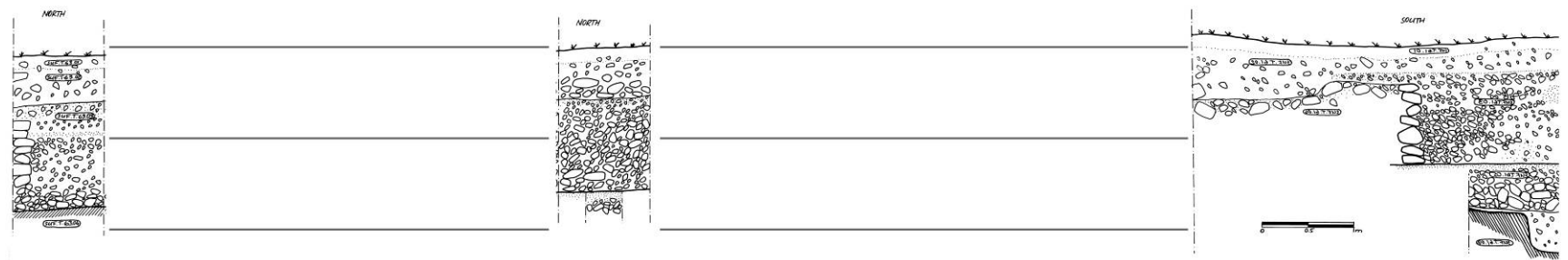


Figure 15: SUF.T.61 / 63 / 65 profile

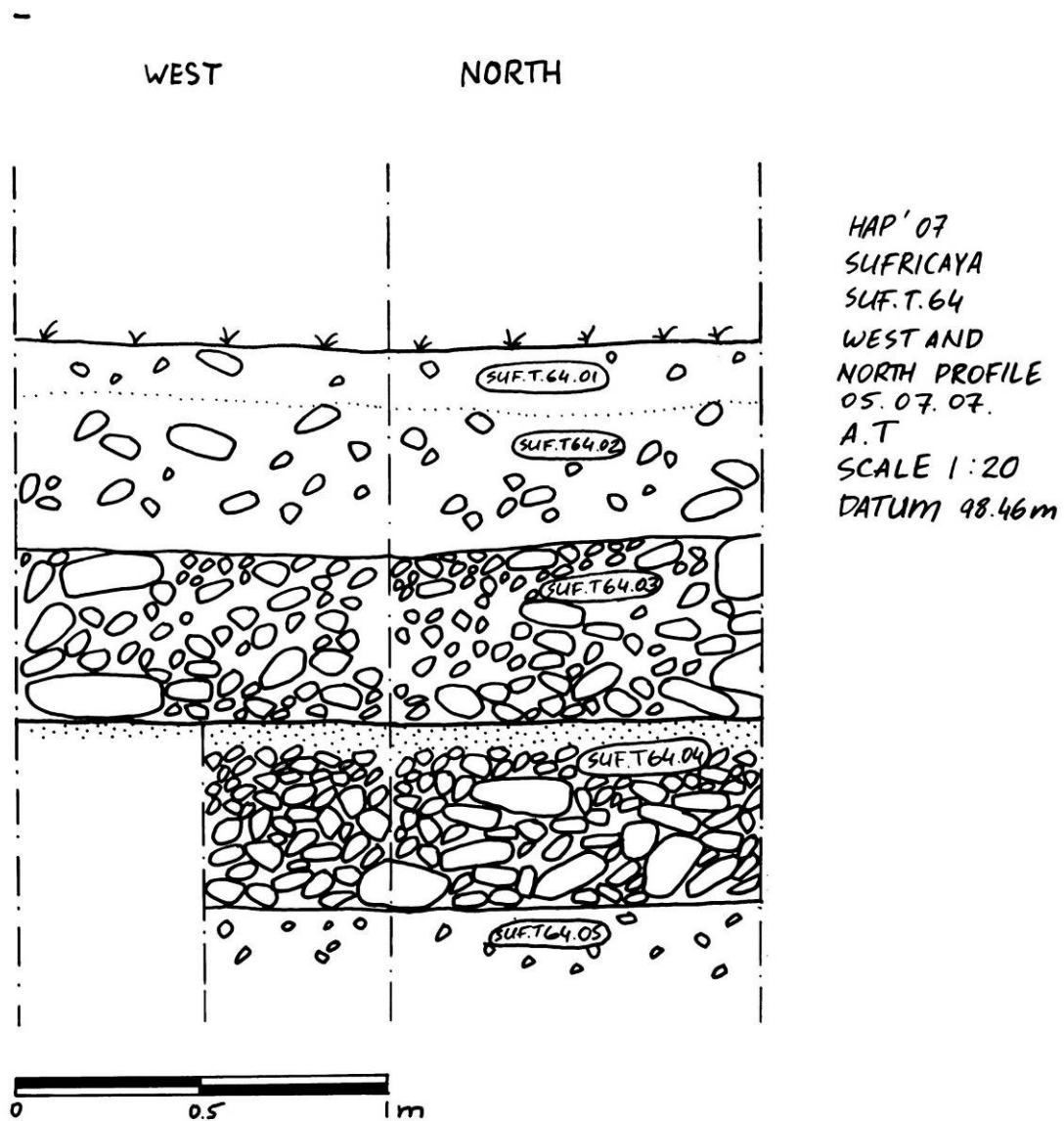


Figure 16: SUF.T.64 profile

