# Salyantar Excavation

*Shukra Sagar Shrestha*

**Prelude**

The archaeological site of Salyantar was noticed when Gurdhum mound to the South West of Argauta Village was dug by the local people to rob the bricks in order to build a water tank in the village. Once the mound was broken open some brick alignments with terracotta vessels were also exposed. One of them is taken out (Pl.5d.FigXb) and others were reburied after the hot discussions among the village people. The vessel contained some carbonized rice grains and other unidentified objects. The matter was brought to the Department of Archaeology. The archaeological remains was surveyed by Rajesh Mathema an archaeologist from the Department. The report was submitted in 2045 B.S. (1988) and the recommendation made by him was to excavate the site even shifting, if necessary, the present village to somewhere else.

**Location**

The Salyantar terrace is located approximately in 80°x 84"x 30' East Longitude and 28° x 19"x45' North Latitude. It is above 592m. from MSL and above 160-165m from surrounding rivers of Burigandaki in the West and Ankhu Khola in South and East. The North is bounded by Hyappin khola, dissecting it from Aienchok hill.

The terrace of Salyantar is formed due to the accumulation of river debris during Pleistocene period of geological time scale and runs for more than ten kilometers in North-south direction. The East West width of the terrace is not evenly formed and is from one to two kilometers wide. The top surface is formed with red lateritic soil and many layers of pebbles and cobbles are noticed underneath the surface in the sections cut by the rivers. There are three distinctive terraces noticed in western side towards the river Burigandaki. The site is also of great interest to the Himalayan geologists as well.

Salyantar is located in the main trial towards the west from Kathmandu valley at a distance of three day's march via Nuwakot and Trishuli. It lies twenty traditional Kosh west from Kathmandu. There is a milestone erected near the archaeological site during Rana period. The stone is called *Koshe Dhunga* (Mile-stone).

At present context, one can drive up to Salyantar if one has a car, if not, can be taken a local bus that ply between Kathmandu and Tari-Besi just at the eastern entrance to Salyantar terrace. The drive takes about eight hours.

**Site**

The habitation site is spread over an area of 700 x 600m approximately (Fig. -II). The whole site is littered with brickbats and foundation walls. The village of Argauta is settled down on top of those old ruins. Many

houses are built of reused bricks robbed from old foundations. The process of robbing the bricks from buried foundation is still continued (Pl. 8a).

The site has distinction of an aristocratic area, general habitational area and the monumental (temple or stupa) area clearly demarkable. The temple site is known by the local people as Gurdhum, and lies to the South West of Argauta village. Besides, there is a pond to the east of habitation. The Southern portion of the habitation area was left fallow as grassy ground. This grassy ground is now being encroached by the local people. Further south of grassy land is the river Ankhu Khola. The river is flowing more than 150m. below the grassy ground.

**Excavation**

The short duration of trial trenching for forty five days was conducted during 1996 and two trenches were cut open in two different parts of the old settlement. One trench was laid in the foreground of Mukhiya Darai and another one in the forground of Purna Darai. They were given the numbers as SNT-1 and SNT-2 respectively. The trenching were laid in situational excavation method. In situational excavation method, any area could be excavated in any size according to the necessity and area of excavation could be extended as required. There is no necessity of fixed squares like in grid system. This system was also adopted during the cave excavation of Mustang by the team of Cologne University Germany. Only detail descriptions of each cutting and openings are recorded for report writing, followed with the measurements.

**Stratigraphy**

The cutting in SNT-2 location brought out more vivid picture and detail stratigraphy in Salyantar. Total of seven layers were recognized including deep layer of natural surface, Further sixty centimeters were gone down in natural layer but found only compact concentration of layer. The thickness of occupation layer thus totals up to only 140cms. The stratigraphic layers of seven units are: (Fig. VIII).

**Layer - I**

The humus layer is merely a dusty layer and trampled. Therefore no grass is grown due to the trampling over and other day to day activities. Then first layer starts. First layer is merely harder due to too much dryness. The layer is in average 20cms. thick and grayish in colour and brought good quantity of potsherds and brickbats.

**Layer - II**

This layer starts with the mixture of brick - grits and red lateritic soil. The layer have got brickbats also mixed equally and same quantity of potsherds as in layer one. This layer is pierced with many roots of big trees grown around the site. The trees are Kapro (ficus lacus) and Sami (known locally). This layer is softer than layer I in Comparison.

**Layer - III**

Third Layer is coming with more amount of the brickgrits and brickbats. The colour and texture are almost same as that of second layer. The top of this layer is paved with brickbats on top of brickgrits ramming. A coin was unearthed from this layer but collected from below the brickbat paving (Pl. 8b) The coin is unfortunately too much worn out. Still it could be seen as made of copper.

**Layer - IV**

Fourth Layer starts below the paved layer. Much lesser number of brickbats and potsherds are collected from this layer. The compactness is more sticky and itchy and comparatively darker in colour than the layer above. The content of some organic remains are the cause of darker colour. Therefore it is assumed that this layer was the cultivated layer of the contemporary people. Very small quantity of potsherds is noticed in this layer.

**Layer - V**

The fifth layer bought out again some more brick grits composition. It is more similar to the layer three in terms of colour but more darker with content of some brick grits. Only one or two potsherds were collected from this layer.

**Layer - VI**

Brickgrits also decreased in this layer with nil number of potsherds. Therefore it is considered to be aceramic layer. The pit rests on this layer. Still some traces of organic remains noticed and colour is darker in

comparison. This is the starting layer of culture in Salyantar terrace.

**Layer - VII**

The seventh layer is full concentration of lateritic soil. No brickbats, potsherds and any other human activities are noticed. Went down further sixty centimeters but the compactness and concentration came-up with only of lateritic soil. Therefore concluded it to be the natural layer.

**Structures**

From the opening in two places (SNT-1 and 2) the buildings of two different status have come to light. Both are made of bricks on mud mortar but different in size and quality. In SNT-1, the house complex of a general people is exposed where as location SNT-2 brought forth an aristocratic building with a piece of road and other subsidiary structures were noticed. (Pl. 11 fig. VI, VII). The structures are super imposed by the modern buildings being used by the present Darai people. Only partial portions could be excavated and dug down. (Figs. IV and V) Therefore the information could be collected only sporadically. An extensive horizontal excavation, if conducted in future, would reveal the detail information of the structures. However sporadic the small findings are given below.

**House complex of a general people.**

**SNT-1**

The Trench number SNT-1 is cut and found in a joint of two houses (P. 11c and fig VI). From the position, it seems that the western house was made first and eastern one followed latter. The construction seems very poor and the structure is raised with majority of brickbats. The number of full bricks are very low. (less than 10%). Only six courses of brick are found on top of eight course foundation. The thickness of the wall is 33cms and foundation is 42 cms (Fig. V).The house is raised from salvaged bricks from surrounding. Even the mud-mortar is not evenly laid, the thickness of which varies from two to four centimeters.

A mudbrick wall was also noticed below the foundation of the burnt brick wall. The first phase mud brick wall was sealed by IIIrd layer (Fig. IX, Pl. 11a).

**Aristocratic building**

The structure in SNT-2 is simply an aristocratic building. (Pl 11bd). The wall construction is superb and although the mortar is of clay it is laid evenly with the thickness of only one centimeter. Even the laying of brick is skillfully done with the peculiarity of two headers and two stretchers alternatively. Such pattern is nowhere traced in other archaeological sites. Majourity of the bricks are full in size and measures 23x15x4 and 5 cms. Hardly five percent of the bricks are broken.

The thickness of the wall is 60 cms and the foundation width is extended six cms each time and has four time extension thus totaling to little more than a metre in the deep foundation. At the joints of the two buildings, the engineer seems skillful, and thus has left the sinkage value as well. But fortunately and due to the compactness of the lateritic foundation, there was no sinkage of foundation noticed at all. The sinkage value remained unchanged. ( Pl. 10b).

**Pottery and Bricks**

Only twenty pieces of representative rimsherds are collected for analysis. The rimsherds are comprised of comperatively big vessel types that were used for storing water and grains. Out of twenty, only three pieces were red burnished before firing. Two pieces are well burnt and strong in quality and looks darker in colour. Rest of other fifteen pieces are noticeably ill fired and soft in character. They look comparatively poor in firing. The colour is fate and yellowish brown and softer in texture. That is the result of firing in low degree temperature.

Due to the acidic nature of the soil, almost all the bricks and potsherds are affected very badly. When rubbed the surface produces very fine (*Chandan type*) dust. It is either caused by the acidic nature of the soil or the illfiring in the kiln. But when we see it rather looks in full colour. Therefore, the cause of the effect must be due to the destructive chemical present in the soil.

Most of the potsherds, when washed, loose all the surface glisters. So it posses a great difficulty and risk on how to clean the potsherds. Due to the too much

compactness of the surface, not a single pot coluld be retrived in full shape. Almost all are broken. Even when recovered very difficult to lift it out without damage. Therefore very few rimsherds could be illustrated here.

The bricks and roof tiles are found more well fired. The Upa and Jhingatis have characters of more well fired and compacter than the bricks. The bricks are found even inferior quality of firing in comparison to the roof tiles. This also could have been due to the presence of acid in the ground. From the study of pottery type and its surface structure, the pottery from Salyantar is similar to the Ist period pottery from Satyanarayanthan in Kathmandu basin (Fig. xiv, xv, xvi) But Salyantar example is more to the rural in character.

Both of them contain profuse quantity of sand grits mixed with lateritic soil. This could have been due to different methods of firing. The bricks should have been fired in kilns and the pots were covered with hey and dungs and then fired in open sky for certain hours. This caused the pots to be ill fired and the kiln-products which comprised bricks, *Upas* and *Jhingatis* were well fired in comparion.

**The size of the bricks are:**

4 × 11 × 17 cms
4 × 14 × 19 cms
4 × 15 × 23 cms
5 × 15 × 23 cms

The Jhingati measured 2x10x20 cms. The cover of Upa (a kind of tiles covering the edge on roof) is found in two sizes showing two different dimension of roofs. The bigger one measures 2x22x23 and curvature height is 6 cms. (Pl. 6ac). The smaller size of Upa measures 2x15x23 and curvature height is only 5 cms. (Fig. XII and XIII).

**Three Lichhavi Chaityas**

Three Lichhavi Chaityas are found in Salyantar. (Pl. 3). There are another four of them also found in Gorkha Durbar further west from Salyantar.(Pl.4). They are now in collection of Gorkha Museum. The presence of those seven Chaityas shows the dominance of Buddhist cult in that region during the Lichhavi period. Two among the four smaller Chaityas in Gorkha are badly eroded on the lower part due to the lifting and throwing act done by the fools. Two bigger ones are fairly preserved due to its weight which were prevented from lifting and throwing act.

All the seven Chaityas are quite identical with the contemporary Chaityas from Kathmandu Valley and thus could be easily said that they were also imported to Salyantar and Gorkha from Kathmandu Valley.

Although looks similar in theme, every Chaitya is a single product in art and thus is an independent original creation. No two Chaityas are found copy of each other. Only idea is similar but patterns differ. Some of the Chaityas from Gorkha and Salyantar could be compared with the same type of Chaityas from Chabahil, Musumbaha, Sighavaha of Kathmandu and Minnath in Patan.

**Chaitya No. 1**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Posseser | - | Chandra Bahadur kami |
| Address | - | Ward No. 3 Salyantar VDC |
| Size | - | Height - 33cms. |
| Breadth | - | 29 × 29 cms. |
| Photo | - | Pl.3d |

Remarks- only dome and a square dias in monolithic structure is found. Very intricately carved with four lions in four cardinal directions. Three lions are still intact and one is slightly damaged. All four Gavakshyas are nicely decorated with floral design and no images in the Gavakshyas are noticed. They are still empty. No animals are shown below.

The chaitya was found by the owner while digging for the foundation of his house. According to him he found it from below seven feet but this seems his exaggeration. The site is about ten to fifteen metres west of his house. About the same distance in south west direction there is a Kapro tree (ficus lacus). The tree is grown over a stupa or a brick temple. This Chaitya could have been fallen from there. Under the tree seems rich in archaeological remains. There are a lot of brickbats found on the surface with raised mound.

The site seems to be the northern end of the old settlement. The local people claim that there is no brick foundations found beyond this place.

The chaitya is made on a sand stone tightly compact with strong bands seen. In between the bands are noticed some fissures.

**Chaitya No.2**

Possesor :- thrown in the Pandhare area.
Address :- Pandhare Water Fountain. Salyantar VDC
Size :- almost to the size of Chaitya No.1
Photo : Pl 3b

**Remarks:** Found only dome and a square dias in monolithic structure. It is thrown in the heaps of pebbly concentration. The Chaitya is a unique one in a sence that no other chaityas are found in Kathmandu Valley also like this. Instead of a lion carving in the cardinal direction, the decorative *Kalasas* are carved on it. Except the *Gavakshya* the structure is in roundish shape. Instead of rectangular *Gavakshya,* they are in oval shape like Sigha Chaitya (Pl. 3c)

The stone is more softer than the Chaitya no 1 and has same type of fissures.

**Chaitya No.3**
**Posser - None**

**Address :** Thrown on the bottom of the Pipal tree (Ficus Religiosa) in a Chautara located just on top of the climb to the terrace of Salyantar on the way to Arughat from Taribesi.

Size : 28 × 28cms breadth
32 cms height
Pl. 3a

Remarks : Bigger than other two Chaitya in height. The animal motifs has not yet appeared. In place of animal motifs, only foliage pattern is carved around Gavakshya. In the cardinal directions the *Makaramukhas* are carved. The carving pattern could well be compared with the Musumvaha Chaitya of Kathmandu valley. But the Musumvaha specimen is devoid of the Makaramukh in cardinal corners. Therefore only similarity is noticed with the foliage carving around the *Gavakshyas,* not the Makaramukhas in cardinal corners. The stone is comperatively softer in quality and buffish in colour.

**Padmapani Bodhisatwa(Pl. 2b)**

An icon of a partial Padmapani Bodhisatwa with Vajrapani Bodhisatwa is attached to the wall of a resthouse(*pati*) of Pandhare. The image is worn out and head of the Padmapani Bodhisatwa is gone but an acolyte figure of Vajrapurush is clearly descernible. Such type of images are abundant in Kathmandu valley also. The images of Bodhisatwa Vajrapani with Vajra anthropomorphised as Vajrapurush are found in bronze and stone. In all instances, either as an independent image or in company with the Bodhisatwa. Vajrapurusha is typically represented as a rotund dwarf from whose skull protrudes part of Vajra. He crosses his arms against his breast in the gesture of submission (Vinayahasta). He wears a Dhoti overdraped with an animal skin, has a fruttering scarf of a cap and is adorned with serpents and various ornaments often including unmatted earrings (Mary Slusser: Nepal Mandala-284).

