

परिच्छ
पुरातत्त्व
PURĀTATVA

BULLETIN OF THE INDIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

NUMBER 30

1999-2000

INDIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY
NEW DELHI

The Ancient City of Sravasti: its Significance on the Urbanisation of North India

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General outline of the habitational history of Sravasti

Kansai University led by Professor Yoshinori Aboshi (now Professor Emeritus) and Professor Takahiro Takahashi conducted nine-seasons excavations at the ancient city of Sravasti (Maheth), which is located in District Sravasti, Uttar Pradesh (Figs. 1 and 2). Although the significance of the site was recognised as early as the 19th century by British archaeologists and was augmented by a small-scale excavation by Dr. K.K. Sinha in 1959 (Sinha 1967), there has not been enough attention paid to the site thereafter. Kansai University, in succession to the excavations at Jetavana (Saheth) from 1986 to 1989¹, commenced an excavation from 1991. As nine seasons have been spent for excavations, the importance of the site was increasingly re-affirmed by the results of excavations, although the work remains small-scale as the site is considerably large. In this short paper, we shall draw attentions of scholars by pointing out several aspects of the site.

As broadly known, Sravasti was one of the ancient cities of Kosala Kingdom during the lifetime of Buddha. The great prosperity of the city is described plentifully in Buddhist texts, and the city is associated with Buddha in those texts. A well known story of the donation of Jetavana by Anathapindika, a wealthy merchant of the

city, to Buddha testifies its economic prosperity which was maintained by a growth of trade.

The site is surrounded by an earthen rampart, the circumference of which measures 5.23km. The area which is demarcated by the rampart amounts to 160 hectares. The shape of the site shows a crescent plan, facing an old riverbed of ancient Achiravati.

Whereas brick structures of Period IV afterwards show upheaval of ground forming mounds; Most part of the site is found to be considerably flat evenly, where successive floorlevels seem to have been uniformly formed over the site through Periods I to III, as indicated by our excavation areas. By the time when burnt bricks were introduced to buildings in Period IV, wood was a dominant construction material in the city, without leading to the formation of mounds. The fact that prominent mounds are more visible in the southern part of the site than in the northern part of the site indicates that the southern part of the site remained habited until later times than the northern half of the site. This observation has been confirmed by excavations.

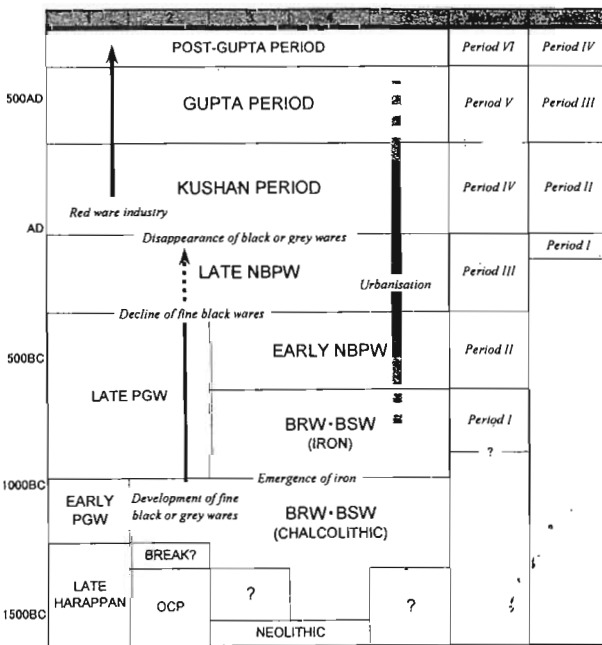
The excavations by Kansai University was conducted at four points viz. Areas A to D (Fig. 2). Area A was located around the Suraj Kund which was in the northern

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part of the site; Area B was on the rampart to the east of Area A; Area C was to the south of Area B; and Area D was situated in the western part of the southern half of the site. By the excavations, comparative data on the stratigraphy of the site was obtained.

The excavations revealed six cultural periods, as described below. As no Carbon14 dating has been available so far, the dating of each cultural period is based on characteristic objects in each period mostly, pottery (Tab. 1).

Table 1.



- Period I BRW/BSW Phase, the 8th to 7th century BC².
- Period II Early NBPW Phase, the 6th to 4th century BC.
- Period III Late NBPW Phase, the 3rd to 1st century BC.
- Period IV Kushan Phase, the 1st to 3rd century AD.