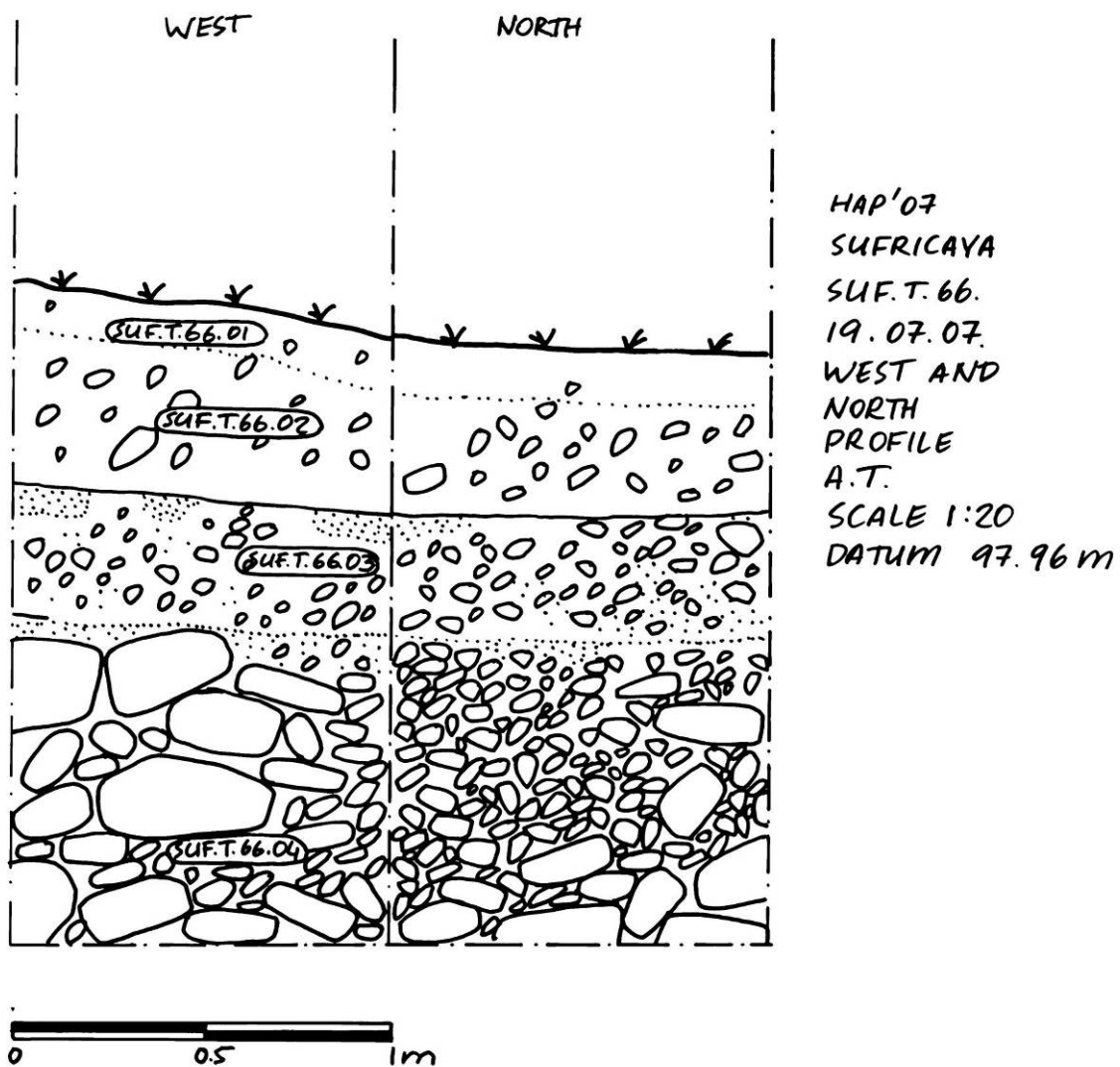


Figure 17: SUF.T.67 profile

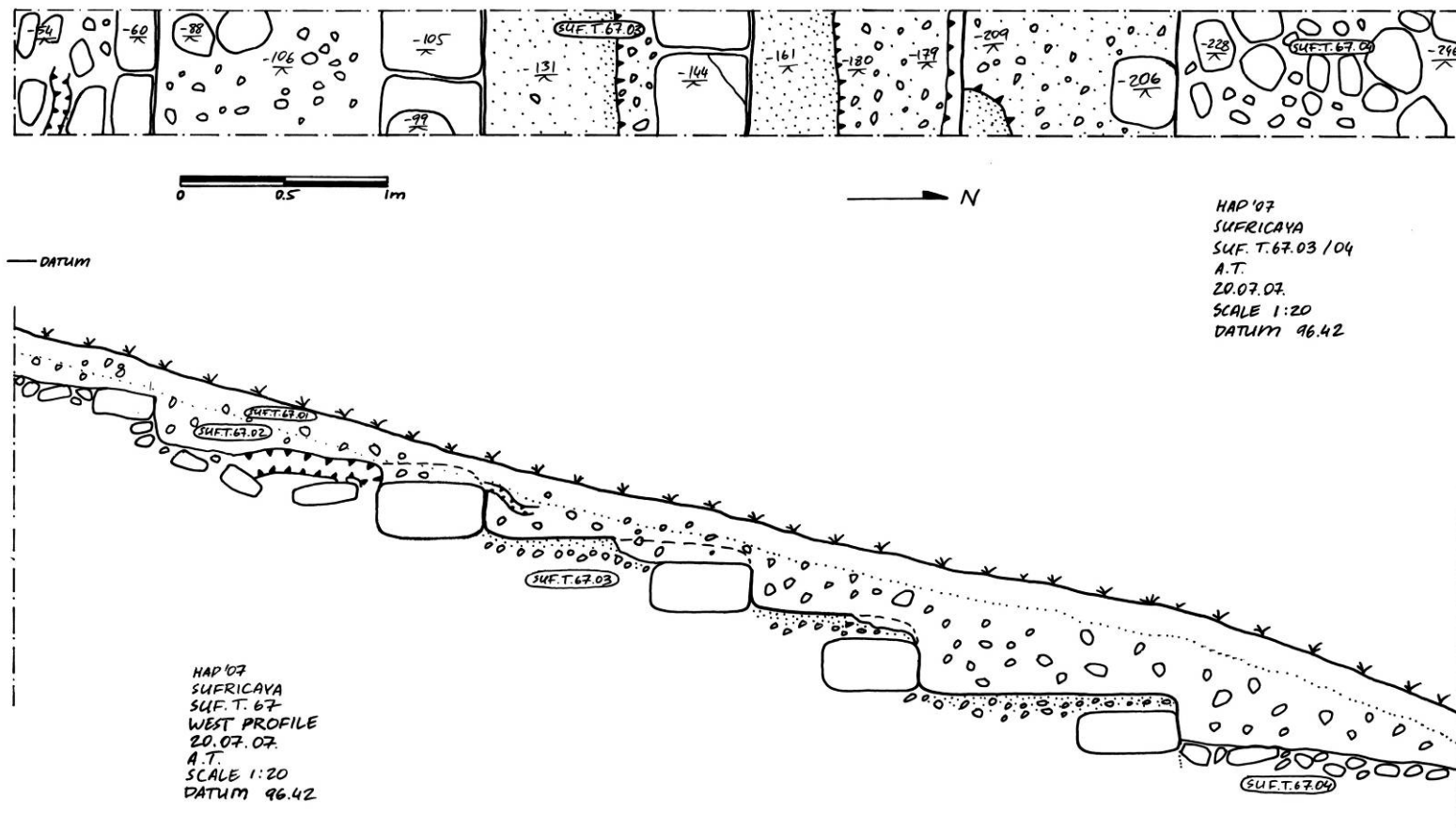


Figure 18: SUF.T.67 profile and plan view

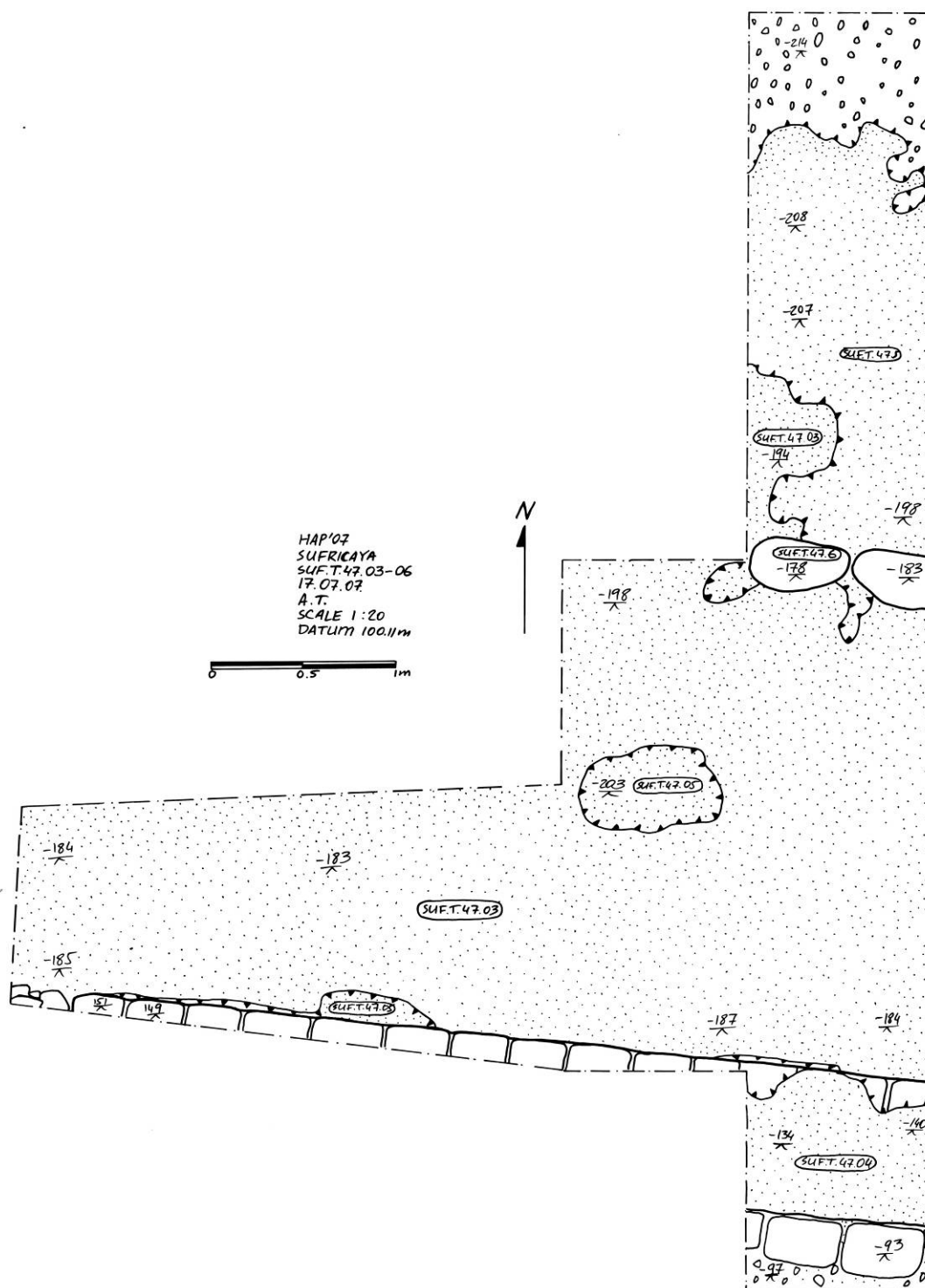


