

The Decorated Pottery Lids of Megalithic Nilgiris



Dr. C. Maheswaran

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S.S. JAWAHAR, I.A.S.,

**The Principal Secretary and Commissioner of Museums,
Government Museum,
Chennai - 600 008.**

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FOREWORD


J.W.Brecks, the first Collector of the Nilgiris, in response to the call letter from the authorities of the Indian Museum, Kolkata had arranged to unearth more than four dozen megalithic burial sites within the Nilgiris in 1873 and was able to acquire antiquities from therein. Dr.F.Jagor, the German Anthropologist of Berlin collected prehistoric antiquities (especially of megalithic period) both from Adichanallur and Nilgiris.

Interestingly, while the Breek's collections have reached the Government Museum, Chennai (on the one hand) and the British Museum, London (on the other hand) the collections of Jagor were retained at the National Museum of Berlin. In short, the antiquities of Megalithic Nilgiris, at present, are housed in three different Museums, viz., the Government Museum, Chennai, the British Museum, London and the National Museum, Berlin.

Dr.C. Maheswaran, Curator for Anthropology, Government Museum, Chennai has studied and documented the 'Decorated Pottery Lids', one of the unique set of artefacts of the Nilgiri Megalithic antiquities, recently. I am indeed happy to bring this documented study of the 'Decorated Pottery Lids of Megalithic Nilgiris' as a new publication during this year 2008-2009, with the financial assistance of both Government of India and Government of Tamilnadu.

I hope that this work will be a useful reference work for the scholars, students and general public who are interested in the Megalithic Studies of Tamilnadu, in general and the Megalithic Studies of the Nilgiris, in particular.

Station : Chennai – 600 008
Date : 23.3.2009


(Dr. T.S. SRIDHAR, I.A.S.,)

PREFACE

The Nilgiris forming a significant land mass of the Western Tamilnadu is not only a paradise for tourism but also a valuable survey area for the experts of various disciplines, like prehistorians, archaeologists, anthropologists, art historians, linguists, folklorists, naturalists owing to its potential resourcefulness on all possible domains of study. Such significance of the Nilgiris was realized even during the British colonial period. For instance, J.W.Brecks, the first Collector of the Nilgiris in 1873, not only documented the accounts of the Primitive Tribes of the Nilgiris but its archaeological wealth as well. During 1876 Dr.F.Jagor, the German Anthropologist carried out his field explorations in and around the Nilgiris and decamped with a sizable collection of the Nilgiri Megalithic finds to Berlin.

While the collection of Jagor on Megalithic Nilgiris are housed, at present, at the National Museum, Berlin, their corresponding collection of Brecks were send both to the Government Museum, Chennai and the British Museum, London.

Among the Nilgiri Megalithic finds, the pottery lids remain as a topic of interest and attraction due to the presence of decorated motifs (of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, phytomorphic and inanimate object) atop them.

In this monograph of 'The Decorated Pottery Lids of Megalithic Nilgiris' not only the lids concerned are studied and documented but the various conjectures for their presence are discussed as well.

I wish to record my deep sense of gratitude to our Principal Secretary / Commissioner of Museums Dr.T.S. Sridhar, I.A.S., for having included this work as a new publication of 2008-2009.

Station : Chennai – 600 008
Date : 23.3.2009

(C. MAHESWARAN)

Dedicated
to
the erudite scholarship
of
J.W. Breeks
who has done the pioneering study
on the
Megalithic Nilgiris

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.0 General

The Nilgiri Hills in Tamilnadu State, South India are noted for their scenic beauty, their characteristic primitive tribal communities, and for an unusual archaeological heritage which in more than one respects seems to deserve the attribute 'unique'. And the *Nilgiri Hills* rise abruptly from the surrounding plains on southern, eastern, and northern sides while they slope down gently on northwestern side to the Wynad region of the Kerala State. Thus, the Nilgiri Hills form a massif to the north of the Palghat Gap and where the Eastern Ghats and the Western Ghats meet.

1.1 Megaliths of the Nilgiris: An Introduction

Throughout the Nilgiri Hills abundant Megalithic tombs of three¹ distinct categories are identified, viz., (i) Cairns/Cairn Circles/Non-piled Stone Circles, (ii) Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles, and (iii) Dolmens. Of these three types, the Cairns/Cairn Circles/Non-piled Stone Circles and the Dolmens are not unique to the Nilgiris, as these types of Megalithic structures are also attested in other districts of Tamilnadu, other States of India, and other parts of the world. Contrary to this, the third type of Megalithic structures, namely, the draw well cairns/piled stone circles/walled circles are unique to the Nilgiris and not attested at all in Tamilnadu or any other parts of India or in any other parts of the globe.

In the sub-terrain level of these three types of Megalithic structures, unique type of single or multi-tiered grotesque pottery in dull red finish, bearing terracotta lids of various motifs such as anthropomorphic motifs, zoomorphic motifs, phytomorphic motifs, and quite rarely a motif of columnar structure of inanimate nature in the same dull red finish are all identified. These altogether exemplify the terracotta art of the Nilgiri Megaliths. And it is adduced that one of the most outstanding traits of the graves of the Nilgiri Megaliths is the abundance of terracotta figurines observed as the decorated pottery lids in them. Further, the fragmentary state of a large number of terracotta figurines seems to point out a possible ritual breakage of certain portion of the figurines involved. And such abundance of terracotta figurines within the burial complex of the Nilgiri Megaliths put them clearly into a distinct category among the Megalithic Culture of South India.

II. EARLIER WORKS ON THE NILGIRI MEGALITHS

The Nilgiri Megaliths were studied since 1603, when the Italian Jesuit Glacomno Fenicio found his way to the pleasant hilly tract of the Nilgiris. H. Congreve (1847:72-110) has done a large amount of work on the Megalithic antiquities of the Nilgiri Hills. In response to the requisition from the authorities of the Indian Museum at Calcutta (i.e., the present day "Kolkata"), J.W. Breeks, the first Commissioner (i.e., the 'District Collector') of the Nilgiris made arrangements in 1870s to unearth more than forty Megalithic structures in and around the Nilgiris and revealed their contents to the outside world. And all these details have been published in a monograph on the Nilgiri Hills (Breeks, 1873). Majority of these Megalithic finds are now housed in the British Museum (at London), the National Museum (at Berlin), and the Madras State Museum (at Madras, the present day 'Chennai'). A few representative Megalithic finds from the Breeks' collection of the Madras State Museum (i.e., the present day 'Government Museum, Chennai') have been transferred and displayed in the Government Museum of the Nilgiri District (i.e., the 'Government Museum, Udhamandalam').