The example from Salyantar could well be compared with the figure of same type found from Guita tole of Patan. This example has seated Buddha to the right of Vajrapani where as from the study of the partial remains of sash in Salyantar example, the Buddha at the centre should have been standing Shakyamuni Buddha. This is a unique example. If we try to compare those two images, the Salyantar example could well predate the Guita tole example. The Salyantar image has more of the Lichhavi characters than the Guita example. The stem of the lotus flower are more roundish and the lotus are full blown. Mary Slusser dates the example from Guita Tole to 8/9th. Century. If it is so, then the Salyantar example could well predate and be of 6/7th century A.D. It could thus be first of such Vajrapani images found in Nepal. There was once the cult of its own in Kathmandu Valley but the people worship to the independent image of Vajrapurush as Balaram which was standing to the east of Tavaha in Patan. But the image has been stolen in nintees.

**Coins**

A copper coin was found in SNT 2 from 55 cms below the level of the surface. The coin is completely debased and corroded without a single letter and any figures.

Therefore it could not be deciphered. This could well be compared with the Lichhavi coins because other coins collected on the surface by the people are all Lichhavi coins. Other coins are deciphered. They are Mananka, Shryamso, Vaisravana, Pasupati, Kamadohi and Gunanka. Therefore this example also could well be one of the Lichhavi coins.

Besides the stone Chaityas, two ancient broken icons are also traced in Salyantar. One is the headless figures of a Padmapani and other one is the lowermost partial piece of a Mahismardini Bhagavati, found in Pandhare rest house (pati) and on the bank of historical Karnel Pokhari (now dried and cultivated already) respectively(Pl. 2)

**Stone Artefact**

A small stone artefact was also retrived in the terrace of Salyantar. Although a surface finding, it is an indication of Salyantar terrace being inhabited by man since prehistoric times. The artifact was found near *Hatti Banne Dhunga* while ploughing the farmland (Fig. XI a) It is a small Neolithic celt. (Pl. 5e).

One side of the artifact is chipped off and remaining side is still intact with convex profile with sharp edge on the bottom.

With this we are hopeful that there is every possibility of finding more of the proof of prehistoric man's occupation in Salyantar terrace.

**Conclusion**

Why and when this civilization was destroyed and by whom was it destroyed. The answer remains obscure. The possible causes of the destruction of Salyantar Civilization could be surmised as:

- Some endemics or epidemics killed all the inhabitants and remaining few left the site for ever.
- No trace of earthquake or flood is noticed.
- Water shortage forced them to leave the site.

**Additional Information:**

- The foundation structure and extensive distribution of them shows the characteristics of an urban city.
- Local people have the collection of many Lichhavi coins like-Manank, Pasupati, Vaisravana, Shryamso and so on. They were all the surface findings. (Pl. 8 and 9)
- The growth of the trees also shows the antiquity of the site. All the big trees are grown on top of the structures. The structures are certainly older than the surviving trees.
- No evidence of Shah urban cities are noticed yet. No evidence of mediaval structures (Mallas) because most of those cities founded during this dynasty are still surviving in many places. No evidence of the destruction of such city by any one is traced. Therefore must predate Malla dynasty.
- No Malla coins are traced from surface finding showing the terrace already deserted during Malla period.
- The Changu Inscription talks about a revolt by the people of Mallapuri across Gandaki river. Could it not be the same puri ? Because river Trishuli is called by the local people as Gandaki even today. Perhaps, it was the same river which was crossed by the uncle of Manadeva in order to suppress Mallapuri.

All these questions would be possible to get answer, only if, we can do further excavation in the terrace and try to find the evidence in days to come.

**Some more things to add:**

All the archaeological sites in Salyantar fall on the privately owned land. Therefore before digging in such sites, the clear distinction of the ownership of the findings and compensation to the landowners should have to be legally defined.

Since the excavation group goes to the site with limited period of maximum three months, numerous management problems are to be encountered, which are enlisted here in.

- To obtain the permission of the landowner to dig in their farm and courtyards are problematic. Specially in Salyantar, the sites are around the living house and sometimes even under them. Therefore negotiation point on the compensation amount is hardly arrived amicably because no one wants to get their poor house collapsed due to the digging after the excavation team leaves the site.

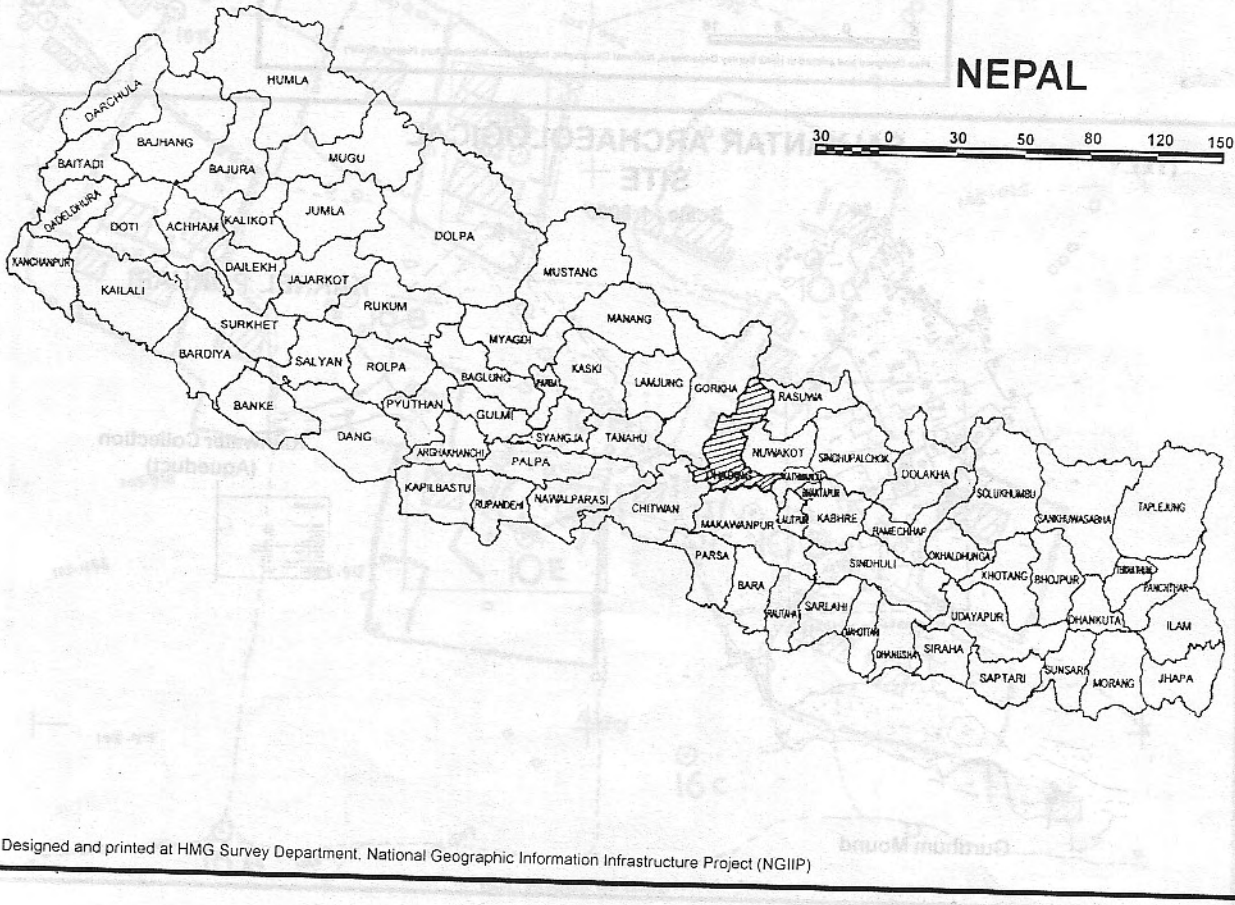
Who will compenrsate them afterwards is a phobe for them.

- If some valuable materials (gold, silver and coin hoards) are found from the excavations in such privately owned land, the problem will even be more critical because in such cases there is no clear legal provision who really owns such properties. Practically the finds are owned by the Government. Also when such finds are disclosed infront of the poor societies it could easily be politicised and situation becomes grave.
- While second year's fieldwork of mapping was over in 1996 the valley of Burigandaki and Salyantar terrace was also affected by the political unrest in Nepal leading it to insecurity in the field. The work of excavation then was shifted to Ramagrama and thus the work in Salyantar was halted temporarily. Once the situation returns to normalcy, the excavation work in Salyantar could be resumed again in order to know about the ancient history of Salyantar.

At last no work would be possible with single handed. Therefore I have been helped by many people. They were Balakrishna Shrestha, Birat Bahadur Thapa and Purna Bahadur Shrestha who cooperated in many ways from their respective fields during the entire period of the field work.

Similarly Ram Bahadur Kunwar my colligue official drew skillfully the pottery drawings which are presented here at the last three pages. He deserves my special thanks for his indispensable help. Purandar Man Vaidya contributed three photographs included in this report. Rest of the Photographs are of writer himself.

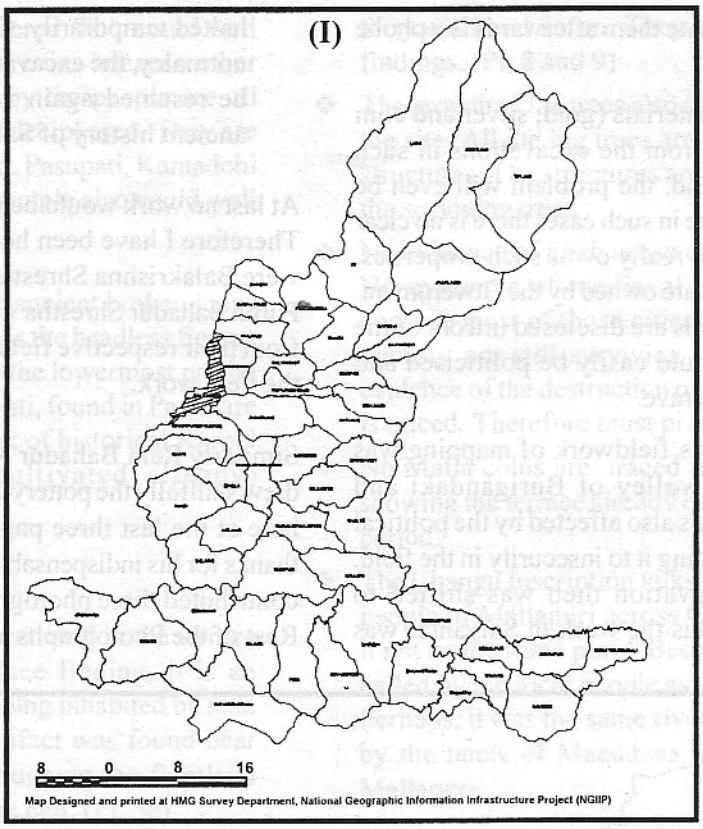
(I)

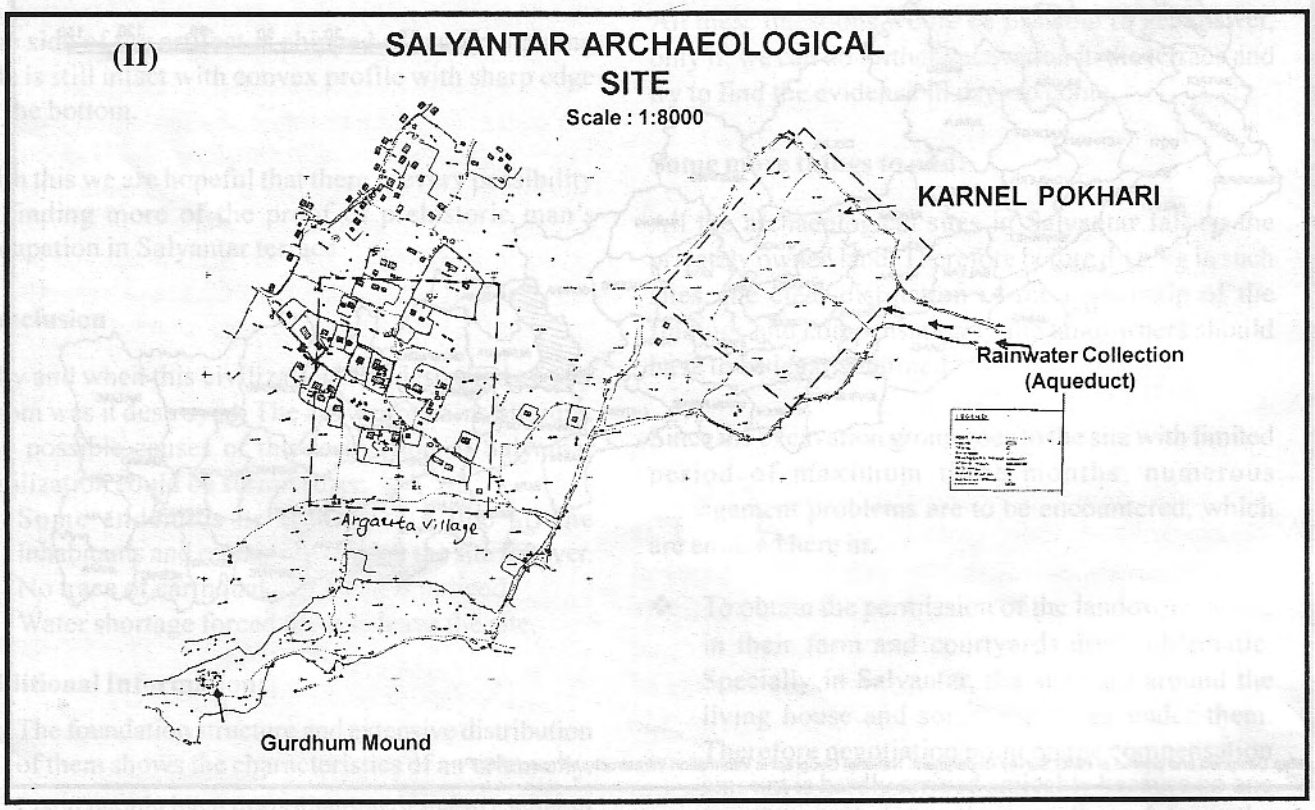



Map Designed and printed at HMG Survey Department. National Geographic Information Infrastructure Project (NGIIP)