Figure 19: SUF.T.47 plan view

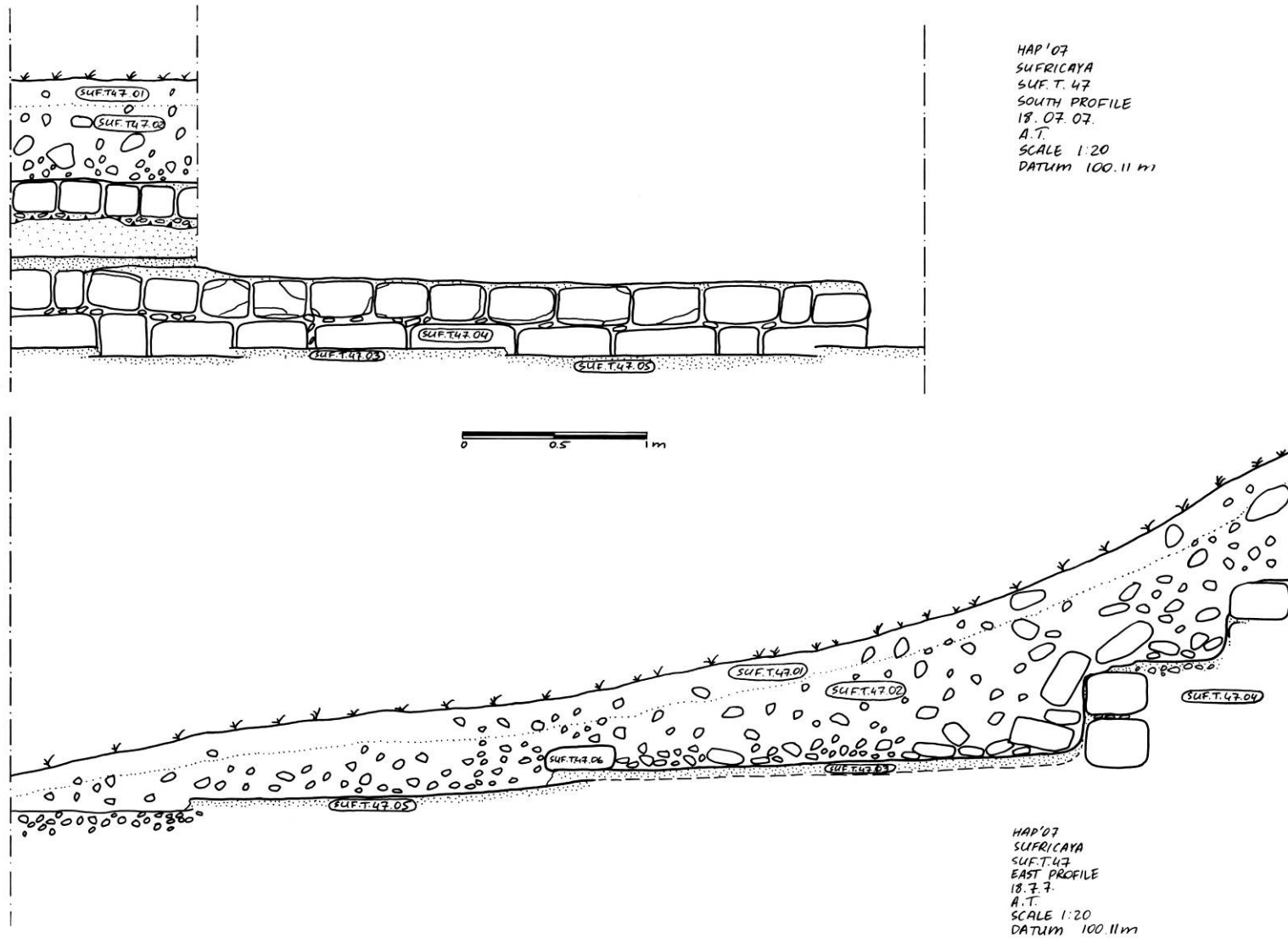


Figure 20: SUF.T.47 profile and front view

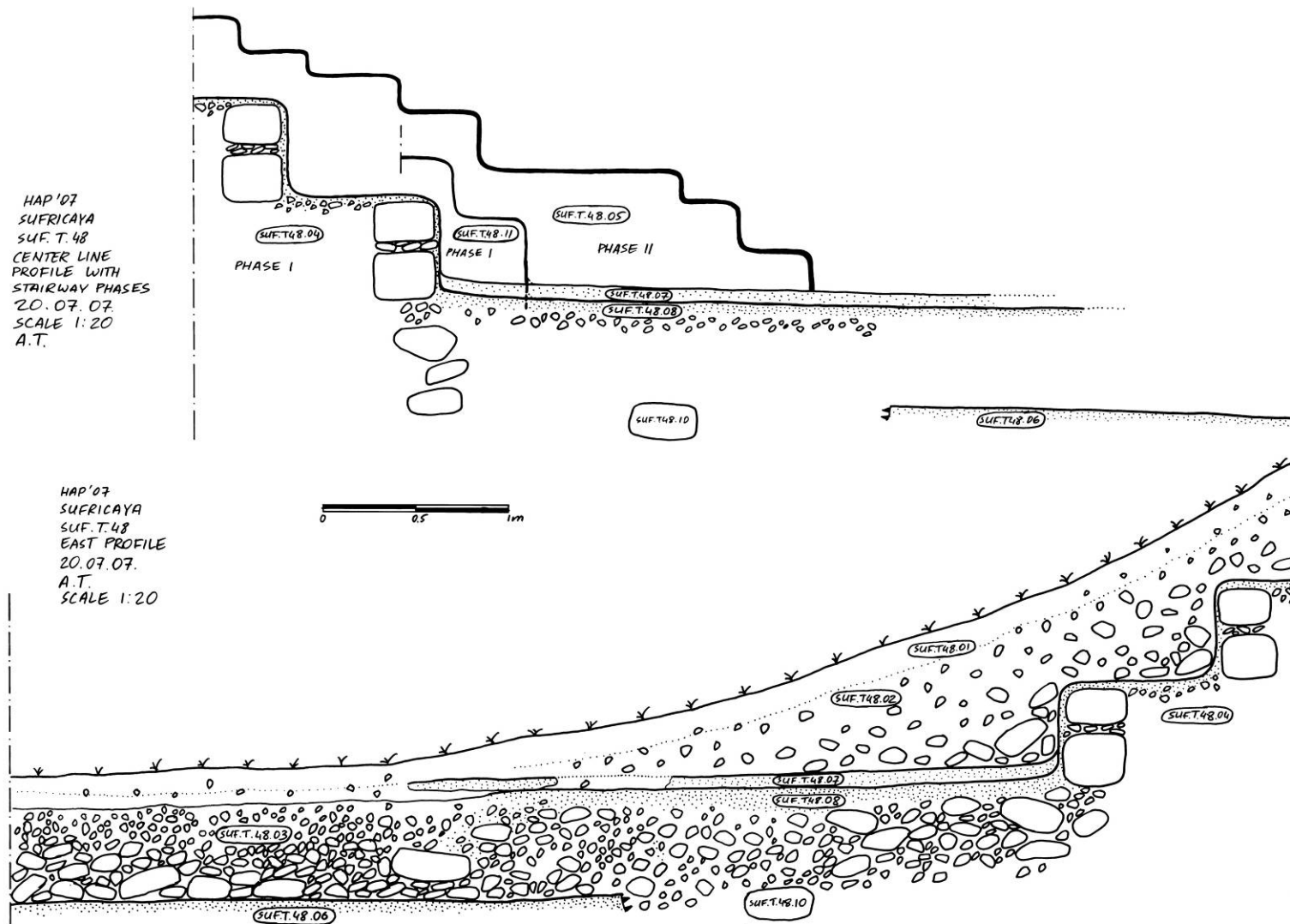