After Breeks, however, there was not even a single attempt made to explore other remaining Megalithic burial sites in the Nilgiris.² During May, 1994 the author of this work – in the capacity of the then Curator, Government Museum, Udhamandalam – have taken up a field exploration at "Yaezhu Kaottai" of the Kil Kotagiri, Kotagiri Taluk, Nilgiri District and collected terracotta remains (both of pottery and figurines) as surface finds from seven draw well cairns located adjacently.³

III. THE NILGIRI MEGALITHIC REMAINS: AN OVERVIEW

3.0 General

The prehistoric remains of the Nilgiri Megaliths are identifiable in the form of "Megalithic Burial Complexes" that exist over the terrain as 'Draw Well Cairns'/'Piled Stone Circles'/'Walled Circles', 'Cairns'/'Non-piled Stone Circles' and 'Dolmens'.⁴

In the sub-terrain levels, these Megalithic burial sites are found to yield prehistoric antiquities of cinerary urns, their decorated pottery lids, metallic antiquities of gold, bronze and iron, apart from semi-precious stones of cornelian, agate and chalcedony.

Hence, it becomes imperative to study the marking stones of bigger size (i.e., 'megaliths') above the terrain and the material remains of antiquities at the sub-terrain levels as well.

3.1 Megalithic Burial Structures of the Nilgiris

3.1.1 Structure of Cairns/Cairn Circles/Non-piled Stone Circles

Stones in these circles were originally laid upon the ground or embedded in a vertical position. By laying stones close to each other, a covered circular feature would be formed. This might then be surrounded with separate stones forming a circle. Or laying vertically emplacing stones apart from each other may form a single circle. The emplacement of stone to form two or three adjoining circles of erect stones formed most complex circles.

Noble (1975:96) has identified four different types of Cairns/Cairn Circles/ Non-piled Stone Circles as enlisted below:

- i. Cairns/ Cairn Circles/Non-piled Stone Circles with laying of stones simply close to each other to form a circular outline;
- ii. Cairns/Cairn Circles/Non-piled Stone Circles with laying of stones simply close to each other to form a circular outline, along with an additional surrounding circle of stones;

iii. Cairns/Cairn Circles/Non-piled Stone Circles with two or more emplaced circles of upright stones wherein the uprights tending to parallel each other; and

iv. Cairns/Cairn Circles/Non-piled Stone Circles with single emplaced circle of stones of comparatively smaller size;

3.1.2 Structure of Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles

The Characteristic Nilgiri Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles typically rise to about one meter in height are found normally on structures in grass. Seven walled circles strung along a prominent ridge behind the easternmost Kota village termed 'Yaezhu Kaottai' (Lit. "Seven Fort") so called after the seven circles of piled stones the ideal sites with walled circles. Most walls, here, rise above one meter.

Noble (1975:96) has identified six different types of Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles as listed below:

i. Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/ Walled Circles with inner wall in perpendicular;

ii. Draw well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles with inner wall in perpendicular while other wall slopes down to ground level;

iii. Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles with sloping inner and outer walls;

iv. Draw well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles with an inner wall of upright stones surrounded by a piled stone wall sloping to ground level;

v. Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles with an inner circle of upright stones, along with an accumulation of earth in the centre; and

vi. Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles with an inner wall of upright stones, along with at least two inner circles of upright stones.

3.1.3 Structure of Dolmens

In contradistinction to the stone circles (of both piled and non-piled types), which for the most part stand on summits in ridges at higher elevation, the 'Nilgiri Dolmens' generally lie within valleys or on nearby slopes at lower elevation. And the ideal Nilgiri dolmen has three vertical orthostats at an angle of approximately 90° to each other; thus there is an opening remains on one side. A horizontal slab of stone is found as the capstone over these vertical orthostats. And thus, a typical dolmen forms a box-like structure over the terrain (Noble, 1975:92).

3.2 Antiquities unearthed from the Nilgiri Megalithic Structures

The grave goods of antiquities unearthed from the Nilgiri Megalithic burial sites are unique on several respects. As cited earlier, one of the outstanding traits of the Nilgiri Megalithic graves is the abundance of terracotta figurines found in them. The graves of the Nilgiri Megaliths have yielded a wide variety of cinerary pottery, decorated pottery lids, arrow points, spear heads, javelins, knives, daggers, swords of iron. Then, there is a wide assortment of bronze vessels ranging from saucer to vase of ovoid to round in shape. The interments are sometimes accompanied by jewellery is evidenced through the unearthing of ear rings, finger rings, and toe rings of gold, rings of bronze, beads of cornelian, agate and chalcedony.

As observed by Noble (1997:106), the Nilgiri Megalithic sites held unusual pottery types, including a unique one in which each pot appears stylistically to contain superimposed pot forms. Such grotesque forms of cinerary pottery are described as 'ridged pottery' or 'tired pottery'. The lids of these cinerary potteries are decorated with figurines of humans, animals, birds, plants and inanimate object, as varied motifs.

The observations of Robert Bruce Foote (1901) on the finds of the Nilgiri Megaliths are worth quoting at this juncture which run as follows: "The most striking objects are tall jars, many-storied cylinders, of varying diameter with round or conical bases, fashion to rest upon.... or to be stuck into soft soil...These jars were surmounted by domed lids. On these lids stood or sat figures of the most varied kind of men, or animals, much more rarely of inanimate objects, but all modelled in the rudest and more

grotesque style. Grotesque and downright ugly as are these figures, yet those representing men and women are extremely interesting from the light they throw upon the stage of civilization their makers had attained to, for they illustrate the fashion of the garments as also of the ornaments they wore, and of the arms or implements carried by them. The animals they had domesticated, those they chased, and others that they probably worshipped are all indicated. Many figures of their domesticated animals, especially their buffaloes and sheep, are decorated with garlands.....”

The Megalithic pottery of the Nilgiris include mostly the coarse, dull red ware besides lids (as handles) in terracotta shaped with figurines of humans, animals, birds, plants, and inanimate object. The pottery shape includes narrow vase with pointed base and ridged body with flaring mouth, and basins with flaring mouth and round base. The vases have, in most cases, ridged bodies. The ring stands are conspicuously absent. An interesting observation, which Breeks (1873) was able to make, based on the extensive nature of his unearthing concerns a regional differentiation of burials of west of the road to Sigur (i.e., north of Udthagamandalam) and those beyond it on the east. The former contacted much rougher, thick-walled pottery as well as 'rough' hollow terracotta figurines.

Each Megalithic burial site seems to have contained nearly twenty urns. Their decorated pottery lids of interesting shapes could be summed up as follows:

- (i) lid with water buffalo;
- (ii) lid with peacock on its handle;
- (iii) lid with coiled snake atop it;
- (iv) lid with cheetah having a long tail encircled around its rim;
- (v) lid with elephant at its top;
- (vi) boar/hippopotamus-like animal for a handle;
- (vii) a humped bull (? he-buffalo);

- (viii) a standing dog with open mouth on it;
- (ix) a curious 'dancing' animal with its four legs diagonally portrayed;⁵
- (x) another curious animal with two heads joined at the necks so as to form a Y- shape;
- (xi) chief mourner resting hand on the head;
- (xii) an anthropomorphic figurine holding a shield in left arm while its right arm raised and extended in the act of brandishing a weapon (? sword)⁶;
- (xiii) a mother with a suckling baby⁶;
- (xiv) a warrior with a stylised cross-belt over his chest⁶;
- (xv) a curious four-headed (? Three-headed) anthropomorphic figurine (? male deity)⁶;
- (xvi) a ferocious female anthropomorphic figurine (? female deity) in a charging mood⁶;
- (xvii) lid with depiction of a sun flower atop⁷;
- (xviii) lid with a palm tree; ⁸ and
- (xix) an inanimate object signifying a columnar structure⁹.