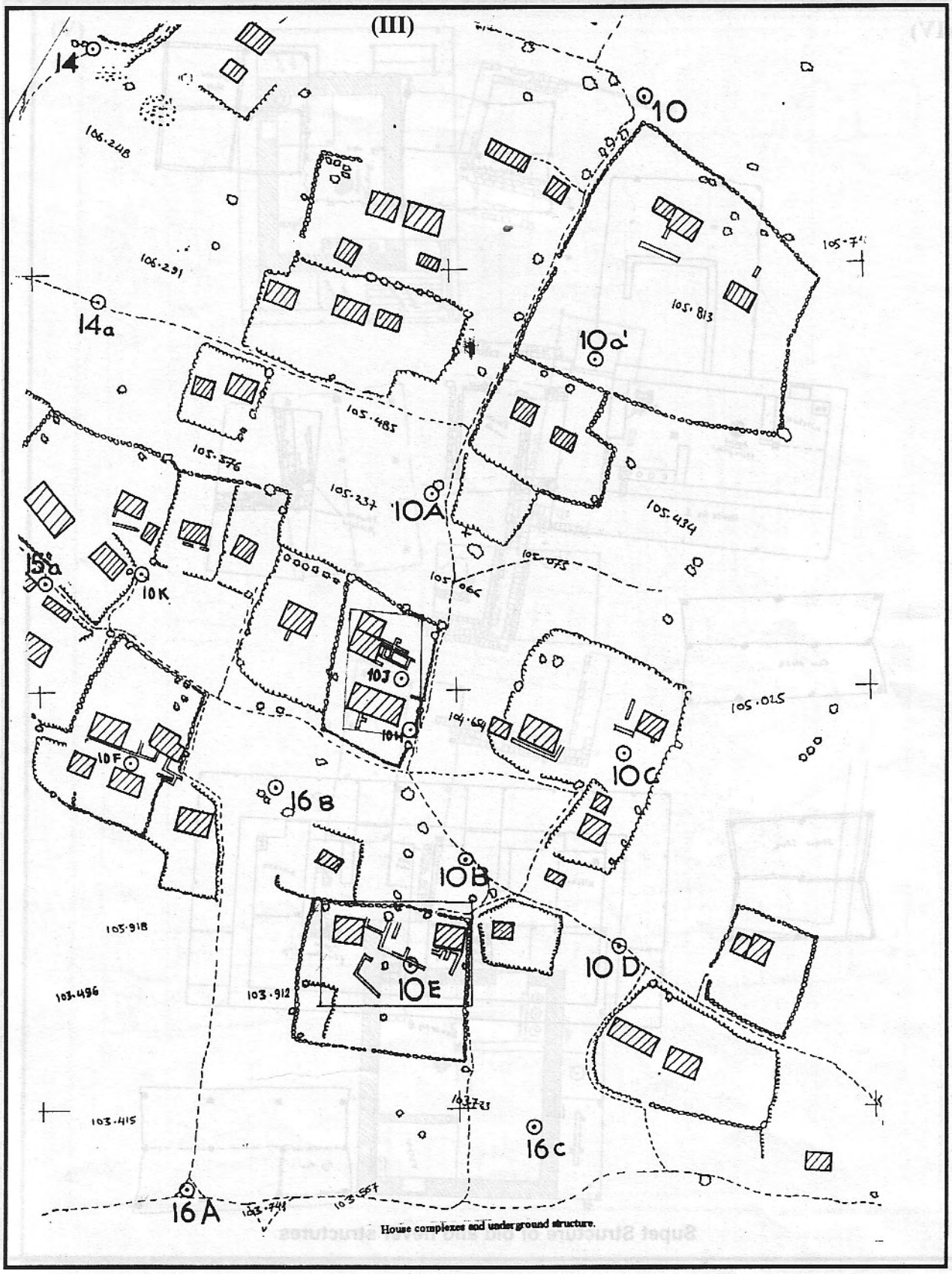
DISTRICT : DHADING

1 Map of Nepal



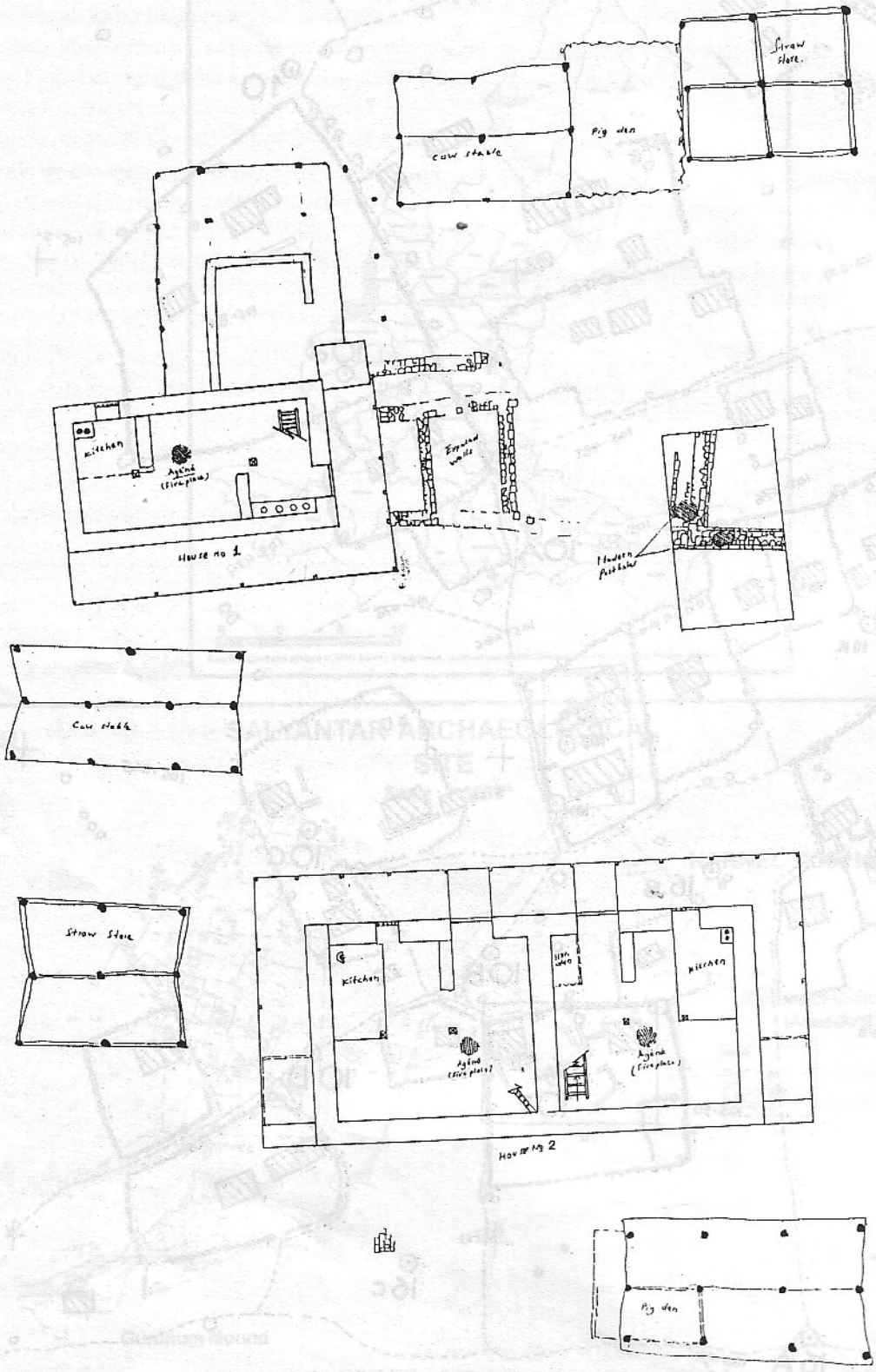




Argauta Village, Salyantar



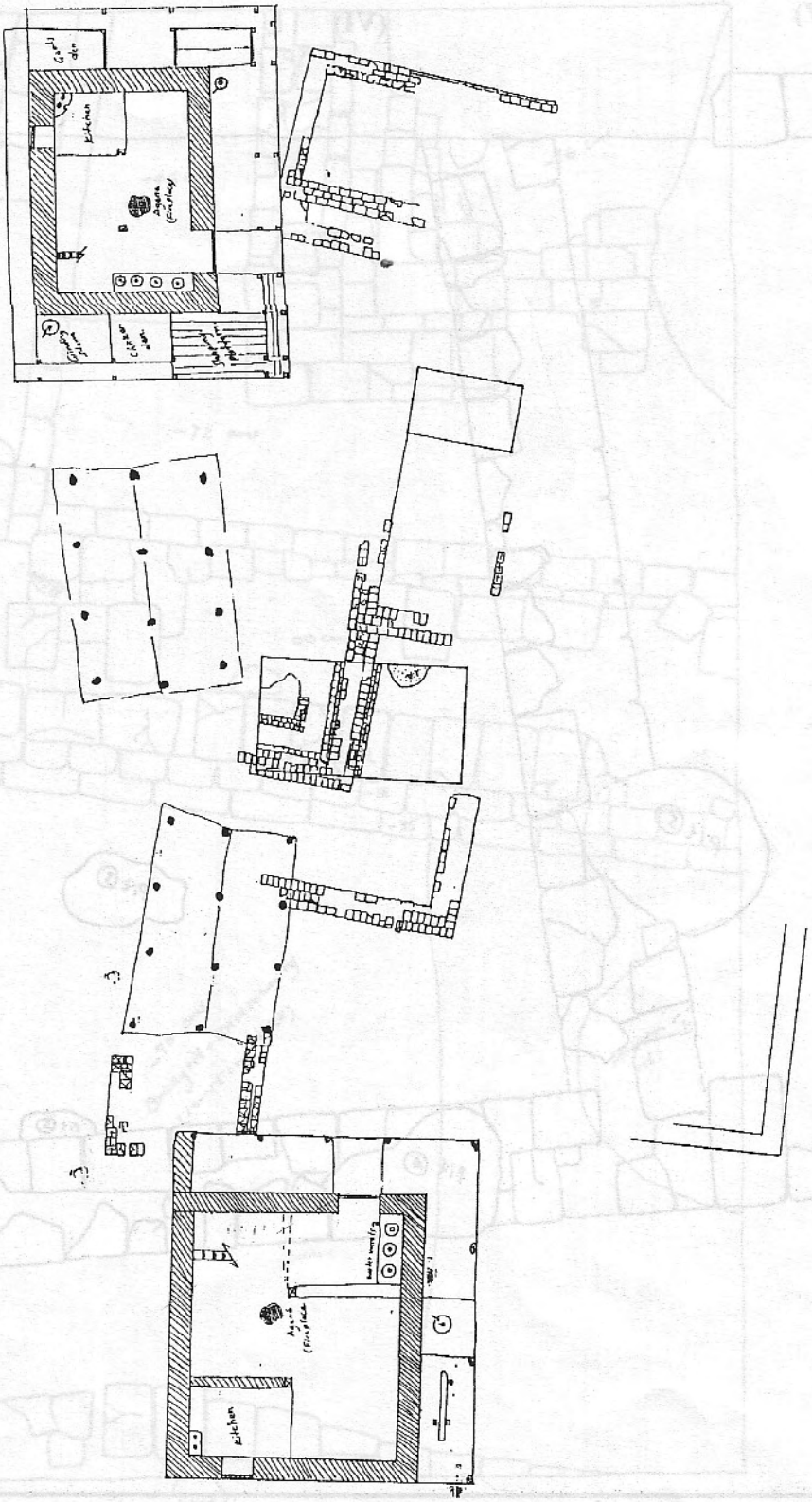

House complex and underground structure

(IV)



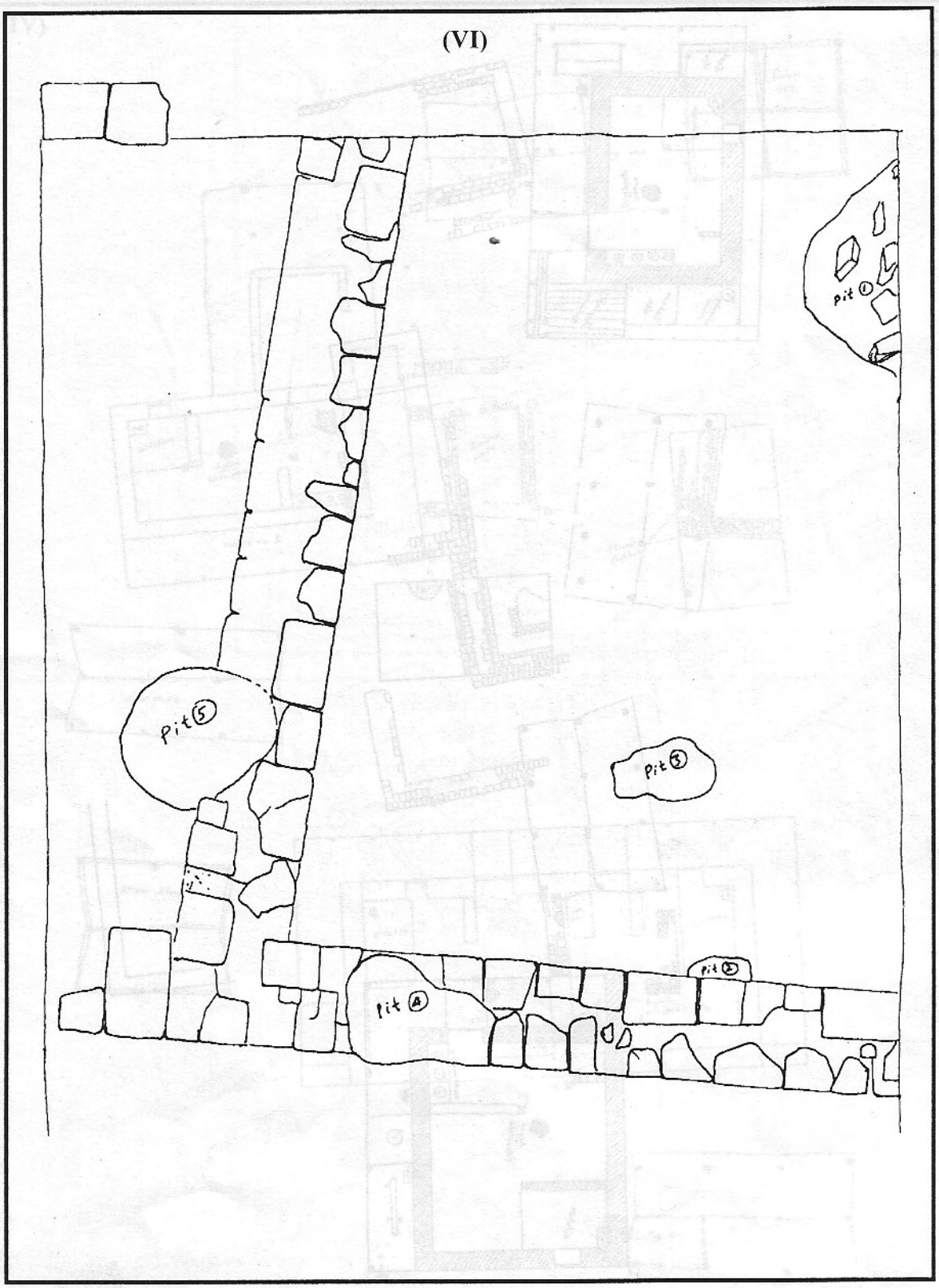

**Supet Structure of old and never structures**

(V)

