

Petroforms: Stone Circles, Boulder Rectangles, and Cairn Features discovered at Yān Oya Middle Basin

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The *Yān Oya* Middle Basin Mortuary Archaeology Research Project 2011-2020 conducted with research grants of the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology (PGIAR) carries the objective of studying the '**megalithic deathscape**' of the *Yān Oya* Middle Basin. The project is suggested to be conducted in five stages and the first involves identifying megalithic burial sites and features, mapping and surface documenting. This region is of vital importance when comprehending the proto historic social variables as it has the largest amount of megalithic burial clusters that have ever been found in a single river basin and is of high archaeological potentials.

1. Introduction

An extensive archeological survey which commenced in 2011 centered around the *Yān Oya* Middle Basin (abbreviated as **YOMB**) has up to now led to the discovery of 25 megalithic cemeteries (with megalithic appendage sites) and mapping and documentation had been completed after subjecting the finding to a systematic investigation (figure 1). Out of these, five sites have been subjected to further study by way of conducting archaeological excavations and accordingly based on primary evidence obtained, one site has been identified as belonging to the classification of Clay Urns while the rest can be categorized as megalithic cist burials. The YOMB team also discovered Stone Circles constructed using large boulders, Boulder Rectangles and Cairn mounds and heaps in proximity to the megalithic burial cemeteries. As all these geometric rock arrangements are located in near proximity to the archaeological sites—specially megalithic burial sites. This may signify a possible cultural association, spatial proximity and links to ethno-historical connections to the megalithic burials and calls for further archeological investigations to ascertain the importance of these rock arrangements. The objective of this article is to document these new archeological discoveries of rock arrangements in the *Yān-Oya* Middle Basin for further archeological investigations given its importance and valuable contributions it may provide for future studies in this area.

2. Terminology for Rock Arrangements

Similar rock arrangements discovered at YOMB have been found in other parts of the island as well (Senaviratne, 1984:246-247; Weerasinghe *et al.*, 2001:48; Dissanayake *et al.*, 2011; Bandara *et al.*, 2012; Herath, 2012; Dissanayake, 2013).

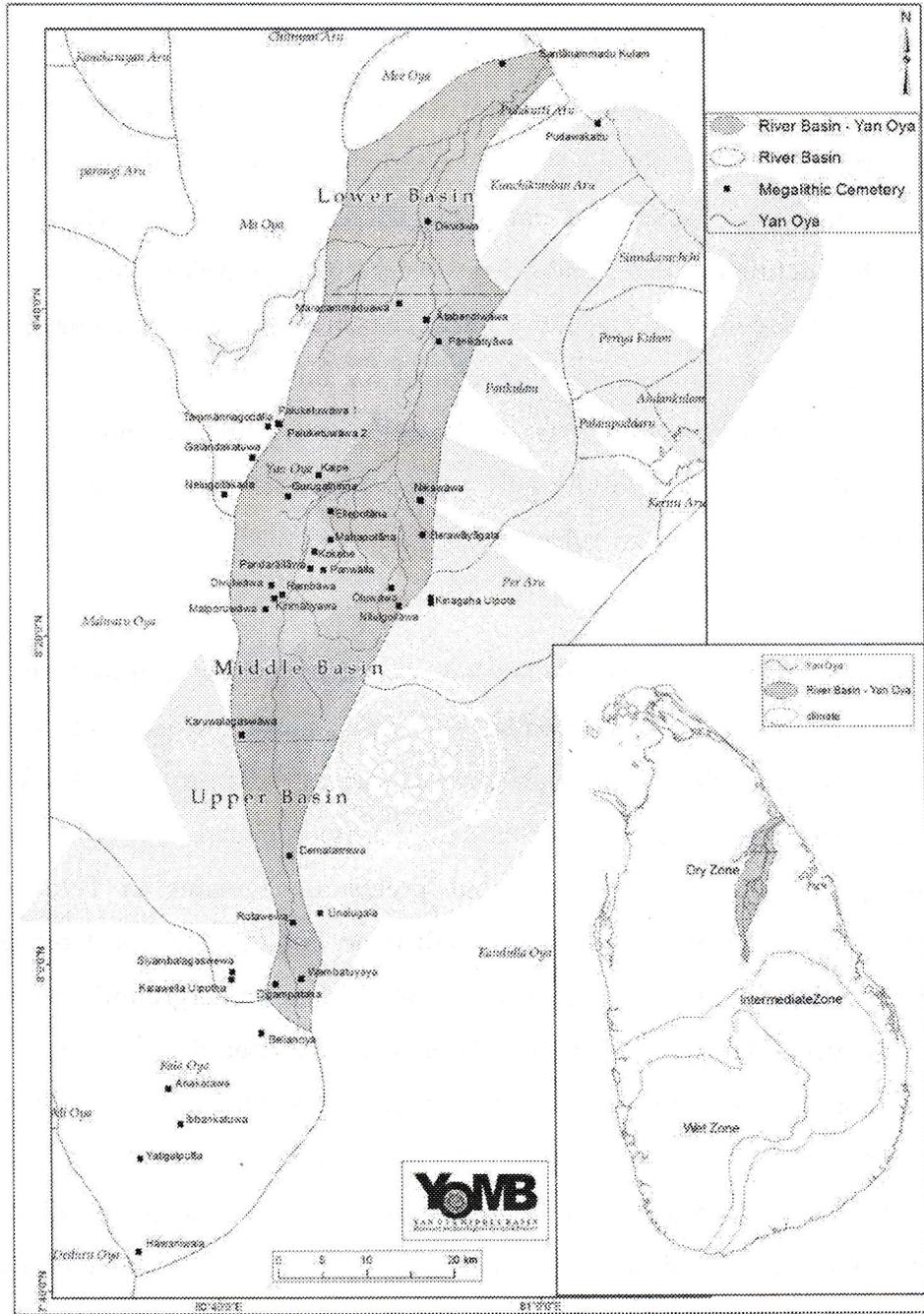


Figure 0-1 Megalithic cemeteries recovered from the Yān Oya river basin.

Up to now the classification and naming conventions of these rock arrangements found in Sri Lanka has used the Indian and

European nomenclature, the majority of which accordingly comes under the naming classification of megalithic constructs. The Indian Department of Archeology has sanctioned their megalithic terminology and related scientific definitions and standardizations given the complex nature of their rock arrangements and megalithic burial sites in the country (Krishnaswami 1949:35-45). The nomenclature developed for this area was based on the physical shapes and contents of the rock arrangements and types of megalithic burial sites resulting in a self-explanatory nomenclature which also to some extent was subjective to each specialists discretion to some extent.

Looking at the chronological development of megalithic terminology, M. Tyoler has used the term 'cromlech' to describe dolmen and closed cists when reporting about the remains in *Hydrabad* in India for the first time in 1951. While A. Rea has used this term for stone circles, urn burials and sarcophagus when reporting about prehistoric remains in *Perumbair*. Cromlech is dolman or circle of large tall stone. But, this term has later been used by K.R. Venkatorama Ayyar in 1944 to name underground cists and single urn burials with a capstone. Tyler (1848) has used the term 'cairn' for the first time to name cist graves however, Brecks (1873) in his exploration on primitive tribal groups in India and monuments in *Nilgiri*, named stone circle of any kind and promiscuous heap of rubble hiding any kind of graves, as 'cairn' (Krishnaswamy 1949: 35). Therefore, 'cairn', the term used by Brecks to name burials or memorials according to the self-explanatory morphology, started being used as a term to identify a mound of rubble built as a land mark or as a memorial in mortuary archaeology.

3. Rock arrangements: petroforms

Petroforms, also known as boulder outlines or boulder mosaics, are human-made shapes and patterns made by lining up large rocks on the open ground, often on quite level areas (in Sinhalese *pāshāni rūpa* or *pahanrū*) (Mathews, 2014:1). Petroforms can also comprise a rock cairn, an upright monolith slab, or simply rocks lined up or stacked for various reasons. The petroforms recorded in North American region at first time, which had erected for astronomy, sacred, healing, memory and teaching purposes by their native people.

