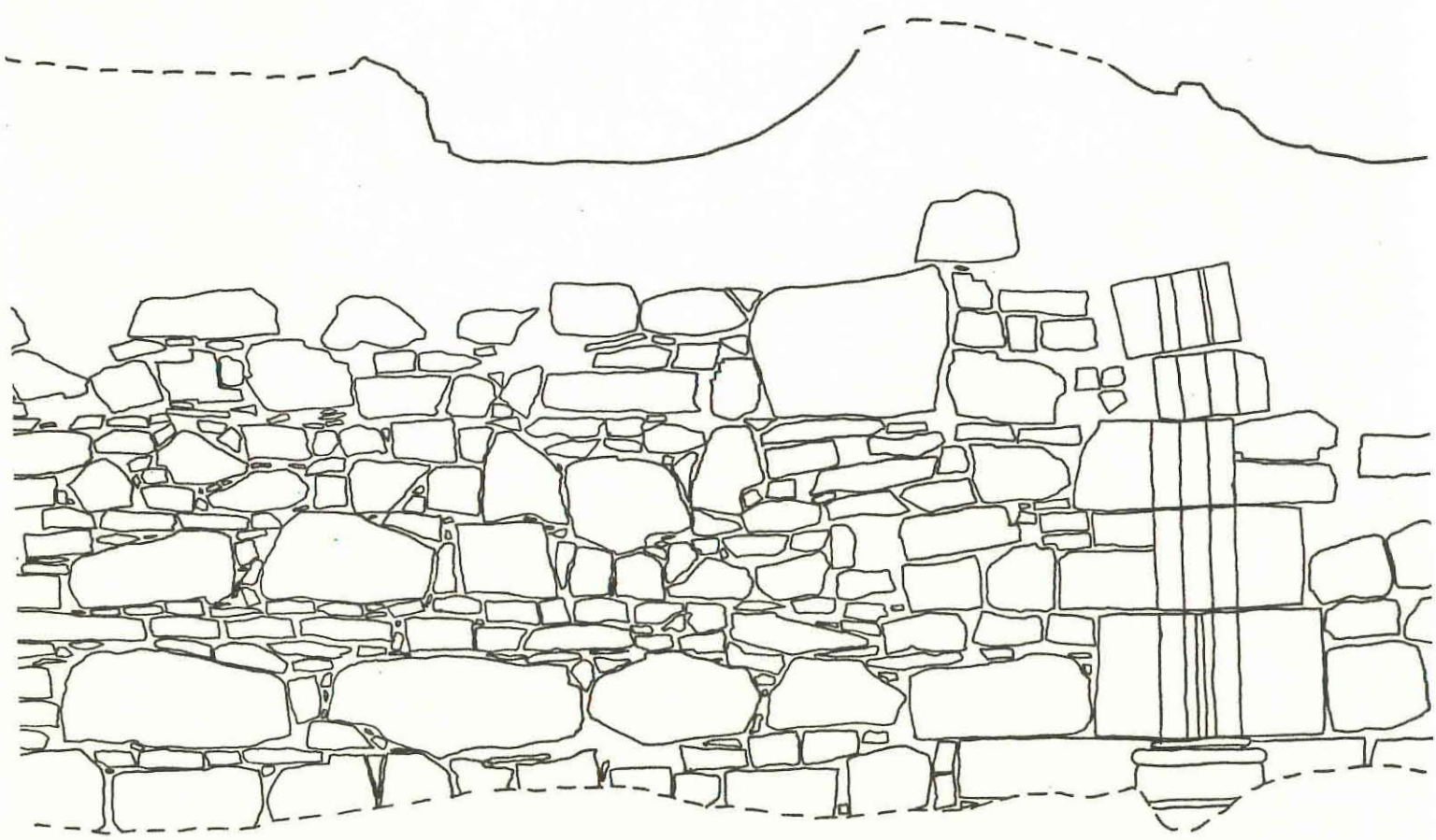
ABBEYCWMHIR

a survey of the ruins



Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust

ABBEYCWMHIR

a survey of the ruins

by Mark Adams

AUGUST 1988

Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust

THE VISIBLE REMAINS OF THE ABBEY

The 12th century Cistercian monastery at Abbey Cwmhir, in northern Radnorshire, was both the largest and one of the remotest in Wales. A greater part of the monastic complex was dismantled at the Dissolution, and although parts of the original plan are known from small-scale excavations carried out in the 1820s and 1890s, only parts of the church are visible today. For a description of the monastery and its historical background see the article by Ralegh Radford in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 1982.

Of the nave, all that remains visible above ground are the outer walls of the north and south aisles and three pier bases of the original fourteen-bay colonnade; the west wall of the nave is largely missing, but shows as a bank (*Drawing 1*). The floor of the nave is terraced into the side of a slight hill, which slopes down from the north, and as a consequence only minor parts of the outer face of the north aisle survive above ground level. At the eastern end, parts of the west walls of both the north and south transepts still survive, as well as a fragment of the north wall of the north transept, and a slight bank suggesting the line of the south wall of the south transept.

It has been suggested that the eastern crossing and chancel were never completed: traces of what is assumed to have been a temporary wall at the east end of the nave is represented by a stony bank. The bases of some of the pillars belonging to vaulting in the north and south aisles and the west wall of the north transept remain, although in most cases the dressed sandstone has been robbed away, leaving gaps corresponding to the original responds. At the eastern end of the nave the pier bases of the west crossing arch are partly visible, and the base of the respond at the junction between the north aisle and north transept still survives. No windows or doorways remain.

What survives of the abbey is gradually eroding away as a result of exposure to the weather, tree roots, and animal activity: as Haslam has observed *'the state of the ruins ... is melancholy. If some action cannot soon be taken to secure what remains, the last bits of carved stone will be pilfered, and a short time only will see the remaining walls broken down'* (1979, 215-6). Most of the surviving walls survive to a height of less than 2 metres, although parts of original facing of the walls of the nave and transept survive to a height of about 2.4 metres; exceptionally, precarious 'pillars' representing parts of the wall core still stand to a height of up to about 5.8 metres.

There is a slight hollow in the ground surface across the nave which has been thought to represent an original subdivision. Otherwise, the ground surface within the nave, chancel and claustral areas is fairly level, although there are slight depressions visible along the lines of the north and south colonnades in the nave.

No trace of the cloisters on the south side of the nave, or of any other ancilliary buildings are visible today. Other notable features of the present site include a large pond to the south which is likely to be of post-Reformation date (Radford 1982, 60), and a large mound just to the south-west of the nave, which though previously described as a collapsed chapter house (Haslam 1979, 216), seems more likely to represent a landscaped spoilheap resulting from earlier excavations. Traces of a broad, low bank, running north to south in the field to the east of the ruins, may represent the original precinct boundary, associated with a series of low banks running east to west at its southern end. Areas of ridge-and-furrow cultivation have been noted from the air in the field to the west of the abbey.

SURVEY WORK 1988

A survey of the standing remains, and a contour sourvey of some areas immediately around them, was carried out by a small Community Programme team between May and August 1988, funded by the Manpower Services Commission, and under the supervision of the author. The survey was undertaken as a training programme in surveying and photographic techniques, though prompted by continuing erosion of the ruins, and in the light of recent proposals for their consolidation.

The survey took the form of a combined drawing and photographic survey of the standing remains, together with a detailed contour survey at 1 metreintervals of the claustral area, the nave interior and a stretch of the possible precint boundary to the east of the church.

Recording of the standing walls proceeded through the following stages:

A base elevation drawing of each stretch of wall was prepared showing certain key features - the outlines of the wall, putlog holes, moulded stonework, and the extent of original facing stones etc - on a 2 metre grid.