Figure 21: SUF.T.48 profile

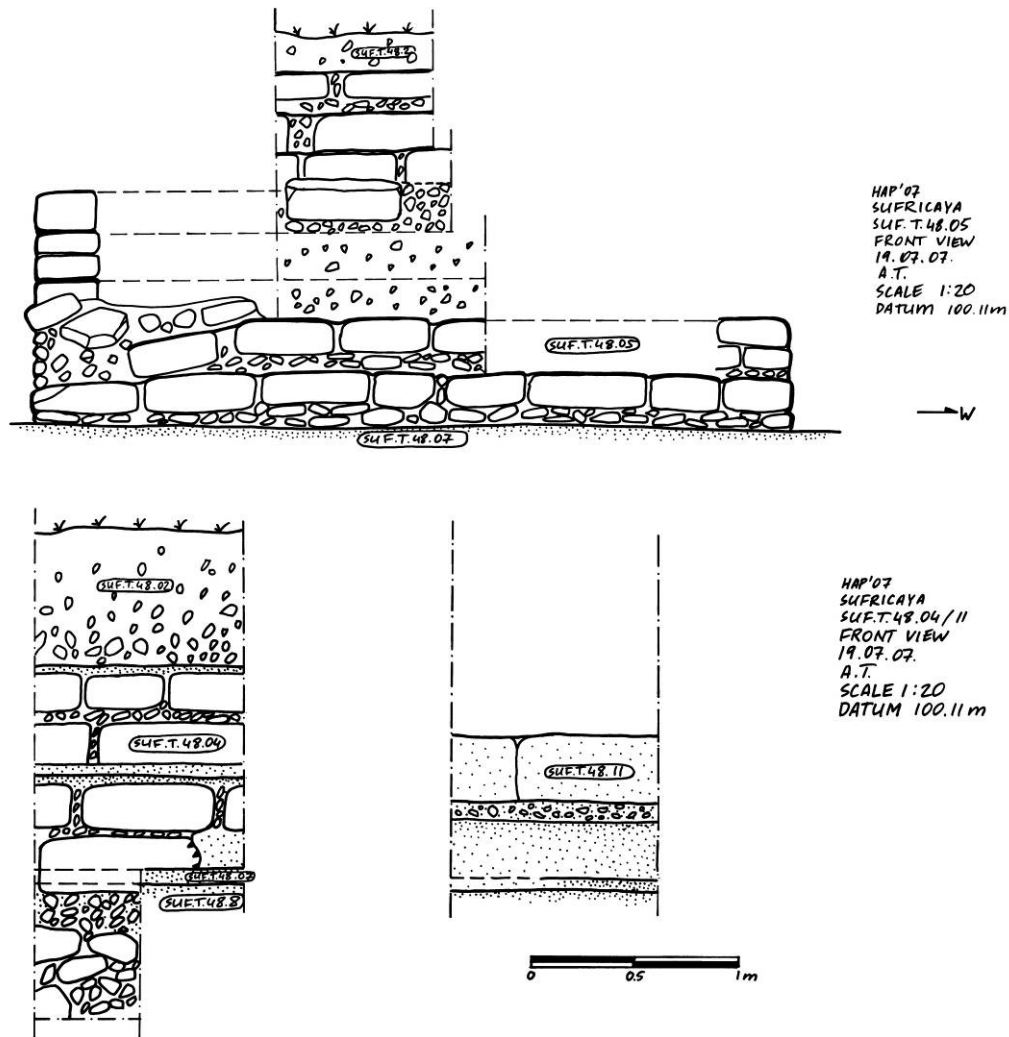


Figure 22: SUF.T.48 front view

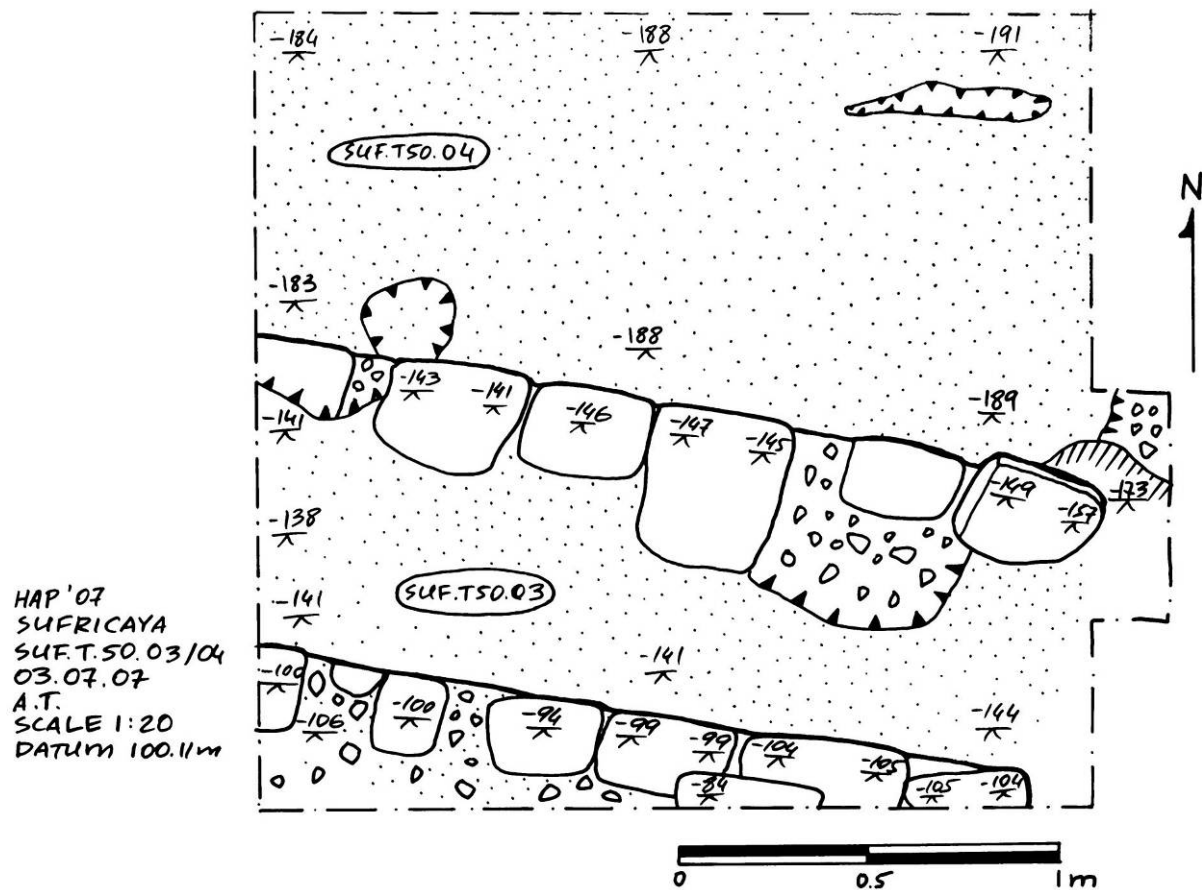


Figure 25: SUF.T.50 plan view

