

# THE EARLY IRON AGE SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE MAHAOYA RIVER VALLEY: A SUGGESTED MODEL FOR THE MONTANE REGION OF SRI LANKA\*

## Introduction

In the early 1980's a series of multi-faceted studies were undertaken by the Department of Archaeology, University of Peradeniya, in the upper valleys of river basins for a better understanding of the Early Iron Age cultural ecology and for the purpose of looking at alternate Iron Age habitats in areas other than the 'dry zone' of Sri Lanka. The study was also carried out for the purpose of identifying various socio-cultural and technological dynamics involved in such a process (Seneviratne and Rambukwella 1987; Seneviratne and Senanayake 1987; Seneviratne 1990).

In addition to the Kala-oya and Deduru oya system, a third area that came under investigation was the middle and the upper valleys of the Maha oya system. This river originates in the western montane region of the central highlands and flows 78 miles before entering the Indian ocean. The area investigated revealed nearly one hundred archaeological sites. Of these, 03 are Iron Age burials (dolmen, cist and urn), 02 cave sites bearing megalithic symbols, and the rest, drip-ledge cave shelters, some bearing B.C 2nd Century Brahmi inscriptions or having pre Christian stūpa sites in their vicinity (Map 1).

## Methodology

The present study essentially looks at the macro and micro distribution patterns of the Early Iron Age (EIA) sites within a spatial and time context. The macro

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locational pattern is viewed in relation to adjacent river basins and their EIA sites. A probe into the spatial distribution pattern of sites within the valley itself indicated the existence of several cultural ecological zones. The internal spatial arrangement within each zone is not determined by the physiography alone. The location of natural resources for subsistence and mineral resources (mainly gem stones and metals) and exchange route networks facilitating a trans-valley movement of such resources had a strong bearing on the locational-distribution pattern of the EIA sites. The socio-political basis of these ecological zones, represented by lineage-based societies, provided the human dynamism for the EIA political landscape in montane zones such as the Maha oya valley.