A photographic record on black-and-white 35 mm negative film was made of all wall surfaces with a standard 50 mm lens at a distance of 8 metres. Thisshowed the same datum line and grid points used in preparation of the base drawing. Each frame was taken at the centre of the 2 metre grid, and both the centre of the base grid and its position are indicated on the photographs.

Prints were enlarged to the same scale as the base drawings, and facing stones not recorded on the field drawings were traced onto the base elevation drawings, making a 'best fit' where there was any discrepancy

between the field drawing and the photograph due to lens distortion

Subsequent checking in the field showed that the maximum error in the case of wall facings was minimal, and in the order of 40 mm across the width of a 2 metre grid. The greatest problems were encountered with areas obscured by tree roots, and by parallax in the case of upstanding pillars of core masonry which it proved difficult to draw by conventional methods. In the latter case, some remedy was found by taking an outline of the wall from longer distance shots. Subsequent checking has shown maximum errors of about 300 mm in these instances.

Field drawing, negatives and prints have been retained by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust.

BUILDING METHODS

Building materials

A brief study was made of the building materials used in the construction of the surviving walls. This study remained incomplete at the end of the project, but annotated copies of the relevant field drawings have been retained by the Trust.

The principal stone is a hard, grey, fine-grained quartzite of a type common to the area (*not* 'hard limestone', as suggested in Radford 1982, 69). It has been suggested that an old quarry at Fowler's Cave (PAR 244; SO 05827154) on the summit of a hill to the north-east of the abbey may have been used as a source of building material (J. Williams, *Archaelogia Cambrensis* 1858, 539-40). In addition, there are occasional blocks of conglomerate containing quartz clasts in a similar matrix, which were probably obtained from the same source.

Minor quantities of slate were used as packing in the facing stones, and a string courses in the core masonry.

The surviving moulded stone at the site is composed of a yellowish-brown, fine-grained sandstone which is said to come from the Grinshill quarries near Shrewsbury (Radford 1982, 69). Blocks of similar dressed sandstone were also used to form the faces of the putlog holes through the core of the walls, which represent waste material or possibly, reused materials from the earier establishment at *Ty Faenor* (cf. Radford 1982, 66).

Constructional methods

Putlog holes, about 200 mm across, presumably used to support scaffolding during the construction of the abbey, appear to have been spaced at horizontal intervals of between about 2.5-4 metres. The walls are between 1.5-1.8 metres thick, and have a rubble core faced with angular blocks of stone which are characteristically 0.2-0.3 metres thick. The facing appears to have been build in 'lifts' of about 0.5 metres, which correspond with courses of the dressed masonry of the vaulting responds, and then filled with a mortared rubble core. Only parts of the original mortaring of the wall faces still survives in places. Occasionally, larger blocks of stone appear to have been used as ties between the inner and outer wall faces.

A mason's mark in the shape of an arrow is visible on a dressed block on the north face of the south aisle (*Drawing 17*), and there is one further possible mark on an undressed stone (*Drawing 2*).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the landowner, Mr Hamer, members of the survey team - Brian Hart, Richard Hankinson, Chris Lewis, Trevor Jones and Andrew Bevan - and to Chris Wright for help with darkroom work.

REFERENCES

C. A. Ralegh Radford 'The Cistercian Abbey of Cwmhir, Radnorshire', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 131 (1982), 58-76.

R. Haslam, *Powys: The Buildings of Wales*, 1982 (Penguin Books).

CONVENTIONS USED ON ELEVATION DRAWINGS

outline of individual stones: wall face only

continuous line: wall core, individual stones not represented

short dashed lines: ground level and areas of wall elevation obscured by trees

long dashed lines: higher ground level to north of north aisle

site datum: 250.33 metres OD

scale: 1:40

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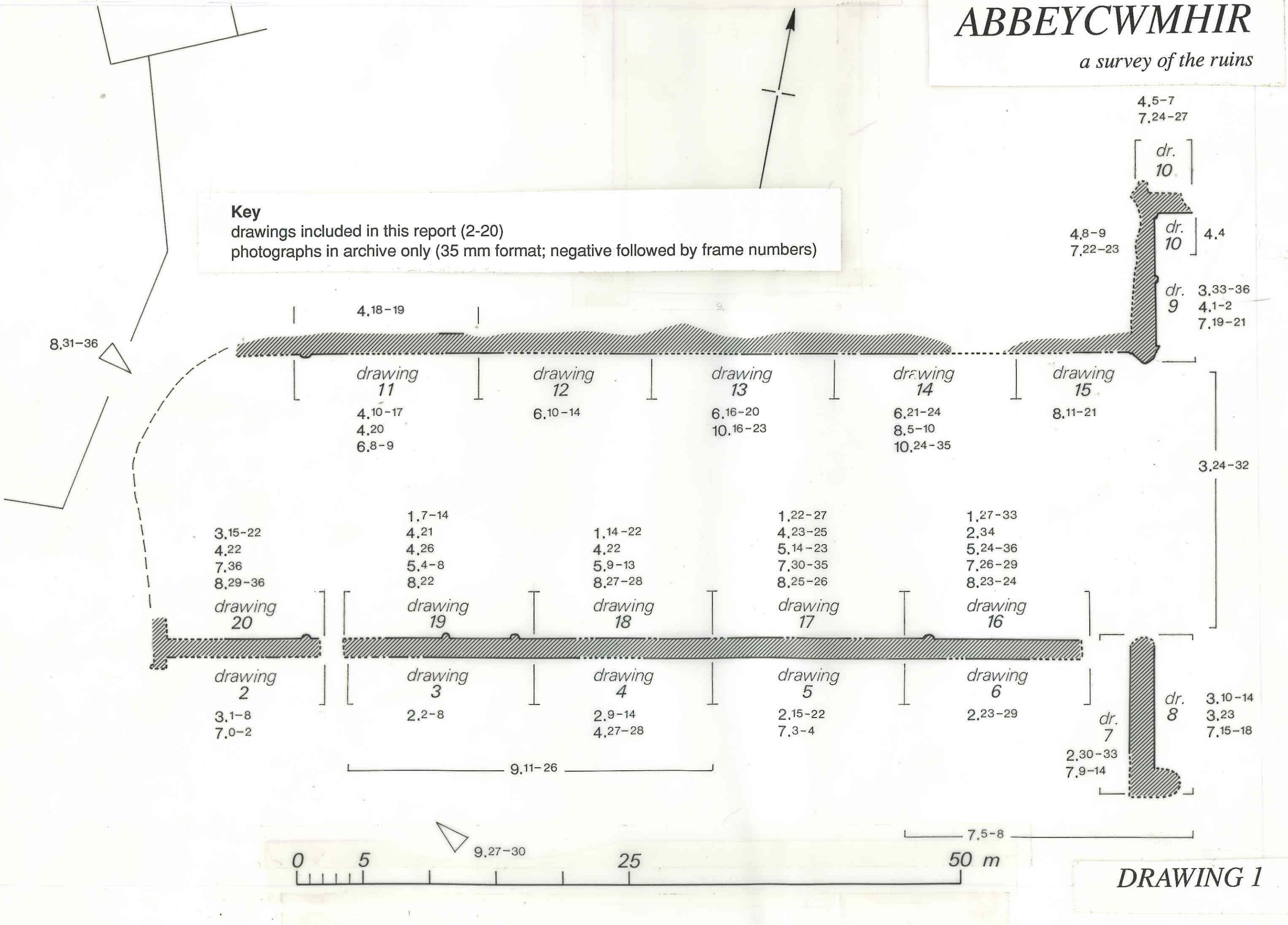
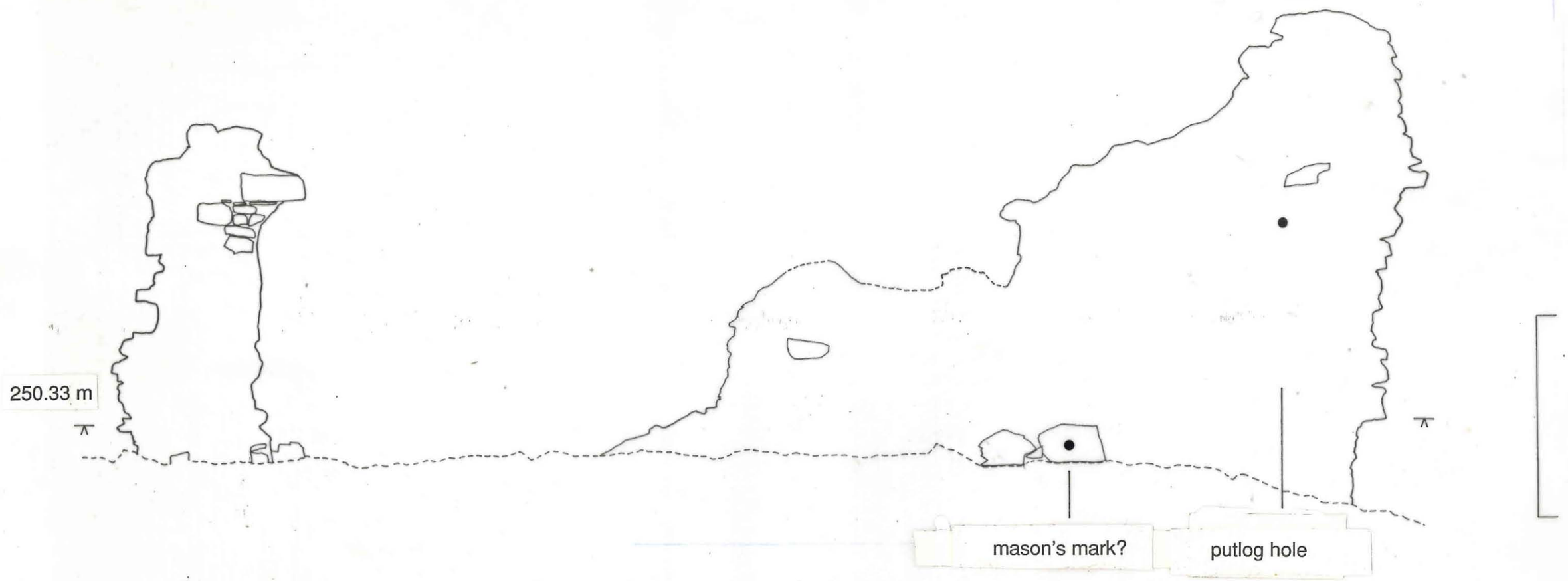
Key
drawings included in this report (2-20)
photographs in archive only (35 mm format; negative followed by frame numbers)