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Majority of the petroforms discovered in Asia and Europe belongs to the Neolithic period and are identified as megalithic burials and monuments. Some of the petroforms, megalithic burials and sacred areas are built to commemorate the dead. The purpose of these constructs would have been to preserve and convey memories of persons or to signify the historical importance of these places for future generations. Therefore these petroforms may be a device for preserving long term memories and served as a mechanism for keeping those memories alive as reminders of the past.

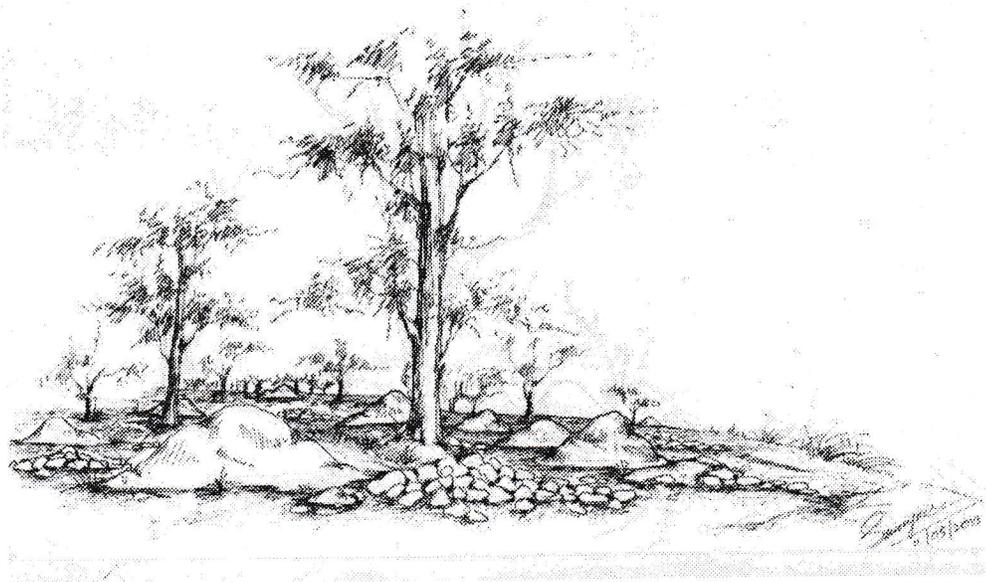
Archeologists and anthropologists have used different terms to classify and differentiate petroforms based on different physical attributes and arrangements. The same terminology is used as the basis for explaining and identifying the petroforms discovered at the YOMB. By applying these standard classifications, the observation site has yielded the following types of petroforms. (i) Stone circles constructed using large boulders and rubble

(in Sinhalese *Shilā Vata*) (ii) Boulder rectangles (in Sinhalese *Āyata Chaturasra*) (iii) Cairn heaps or circles (in Sinhalese *Shilā Gumba*) and, (iv) Cairn scatter (in Sinhalese *Shilā Visirum*). The discussion and descriptions provided in the proceeding text about these petroforms will be conducted in comparison with such finding discovered in other parts of the Island.

4. Rock arrangements in the YOMB1: cairn features

4.1, Óluwāwa Cairn Field

Óluwewa is a small village coming under the *Horowpotana* Divisional Secretariat's division. An archeological survey carried out in 2011 discover heaps of quartz stones near the village tank which the villagers claim to be an ancient burial site (Figure 2). One can also find near this site, remains of an ancient monastic structure belonging to the Anuradhapura period, a large mound containing iron slag, remains of iron extracting crucibles and an evidence of a possible settlement site with sherd scattering as well. 20 quartz rubble scatters can be observed in front of the tank. The number of rubble in the heaps ranges from 10-15 in some cases to 150-200 in some others. Some of the quartz rubble arrangements have on top of them large slag boulders while in some others, irregular shaped terracotta pieces which looked like burnt bricks can be observed (Figure 3). The quartz heaps on closer examination reveals that they are not formed by natural phenomena but are artificially constructed structures. These types of features are called in megalithic tradition, cairn heap or mound or cairn circle burials.



0-3 Óluwáwa cairn field from artist's eye.

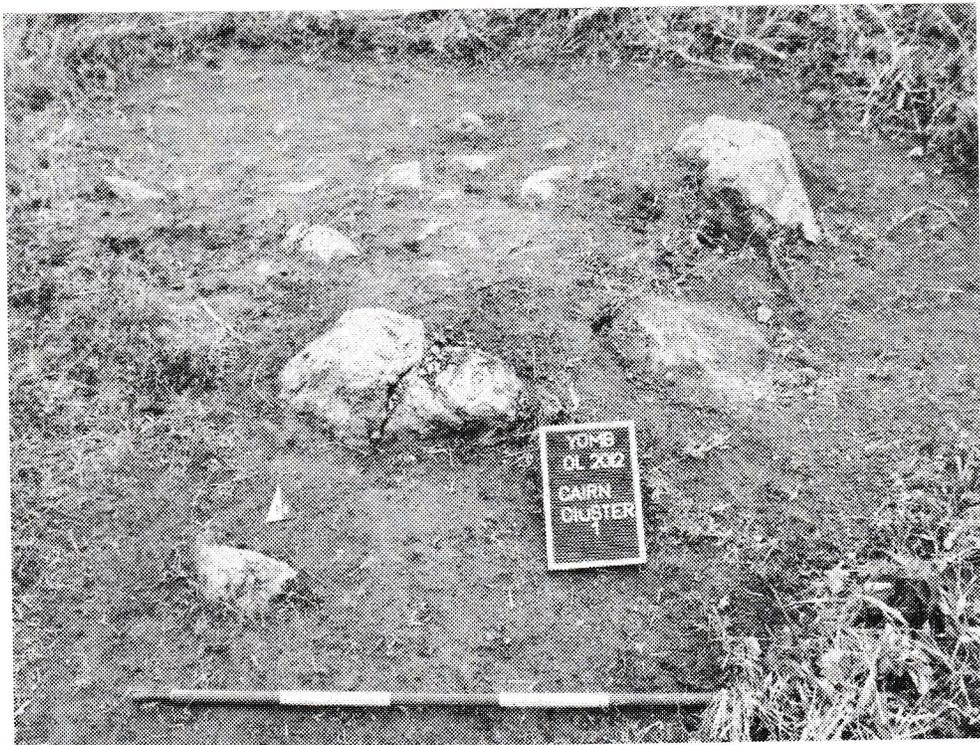
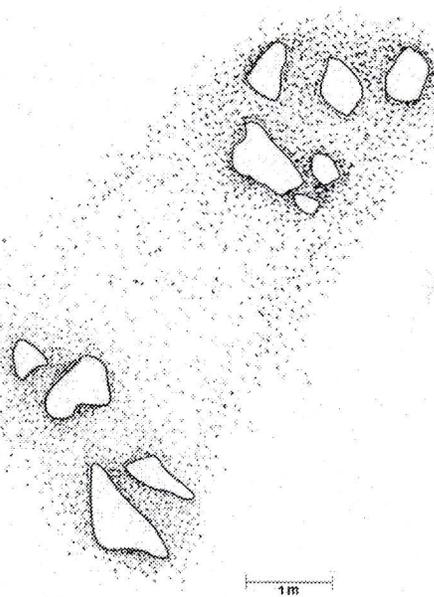


Figure 0-2 Cairn heap found from the Óluwáwa Cairn Field

These archeological features were identified during an intensive archeological survey conducted in 2011 and mapped using a Total Station Survey machine. After an extensive mapping exercise covering around an area of around one acre, 20 petroforms and two earthen mounds (crated by human activity) were recorded (Table 1). Detailed feature recording - Based on the need to have consistency and conformance to conventions already in place, a Standardized Feature Form used for recoding cairn mounds were used, including naming conventions and attributes used in Europe to record this type of burial sites (Smith *et al.*,1901; Tuovinen 2002) (Figure 4-19).

4.1, Surface Features



Feature measurement: 440cm
 Feature type: rock scatter
 Feature Outline: irregular
 Feature Profile: irregular
 Feature Shape: uneven
 Material: quartz External rock size: cobbles Internal rock size: cobbles Number of external cobbles: 10 Number of internal cobbles: External cobble sphericity: angular Internal cobble sphericity: angular
 Associated features: Soil fill: 75%>

Figure 0-4 Feature 1 with archetypal attributes.