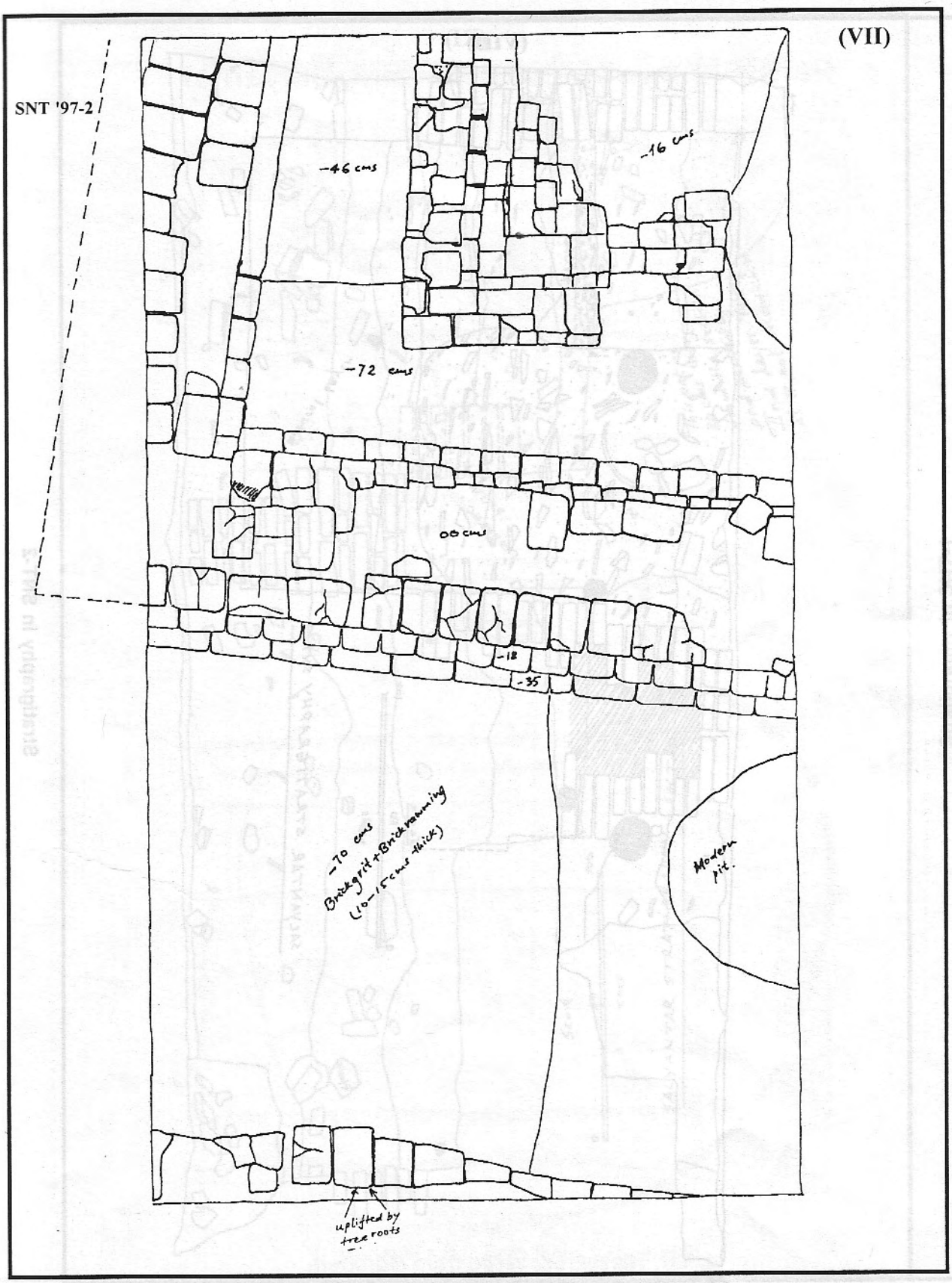


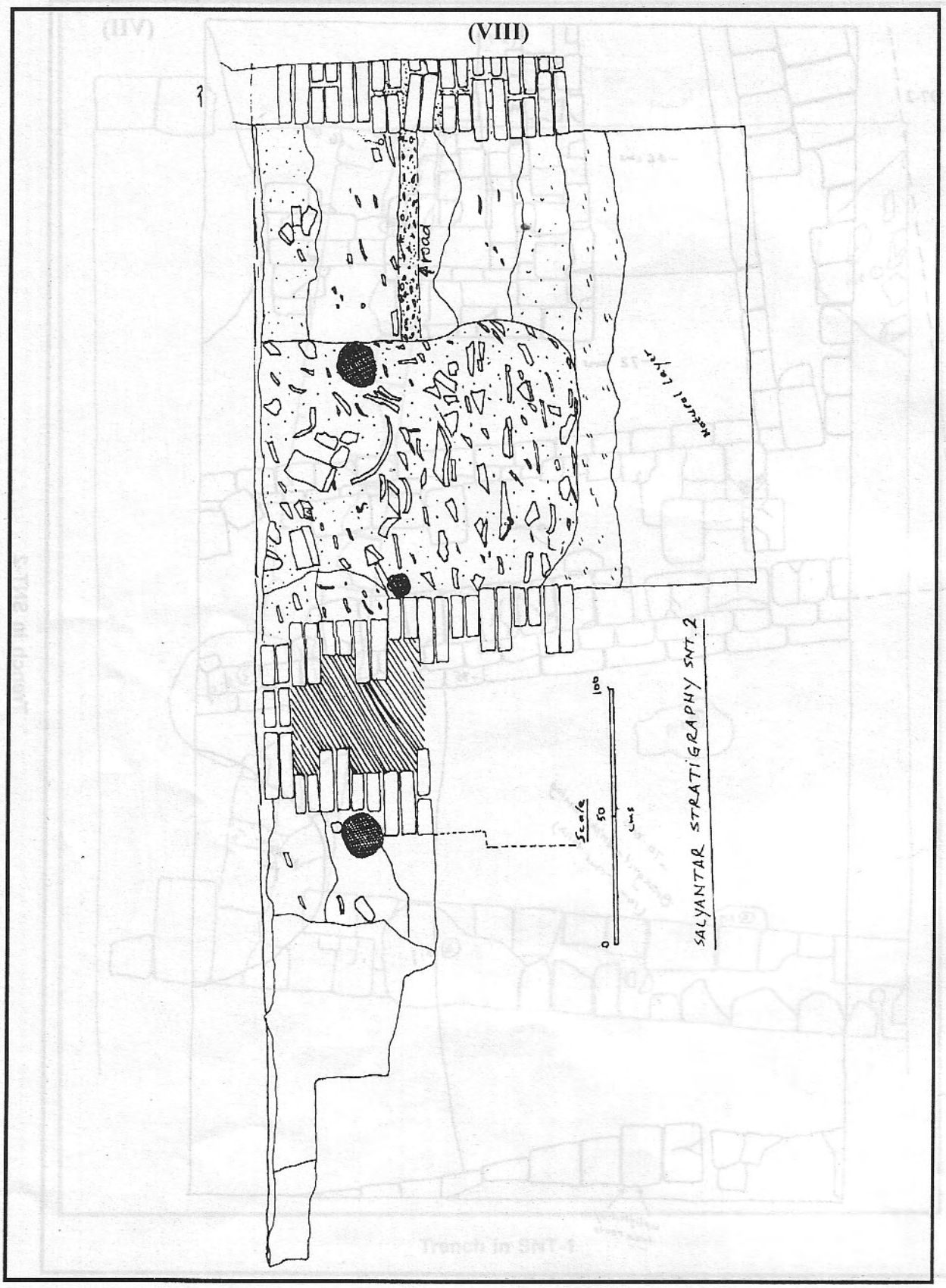

Detail of the house complex SNT-2

(VI)

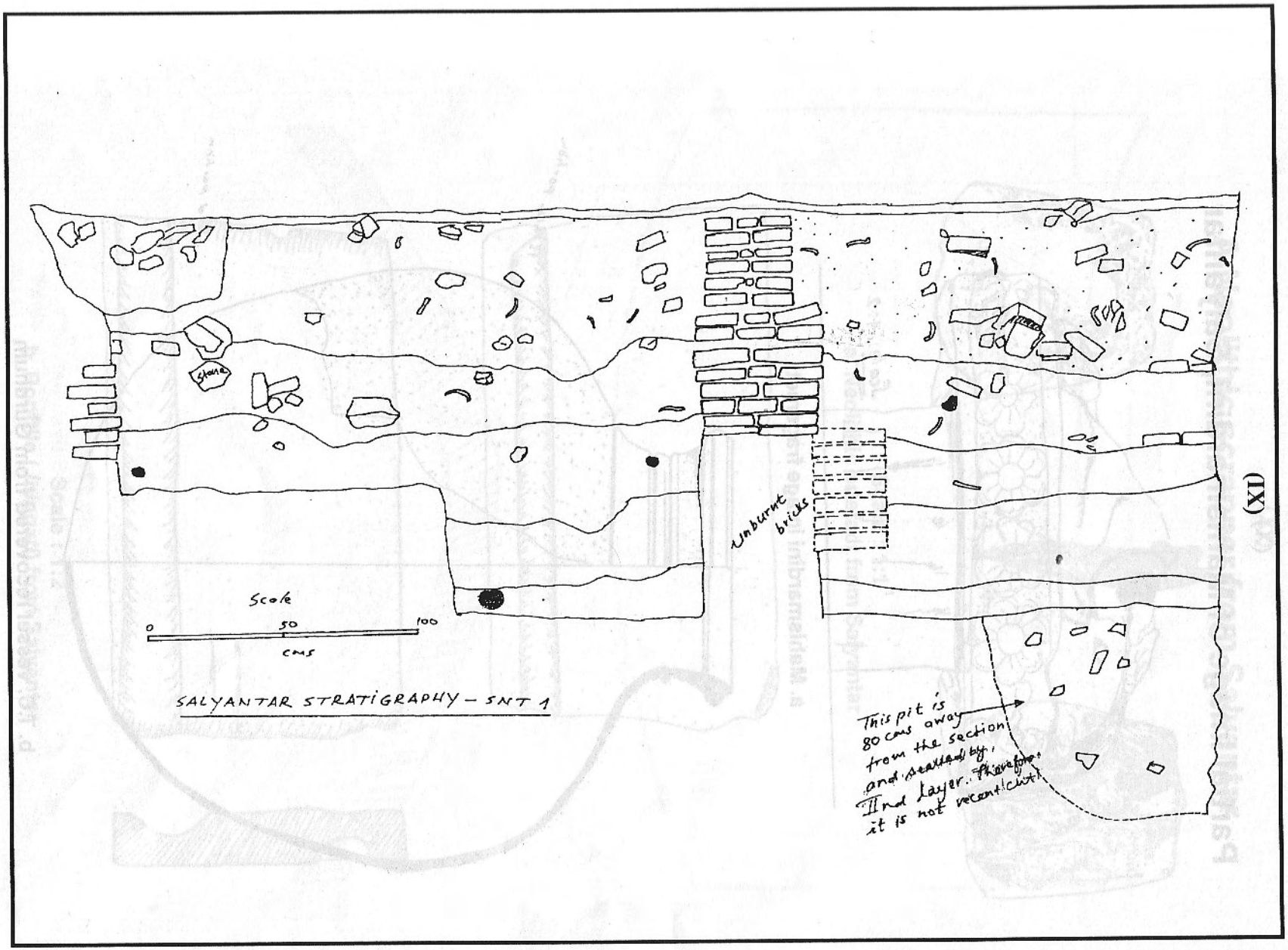



Trench in SNT-1


(VII)
SNT '97-2
-46 cms
-16 cms
-72 cms
00 cms
-18
-35
-70 cms
Brickgrit+Brickrowming
(10–15cms thick)
Modern pit.
uplifted by tree roots
Trench in SNT-2




Stratigraphy in SNT-2

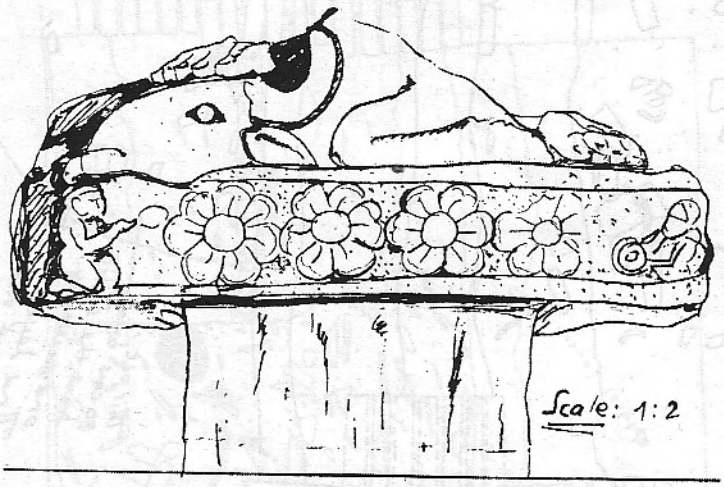



(XI)