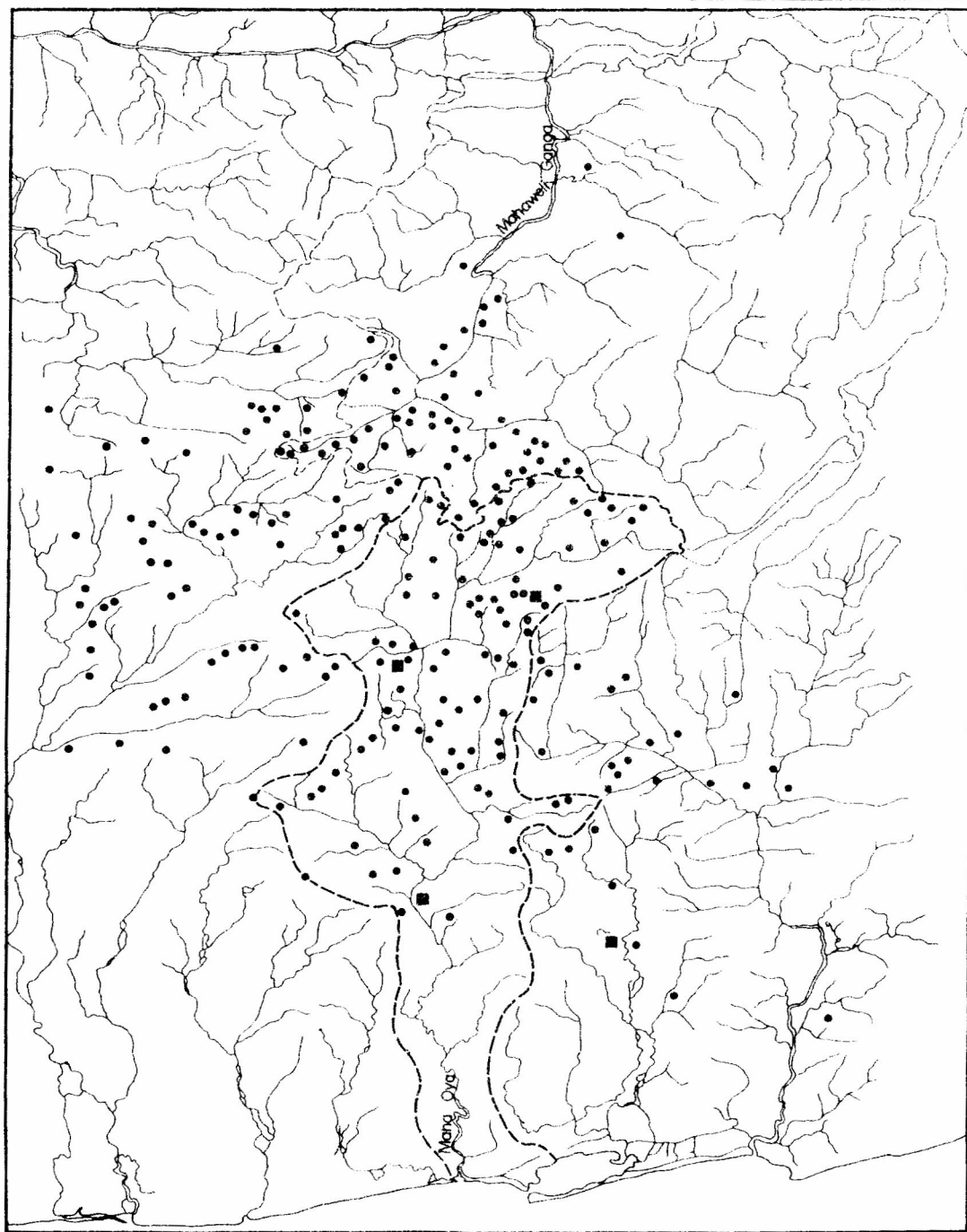
### **Pattern of Development**

The EIA in Sri Lanka may be identified as the Formative Period in this island, where recognizable institutional formation took place for the first time in the broader geo-physical areas, viz. marine littoral, hinterland plains and the lower montane-sub plains. During the period under discussion, techno-cultural groups, i.e., the Pre Historic (Mesolithic), and Proto Historic (Megalithic - Black and Red ware) cultures representing various levels of institutional development had their micro ecological zones.

Our investigations now indicate that the earliest intrusions into the montane region by the EIA culture groups may have taken place around B.C. 6th Century. Such community movements took advantage of the physiography and traversed the banks of the main rivers and their tributaries. However, such demographic shifts represented not only community movement, but also the diffusion of technologies and other cultural traits. It is now possible to chart the movement of the EIA culture along the valley of the Maha oya (see Map2). In addition to direct intrusions, the EIA culture may have expanded through an incorporation of the pre existing Mesolithic people to its fold through a process of acculturation. For instance, the unbroken sequence of the Doravakakanda rock brusings from the Mesolithic to the Megalithic or the uninterrupted techno-cultural sequence from the Mesolithic to the EIA at Karadupona-Alulena may be cited here.

The expansion of the EIA culture within the valley may be recognized as the second phase of this development. Internal diffusion seems to have been triggered off by several nuclei situated within the valley. Such sites are represented by Early Historic BRW (Black & Red Ware) sites, drip-ledge cave shelters (with or without Brahmi inscription) and early **stūpa** sites. This phase also represents a greater proliferation of sites on an expanded scale indicating

MAHA OYA VALLEY AND ADJACENT REGIONS : ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES



a somewhat complex and uneven distribution pattern. Trans basin interaction becomes more apparent only during this phase.

It is suggested that the movement towards the central montane region, which is not easily accessible, may have been caused by resource requirements, mainly mineral and to a lesser extent floral and faunal resources. A growth in the demand for such prestige items by the resident communities in both Peninsular India and the agricultural plains of Sri Lanka (including the demand made by the Roman trade touching South India at this time) may have resulted in an intensive exploration of resources in the montane region.

### **Internal dynamics**

The evolution of the EIA socio-political landscape has to be understood within this background. Traditional historiography has consistently emphasized the central role played by the 'dry zone' and the uniform pattern set by Anuradhapura in the formation of institutions during the EIA. Recent studies indicated, however, that several river valleys that are located outside the pale of the dry zone threw up certain alternate patterns of development representing very specific characteristics based on the material and the social base of each valley (Seneviratne 1990). The Maha oya study provided very vital clues for an understanding of certain internal dynamics associated within a wet zone riverine system.

The site distribution pattern provides the first clue about the physiography associated with the cultural ecology in this process. The highest density of EIA burial and drip-ledge cave/inscription bearing sites are found in the middle valley, which is demarcated by the contour lines of 500 and 1000 feet above sea level. This appears to form the 'core area' during the EIA. There were several other factors that determined the status of the core region in the middle valley.