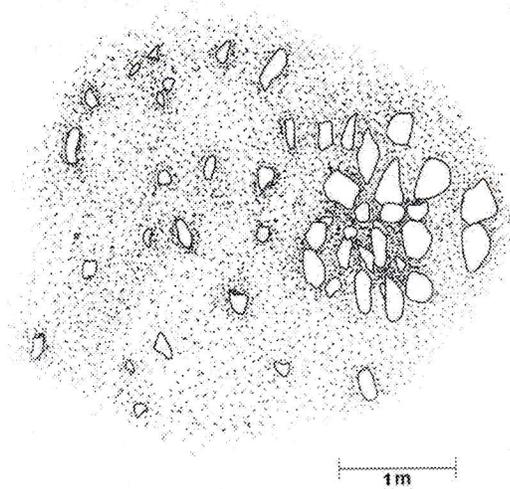


Figure 0-5 Feature 2 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: 330cm
 Feature type: rock ring Feature
 Outline: circular Feature
 Profile: irregular Feature
 Shape: mound Material: quartz
 External rock size: cobbles
 Internal rock size: cobbles
 Number of external cobbles: 46
 Number of internal cobbles:
 External cobble sphericity:
 angular to round Internal
 cobble sphericity: Associated
 features: Soil fill: 50%

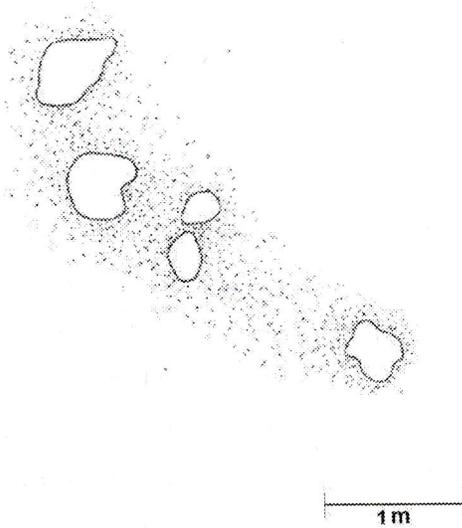


Figure 0-6 Feature 3 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: 382cm
 Feature type: rock ring Feature
 Outline: circular Feature
 Profile: irregular Feature
 Shape: mound Material: quartz
 External rock size: cobbles and
 boulders Internal rock size:
 cobbles Number of external
 cobbles: 5 Number of internal
 cobbles: External cobble
 sphericity: rounded Internal
 cobble sphericity: angular to
 rounded Associated features:
 Soil fill: 80%

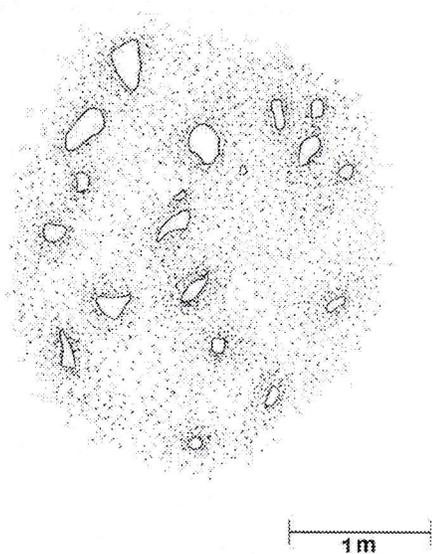


Figure 0-7 Feature 4 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: 194cm
 Feature type: mound
 Feature Outline: circular
 Feature Profile: convex
 Feature Shape: mound
 Material: quartz
 External rock size: cobbles and boulders
 Internal rock size: cobbles
 Number of external cobbles: 19
 Number of internal cobbles: External
 cobble sphericity: angular to round
 Internal cobble sphericity: angular to round
 Associated features: Soil fill: 45%

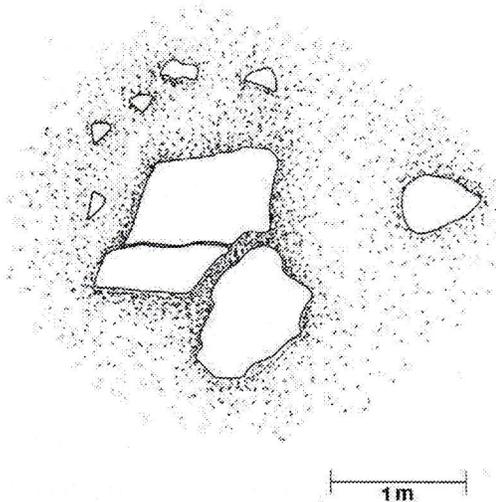


Figure 0-8 Feature 5 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: 177cm
 Feature type: rock heap
 Feature Outline: circular
 Feature Profile: convex
 Feature Shape: mound
 Material: quartz
 External cobble size: cobbles and boulders
 Internal cobble size: cobbles
 Number of external cobbles: 9
 Number of internal cobbles: External
 cobble sphericity: angular to round
 Internal cobble sphericity: angular to round
 Associated features: Soil fill: 75%

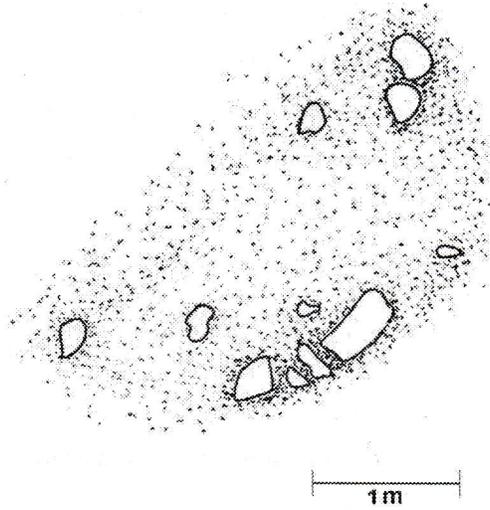


Figure 0-9 Feature 6 with archetypal attributes

Feature measurement: 197cm
 Feature type: mound Feature
 Outline: circular Feature
 Profile: convex Feature Shape:
 mound Material: quartz
 External cobble size: cobbles
 and boulder Internal cobble
 size: cobbles Number of
 external cobbles: 11 Number of
 internal cobbles: External
 cobble sphericity: angular to
 round Internal cobble
 sphericity: angular to round
 Associated features: Soil fill:
 75%

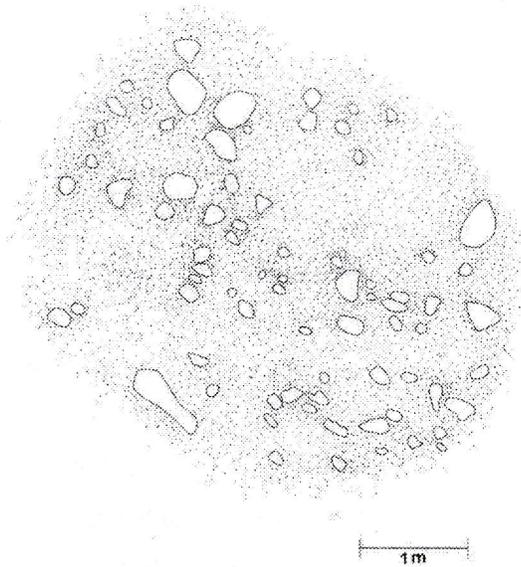


Figure 0-10 Feature 7 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: 329cm
 Feature type: mound Feature
 Outline: circular Feature
 Profile: convex Feature Shape:
 mound Material: quartz
 External cobble size: cobbles
 and boulders Internal cobble
 size: cobbles Number of
 external cobbles: 82 Number of
 internal cobbles: External
 cobble sphericity: angular to
 round Internal cobble
 sphericity: angular to round
 Associated features: Soil fill:
 45%