DRAWING 1

ABBEYCWMHIR

a survey of the ruins



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DRAWING 2

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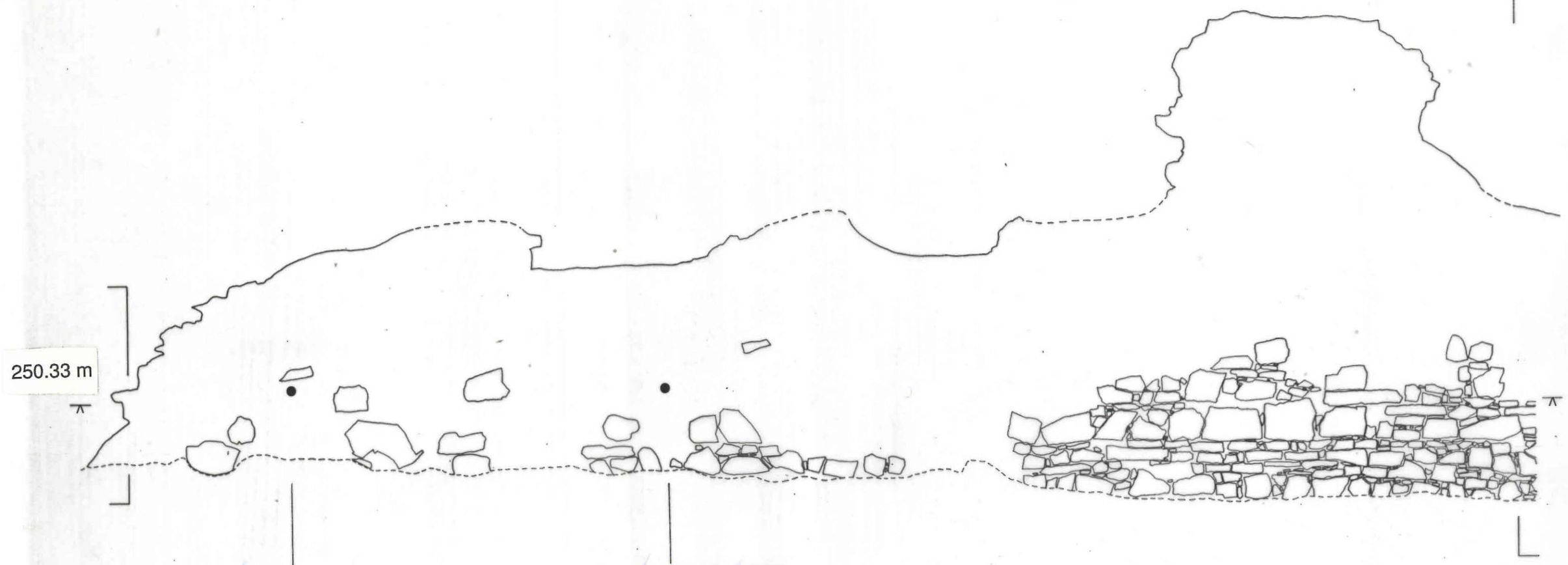

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DRAWING 3

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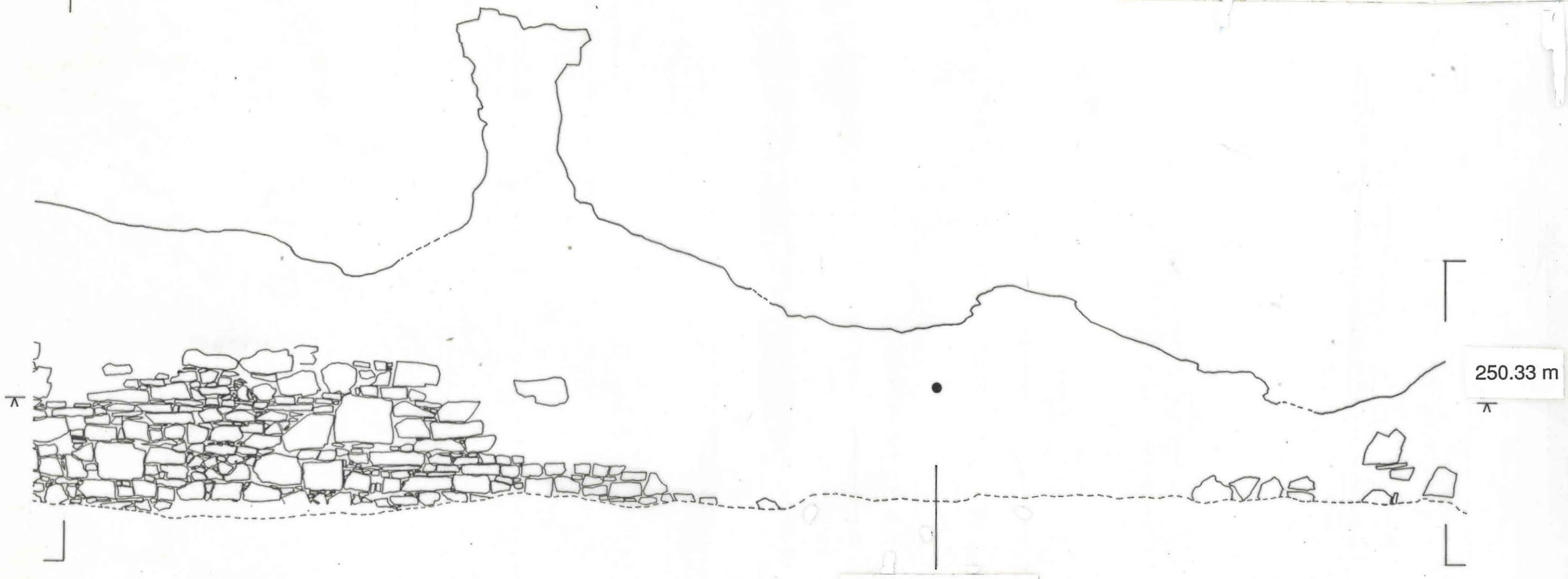