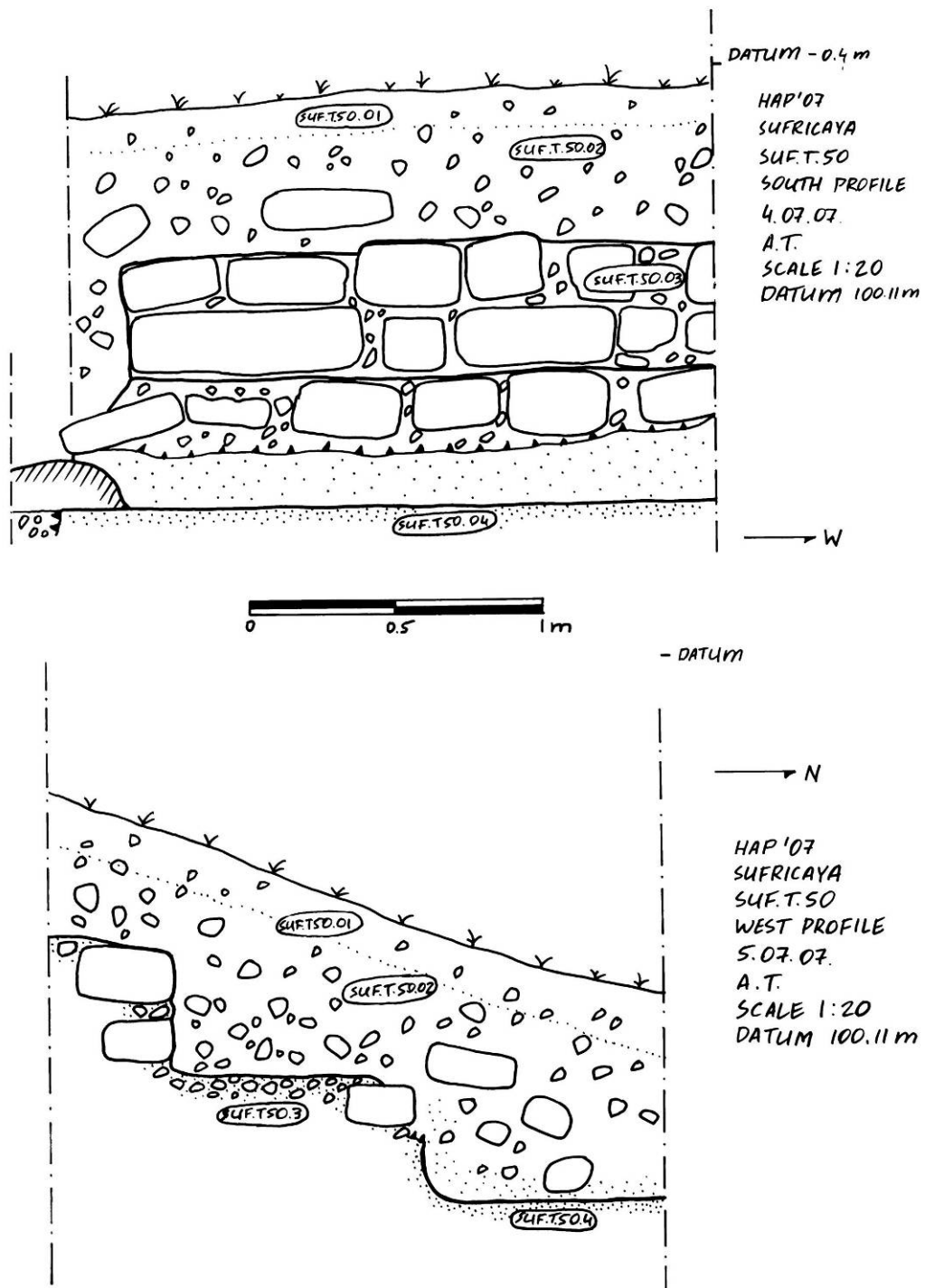


Figure 26: SUF.T.50 profile and front view

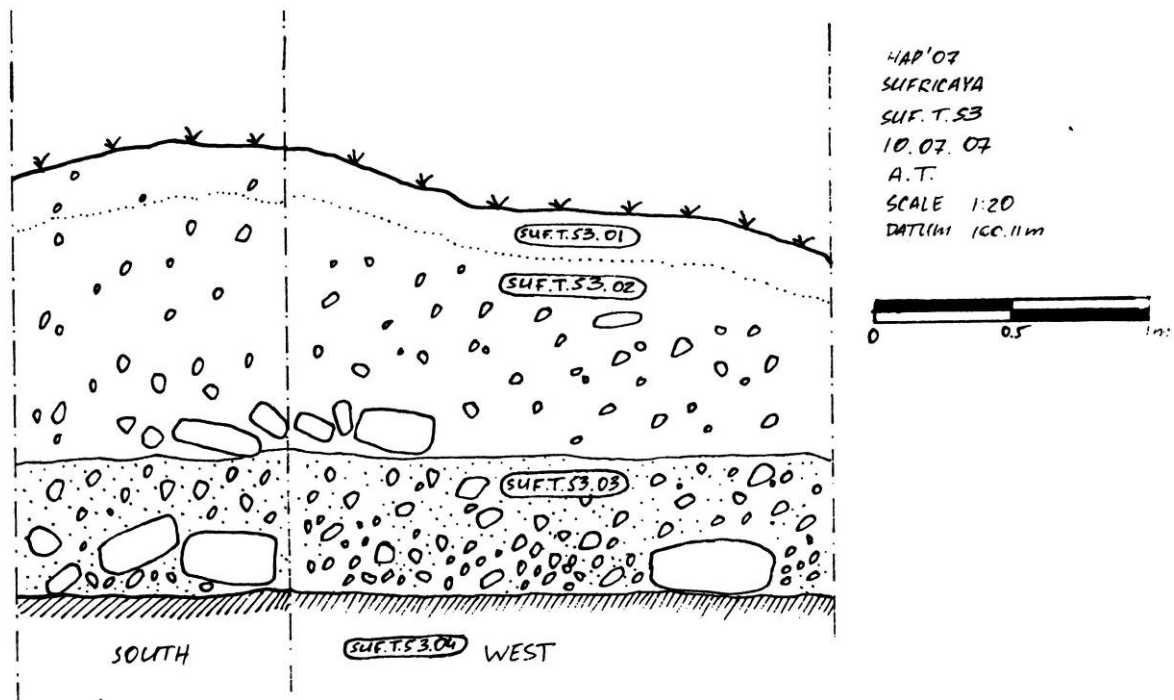


Figure 27: SUF.T.53 profile

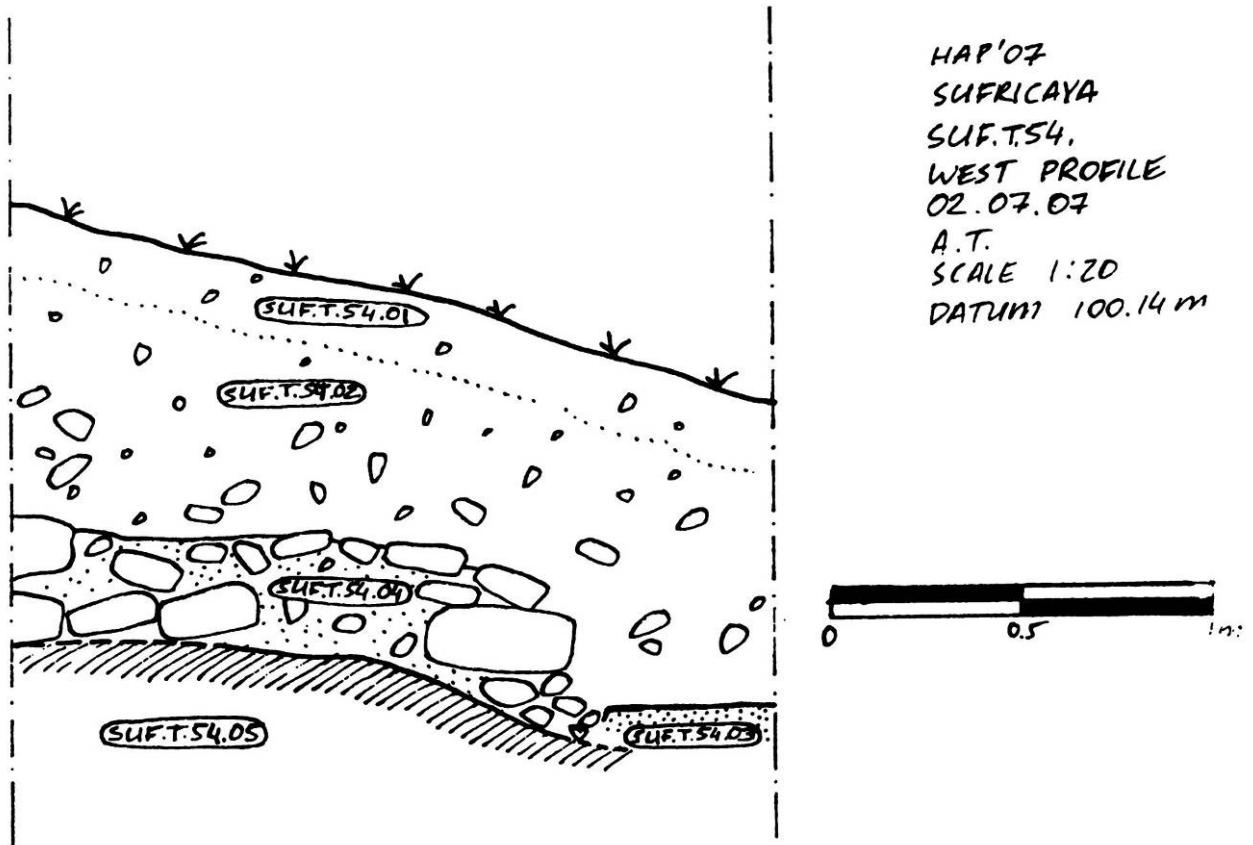