IV. DECORATED POTTERY LIDS OF THE NILGIRI MEGALITHS

4.0 General

The terracotta figurines used as lid finials belonged to high 'tired' vessels in the same fabric and colours, of which parallels are likewise unknown.

4.1 Location of the Decorated Pottery Lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths

Close to the surface, within the stone circles (, in the case of 'Piled' and 'Non-piled Stone Circles') and away from the stone slabs (, in the case of 'Dolmens') grotesque pottery having decorated lids with motifs of humans, animals, birds, plants, and inanimate object are located. And cinerary urns were found buried from 30-150 cm. and more frequently beneath the stone slabs (, in the case of 'Dolmens'). Grave goods made of gold, bronze, iron, and semi-precious stones were usually left in or close to the urns.

4.2 Nature of the Decorated Pottery Lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths

The decorated pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths are mostly dull red in colour. And they have been generally shaped by hand, using material that was levigated with organic substance and mica. Further, they were provided with a slip in the same colour. As a result of firing, the core of the fabric is black. This must have occurred due to the fact that firing tended to remain incomplete because of excessive height above sea level.

These lids are all of a flattish, carefully rounded type but vary in size and shape. However, they do not exceed a diameter of 20 cm. The number of lids with figurines of water buffaloes in the filling soil of the burial is often disproportionately large.

4.3 Motifs incorporated in the Decorated Pottery Lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths

The range of motifs incorporated in the decorated pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths includes humans (male, female, child); anthropomorphic figurines of super naturals (of grotesque figures) either mounted on animals or seated on a platform (? signifying male deities) ferocious female figures (denoting female deities); wild

animals (elephants, boar/hippopotamus like animal, cheetah, snake); birds (peacock, wood pecker, cock); domesticated animals (water buffalo, humped bull, sheep, dog); fantastic animals ('dancing' animal, 'two-headed' animal); plants (sun flower, palm tree) as well as inanimate object of columnar structure (?denoting conical temple/phallic pillar/wind instrument).

Among the group of humans, males were probably most often depicted and shown in a variety of attitudes. Noteworthy is the soldiers wearing a helmet/turban with a double cross-belt across the chest. And soldiers were represented in a 'serious' mood, as expressed in the parallel-incised lines indicating the mouth. A male figure with his erect member exposed obviously represented a demonstration of virility. Chief mourners were depicted with hand resting on the head to symbolise utmost grief.

Contrary to this, females were generally shown with smiling face. In a few cases, they are observed to carry a pitcher on the head or hold a suckling child in the arms. However, their breasts were not always prominently shaped.

Wild animals such as elephant, boar/hippopotamus, cheetah, snake have been found as well. Birds were a frequent subject. And among the birds, peacock with its tail feathers together and not spread out must have been a popular subject. Besides water buffaloes, other domestic animals depicted were humped bull (? he-buffalo) and sheep with bells tied around the neck. Dog was also portrayed in a vigilant posture with open mouth.

Among the fantastic creatures, a rare type shown is the four legged 'dancing' animal with two diagonally opposite legs lifted in an unnatural manner besides a profusely ornate body. Another type is the portrayal of two-headed animal with heads joined together at their long necks, forming a Y shape.

Flora too were represented by a sunflower and in another instance, a palm tree.

Inanimate object as well was fashioned in a lid, showing a conical structure (? representing conical temple/phallic pillar/aerophone).

Regarding the purpose and meaning of Nilgiri terracotta art, one should take into consideration that the human figurines most probably do not represent the deceased

but only typify members of significant social groups while the animals, birds, plants, and another inanimate object respectively illustrate the environment that was perceived by the ancients of the Nilgiri Megalithic period. And the wide range of types was probably designed in order to provide the departed persons with their habitual surroundings in the after life.

4.4 Decorations observed in the Pottery Lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths

A characteristic interest in ornamentation has manifested itself in the decorated motifs of the pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths (, like in their respective pottery). For instance, herring bone patterns and hatchings, bordered by single incised lines, punched circles, and round holes have been profusely made use of. Appliqué technique also occurs, but less frequently either in portraying breast or in embellishments such as bejewelled neckband of bell(s) around the neck of the beasts.

Human figurines are not only embellished with ornamentation such as necklaces, bangles, and double cross belts but also exhibit pattern on their torsos, including their backs which could be regarded as tattoo marks.

Male and female figurines usually have their hair combed back at the rear side of the head in a particular stiff fashion and they are always shown in slightly varying shapes. Long trimmed beards appear to be restricted to images of elderly males. The common clothing for both the sexes is a short (and rarely a long) loincloth. Contrary to this general pattern, figurines of soldiers were shown wearing a girdle and a trouser like garment.

4.5 Dating the Pottery Lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths

The evidence necessary to date the Nilgiri Megalithic remains adequately is, at present, lacking. We can, therefore, only tentatively reach some understanding of when these remains were constructed. The following are our most positive clues:

- i. A gold coin of Roman Byzantine was unearthed from a stone circle in Udthagamandalam which has been dated by Srinivasan and Banerjee, 1953; 142 to the 4th Century A.D. (as quoted in Noble, 1997);

ii. On a potsherd discovered by Das (1957:147.148) there are Brahmi characters which epigraphists of the Government of India's Epigraphy Office have dated to the 1st Century A.D.; and

iii. From sample GPF-2345, with carbon content from pottery unearthed on the Nilgiris by Das (as quoted in Hockings, 1997:195:45), a radiocarbon date of 910 ± 90 years B.P. was obtained.

Based on these above cited clues, it may be suggested that there is no evidence for people having lived on the Nilgiris in B.C. times. And consequently, it is conjectured that most megalithic remains of the Nilgiris were probably construed between 100 A.D. and 1100 A.D.

There have been numerous attempts to assign a tentative date to the burial complex of the Megalithic Nilgiris, in general and the decorated pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths, in particular. For a long time, a tendency has prevailed to postdate it, often considerably, in relation to the Megalithic Culture of South India. The reason for this postdating is its distinction from the main stream Megalithic Culture in some respects. One such point is that cremation occurs uniformly instead of post-exarnation.

After careful analysis of the grave goods of the Megalithic Burial Complex of the Nilgiris, phase of circa 3rd Century B.C. to 3rd Century A.D. can be pinpointed.¹⁰ Further, the simultaneous occurrence of hollow and solid figurines (on the lids) suggests that the ancient Nilgiri artists of the Megalithic period were related to or descendants of the creators of the terracotta deposits of the so-called 'fertility cult' in South India.