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DRAWING 4

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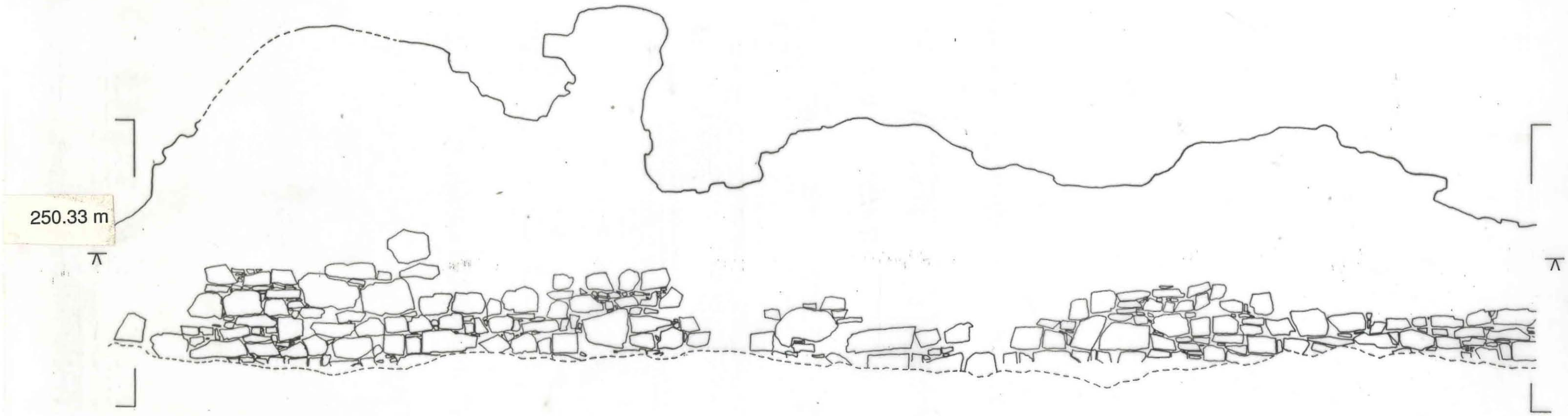

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DRAWING 5

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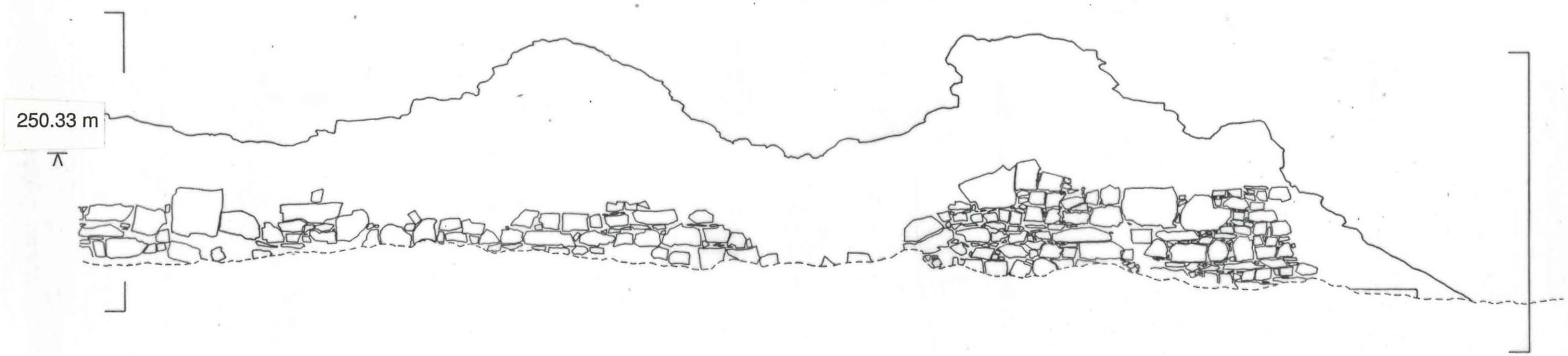

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DRAWING 6

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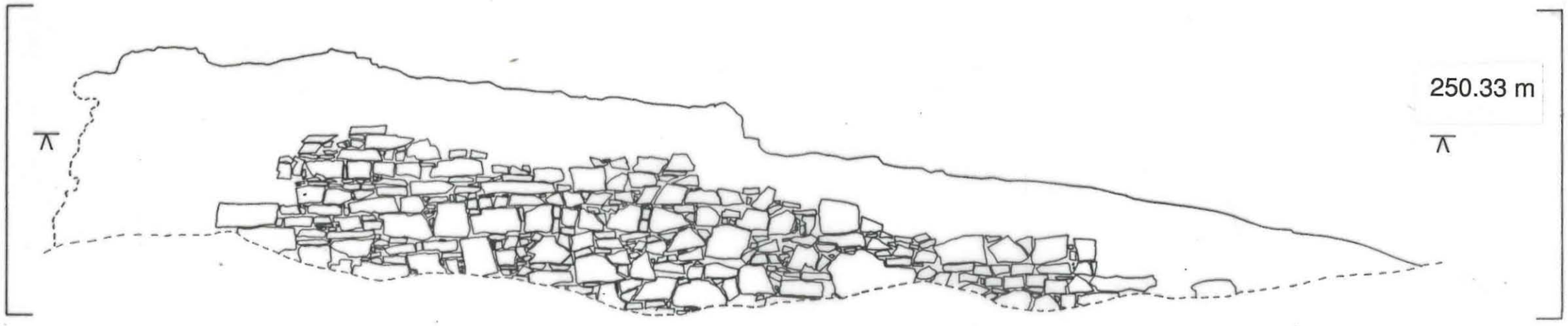