1. Trans basin routes connecting the middle valley with the Deduru basin to its north and the Kelani basin to its south.
2. Trans basin routes connecting the core area with the upper Mahaweli system to its east, ultimately extending to southeast Sri Lanka.
3. Internal routes moving west to the copper deposits and the littoral.
4. The availability of resources including the location of important minerals such as iron, sulphide ores, mica and gem stones.

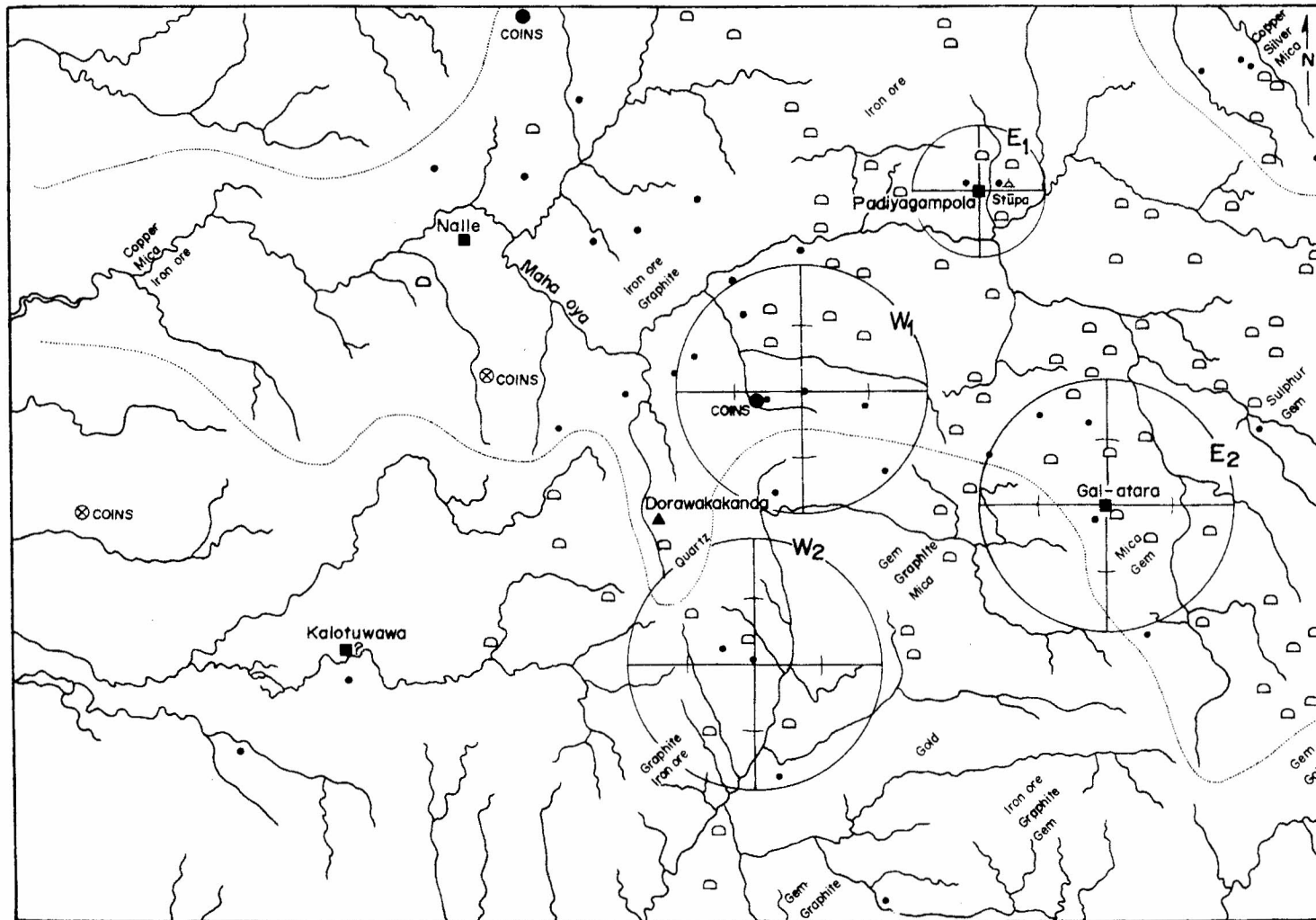
Following this it is then possible to identify an internal hierarchization representing the socio-political landscape, which is a critical trait characterizing the cultural ecology of the core region. A closer look at the spatial distribution of sites combined with the internal evidence from archaeological vestiges and inscriptional records, enables us make an internal demarcation of the core region into two sectors, i.e., east and west. It must be noted that both sectors did have the Megalithic - BRW culture as the formative techno-cultural matrix. However, internal differentiation seems to have developed during the Early Historic Period, ultimately affecting the very basis of the socio-political landscape in the core region.