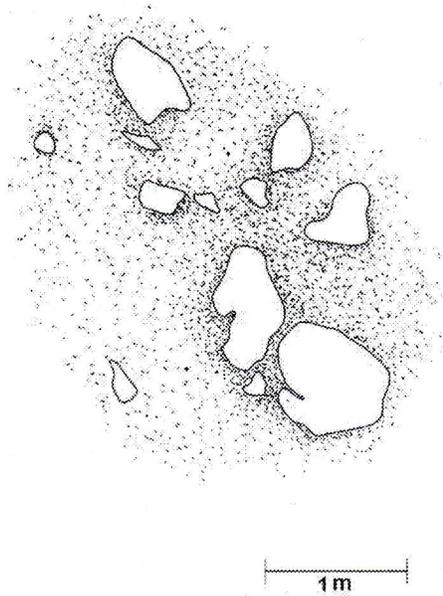


Figure 0-11 Feature 8 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: 286cm
 Feature type: rock heap
 Feature Outline: irregular
 Feature Profile: convex
 Feature Shape: mound
 Material: quartz
 External cobble size: cobbles and boulders
 Internal cobble size: cobbles
 Number of external cobbles: 12
 Number of internal cobbles: External
 cobble sphericity: angular to round
 Internal cobble sphericity: angular to round
 Associated features: Soil fill: 80%

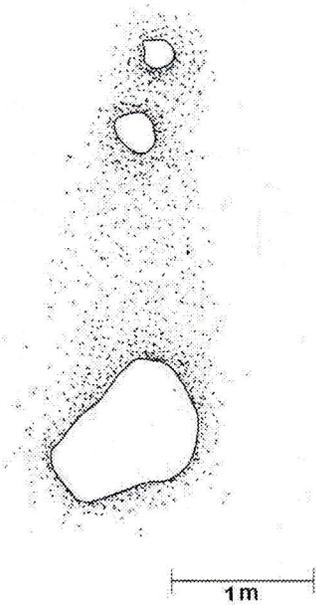


Figure 0-12 Feature 9 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: 202cm
 Feature type: rock scatter
 Feature Outline: irregular
 Feature Profile: irregular
 Feature Shape: mound
 Material: quartz
 External cobble size: cobbles and boulders
 Internal cobble size: cobbles and boulders
 Number of external cobbles: 4cm
 Number of internal cobbles:
 External cobble sphericity: angular to round
 Internal cobble sphericity: angular to round
 Associated features: Soil

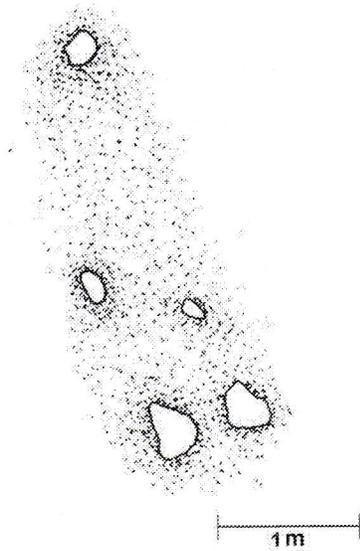


Figure 0-13 Feature 10 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: 248cm
 Feature type: rock scatter
 Feature Outline: irregular
 Feature Profile: irregular
 Feature Shape: scatter Material:
 quartz External cobble size:
 cobbles Internal cobble size:
 cobbles Number of external
 cobbles: 5 Number of internal
 cobbles: External cobble
 sphericity: angular to round
 Internal cobble sphericity:
 angular to round Associated
 features: Soil fill: 95%

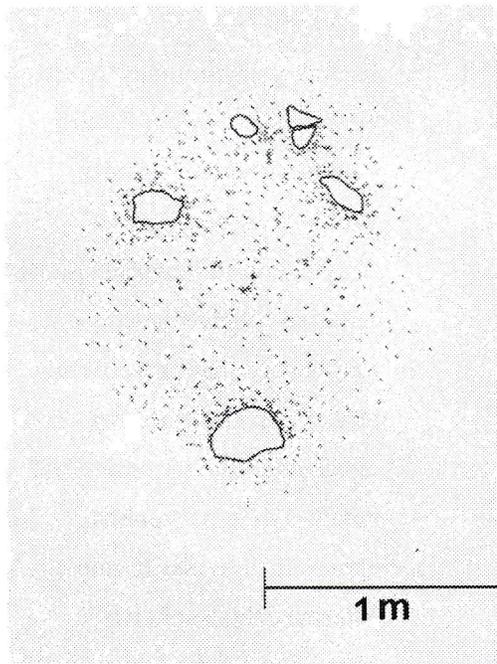


Figure 0-14 Feature 11 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: 71cm
 Feature type: mound Feature
 Outline: circular Feature
 Profile: convex Feature Shape:
 mound Material: quartz
 External cobble size: cobbles
 Internal cobble size: cobbles
 Number of external cobbles: 6
 Number of internal cobbles:
 External cobble sphericity:
 angular to round Internal
 cobble sphericity: angular to
 round Associated features: Soil
 fill: 75%

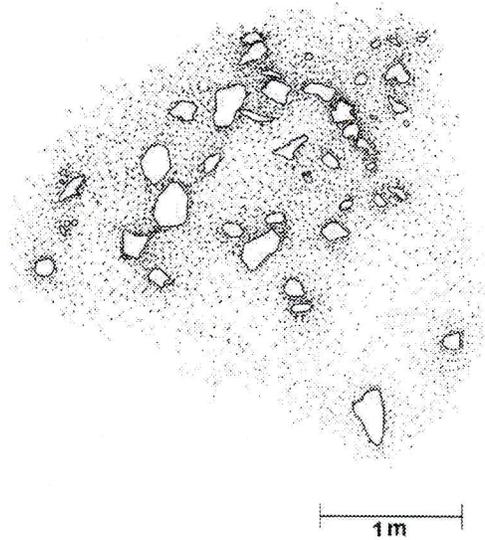


Figure 0-15 Feature 12 with archetypal attributes

Feature measurement: 236cm
 Feature type: mound Feature
 Outline: circular Feature
 Profile: convex Feature Shape:
 mound Material: quartz
 External cobble size: cobbels
 Internal cobble size: cobbles
 Number of external cobbles: 47
 Number of internal cobbles:
 External cobble sphericity:
 angular to round Internal
 cobble sphericity: angular to
 round Associated features: Soil
 fill: 60%

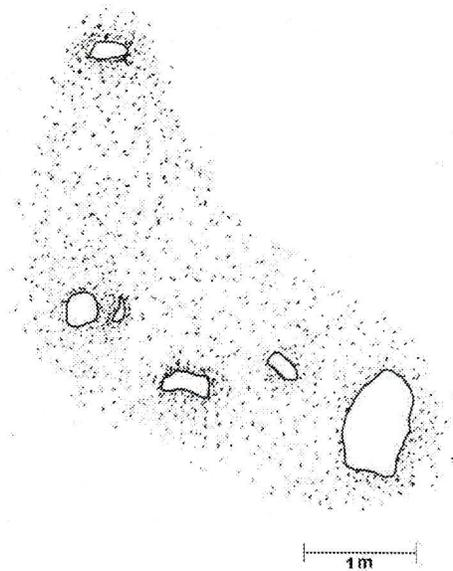


Figure 0-16 Feature 13 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: 246cm
 Feature type: scatter Feature
 Outline: irregular Feature
 Profile: irregular Feature
 Shape: mound Material: quartz
 External cobble size: cobbles
 and boulders Internal cobble
 size: Number of external
 cobbles: 6 Number of internal
 cobbles: External cobble
 sphericity: angular to round
 Internal cobble sphericity:
 angular to round Associated
 features: Soil fill: 85%

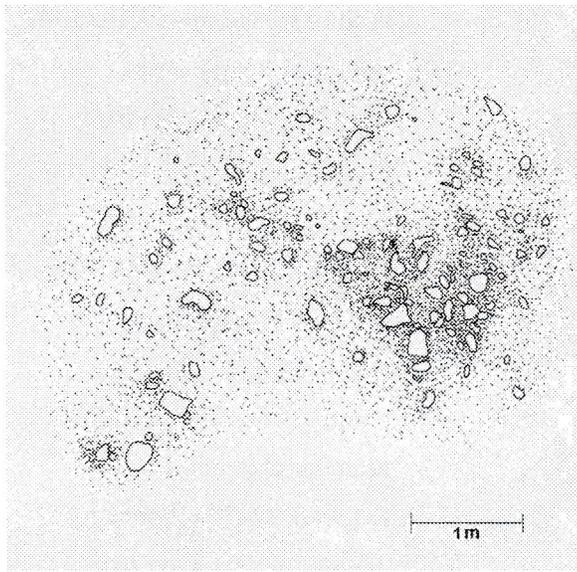


Figure 0-17 Feature 14 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: Feature type: mound Feature Outline: irregular Feature Profile: convex Feature Shape: irregular Material: quartz External cobble size: cobbles Internal cobble size: cobbles Number of external cobbles: 78 Number of internal cobbles: External cobble sphericity: angular to round Internal cobble sphericity: angular to round Associated features: Soil fill: 55%