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DRAWING 7

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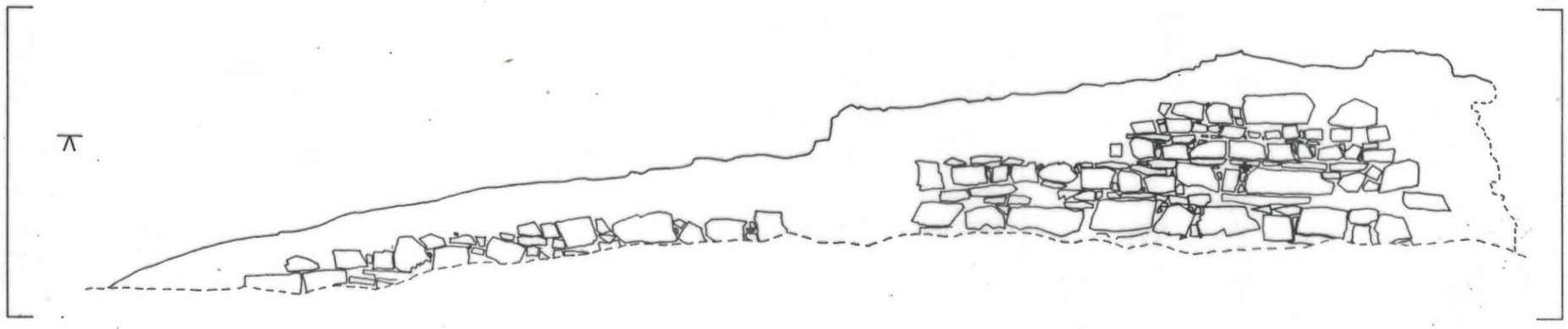

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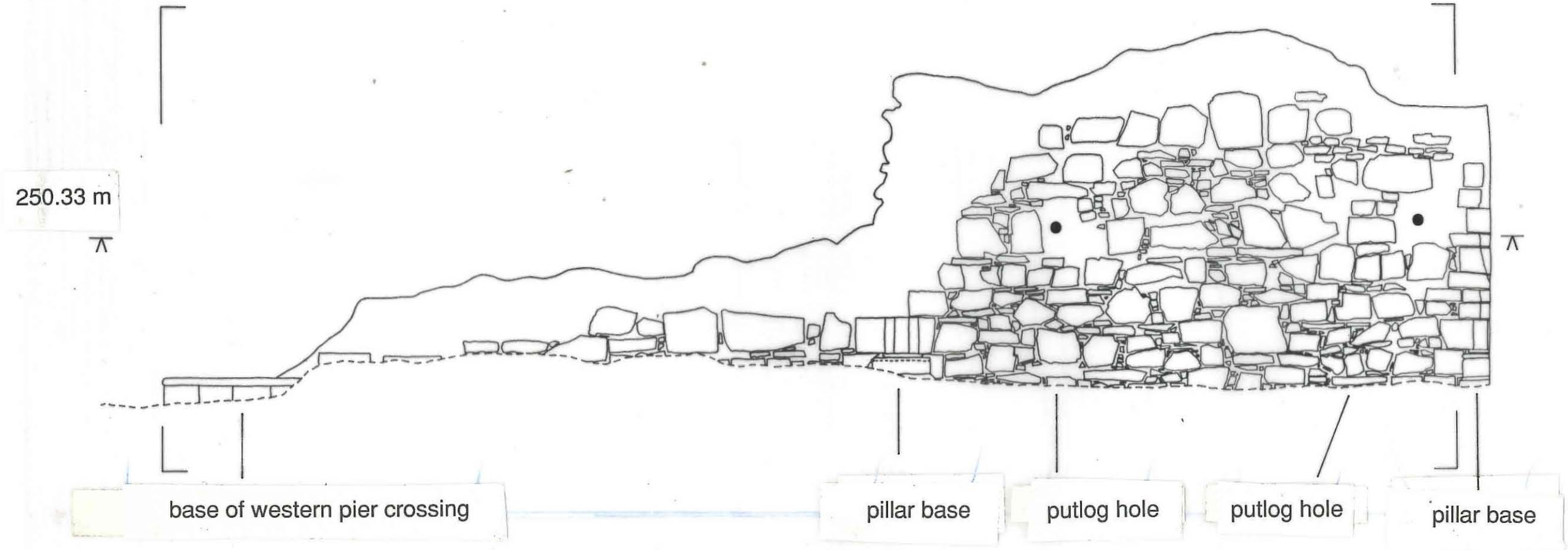

DRAWING 9

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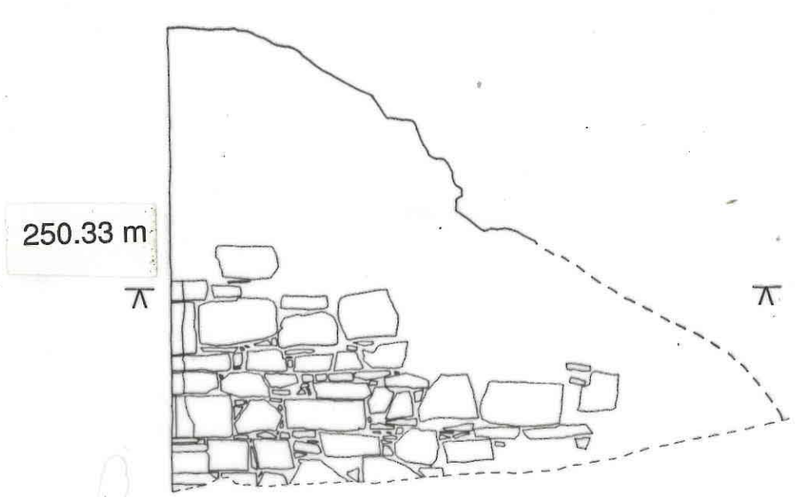
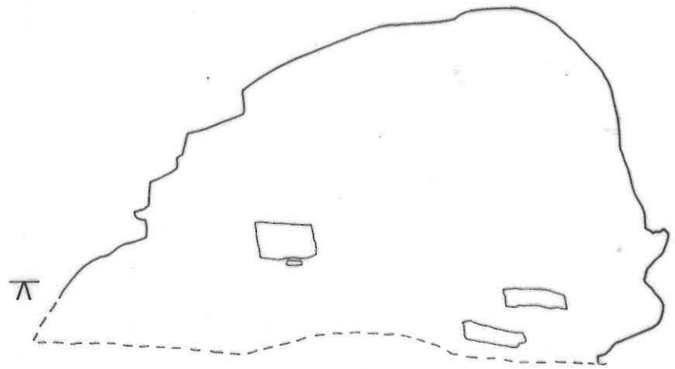