Figure 28: SUF.T.54 profile

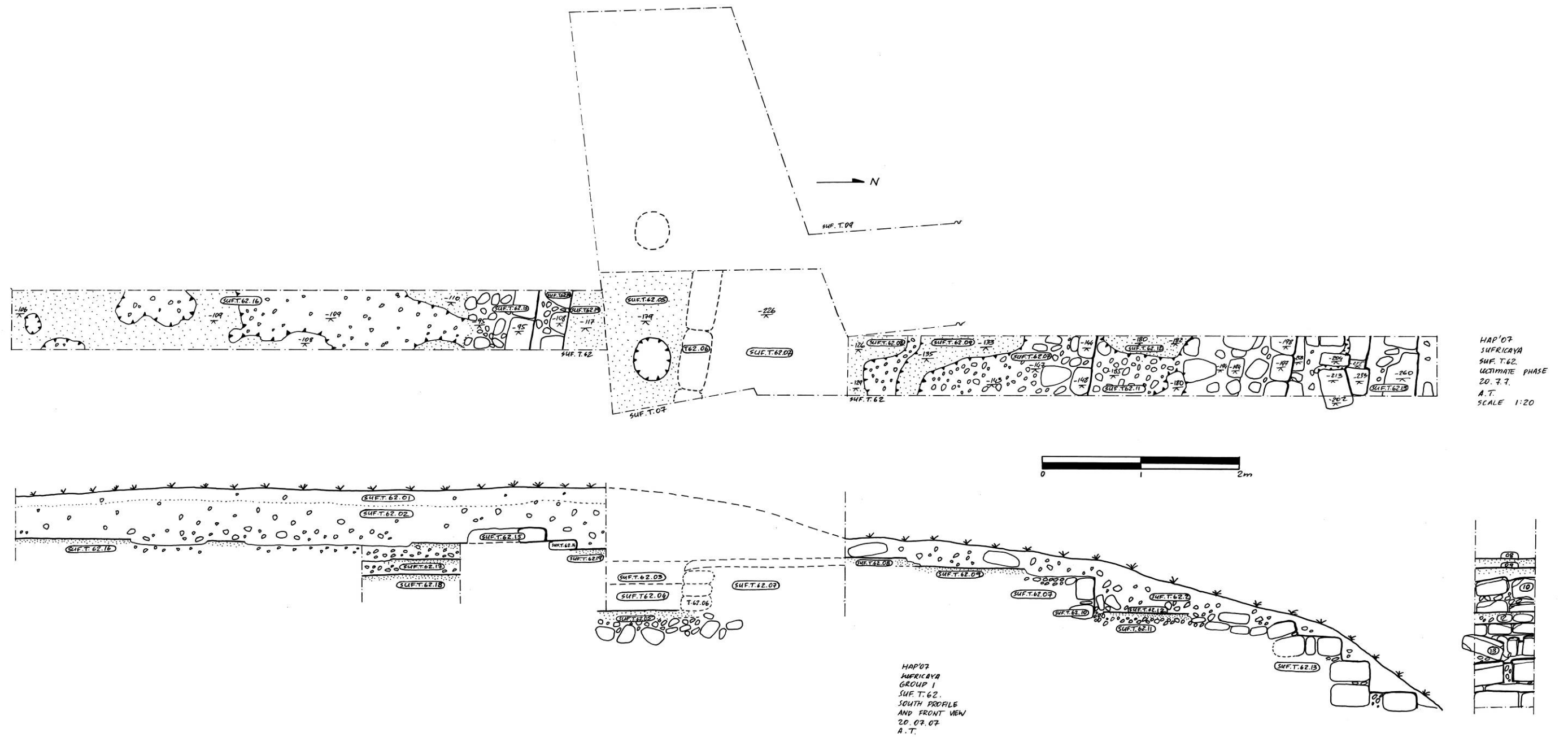


Figure 29: SUF.T.62 profile and plan view

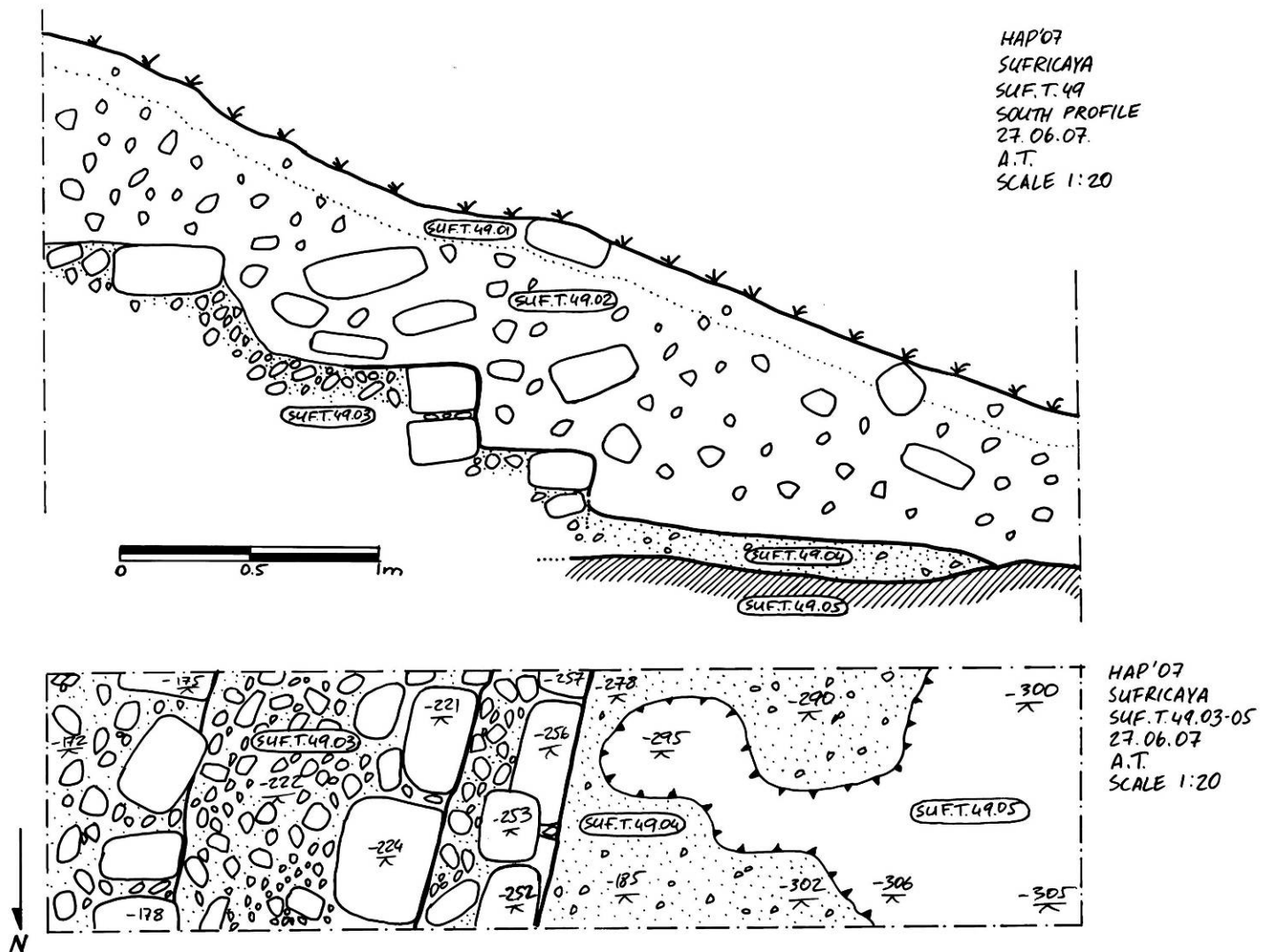