For this purpose we have attempted to identify certain indicator traits associated with these two sectors (see table). These ultimately suggested to us that in spite of the common Proto Historic techno-cultural matrix shared by these two sectors, the western sector seems to have moved towards relatively more advanced institutional formation ahead of the eastern sector by B.C. 2nd/1st Century.

INDICATOR TRAIT- 'CORE AREA'	WESTERN SECTOR	EASTERN SECTOR
1. Megalithic burials	01	02
2. Megalithic symbol bearing sites	01	02
3. Drip-ledge cave sites	> 20	15
4. Drip-ledge caves, total count	> 50	40
5. Early Brahmi inscriptions	29	13
6. <b>Parumaka</b> lineage chieftains	03	15
7. Royal titles	05	-
8. Administrative titles	04	-
9. Agrarian elite ( <b>gahapati</b> )	01	01
10. Commercial elite ( <b>bata</b> )	05	01
11. <b>Nagara</b>	03	-
12. <b>Gāma</b>	07	-
13. Craftsmen	01	-
14. Ref. to coins (punch-marked)	01	-
15. Share donations	10	-

The eastern sector, possessing a lesser amount of extensive fertile tracts, is actually an extension of the central hills. It is quite significant that as against 03 **parumaka** inscriptions found in the western sector, the eastern sector boasts of

# MAHA OYA EARLY IRON AGE SITES



## LEGEND

- Megalithic Burial Site
- Early Brahmi Inscriptions
- Drip-edge Cave Site
- ⊗ Coin Site
- Coin Reference
- E<sub>1</sub> Eastern Micro Zone 1
- E<sub>2</sub> Eastern Micro Zone 2
- W<sub>1</sub> Western Micro Zone 1
- W<sub>2</sub> Western Micro Zone 2
- River Basin

Map 4.1

8 0 8 16 miles

Chulani Rambukwella 1992  
Revised 1992

08. This is a useful indicator in our study. Recent studies identified the **parumaka** lineage chieftains as the earliest political elite of the Proto Historic Period (Seneviratne 1992). They are credited with the introduction of the Early Iron Age culture not only to this island from Peninsular India, but also with the dissemination of that culture within the island by locating themselves in fertile alluvial tracts, in the littoral, along exchange routes and areas possessing strategic mineral resources. Our studies in the Maha oya clearly indicated that by B.C. 6th/5th Centuries, these lineage chieftains and their kinsmen arrived at the foothill areas in search of resources. The Doravakakanda site carrying megalithic symbols, the dolmen site at Padiyagampola and the burial sites at Gal-atara may be noted here (see Seneviratne 1990;1992).

It is significant to note that the primary concentration of the **parumaka** inscriptions in the eastern sector is clearly located in relation to the megalithic sites. Consider the Padiyagampola site, for instance. This site is found on a major transecting route connecting the middle valley of the Maha oya and Deduru oya. All **parumaka** inscriptions are located within a two mile radius circle of the dolmen site. The continued presence of these lineage groups at this site is established by a **parumaka** inscription (B.C. 2nd Century) which records two generations of pre existing lineage ancestors (Paranavitana 1970: No. 800). The situation is not different at the Gal-atara site, which again is located on a route moving into the central hills from the Maha oya valley. Given the physiographic backdrop and natural limitations on demographic expansion imposed by its ecological context, the eastern sector may not have been able to go beyond the confines of marginal developments even by the Early Historic Period. With the exception of a multitude of fertile pockets capable of only being micro habitats suitable for lineage based societies, other relatively more advanced institutional formations could not find a convenient material basis within this context. The occurrence of only one each of **gahapati** and **bata** individuals, who represented relatively more affluent agrarian and commercial groups, is a case in point (for **bata** see Seneviratne 1985).