pillar base



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DRAWING 10

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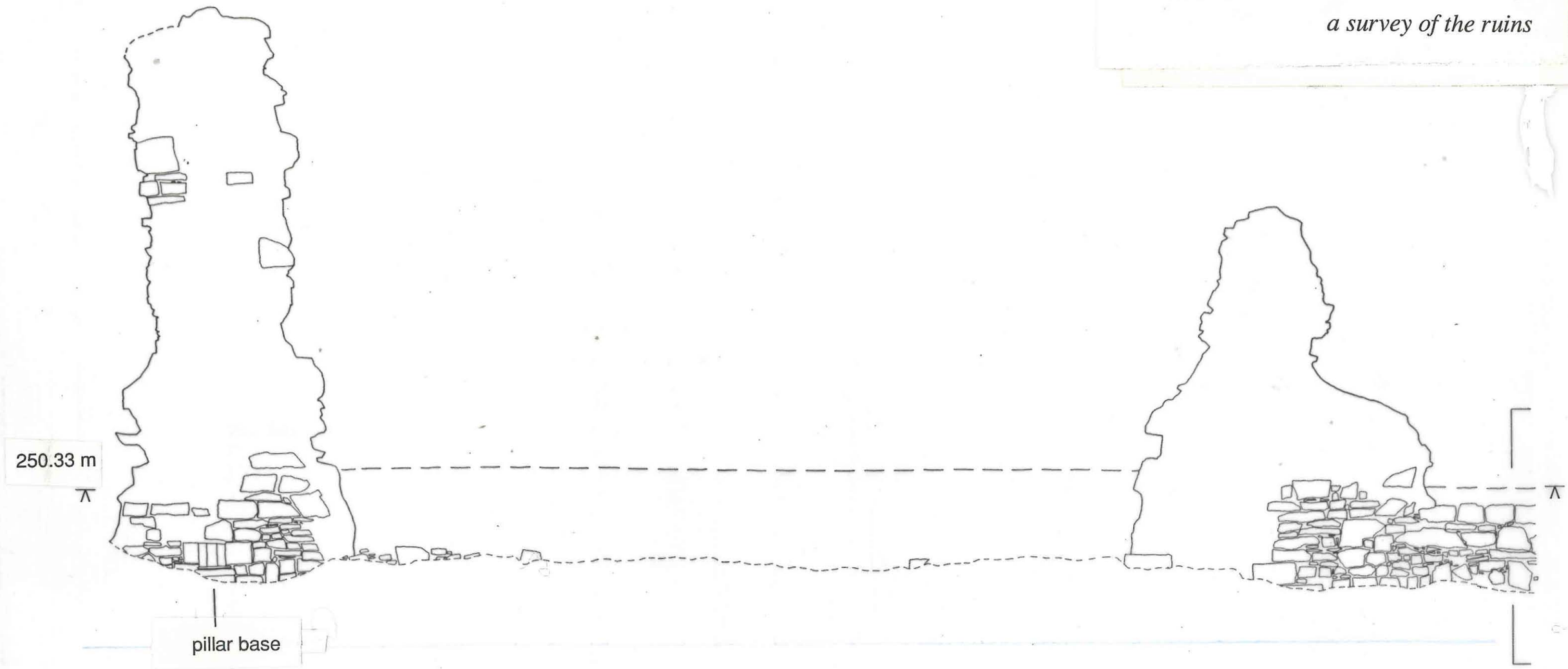

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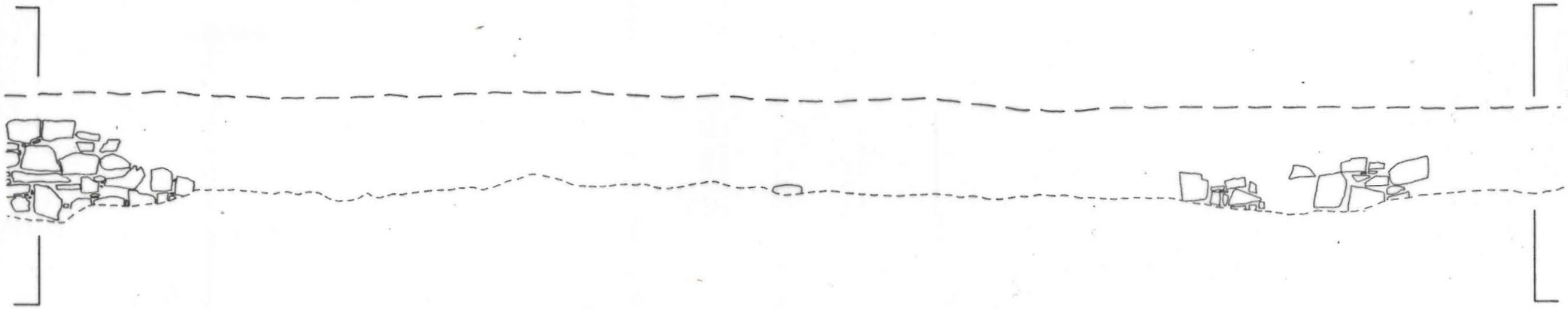

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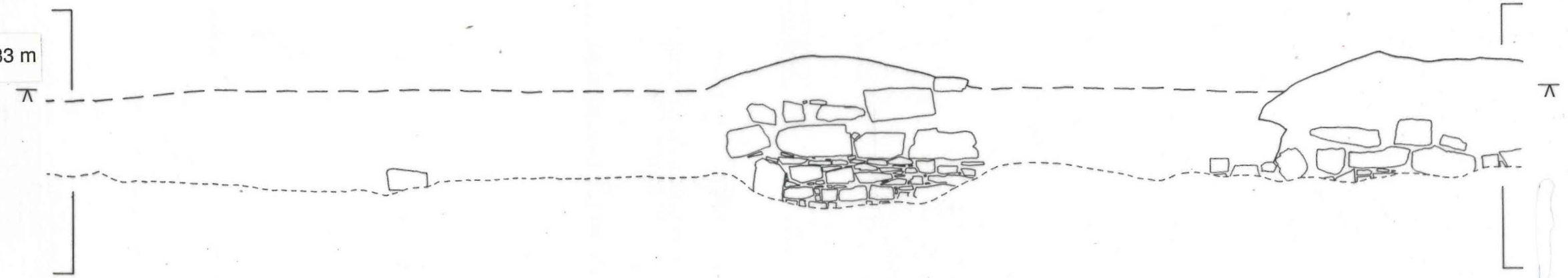

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DRAWING 13

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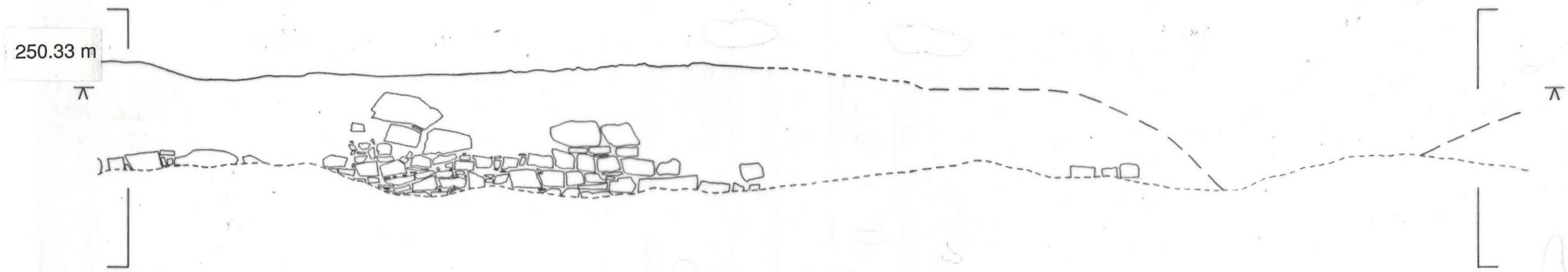

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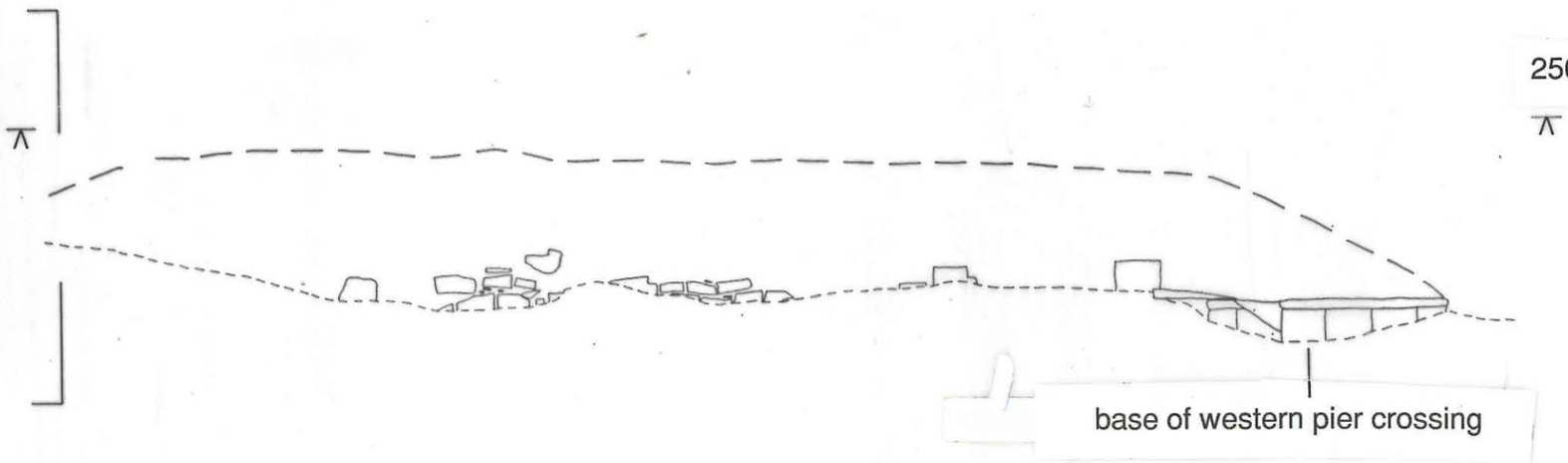