Hence, Wessels Mevissen (2002:30) conjectures that "... the Nilgiri hills must have been a focal region for particular trade oriented activities...in the later Megalithic Culture phase/Early Historical period (circa 3rd Century B.C - 3rd Century A.D.). Around this time, a substantial member of the later Nilgiri inhabitants must have migrated to the plateau. And they might brought with them the knowledge of producing hollow and solid terracotta figurines to embellish the pottery lids".

V. SOCIO CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE DECORATED POTTERY LIDS OF THE NILGIRI MEGALITHS

5.0 General

The motifs that form the decoration of the pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths were used mostly as 'handles' to handle them in lifting from their respective cinerary pottery. However, the socio-cultural aspects of them remain as a topic of varied categories.

5.1 Conjectures concerned with the Figurines of the Decorated Pottery Lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths

A school of thought conjectures that the various figurines of humans, animals, birds, plants and inanimate object portray the fauna and flora, apart from portraying the socio-religious life of people of the Nilgiri Megalithic period. This conjecture seems to be plausible but at the same time superfluous too, for want of further supporting evidences.

Another school of thought conjectures that the animal motifs depict the various vehicles believed to transform the departed souls of deceased persons to the other world. Interestingly, this conjecture conveniently remains silent in relation to other types of motifs, viz., humans, plants, and inanimate object that get depicted in the lids.

On the occurrence of water buffalo as the predominant motif, yet another school of thought construes that the Megalithic people of the Nilgiris could be the forerunner of the Todas, one of the primitive tribes of the Nilgiris at present. The buffalo-centred culture of the Todas believes that the buffaloes alone know the route to the other world and only by catching hold of their tails, the soul of the deceased person could attain there ¹¹. Here again, this conjecture does not account for other types of motifs. In the same way, presence of ram interpreted as the vehicle of 'Agni', one of the deities of directions – the purifier of soul and 'Yama's dog' that guards the gateway of other

world appear to be plausible but do not answer for other available motifs in the realm of the decorated pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths.

Adducing ownership of the decorated lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths to the artisan tribes of the present day Nilgiris, namely, the Kotas, by yet another school of thought is also conceived non-justifiable, on account of the migrational history of them tracing their legacy from Hasan in the recent past only.

One more conjecture is also attested in the line of the decorated pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths. And this relates the occurrence of different motifs as designates of various clans of the Megalithic people of the Nilgiris. This conjecture seems to be highly plausible, as the clan images could be an animal or a bird or a plant or an inanimate object. However, we should bear in mind that this conjecture too does not speak about the anthropomorphic motifs. But, if they could be identified as deities and or ancestral images then there will not be any hesitation to accept this conjecture. And the author of this book held this conjecture as a relatively quite meaningful one.¹²

VI. SUMMARY

The Nilgiri Hills form a massif to the north of the Palghat Gap and where the Eastern Ghats and the Western Ghats meet. Abundant Megalithic structures of three distinct categories, viz., (i) Cairns/Cairn Circles/Non-Piled Stone Circles, (ii) Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles, and (iii) Dolmens are found attested throughout the Nilgiri Hills. Of these three types, the Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles are identified as unique type to the Nilgiris alone.

In the sub-terrain level of all the three types of Megalithic structures, unique type of single or multi-tiered grotesque cinerary pottery mostly in dull red finish, bearing terracotta lids of various motifs such as anthropomorphic motifs, zoomorphic motifs, phytomorphic motifs, and rare type of inanimate object as motif are identified.

All these above cited grave goods of terracotta exemplify the terracotta art of the Nilgiri Megaliths. Presence of abundant terracotta figurines, in the form of decorated pottery lids within the burial complex of the Nilgiri Megaliths clearly puts them into a distinct genre among the Megalithic Culture of South India.

Several scholars like H. Congreve (1847), M.J.Walhouse (1873), J.W. Brecks (1873), F. Jogar (1875), R.B. Foote (1901), G.N.Das (1957), Naik (1966), L.S.Leshnik (1974), P. Hockings (1975), W.A. Noble (1975 & 1997), C. Maheswaran (1994), A. Zagarell (1997) have studied the Nilgiri Megaliths.

In order to study in detail of the terracotta pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths, a cursory look into the types of the Nilgiri Megalithic structures and their detailed structure are attempted. Antiquities unearthed (inclusive of funerary pottery with their corresponding decorated lid finials) are also subjected to study. And consequently, location, nature, motifs, decorations, and dating of the decorated pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths are also dealt with in detail.

The socio-cultural aspects of the decorated pottery lids are also revealed, along with the different conjectures put forth by the various schools of thought. Of the various conjectures put forth so far, one relating the occurrence of different motifs (viz., anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, phytomorphic, inanimate object) as clan symbols seems to be plausible, although that needs further supporting evidences to strengthen it.

VII. CONCLUSION

The unique decorations with figurines of humans, animals, birds, plants, and inanimate object intrigue the scholars who happened to come across the ornate pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths by appliqué method. And it is conjectured that these varied motifs that adorn the funerary pottery might have served as handles to lift open at ease.

The figurines of the lid finials were mostly of hand made solid images of terracotta and less frequently by single moulding with solid and or hollow images of terracotta. And these figurines were later attached on the dome of more or less circular fashioned lids.

Although figurines of terracotta are attested as creative legacy of the mankind since Neolithic period up to historic period, their abundance-that too with varying shapes (say humans, animals, birds, plants, inanimate object)- as lid finials was perceptible, exclusively from the Nilgiri Megaliths.

The various scholars who worked on these decorated pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths, having get intrigued by the decorations with different motifs, started to corroborate them either with the prehistoric remains of other arenas or with the present day primitive tribes of the Nilgiris. Such attempts become futile as nothing concrete could be achieved out of these, for want of appropriate supporting evidences. Attempts such as to link the decorated lid finials of the Nilgiri Megaliths with the bronze terminals of Adichanallur (of Tamil Nadu, South India) and or to Todas or Kotas (of the present day Nilgiris) could be cited as instances in this line of inquiry.

These cinerary pottery with ridges as superimposed pots, which have been used to house the interment of the body of the deceased person are comparatively smaller in size, unlike the burial urns and or sarcophagi of other regions, which are relatively bigger in size. As the interments are nothing but the remains out of total cremation, the Megalithic people of the Nilgiris might have contended themselves with these sorts of smaller sized cinerary urns as containers. The decorated pottery lids under discussion are used to cover these funerary pottery. Interestingly, while the pottery

and the lid finials were the products of the turn-wheels, the figurines atop the lids were either hand made solid images or casted out of single moulds most predominantly as solid images and less predominantly as hollow ones.

As the decorated pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths were distributed presently in three different collection (, namely, at the Government Museum, Chennai; the British Museum, London; and the National Museum, Berlin), attempting a comprehensive study could not get materialised at present. Further, the collection concerned the Nilgiri Megaliths at the British Museum, London are still at dark, due to the unpublished research report by Naik (1966) and the most awaited publication of J. Robert Knox.

FOOT NOTES

¹ Contrary to this three-fold classification, some scholars like William A. Noble have put forth an alternative two-fold classification of 'Stone Circles' and 'Dolmens', by clubbing both the 'Piled Stone Circle' and 'Non-piled Stone Circles' under a single category of 'Stone Circles'.