Figure 30: SUF.T.49 profile and plan view



Figure 31: SUF.T.52 plan view

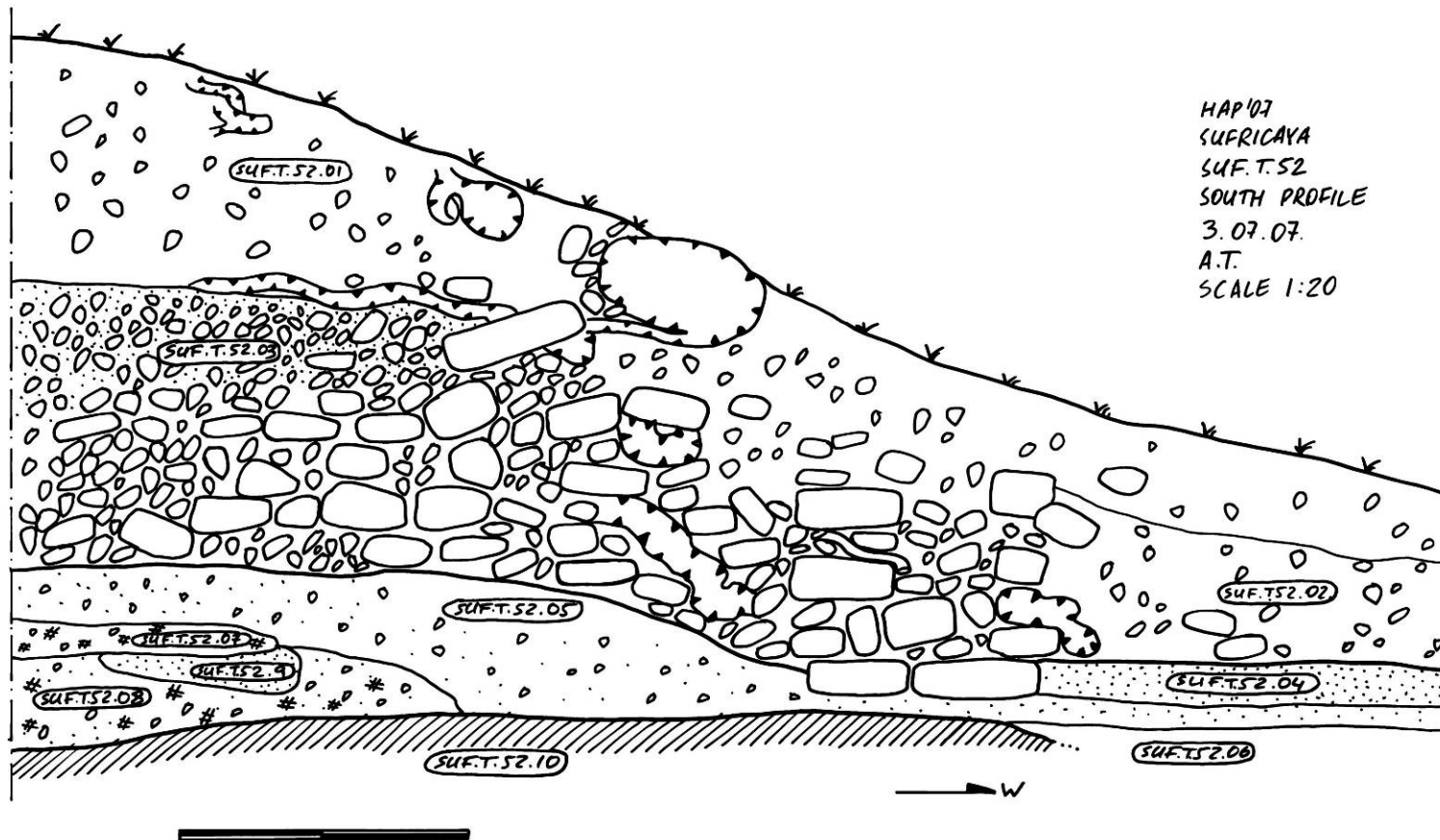


Figure 32: SUF.T.52 profile

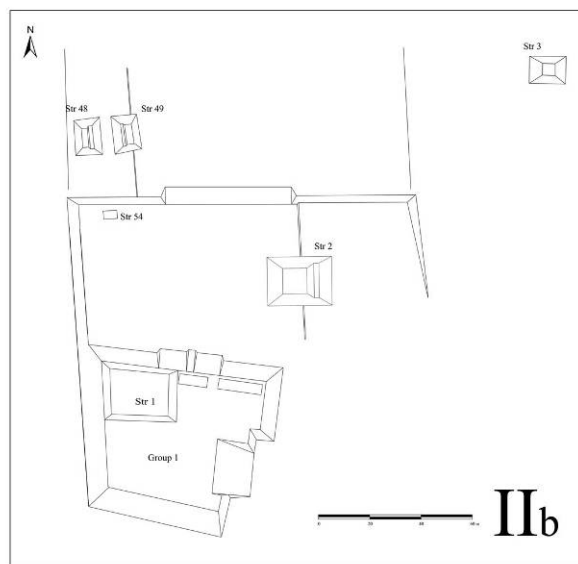