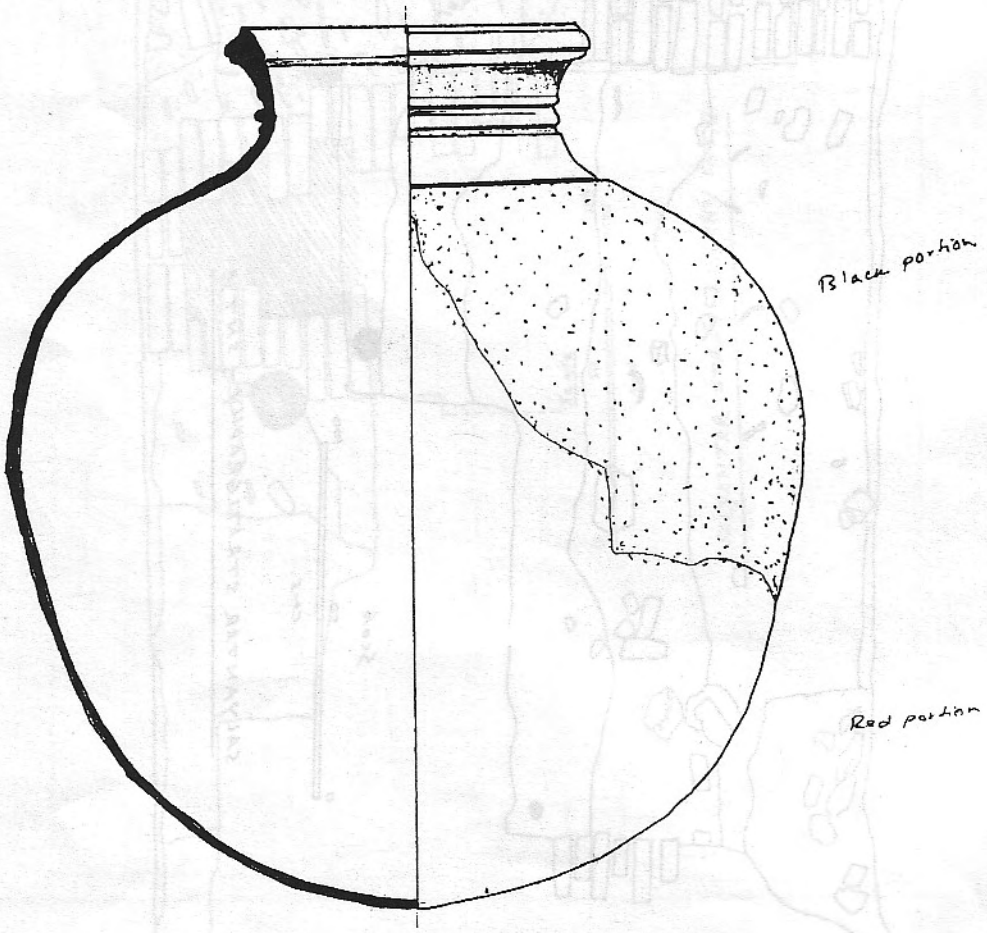
**Stratigraphy in SNT-1**

(X)

# Partial Image of Mahismardini, Salyantar



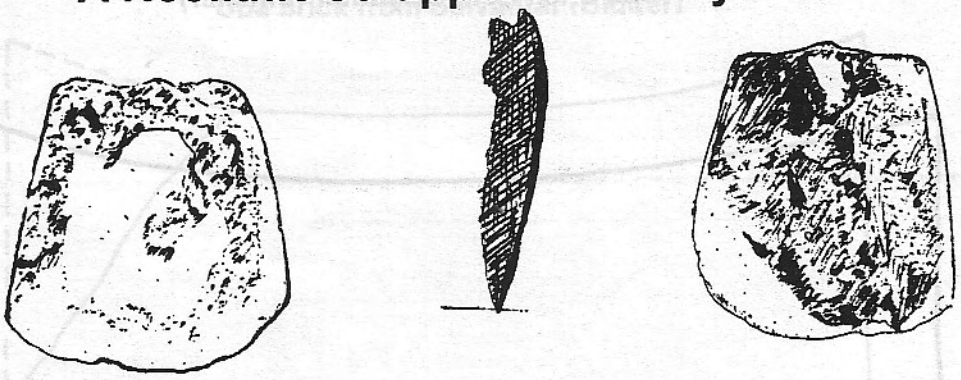

a. Mahismardini image fragemet




b. T.C. vessel recovered from Gurdhum

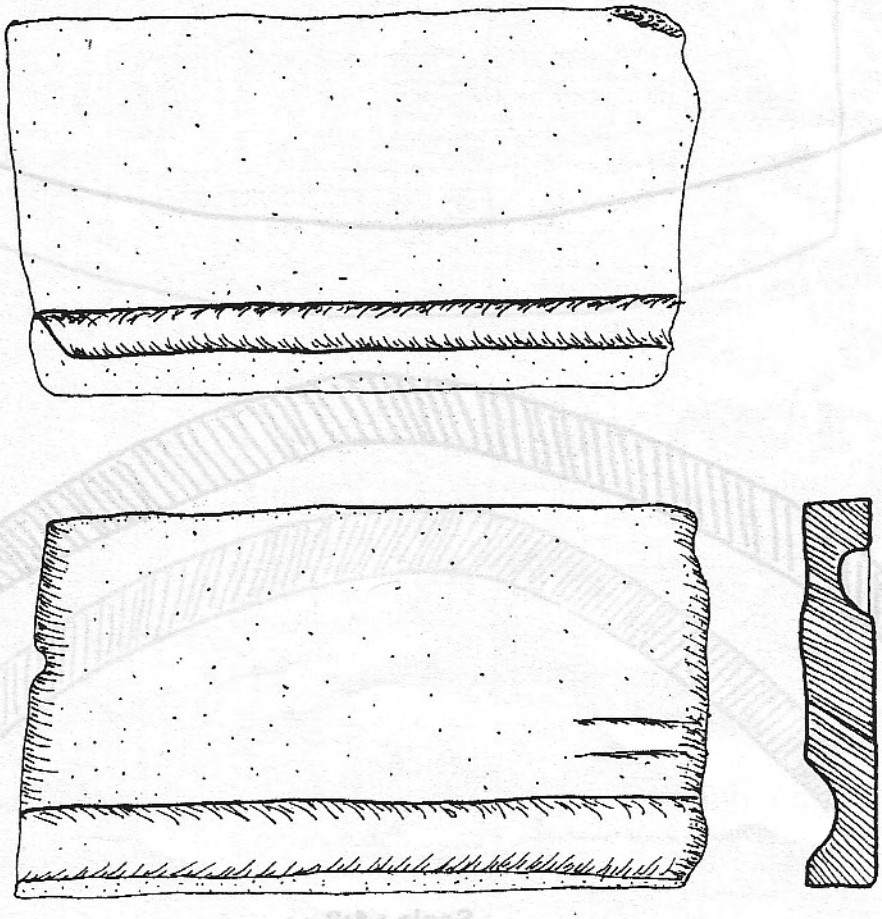
(XI)

# A Neolithic scrapper from Salyantar



Scale : 1:1

a. Neolithic artefact from Salyantar

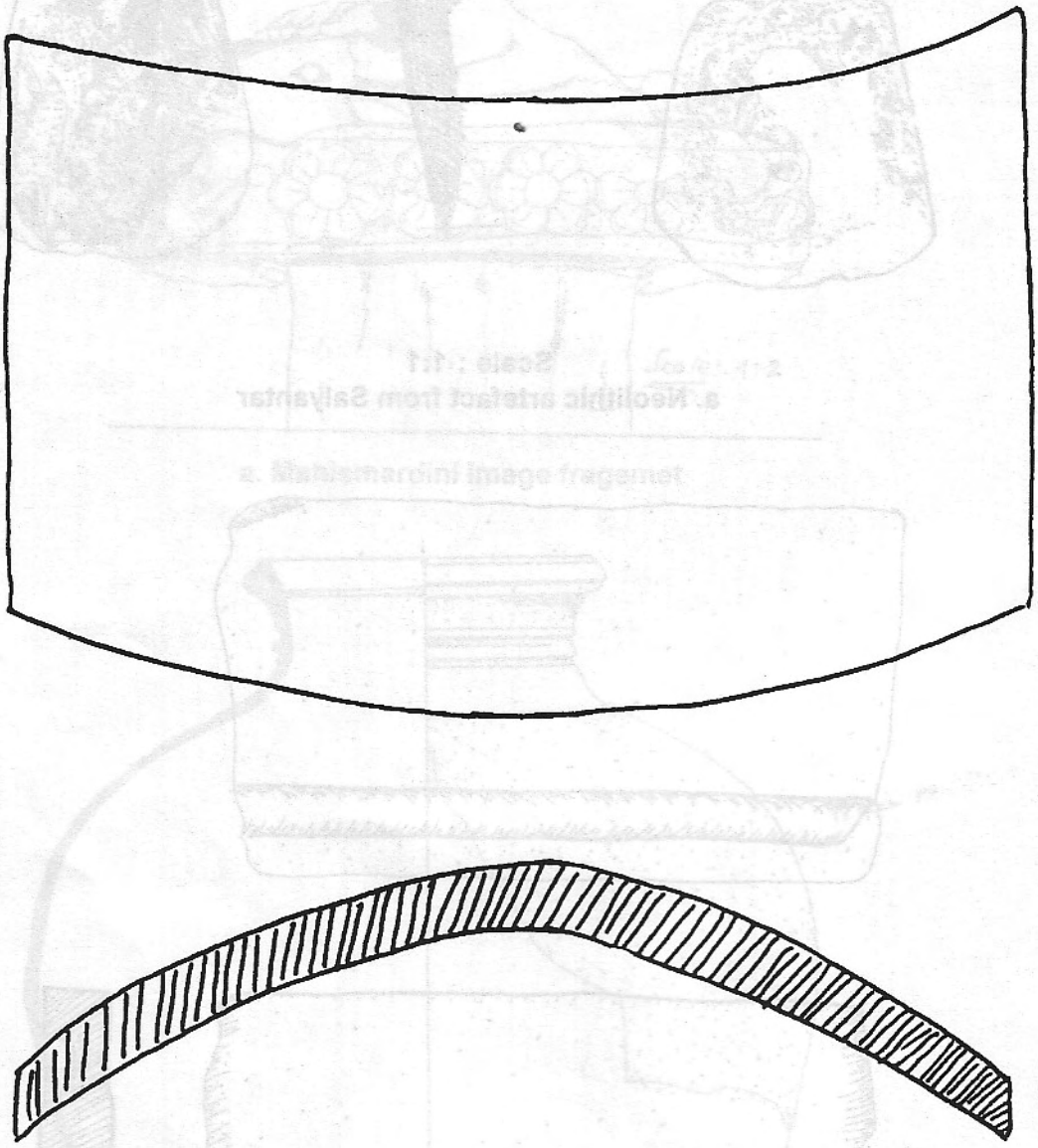


Scale : 1:2

b. Rooftile (*Jhingati*) from Salyantar

**(XII)**

***Upa* brick from Salyantar (Smaller)**

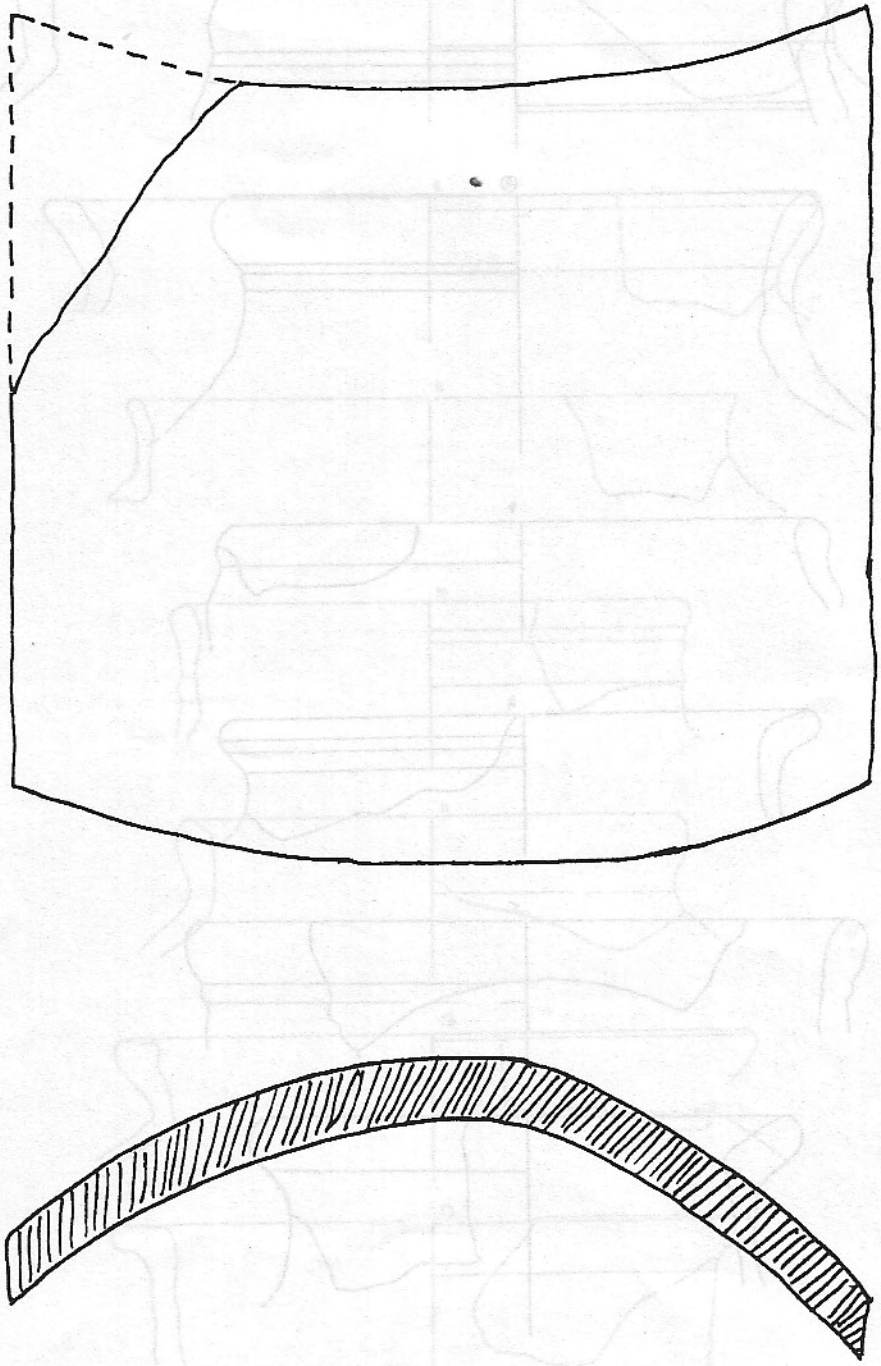


**Scale : 1:2**

***Upa* Brick from Salyantar**

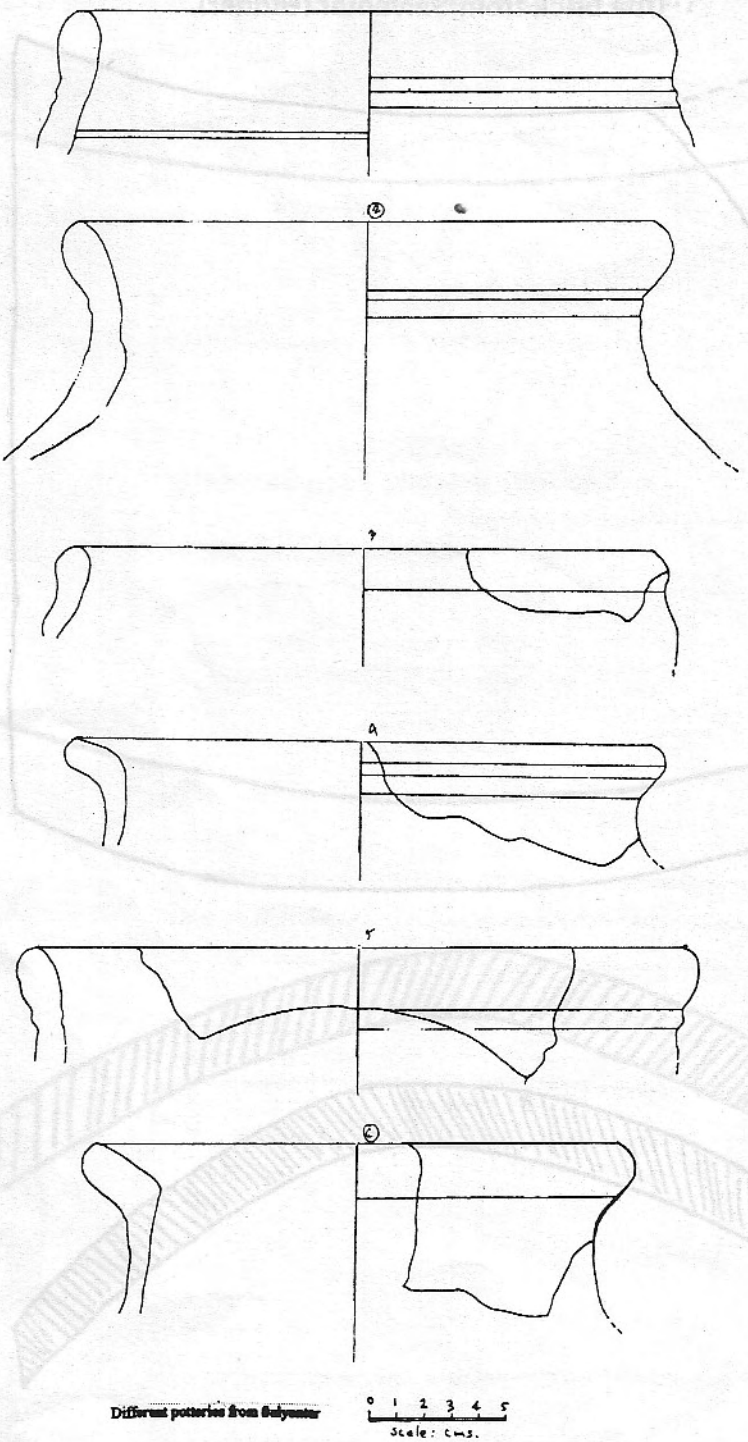
(XIII)