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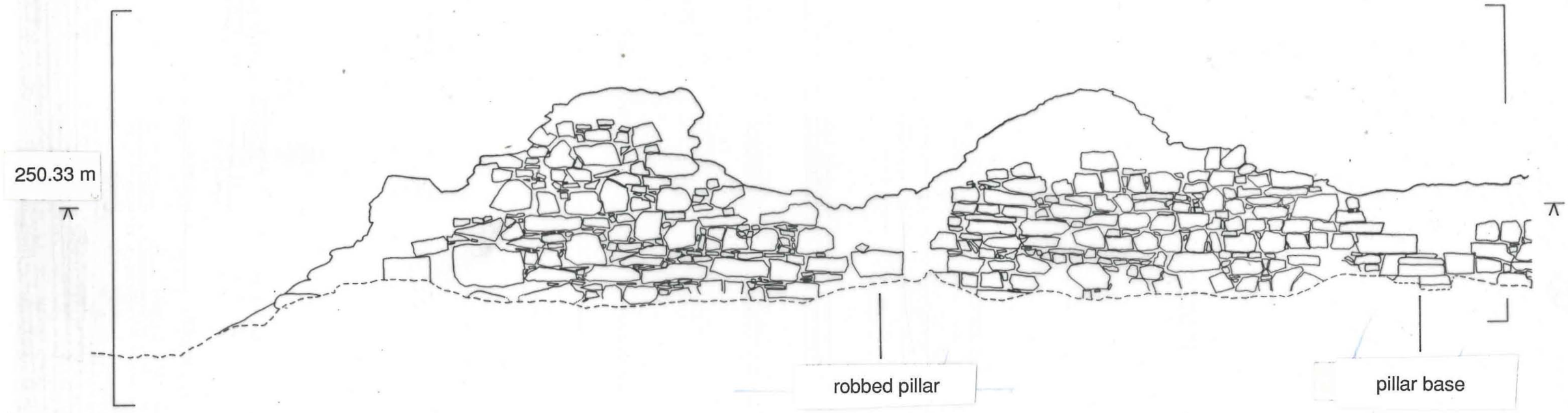

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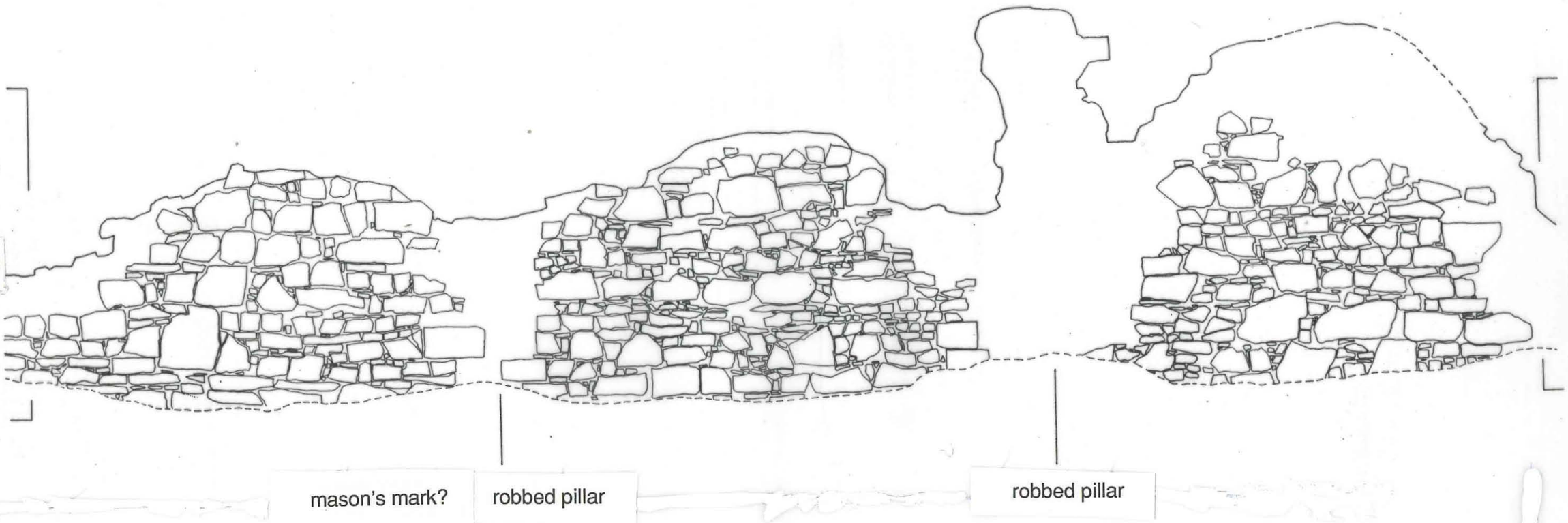

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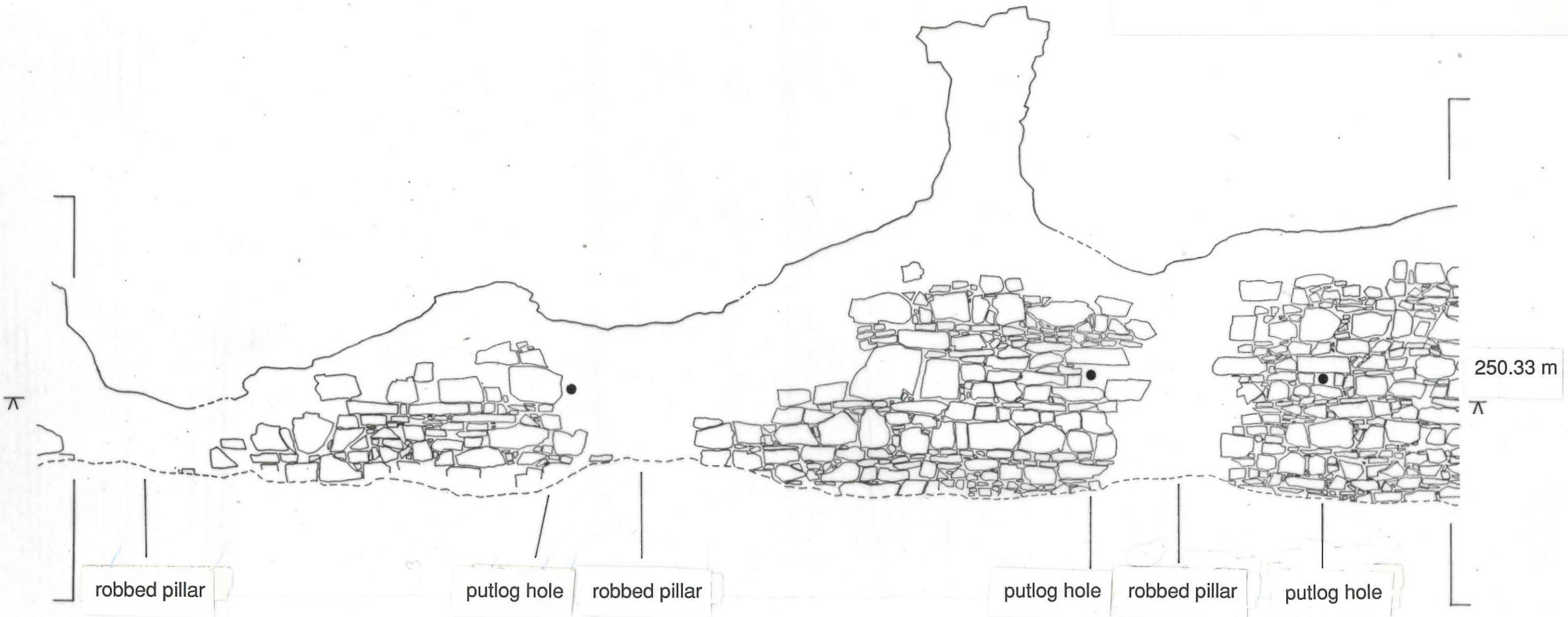