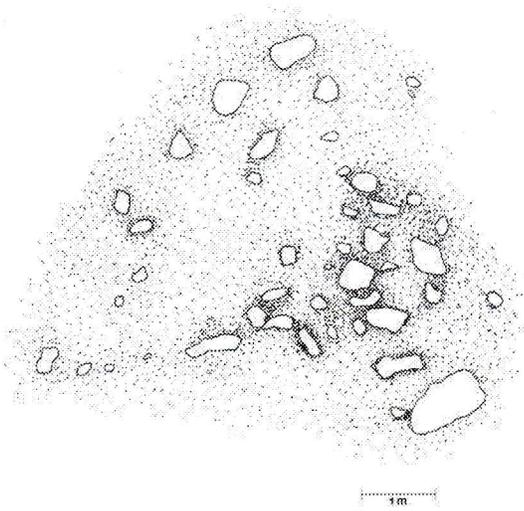
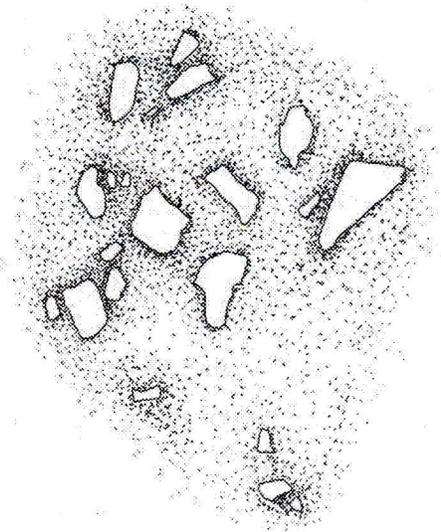


Figure 0-18 Feature 15 with archetypal attributes.

Feature measurement: Feature type: mound Feature Outline: irregular Feature Profile: convex Feature Shape: irregular Material: quartz External cobble size: cobbles and bouldres Internal cobble size: cobbles Number of external cobbles: 46 Number of internal cobbles: External cobble sphericity: angular to round Internal cobble sphericity: angular to round Associated features: Soil fill: 55%



Feature measurement: Feature
type: rock heap Feature
Outline: irregular Feature
Profile: convex Feature Shape:
irregular Material: quartz
External cobble size: cobbles
and boulders Internal cobble
size: cobbles and boulders
Number of external cobbles: 22
Number of internal cobbles:
External cobble sphericity:
angular to round Internal
cobble sphericity: Associated
features: Soil fill:55%

Figure 0-19 Feature 16 with archetypal attributes.

Caim No.	Diameter	Feature Type					Feature Outline					Feature Profile				
		Caim	Mound	Petroform	Rock Scatter	Rock Ring	Oval	Circular	Square	Rectangular	Irregular	Rounded	Convex	Square	Concave	Irregular
1	440cm				X											X
2	330cm					X										X
3	382cm						X								X	
4	194cm		X													X
5	177cm				X					X						X
6	197cm					X										X
7	329cm				X											X
8	286cm				X											X
9	202cm				X											X
10	248cm				X											X
11	356cm															X
12	71cm									X						X
13	232cm				X											X
14	246cm				X											X
15	683cm		X												X	
16	432cm		X												X	
17	603cm		X												X	
18	495cm		X												X	
19	460cm									X					X	

Table 1 The attributes collected from surveyed each petroform feature.

4.2, Heap of rubble at *Parangiyawādiya Nikawāwa*

Three petroforms were observed at the megalithic burial site. This was first recorded during an initial archeological survey carried out in 2012. The survey uncovered more than 300 burial structures with different features made using Biotite granite. The above mentioned three petroforms were discovered among these burial scatters. The one located near the Western end of the megalithic burial site has a circumference of 5.5 meters. The average rubble size of this arrangement is between 10-15 centimeters. One can also observe four boulders (around 150 cm in circumference) jutting out of the surface. The heap also contains a few scattered burnt claybats and a relatively large piece of iron slag (Figure 21). Apart from this, two more rubble heaps can be observed but are smaller in size in comparison to the latter.

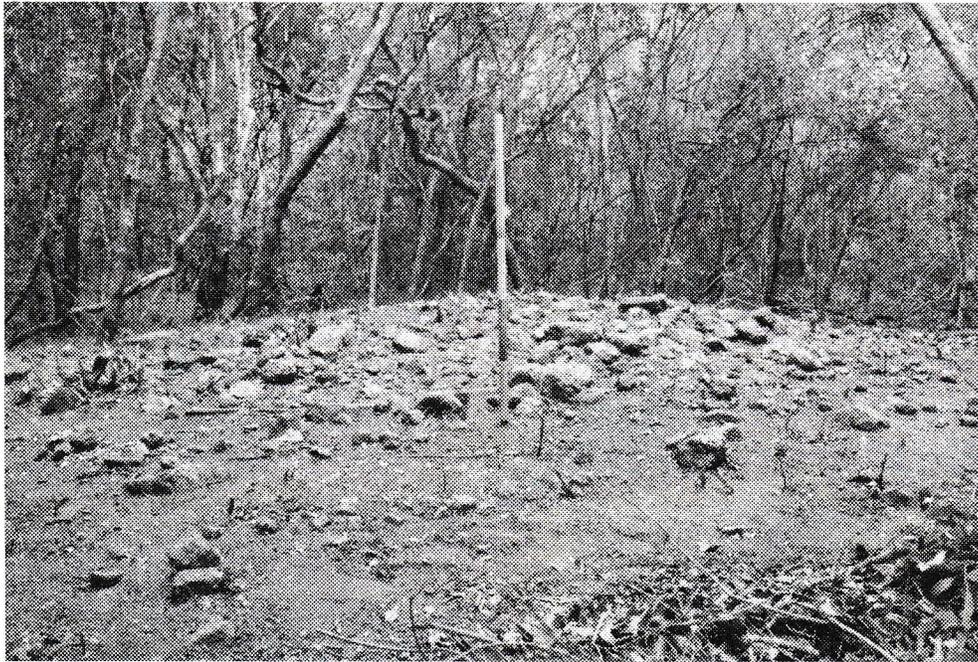


Figure 0-20 Cairn mound at *Parangiyawādiya Nikawāwa*

4.3, *Keenagaha Ulpota* Cairn Field

A discovery of quartz rubble scatters were made in 2013 inside the *Huruluwāwa* forest reserve coming under the administrative boundaries of *Horowpotāna* Divisional Secretariat. A large deposit of iron ore and slag lumps were observed in *Keenagaha Ulpota* located near the *Mee-Oya* left bank inside the *Hurulu* forest reserve. The site also has scattered sherds of Black and Red Ware and Red Ware. Based on the surface characteristics and deposit remains one can propose that the site was an ancient metal extracting site. In proximity to this location one can also observe heaps of quartz rubble and on close observation of the features one can come to the