Upa brick from Salvantar (Bigger)



Scale: 1:2, Bigger size *Upa* brick from Salyantar

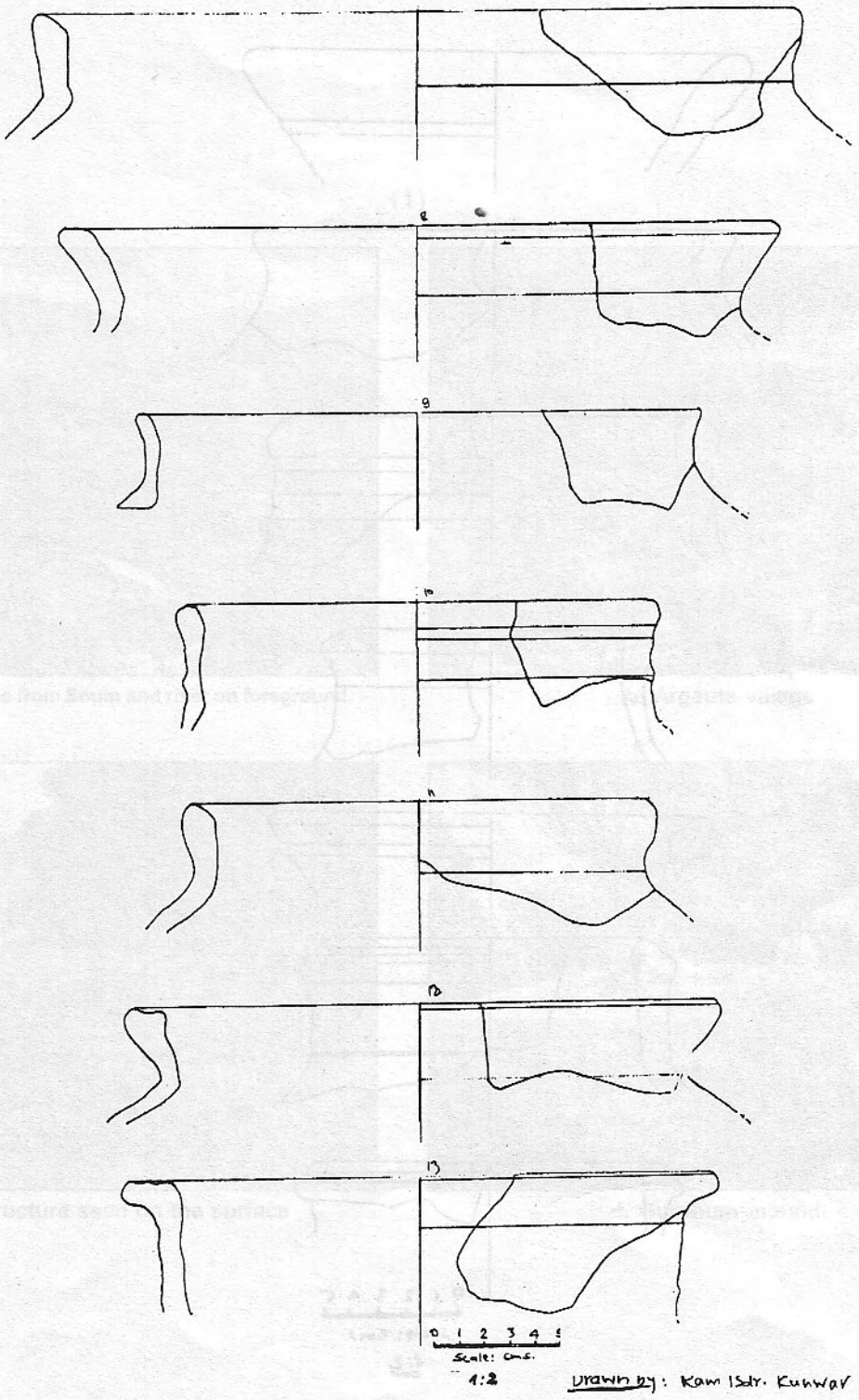
(XIV)




**Different potteries from Salyantar**

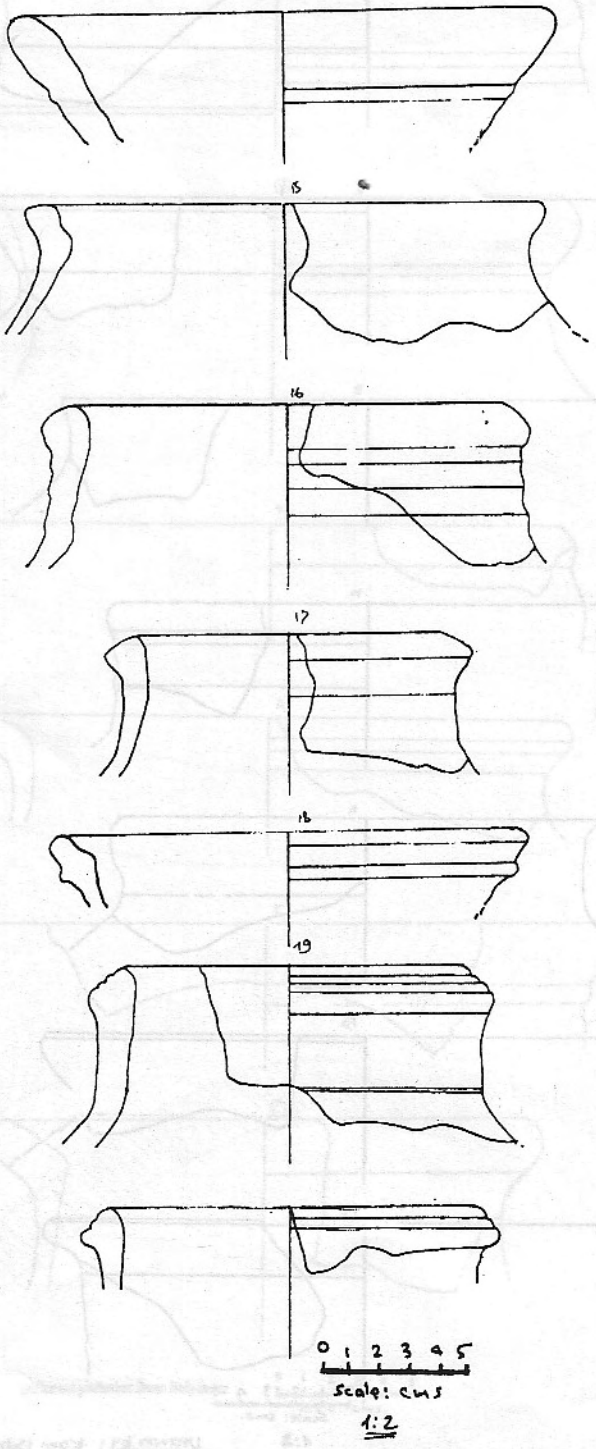
*Drawn by : Ram Bdr Kunwar*

(XV)




**Different potteries from Salyantar**

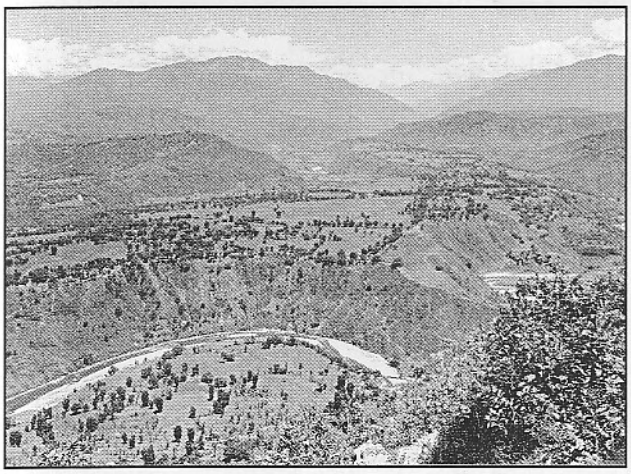
*Drawn by : Ram Bdr Kunwar*



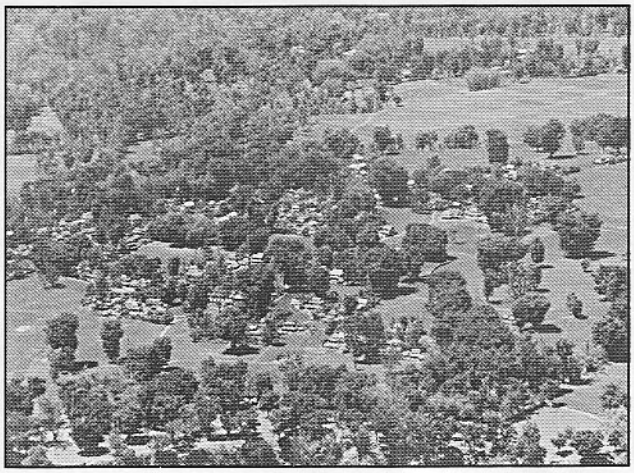

different potteries from Salyantar

*Drawn by : Ram Bdr Kunwar*

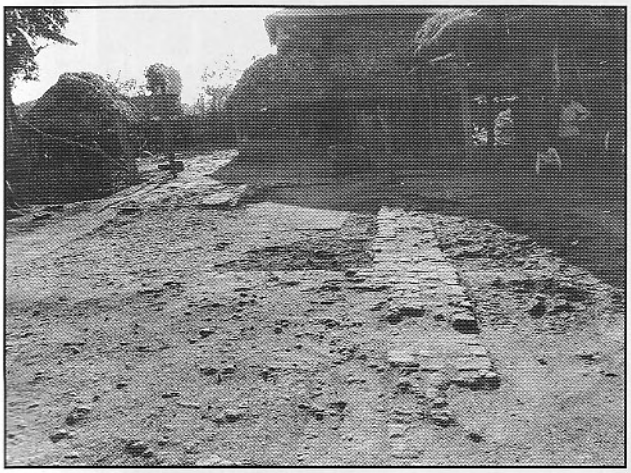
(1)



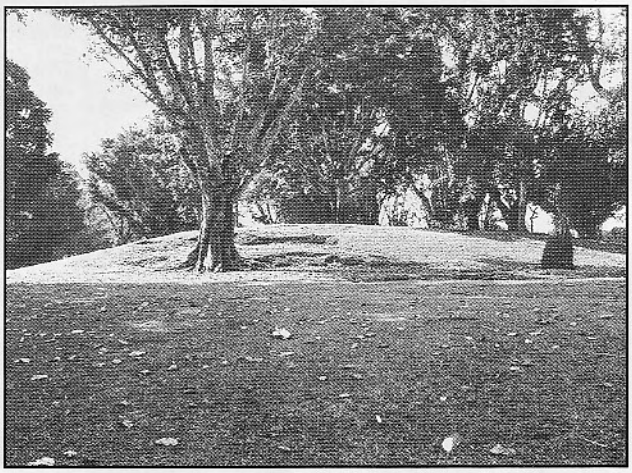
a. Salyantar terrace from South and river on foreground.