² The studies by Naik (1966), Paul Hockings (1975), William A. Noble (1975 & 1997), Allen Zagarell (1997), Corinna Wessels – Mevissen (2002) were based on secondary sources. And hence, they are not treated in this present work elaborately.

³ Of course, William A. Noble (1975-1997) have studied the same site of 'Yaezhu Kaottai'. But, he failed to collect fresh specimens – not even fragments of lid finials and or terracotta figurines from the site, unlike the author of this present work.

⁴ As cited earlier, of these three types of burial structures, Draw Well Cairns/Piled Stone Circles/Walled Circles alone is identified as an exclusive one to the Megalithic Nilgiris.

⁵ This rare motif-bearing lid finial is at the collection of the National Museum of Berlin, observes Wessels - Mevissen (2002).

⁶ These are available, at present, at the National Museum, Berlin (Wessels - Mevissen, 2002).

⁷ The floral motif of sunflower as lid finial is observed by Wessels - Mevissen (2002) from the collection of the National Museum at Berlin.

⁸ The floral motif of palm tree atop the lid is attested in the collection of the National Museum, Berlin (Wessels - Mevissen, 2002).

⁹ The depiction of inanimate object of columnar structure is although interpreted variedly as a 'Phallic Pillar', a 'Conical Temple', an 'Aerophone', the author of this work prefers to identify this motif as a typical aerophone, owing to the presence of various parts identifiable in an aerophone such as 'blow pipe', 'central body', 'circular distal end' in this particular lid.

¹⁰ Based on the study of Paul Hockings (1975), William A. Noble (1997) has assigned a post date of 300 A.D. – 1100 A.D. to the Megalithic Burial Complex of the Nilgiris. However, the author of

this work conjectures that pushing the age of the Nilgiri Megaliths to such a later phase needs further supporting evidences.

¹¹ The religious observance of sacrificing the buffaloes during the 'green funeral ceremony' of the Toda tribes is adhered to ensure that the soul of the deceased person reach the other world, says the Todas of the Nilgiris.

¹² All these conjectures have been elicited by the author of this work from various scholars who worked on the decorated pottery lids of the Nilgiri Megaliths as and when he got a chance to interact with them in between the time span of 1983-2001.

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Megalithic sites at the Nilgiris