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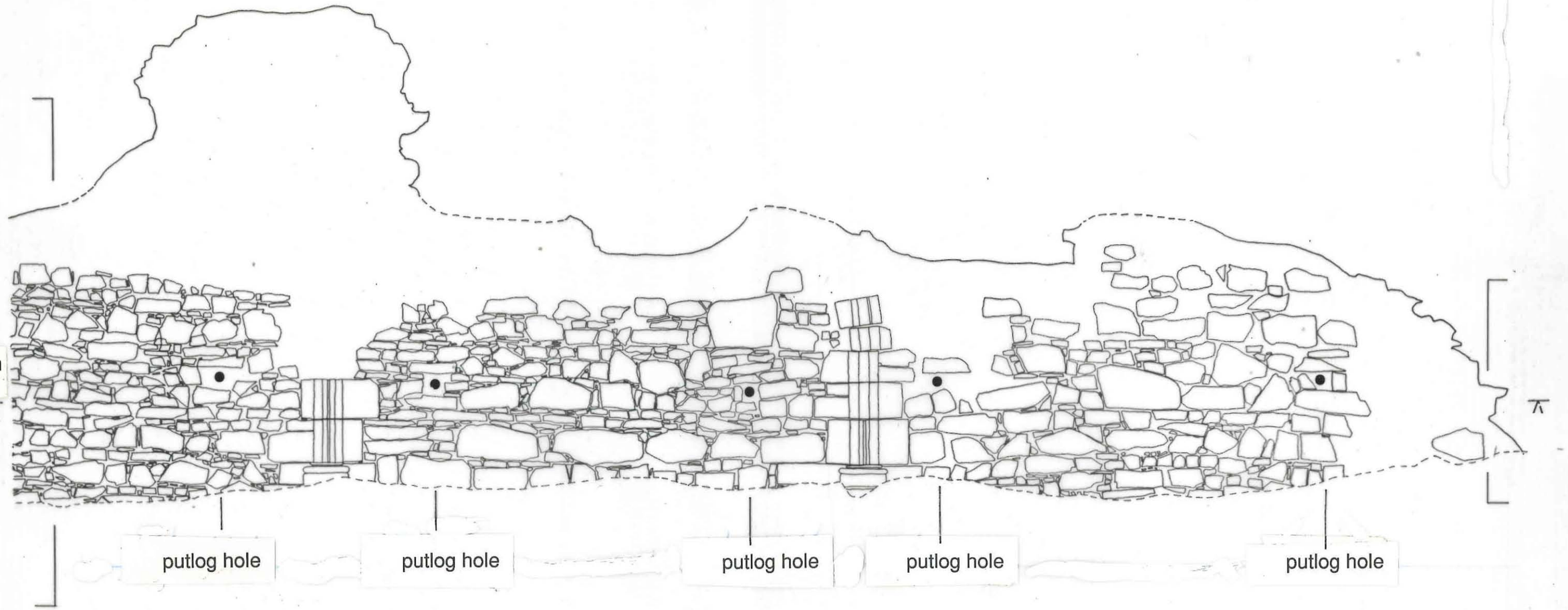

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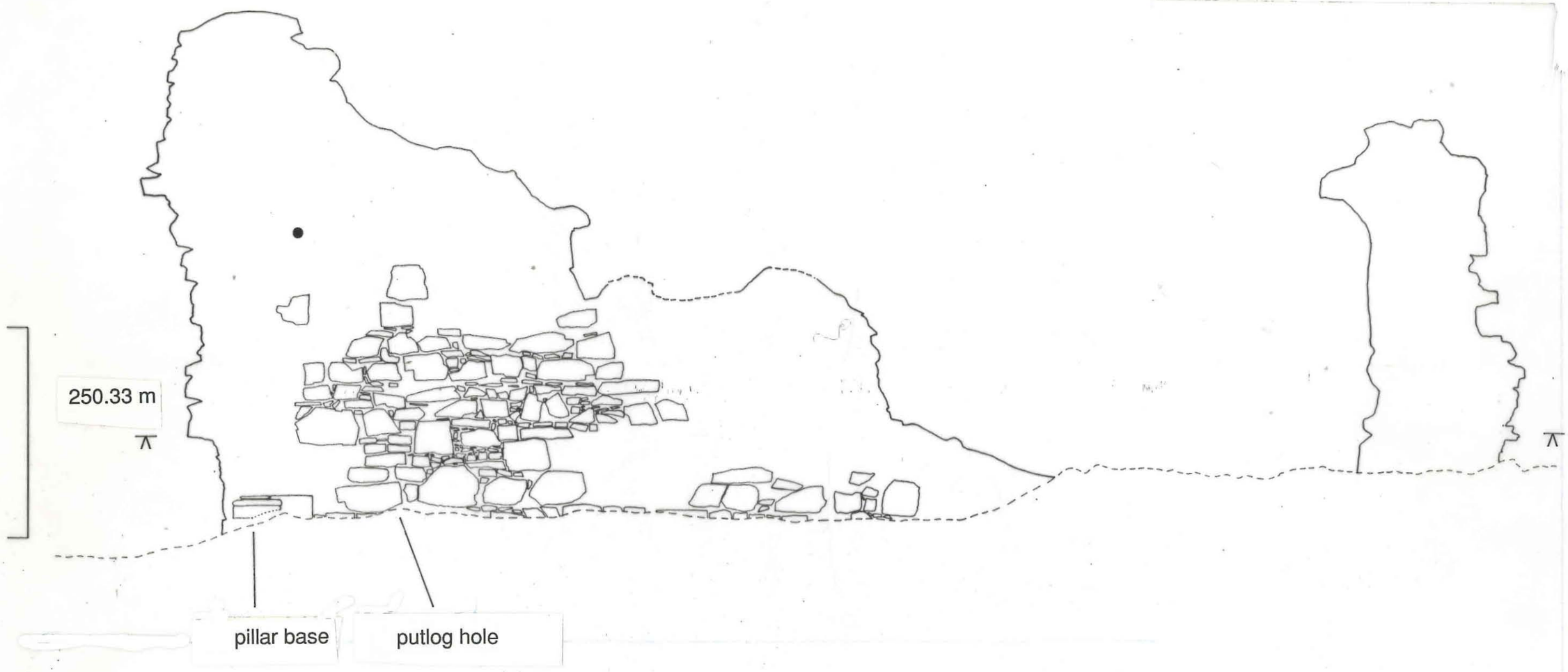

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