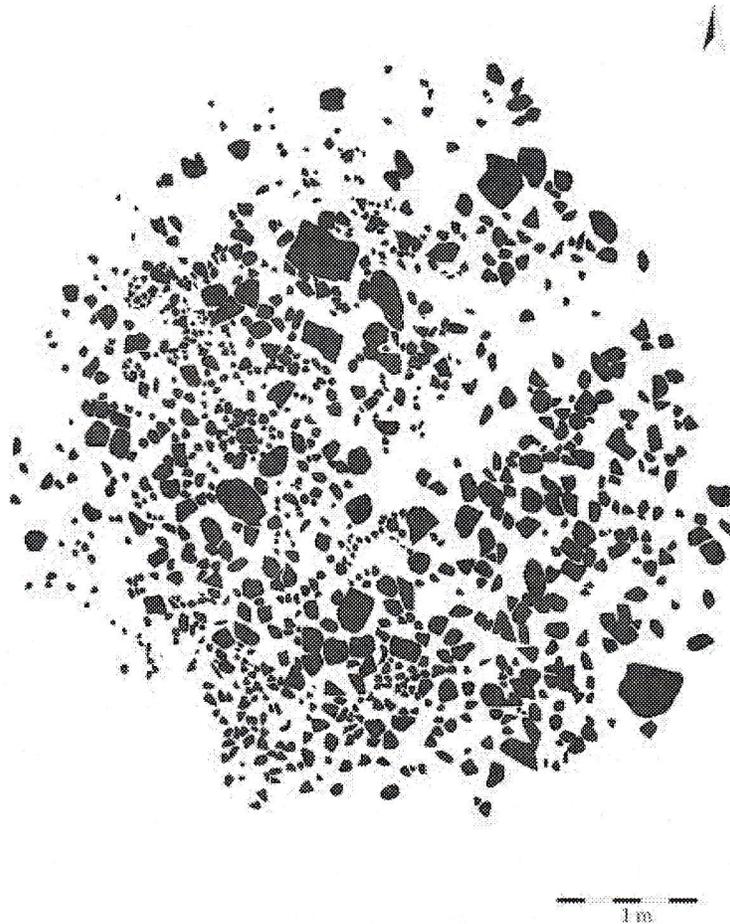


Figure 0-21 Elevation drawing of Cairn mound at *Parangiyawādiya Nikawāwa*

assumption that these heaps could be classified as belonging to the cairn heap of petroform category. About 10 rubble heaps of this nature of different sizes was observable and the number of rubble in a heap ranges from 3-5 in some instances and 5-7 in some others. Overall this scatter covers an area of around half an acre.

This type of rock arrangements are found in other parts of the Island as well. These allpetroforms identified as types of burials belong to the megalithic mortuary tradition (Figure 22).

i. Heap of Rubble and Mound with a Stone Circle at *Māmaduva*

The oldest evidence reported in this regard is the burial site in *Māmaduva* in *Vauniya* district identified by Seneviratne (Seneviratne, 1984:246-247). It was the former Archaeology Commissioner, M.H.M. Sirisoma who has discovered the existence of a megalithic cemetery site in the teak plantation close to *Parangi Āru* in *Vauniya* district. That was in year the 1976. According to Seneviratne, there had been two types of burials in the site. They are cist burials (type A) and heaps of stone rubble mound with stone circle (type B). He has referred to this burial site as cairn circle. Unfortunately, all these burials have been destroyed in 1978-9 period due to a development project.

ii. Cairn Circles at *Habarattawala*

A cemetery site with extremely small burials that belongs to the type of cairn circles was found in 2003 from the village *Habarattawala* in *Sūriyavāva* Divisional Secretariat in *Hambantota* District. Though it was being destroyed due to slash and burn (or chena) cultivations by the period of its discovery, it was possible to identify about 7 burials there (Table 2). After much effort was taken in observation, it was clear that there stone slab placed in the

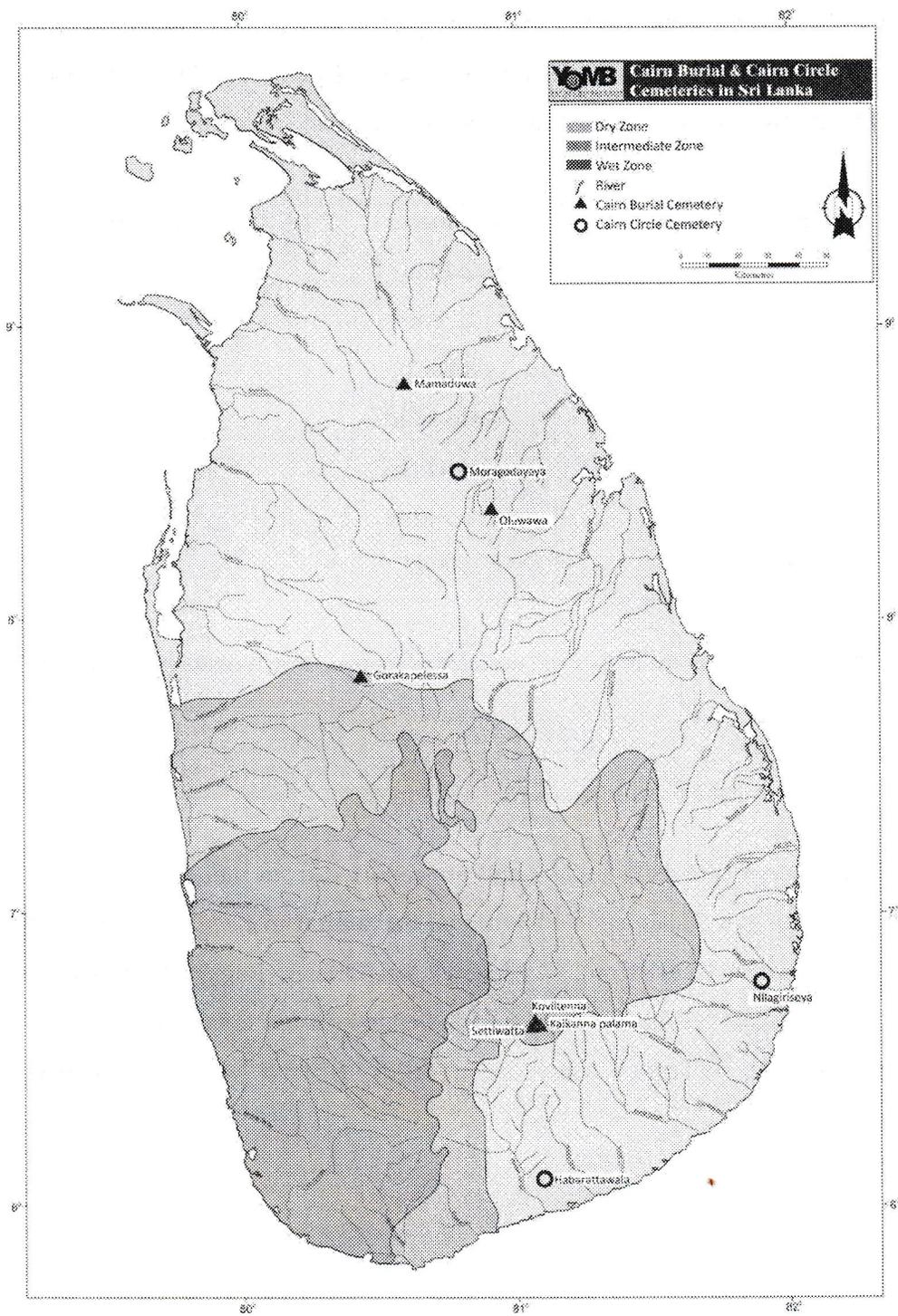


Figure 0-22 Recorded petroform sites in Sri Lanka.

middle and the other stone rubbles are placed around the slab. Many stones in burials are covered by the soil. In a short distance, a sign of an ancient settlement has also been found (Weerasinghe *et al.*, 2003:48).

Burial NO.,	Diameter	count of rubble
1	2.40m	6
2	2.70m	6
3	3.20m	5
4	dislocated	5
5	dislocated	6
6	dislocated	5
7	2.90m	5

Table 2 The size of the burials and the count of rubbles (after Weerasinghe *et al.*, 2001).

iii. Heap of rubble and Mound at *Welanwita*

A few heaps of rubble and mound are reported from the area of *Welanwita* that belongs to *Haldummulla* Divitional Secretariat in *Badulla* District of the *Uva* Province (pers. Com., Archaeological Officer, Regional Archaeology Office, *Badulla*) (Table 3). These memorials which are called '*mukkaru sohon*' by the villagers were already destroyed by treasure hunters when it was reported.

Site	Feature No.	Diameter	Height
1. <i>Kóviltánna</i>	1	6m	1m
	2	7m	1m
2. <i>Káلكanna Pálamá</i>	1	3.90m	1m
	2	5.50m	1m
3. <i>Settiwatta</i>	1	12m	1.50m

Table 3 Sizes of the features (after Dissanayake *et al.*, 2011)

Heaps of rubble and mound at *Kóviltánna*- Evidence of petroforms that have the shape of a stúpa with the height of about one meter has been found at the right bank of *Kudā Oya* (Figure 24). These petroforms are believed to have been built on rubbles placed in a circle, in the form of a foundation. The distance between the two petroforms is 3 meters. As they have been dug and destroyed by treasure hunters, the potsherds that were inside are scattered on the surface.