CAIRN CIRCLE - I



CAIRN CIRCLE - II



CAIRN CIRCLE - III



WOOD PECKER

PEACOCK



DOUBLE-HEADED ANIMAL



BUFFALO WITH BELL-FRONT VIEW



BUFFALO WITHOUT BELL-SIDE VIEW



BUFFALO WITH BELL-SIDE VIEW

Collection from the Government Museum, Chennai



CHEETAH WITH LONG TAIL



CHEETAH



BOAR OR HIPPOPOTAMUS



DOG



MOUNTED DEITY-1



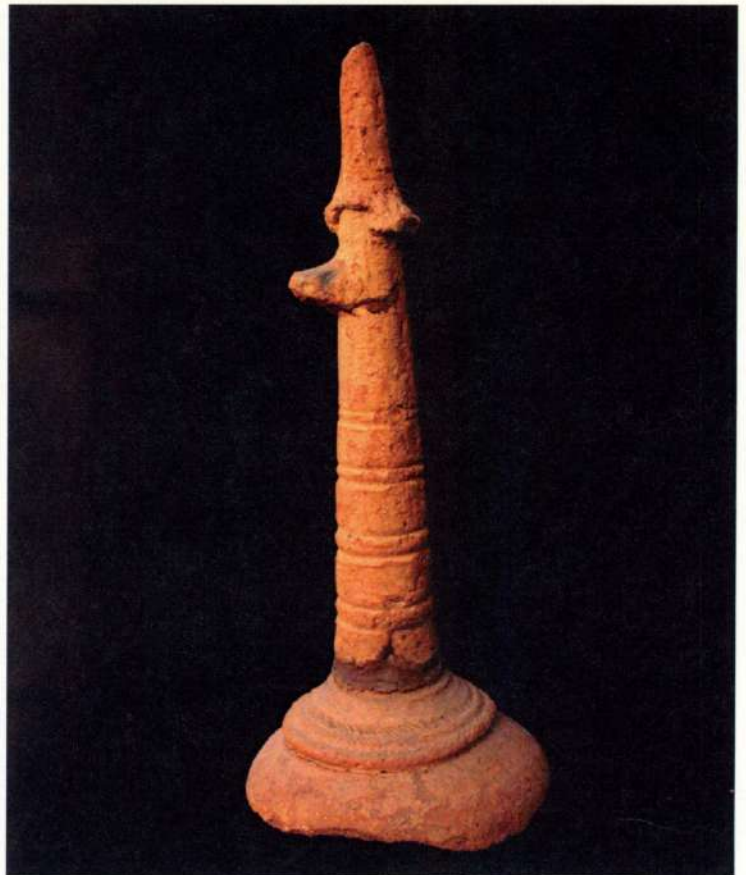
MOUNTED DEITY-2



FOUR HEADED DEITY



CHIEF MOURNER



COLUMNAR STRUCTURE



SEATED FIGURINE



COILED SNAKE



VIRILE MALE



HUMPED BULL



FEROCIOUS FEMALE DEITY

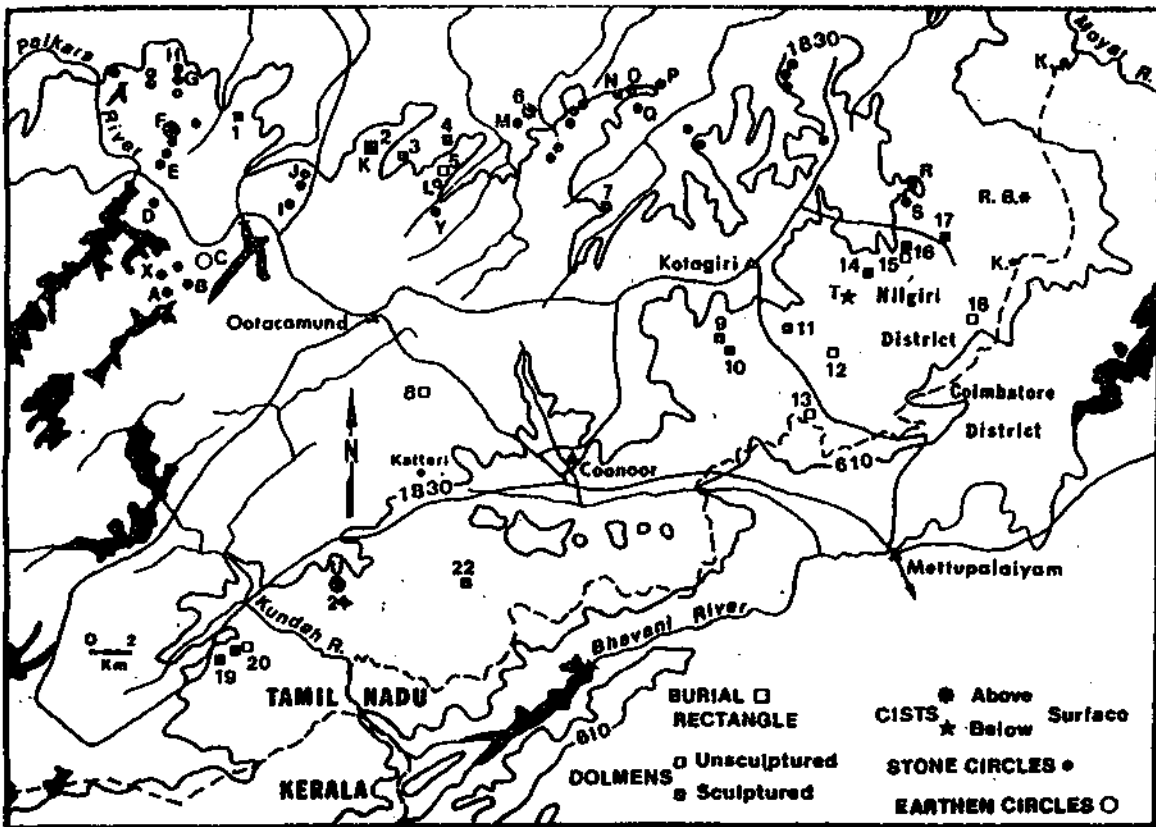


MOTHER & CHILD

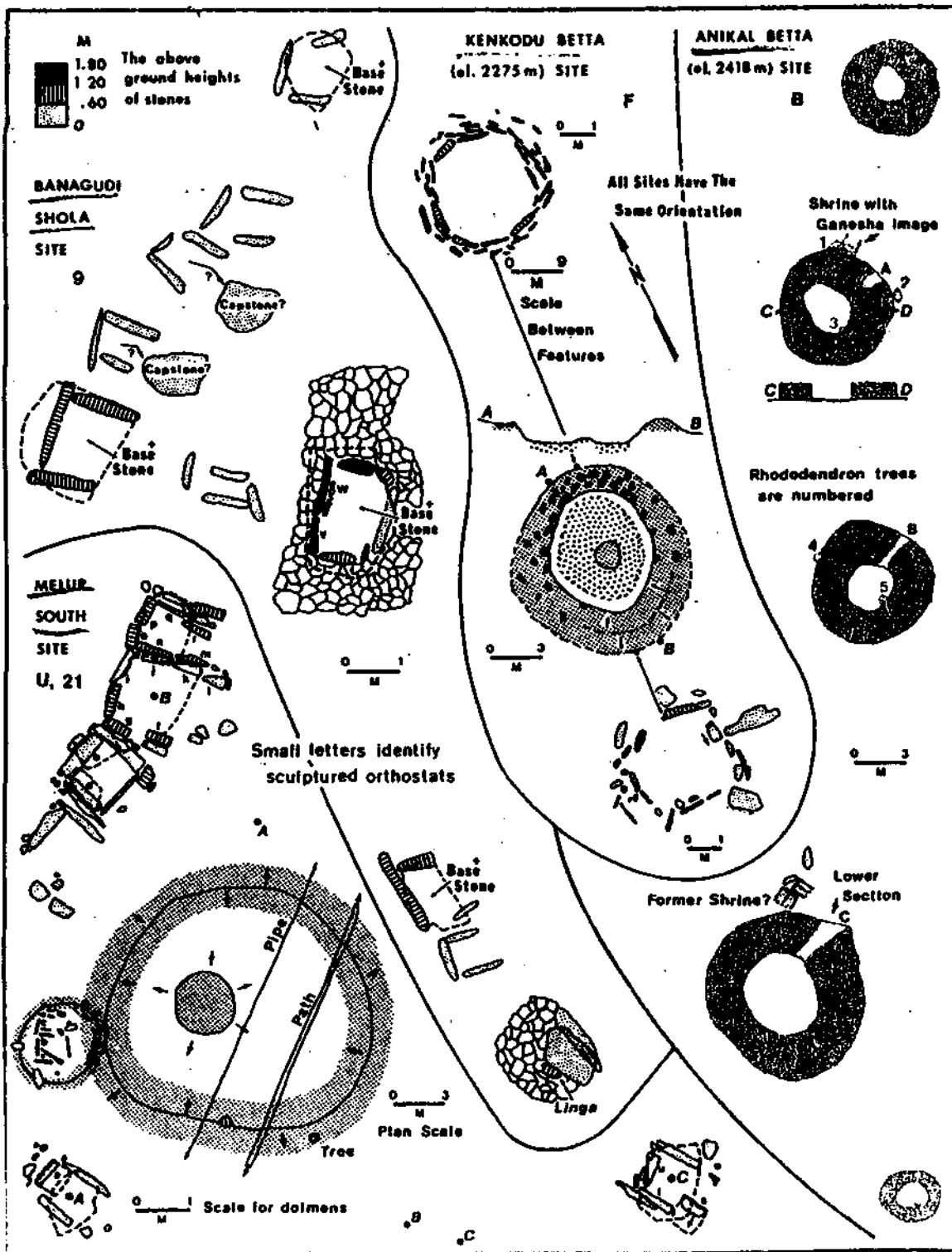


MALE WARRIOR