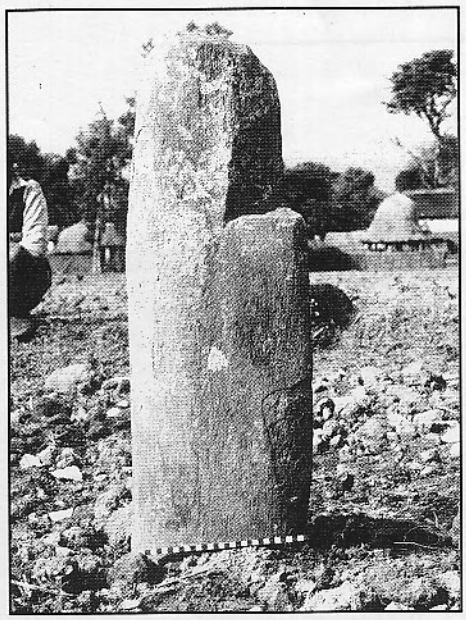
b. Argauta village



c. Wall structure seen on the surface

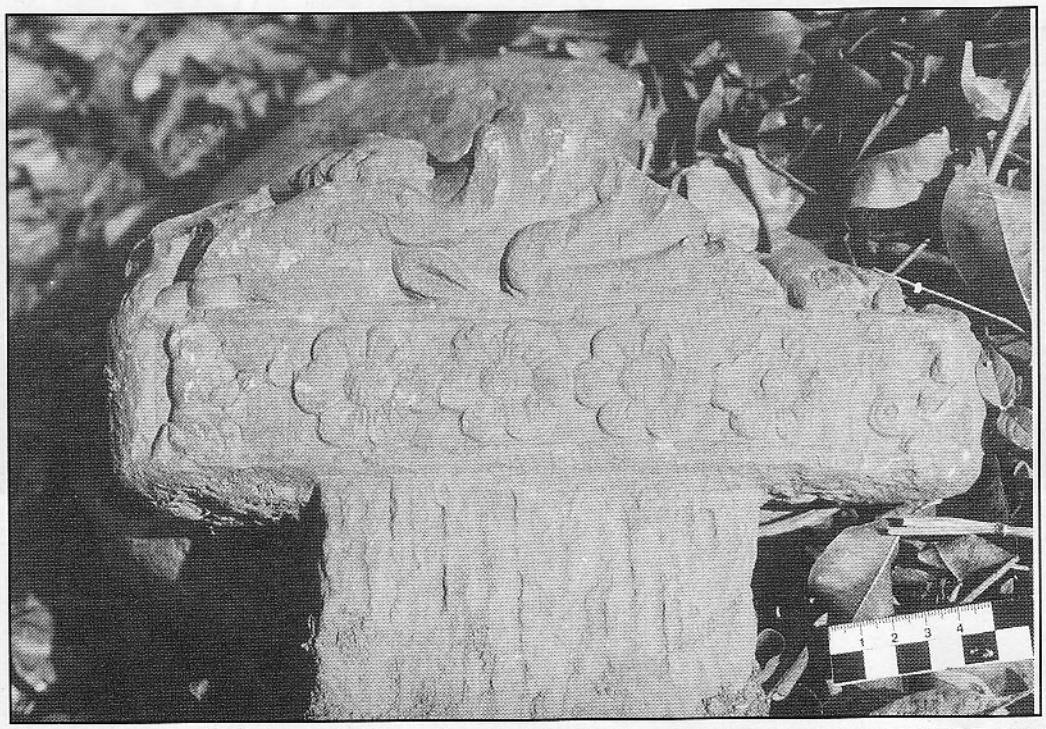


d. Gurdhum mound.



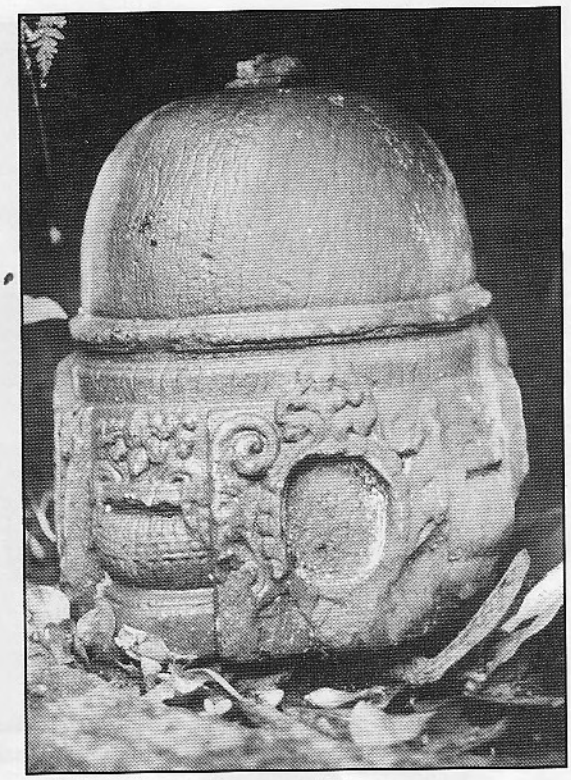
a *Hatti Banne Dhunga*

b. Padmapani and Vajrapurush icon in Pandhare pati.

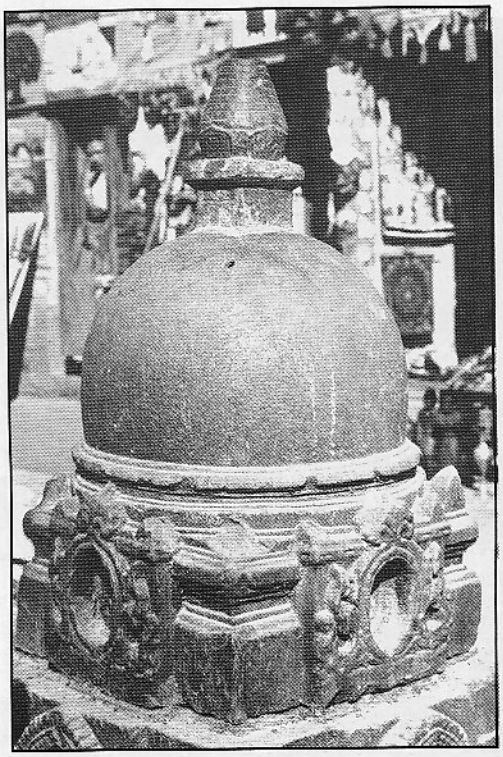


c. Partial piece of Mahismardini icon found at the bottom of a tree shrine in Karnel Pokari

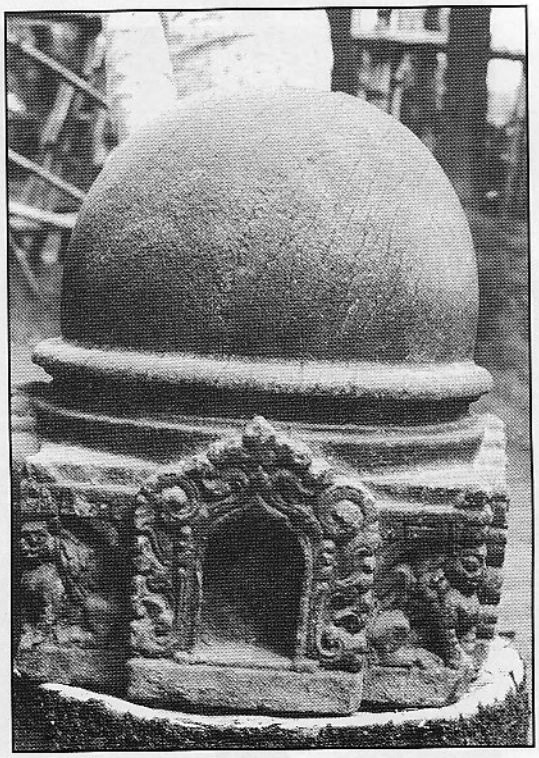
a Chaitya on the way up from Taribesi



b. Chaitya in Pandhare



c. Chaitya from Sighavaha, Kathmandu

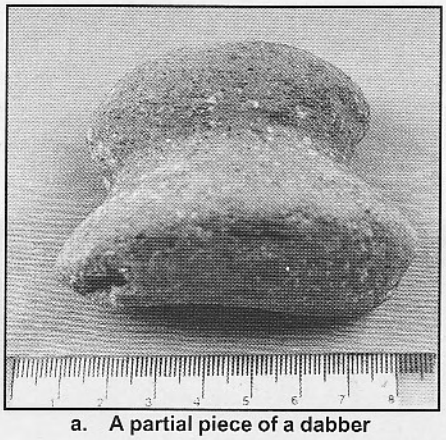


d Chaitya frm Argauta village
(Now in possession of Chandra Bdr. Kami)

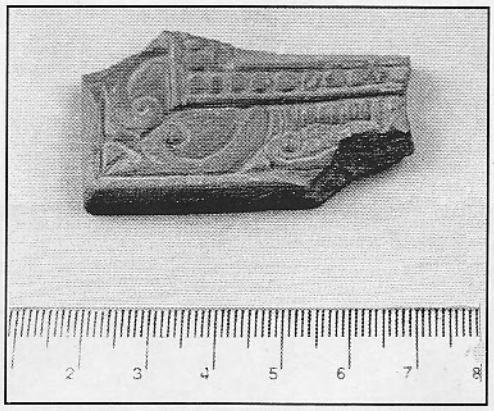
(4)

Lichhavi Chaityas from Gorkha Durbar

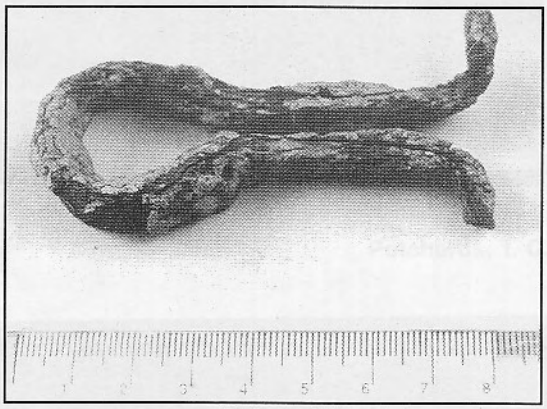
Lichhavi Chaityas from Gorkha Durbar



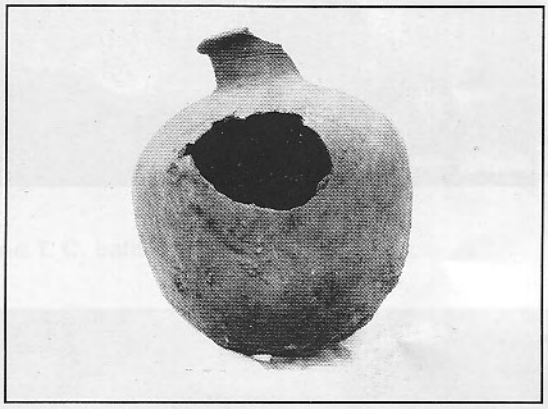
a. A partial piece of a dabber



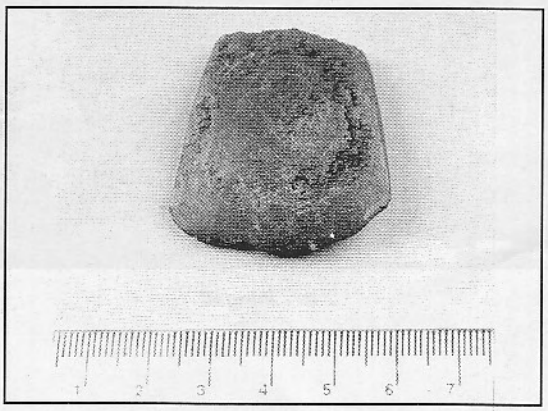
b. A piece of an icon fragment



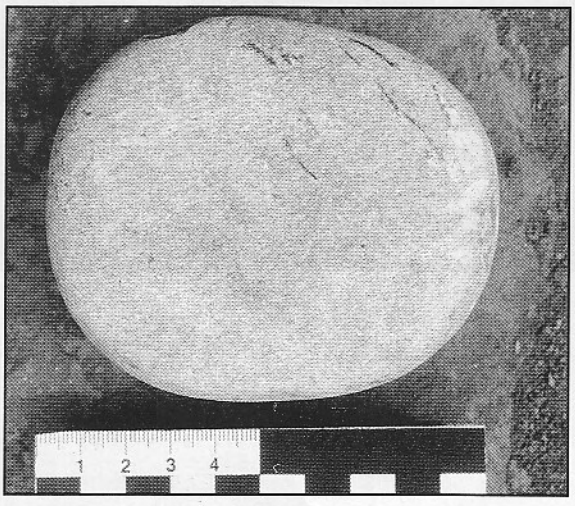
c. An iron piece



d. Vessel recovered from Gurdhum

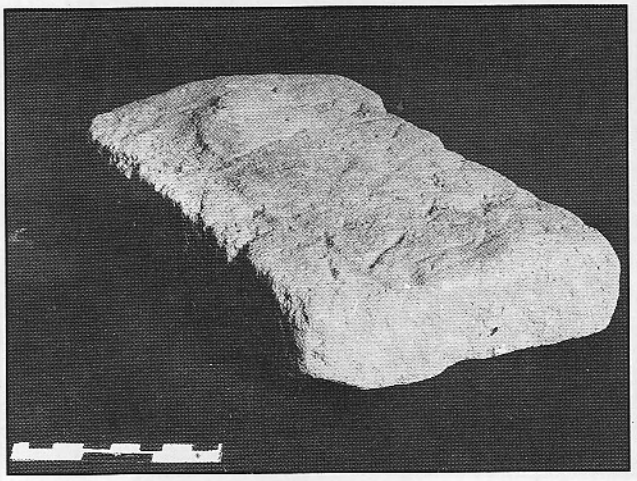


e. A stone artefact collected from the salyantar terrace

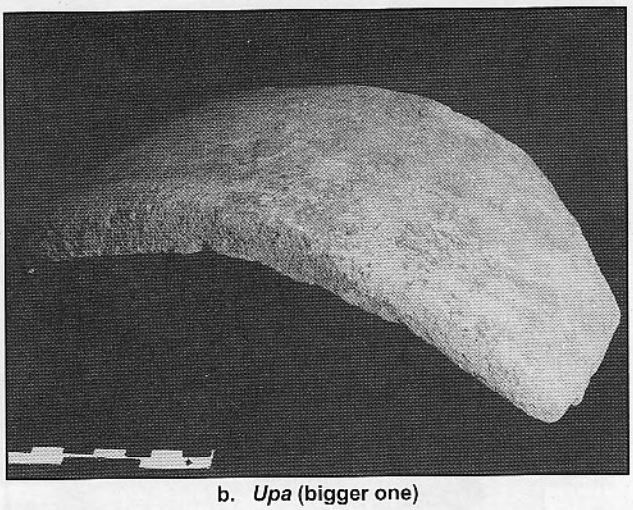


f. A stone pestle. (SNT-2, III layer)

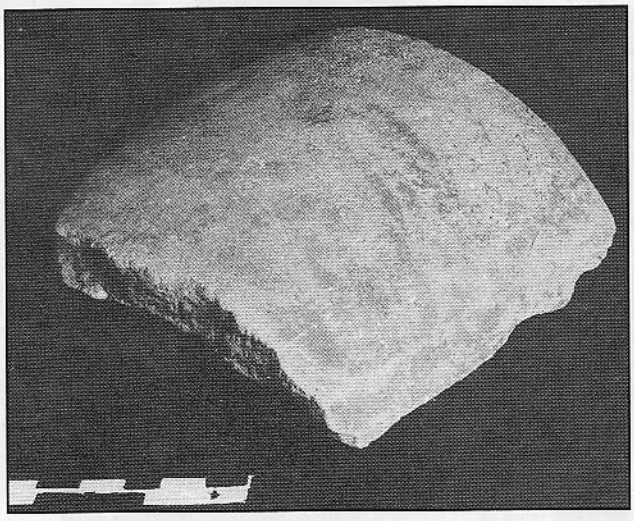
(6)