Figure 0-23 Petroform built using rubble stones (Photo by Mangala Katugampola)

Heap of rubble and a Mound at *Kālkanna Oya pālama area* - Two heaps of rubbles and a mound have been reported from the left bank of *Kālkanna Oya*. In the feature no., 2 a foundation laid with stones in the shape of a circle was to be seen and a similar circle of stones was found on the top of the heap of soil. Potsherds were scattered around the centers of these two rubble mounds had also been dug by treasure hunters.

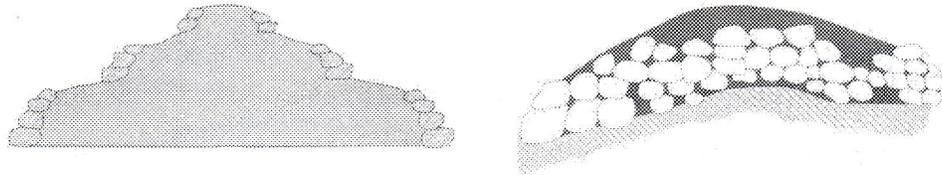


Figure 0-24 Section drawings of the *Kóviltānna* petroform (after Dissanayake *et al.*, 2011).

Heap of rubble and Mound at *Settiwatta* - This petroform was recovered from the right bank of the *Kālkanna oya*. This is entirely different from all the above mentioned features in the way it has been built. Although destroyed by the treasure hunters, some features are intact to the extent that it can be clearly identified. This has been built in a circular shape using five rows of round rubbles and on the top of this which is quite similar to a platform, other lines of rubble are used to create a mound. Considering the nature and the characteristic of the rubble formation, it is clear that there had been a water supply. This has been build in the shape of a stūpa or a cone using soil and stone. Evidence related to this are found in an ancient settlement in the left bank of *Kālkanna Oya*.

iv. Heap of rubble at *Gorakapālāssa*

The discovery made at the upper basin of the *Mee-oya* is the first of its kind of cairn heap type burial petrofoams in the Island. Around 20 such constructs using quartz pebbles can be observed spreading in an area of around 100 X 100 meters (Figure 25). One can also observe ancient posherds and a piece of iron slag as well within the scatter area. The site located inside the *Kahalla Pallekele* forest reserve can be identified as a cairn heap burial site. This is bounded from one side by a branch of *Hakwatuna Oya*. The site contains a mandatory feature of a megalithic burial site by having a rocky outcrop at one end of the site. The archeological landscape consists of two tanks, a habitation site with slag scatter. The grassland in which the site is located is called *Gorakapālāssa*.

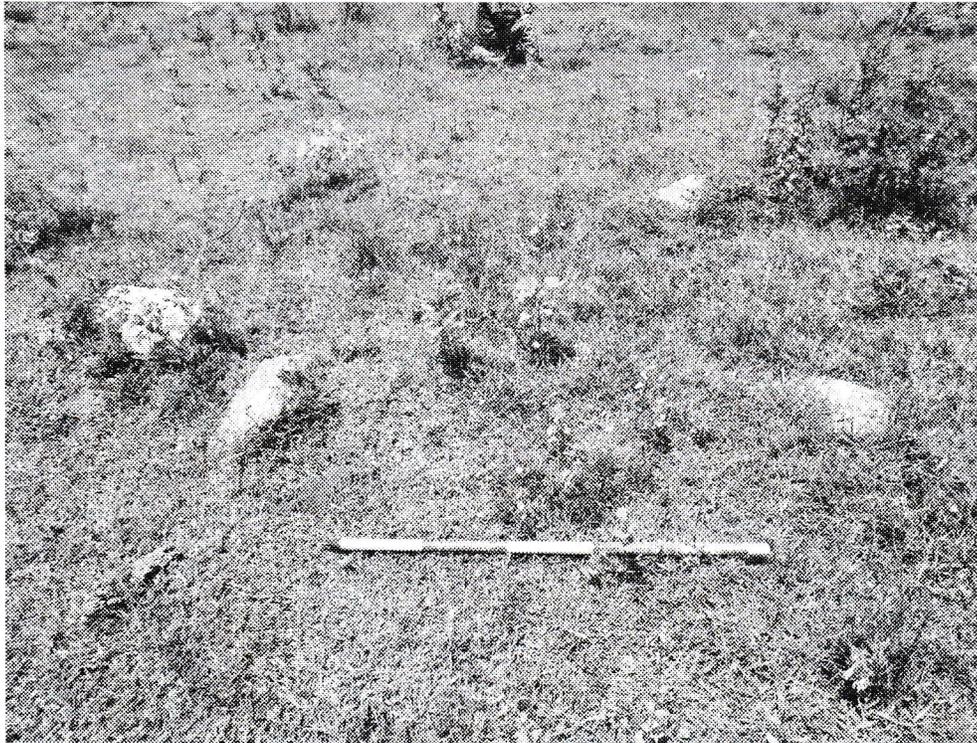


Figure 0-25 Milky quartz rubble scatter of *Gorakapālāssa*.

Rock arrangement in the YOMB2: stone circles

Paluketuwāwa Moragodayāya stone circles

Paluketuwāwa located at *Walaha*

widdawāwa village can be characterized as a middle-scale tank of the area. *Tammennagodella* megalithic burial site is located towards the Western side of the above tank. One can also observe petroforms towards the eastern side of the catchment area of the tank as well. At a location about 150 meters from this one single circular structure with three concentric rings can be observed made of relatively large stone boulders with a diameter of 7 meters. A little further away from this one can observe 2 smaller size stone circles with diameters respectively of 6m and 5.5m. The special feature of this structure is that apart from the granite stone boulders kept around to form the circle, there are milky quartz type stones kept intermittently. There are potsherds scattered on the surface. This petroform closely resembles the type identified in Indian (and other parts of the World) as stone circles type megalithic burials. An archeological survey conducted in 2012 around the periphery of *Neelagiri Seya* archeological reserve in *Ampāra* has also yielded evidence of stone circles or ring circles in this area (Bandara *et al.*, 2012). In this instance, the diameter of the stone circles ranges from 3-5 meters.

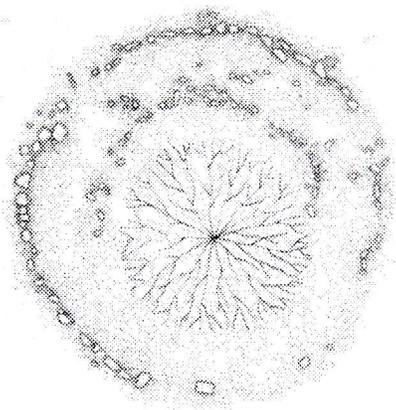


Figure 0-26 *Paluketuwāwa Moragodayāya* stone circle.