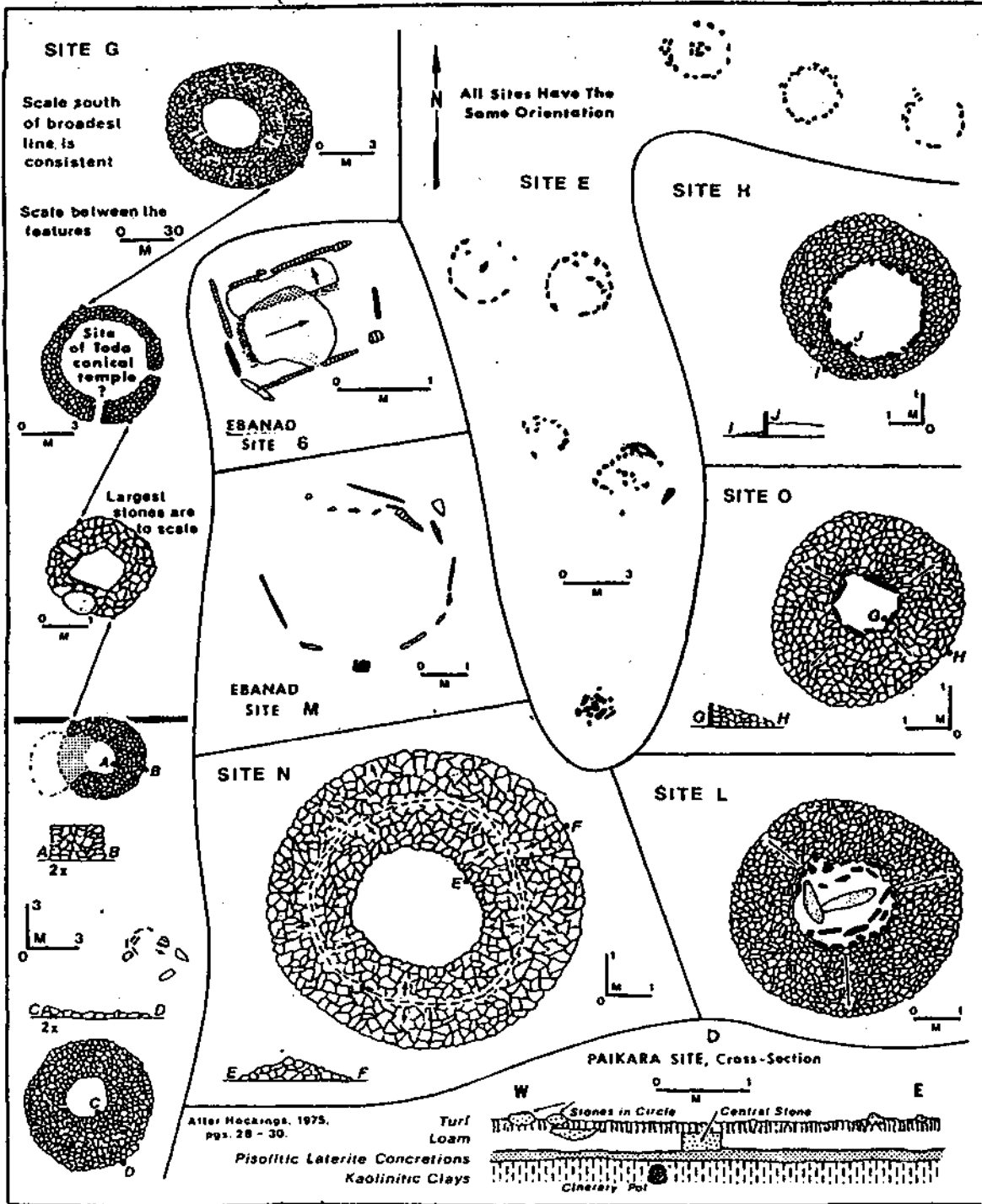
TOPOGRAPHY MAP OF THE NILGIRIS



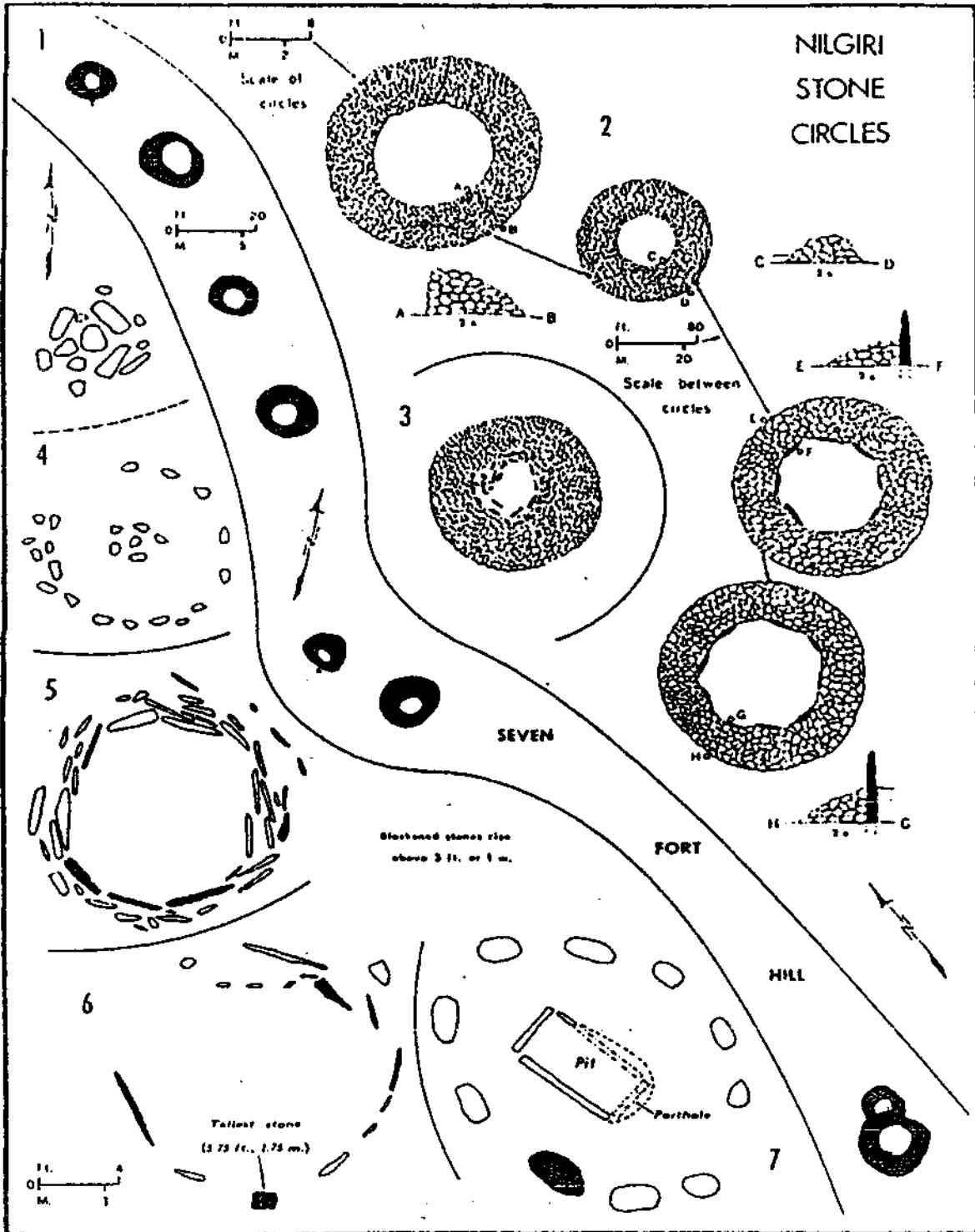
MEGALITHIC SITE MAP - I



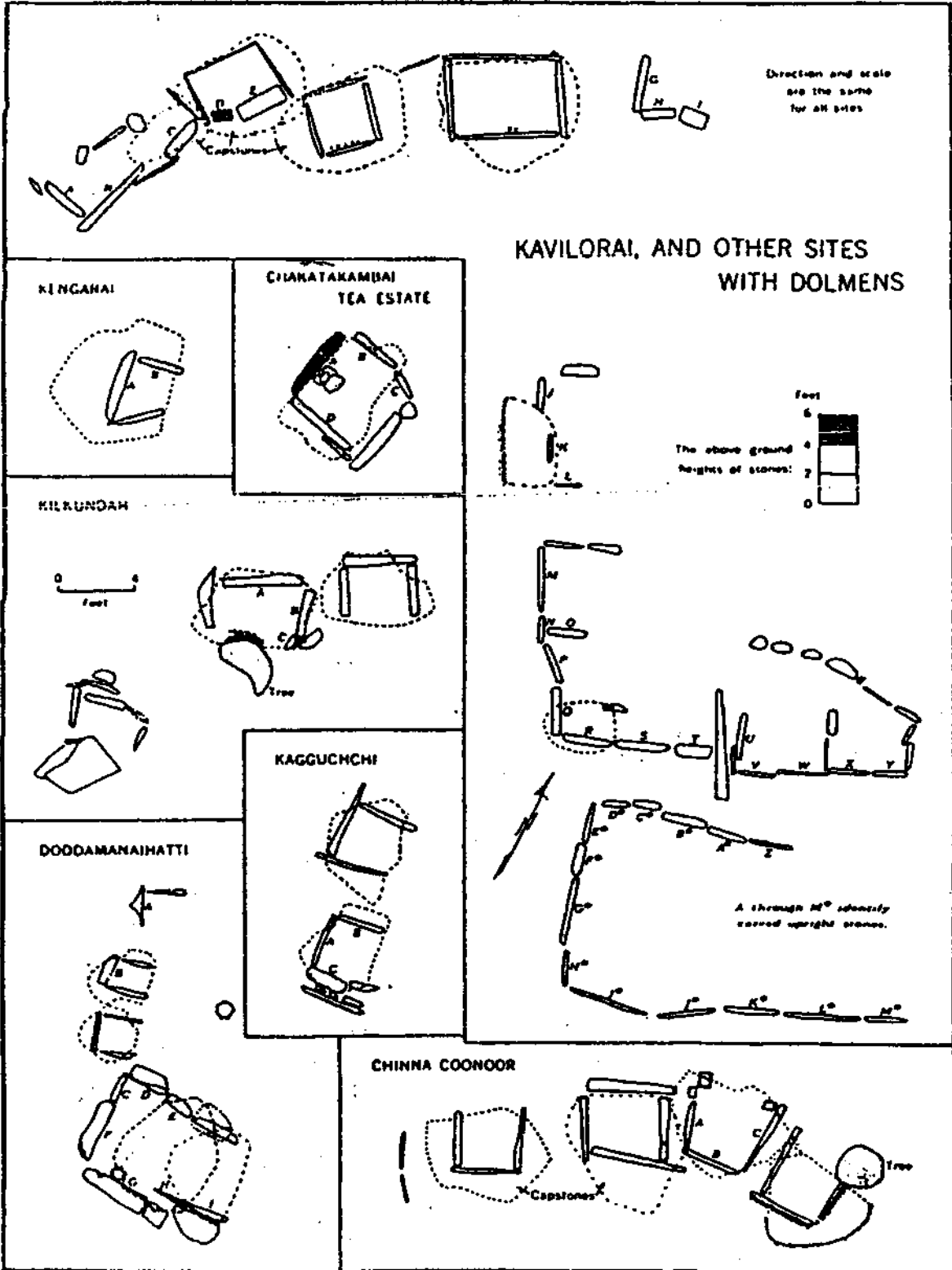
MEGALITHIC SITE MAP - II



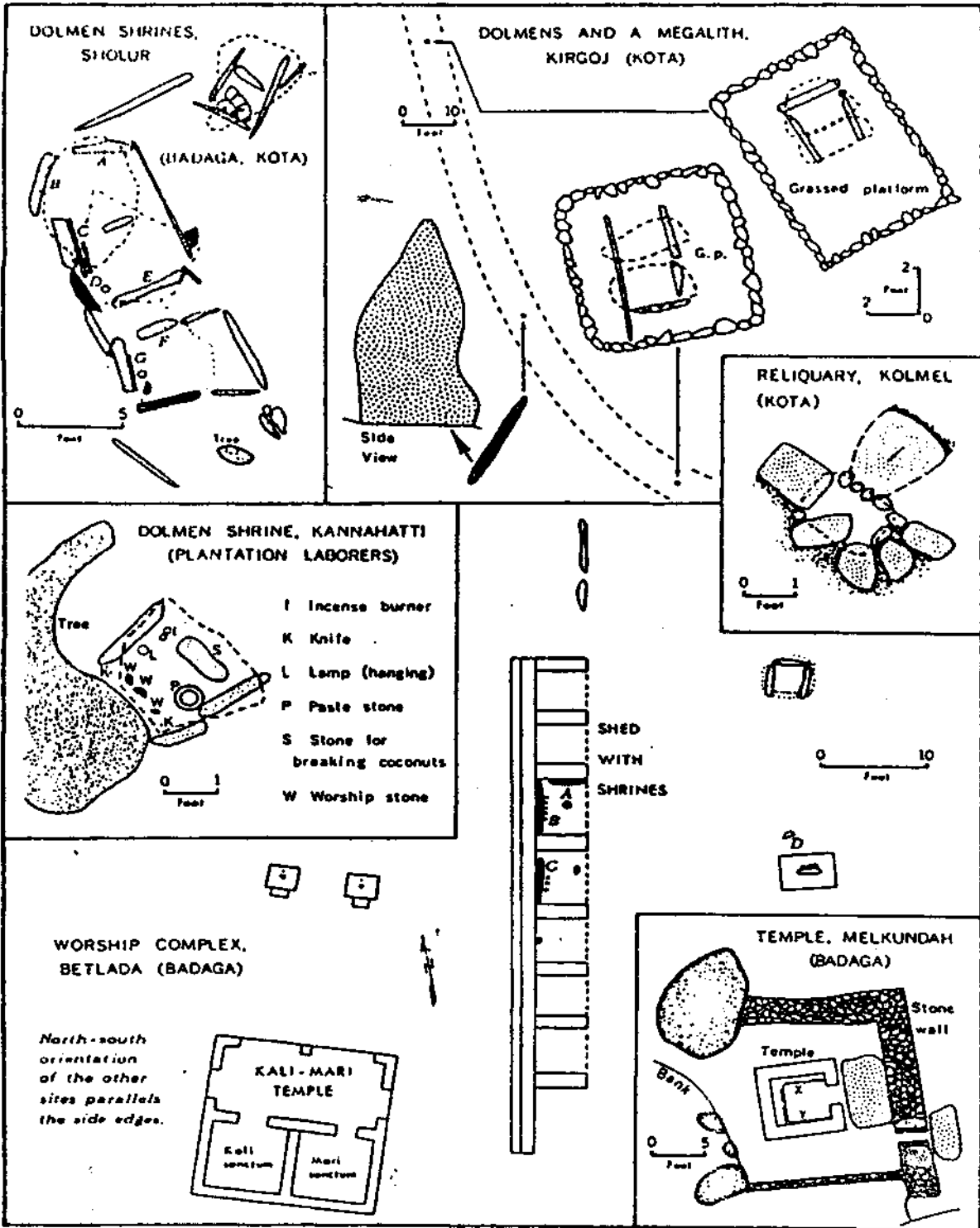
MEGALITHIC SITE MAP - III



MEGALITHIC SITE MAP - IV



MEGALITHIC SITE MAP - V



MEGALITHIC SITE MAP - VI