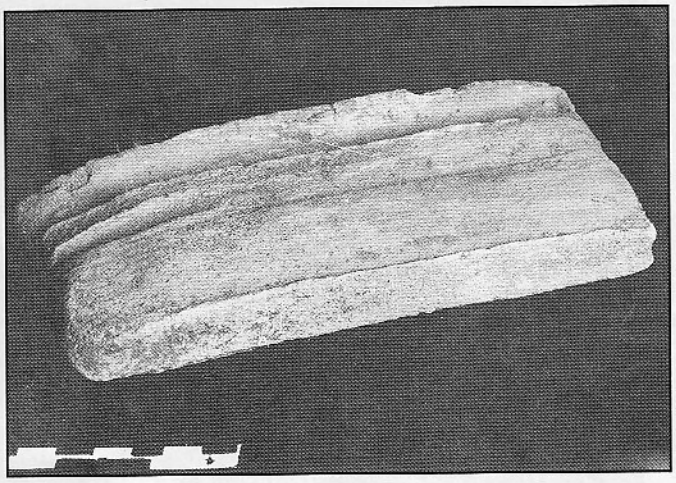
a. A brick



b. *Upa* (bigger one)

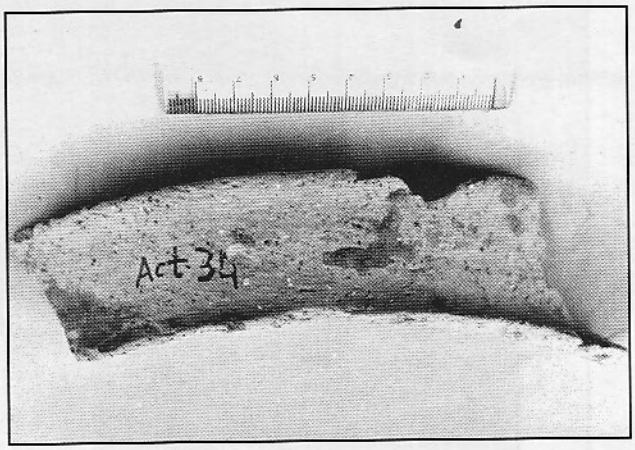


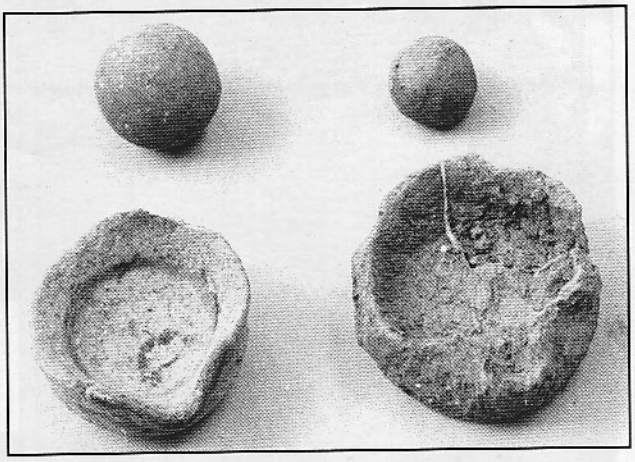
c. *Upa* (small one)



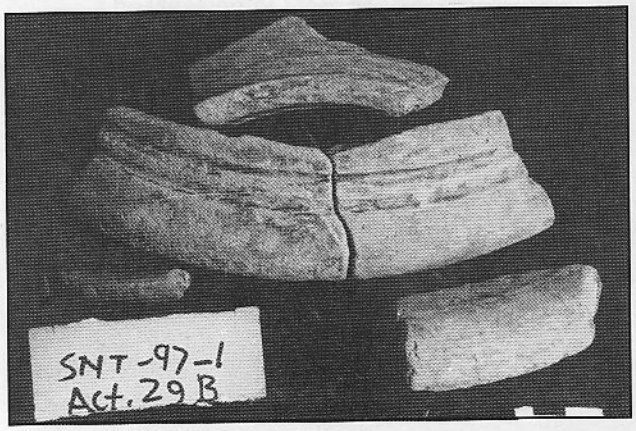
d. *Jhingati*

(7)

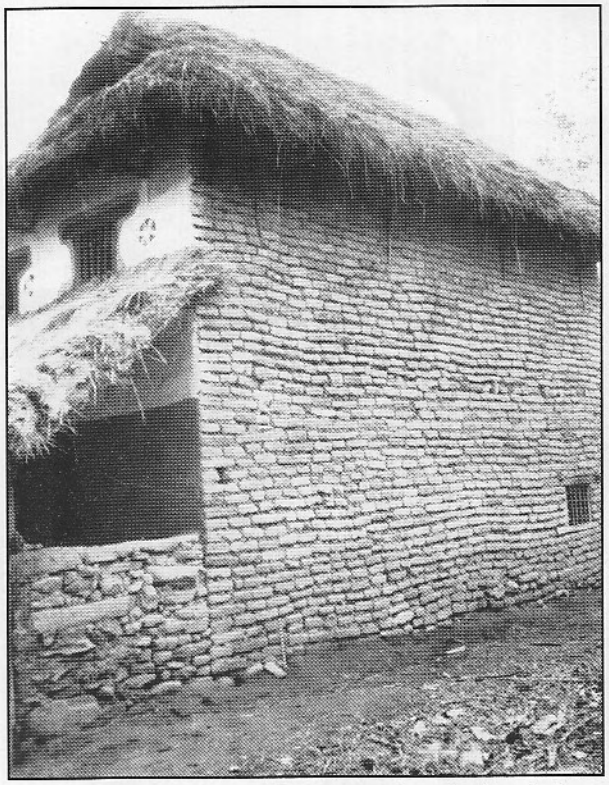


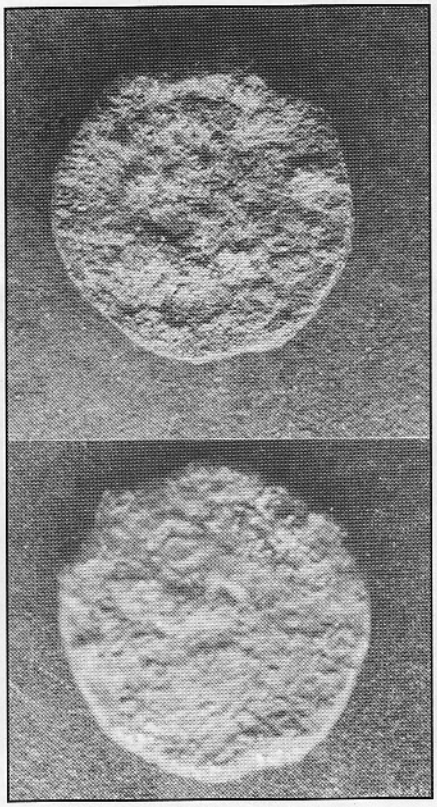
Potsherds, T. C. Lamps and T. C. balls.



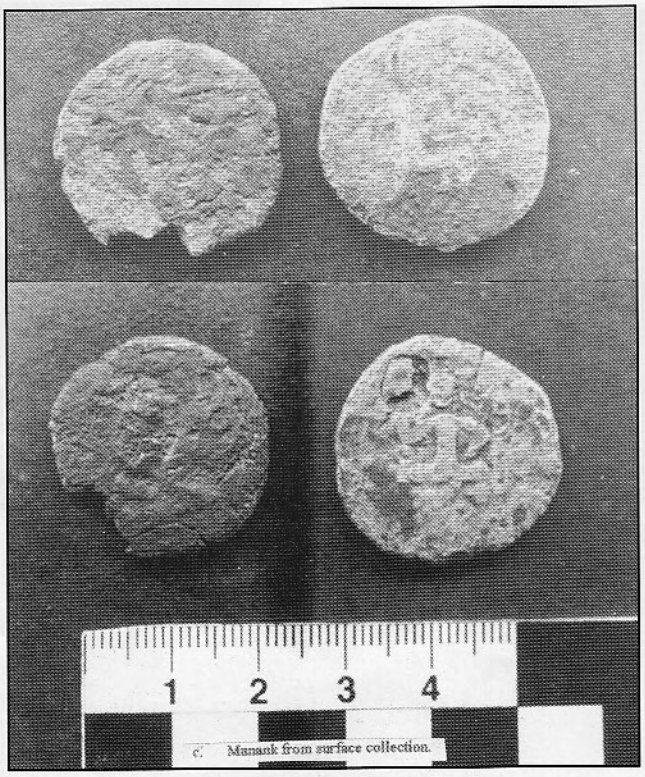

(8)



a. A house made from robbed bricks from the foundation, Argauta village

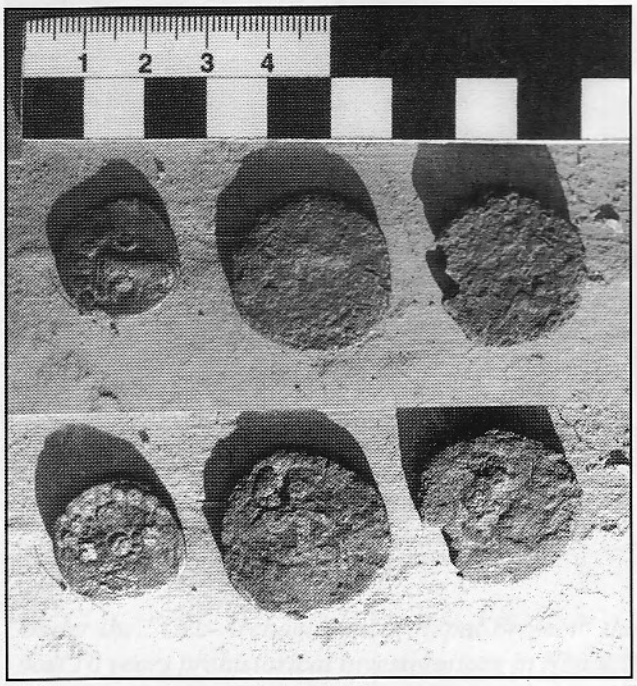


b. Coin collected from excavation

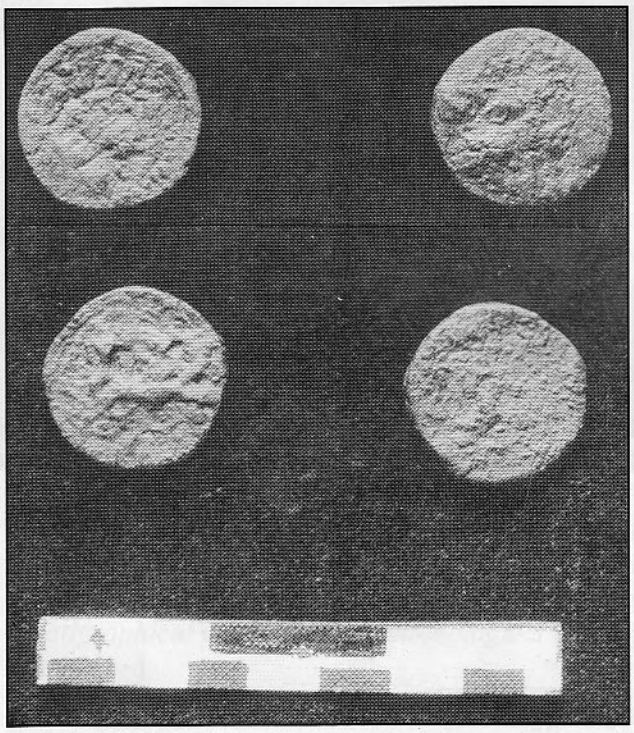



c. Manank from surface collection

(9)




Some coin collection from surface now in possession of local pepole

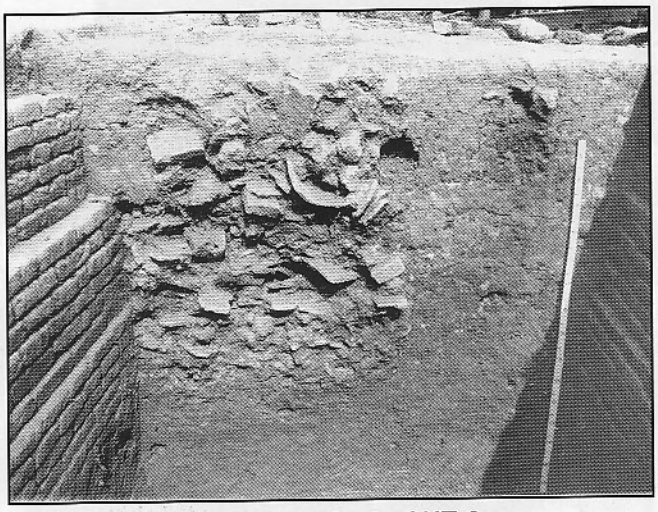


(10)

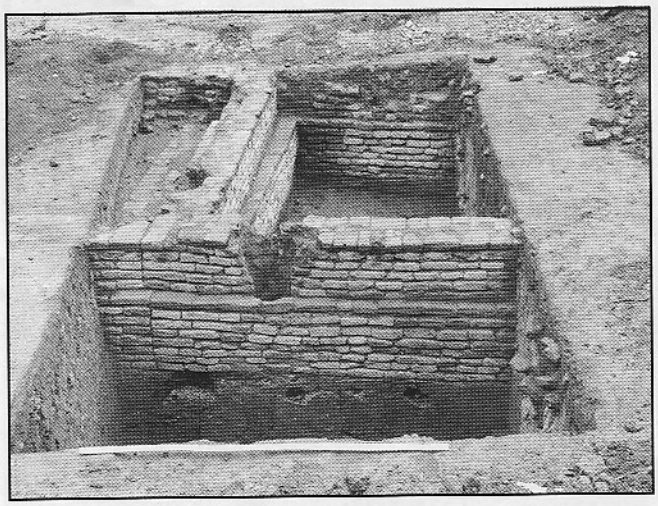
Road Level in SNT-2 house front

Sinkage value left in wall

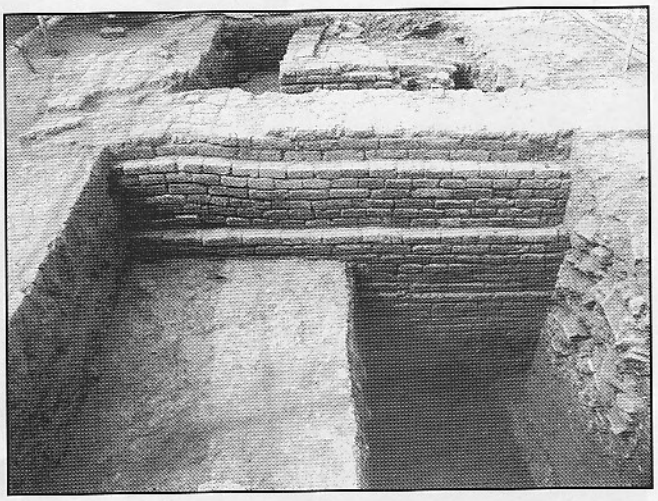
a. Stratigraphy in SNT-1



d. Stratigraphy in SNT-2



c. Structure of a layman's house complex (SNT-1)



d. Structure of an aristocratic complex (SNT-2)