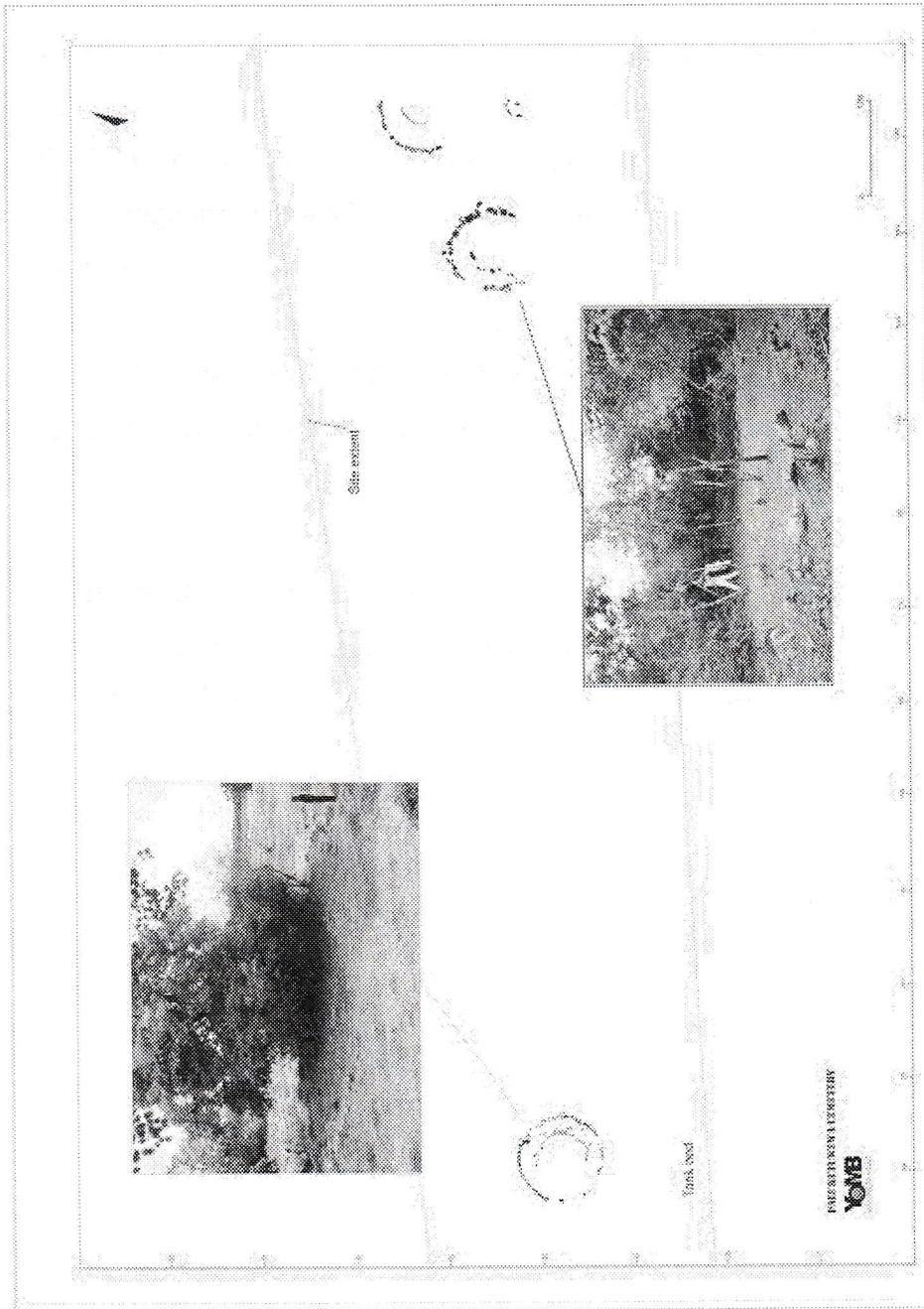


Figure 0-27 Paluketuwāwa Moragodayāya stone circles site plan.

Rock arrangement in the YOMB3: boulder rectangles

Around 300 meters towards the South-Western side of the *Ellepotaāna* megalithic burial site one can observe the remains of a rectangular structure and a adjoining smaller structure on the rocky plane (Figure 27). The length and breadth of the larger rectangular structure is 904x585 cm while the small structure is 570 X 60 cm respectively. Near the large rectangular stone structure there are two artificially constructed square shaped cavity on the surface (Plan 14). Evidence of a similar structure has been discovered at *Yān-Oya* lower basin in *Dickwewa* area (Herath, 2013). This located is named by the villagers as *Nagāmerûgala*, which is about 500 meters west from the *Dickwewa* megalithic burial site. One can observe a large number of both, square and rectangular boulder rock arrangements at the *Rajaḡala* archeological site in *Ampāra*. A large number of these type of arrangements can be found at *Sohonagala* hill in *Ragagala* and the villager in that area is of the opinion that these are special types of ancient burials.

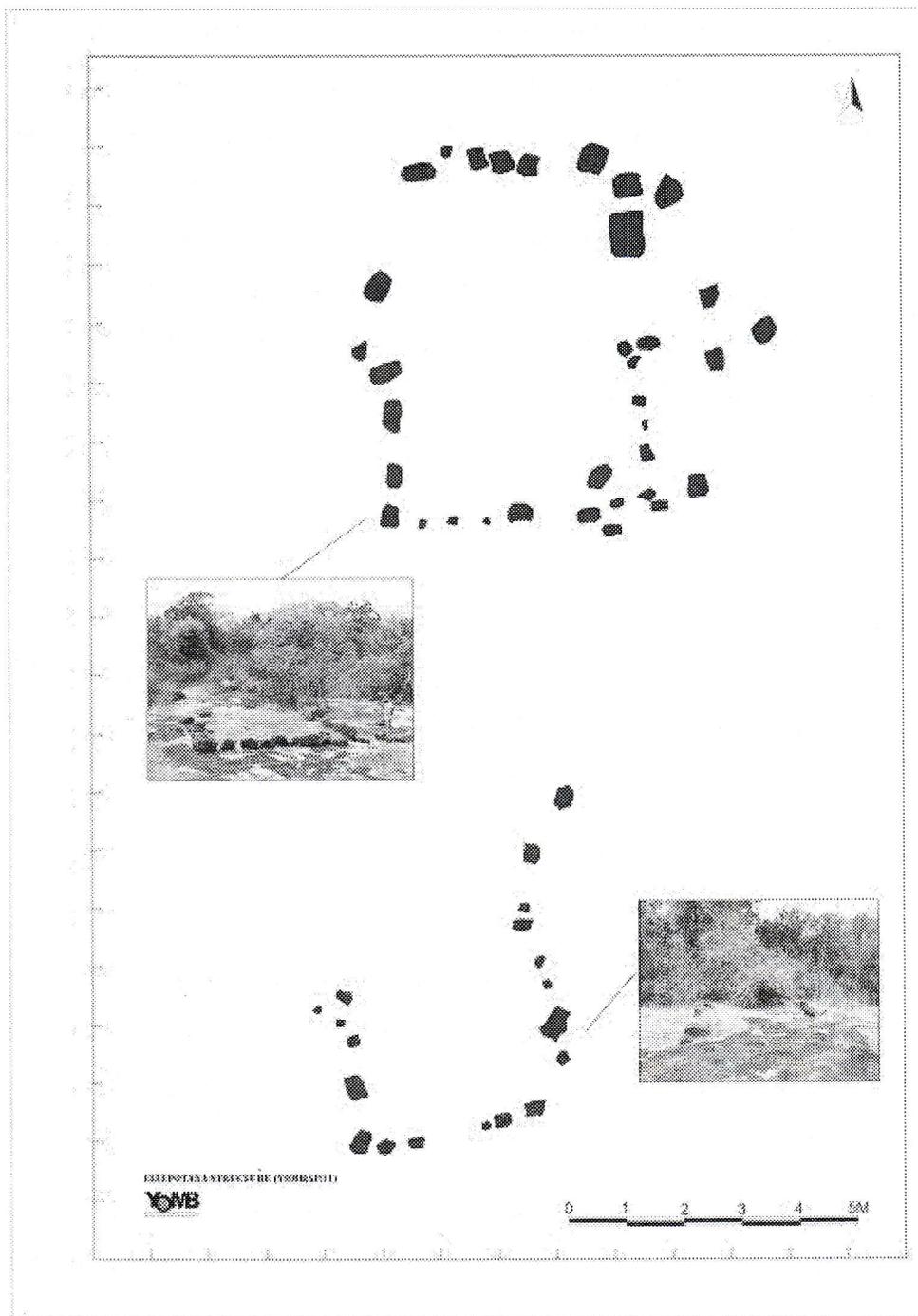


Figure 0-28 *Ellepotaāna* boulder rectangles.

Acknowledgement: I am grateful to the Director and finance committee of PGIAR for granting financial aid for doing this field work of YOMB. I am also grateful to the YOMB Team (T.G.K. Priyanta; Mangala Katugampola; Chandima Bogahawatta; Amalka Wijesoorya; Harendralal Namalgamuwa; Shayamal Iroshana; Jayampath Senanayake; Umanga Rammungoda; Samanti Ranjani; Thilini Gunatilake and Anuradha Wijebandara) for giving their support to me whenever it was required. I am indebted to Lohita Karunasekara for editing the text.

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