A sharp contrast could be observed in the Early Historic developments that took place in the western sector. It is curious that in spite of the common technological matrix both sectors shared during the Proto Historic Period, the **parumaka** lineage chieftains are almost non existent in this sector, with the exception of two notices from marginal areas. It is possible therefore to suggest that either the EIA lineage chieftains underwent a rapid process of acculturation, transforming their personal names and titles, or that they were subordinated by new political groups moving into these regions. In fact, the **Mahāvamsa** records the intrusion of dissident chieftains into this region from the north and west around B.C. 250 and that they held titles such as **aya**, **gamaṇi**,

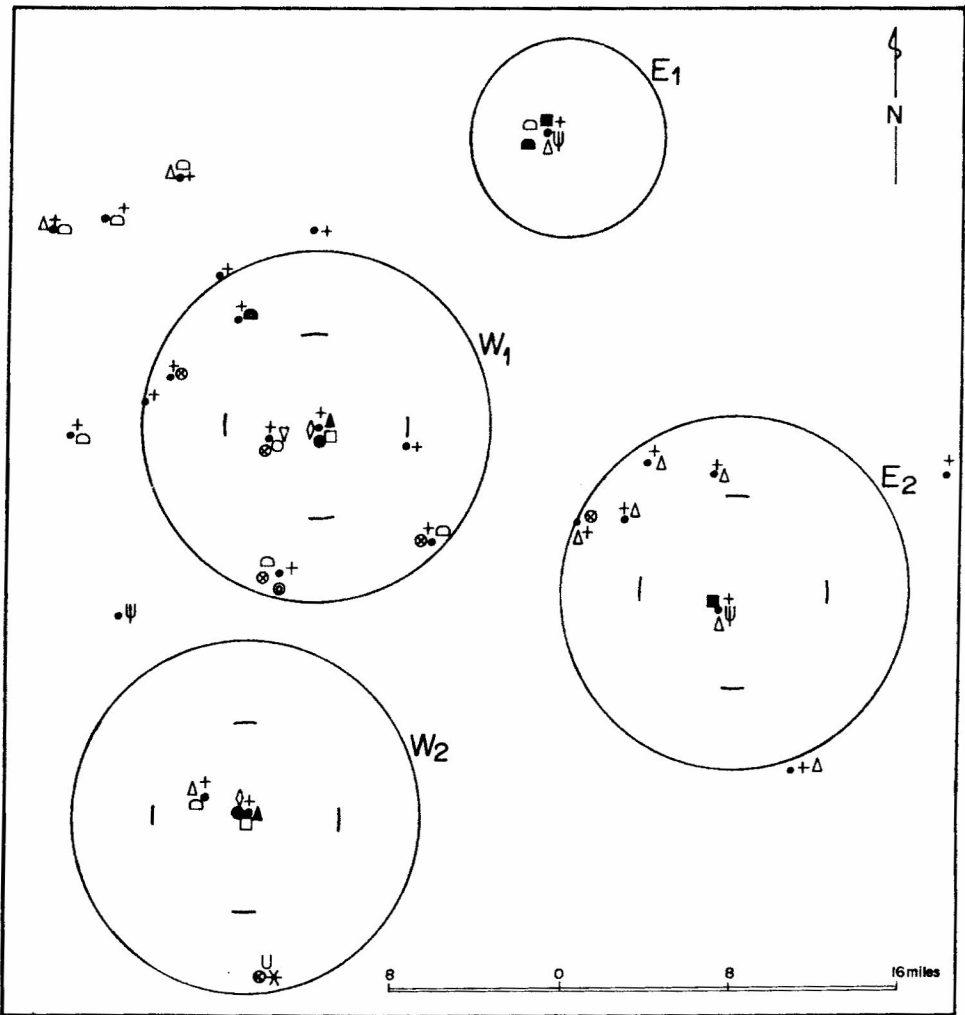
**devanampiya, rajha** (Geiger 1950: XXII: 7). Such titles were associated with the major political centres at Anuradhagama and Mahagama of that time (Gunawardana 1985: 11 ; Paranavitana 1970: liv- lxiv). It is then possible to suggest that the new political elite subordinated the pre-existing political elite, **parumaka**. It is significant that an **upaśika Vēļ** has been mentioned as a lady of **aya** (prince) Śiva, son of **aya Duhatara** (Paranavitana 1970: No. 795). This inscription gives us very valuable information. First, the term **Vēļ** indicates that this particular lady belonged to the **parumaka** group. The **Vēļir** were one of the most exclusive families among the Early Iron Age lineages in Peninsular India and they formed a section of the **parumaka** in Sri Lanka (Seneviratne 1992). The fact that **upaśika Vēļ** could make shares of land allocations as donations also indicate that the nature of property right transmitted through mother right prevailed from the Proto Historic Period among **parumaka** and very specially among the **Velir** (ibid.). If this assumption is correct, it is then possible that the intrusive new political elite subordinated the old political elite and may have even contracted marriage alliances with them with a view to gaining political legitimacy and access to material wealth as well.