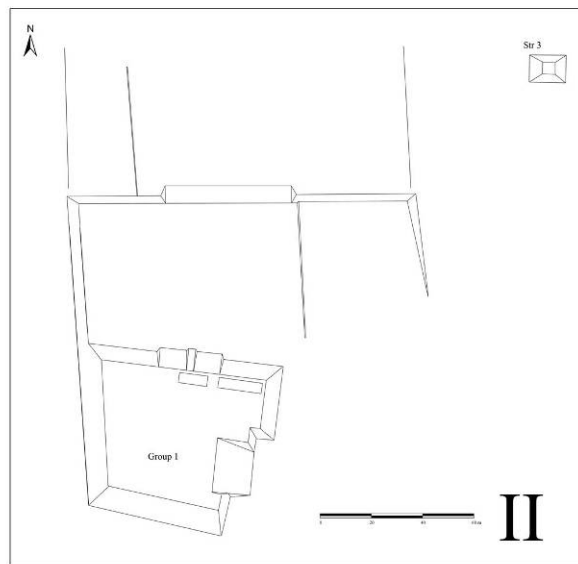
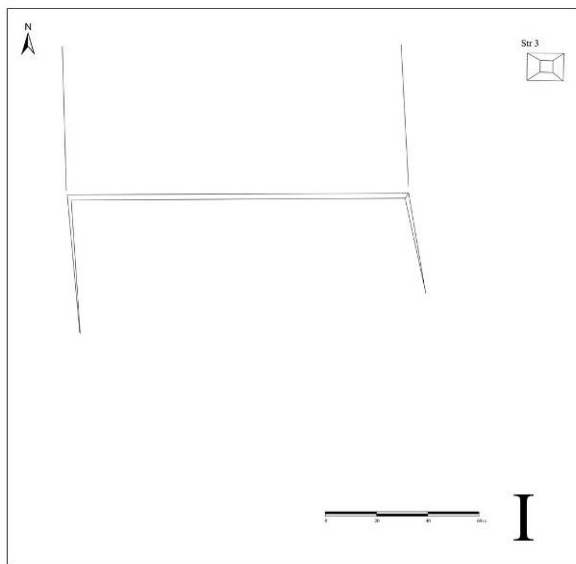


Figure 33. Major construction phases of public architecture at La Sufricaya