The arrival of a new intrusive political elite also witnessed the gradual induction of other socio-economic changes influenced by changes taking place outside the valley during the Early Historic Period. The Table indicates that all aspects of relatively developed institutional formation had evolved in the western sector by the Early Historic Period. In addition to titles such as **aya, gamañi, devanampiya, raja**, several administrative titles such as **amati, gamika, adikaya** indicate the administrative organizational structure that had evolved even in a rudimentary manner. Inscriptions in this region record the existence of at least three **nagara** or production-distribution centres and their affiliated **gāma** or village settlements. The area bordering the Maha oya has also yielded punch-marked coins and one inscription in this valley very clearly mentions a donation of **kahapaṇa** or punch-marked coins. This evidence taken along with the references in the Brahmi inscriptions indicate the existence of specialized craftsmen such as **manikara** or lapidarists, who were associated with primary luxury items of that time. The existence of **bata** who were a section of the commercial elite dealing in the long distance trade network point to new developments associated with the commercial vortex as well.

The western sector also possessed a broader physical area suitable for plough agriculture, which may have resulted in specialized agricultural production. The references to **gahapati** or the land owning agricultural elite is a case in point. The very occurrence of a large number of cave donations, production distribution centres and other units indicate the ability of this region to sustain both producing and non producing groups. It is in the western sector that we



# SCHEMATIC PRESENTATION OF CORE AREA - MAHA OYA



Chulani Rambukwella, 1992  
Revised 1997

### LEGEND

- |                             |                   |          |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------|
| ■ Megalithic burial sites   | ⊙ Badakarika      | ✕ Gamika |
| ψ Megalithic symbol sites   | ▲ Nagara          |          |
| + Early Brahmi inscriptions | □ Gama            |          |
| Δ Parumaka                  | ∇ Craftsmen       |          |
| ● Royal titles              | ○ Coin reference  |          |
| ⊗ Administrative titles     | ◇ Share donations |          |
| ■ Gahapati                  | • Site location   |          |
| ○ Bata / Barata             | U Kada            |          |

Fig. 4.4

come across the only notices of donations of land allocations or **paṭake** to Buddhist monks for their use. A reference to an officer in charge of canals (**adikaya**) quite clearly points to the control over a primary natural resource exercised by the political elite.

The above traits clearly demonstrate that the western sector developed social stratification, specialized economic production, new forms of exchange based on coins, and new elements in the organization of labour and land ownership. All these were associated with the developments taking place within the 'nuclear' areas in the island. The spatial distribution of inscriptions and other archaeological sites representing these developments are located in close proximity to two inscriptions mentioning three **nagara** in this sector. While all inscriptions fall within a radius of 08 miles from these two inscriptions, the two **nagara** inscriptions also maintain a distance of about 16 miles between each other thereby giving a balanced distance of 08 miles for the feeder area of each unit (see fig. 1). However, both circles are located on the most important route network and junction area of the trans valley region of the Maha oya.

To summarize, it is clear that for the EIA, uniform patterns cannot be found even within the small valleys of Sri Lanka. Both internal and external situations contributed towards creating a significant variation and unevenness in the political landscape during the Early Historic Period. Further research is expected to provide a complete understanding of the total cultural ecology of the EIA in the Maha oya valley.

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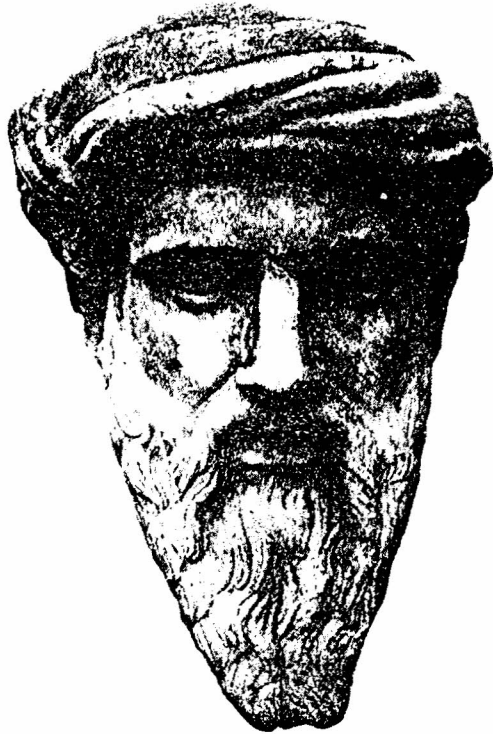
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Pythagoras, bearded and wearing a turban. Roman copy of a Greek original; Capitoline Museum, Rome.