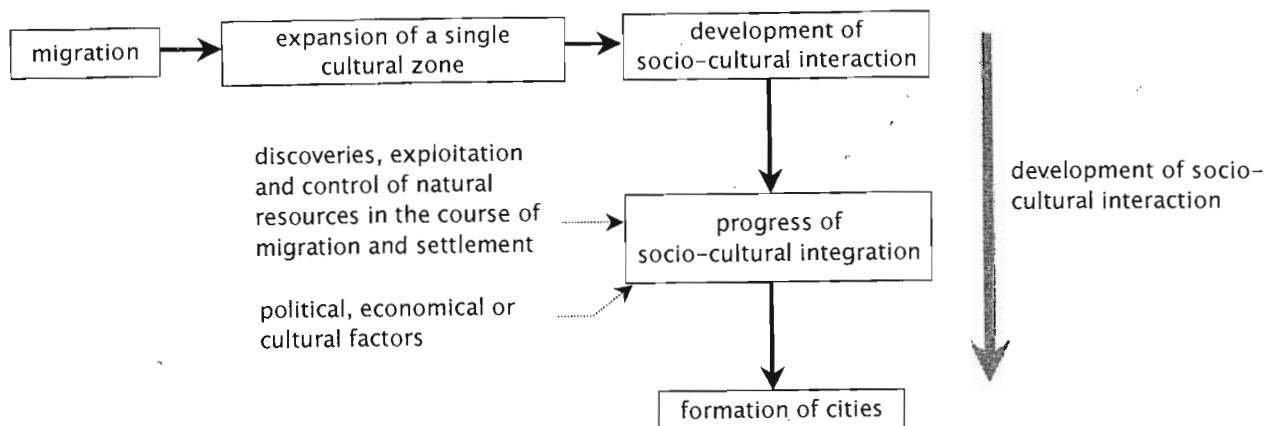
- Period V Gupta Phase, the 4th to 6th century AD.
- Period VI Post-Gupta Phase, the 7th to 10th century AD.

Period I, which is represented by BRW/BSW ceramics (figs. 3 and 4), is confirmed only in the lowest level of Area A. The cultural contents of Period II are observed in all areas, though there are some indications of time lag from area to area in the pottery types³; Area A produced more plentifully older types of NBPW (fig. 5), while other areas are represented by new types of NBPW, though both types are within the fine group of NBPW. Period III is also constantly found through all the excavated areas (fig. 7). Remains of Period IV is quite limited in Area A, but more plentiful in Area D in the southern half of the site. Period V is represented only in Area D. Period VI, which seems to be an occupation after the decline of the city, distributed over the site, forming mounds here and there. As a matter of fact, the occupation of Period VI is represented not by habitational buildings but by temple complexes as unearthed in Areas C and D.

The excavation at Area A yielded successive floor-levels from Periods I to III, showing a stable development of habitation. Period I is represented by only one floor-level, indicating that the occupation in this period was short lived. Period II, in which NBPW became dominant pottery, has several floor-levels, having in each level many pits containing pottery, ash, charcoal, and animal bones. What is noteworthy to state here is the existence of a working place of iron-tool-making, glass-bead-making, semi-precious stone bead-making and bone tool-making during Period III. The working place seems to have been maintained for a considerable period of time, as it is represented by several floor-levels. In Period IV, the habitational activity decreased its size to a great extent, and Period V witnessed a total desertion of habitation. In Period VI, the area was resettled to some extent, but it was not a kind of urban character.

In Area B, which was laid across the earthen rampart at a point to the east of Area A, the excavation was aimed to confirm the stratigraphy and date of the rampart. The excavation, has revealed that the rampart was constructed in Period III and was maintained until the end of Period IV. It seems likely that the rampart did not function during Period V, as there is no trace of maintenance on the

Table 2.



during chalcolithic and iron-using stages. Rice cultivation was adopted as early in the Neolithic stage, along with domestication of animals. On the basis of iron technology Ganga basin was able to develop its own cultural complex. In terms of cultural equipment, BRW was one of the most characteristic cultural traits in this region. BSW also appeared in the Chalcolithic stage along with BRW. As far as the ceramic industry is concerned, the development of culture in this region was linear in its course.

The important aspect of the Gangetic Chalcolithic and iron cultures is that they spread over the eastern half of Ganga plains during the Chalcolithic stage (fig. 8). This dispersal was extended as far as the doab region; this is testified in the excavations at Atranjikhhera, Noh, Jakhera, Allahapur, etc. Although some scholars argues that BRW at these sites came from Banas (Ahar) Culture in southern Rajasthan (Gaur 1969), we shall insist that the dispersal of BRW culture occurred from the lower middle Gangetic region, as argued by K.N. Dikshit (Dikshit 1969)⁴. By the analysis of pottery, the origin of BRW in the doab region should be placed in the east, not in the southwest. The excavations at Sringaverapura (78-84) by Lal and Dikshit also confirmed this hypothesis.

It seems likely from excavations at Neolithic sites in the middle and lower-middle Gangetic regions that the origin of BRW goes back to the Neolithic stage and that BRW developed through time, changing into fine ware during the Chalcolithic stage. On the basis of this observation, it can be argued that the Chalcolithic people using BRW occupied Gangetic plains during the later half of the

2nd millennium BC.

This expansion of BRW people seems to have continued in the early half of the 1st millennium BC. Besides, archaeological evidence attests the presence of iron by this time. It seems likely that the introduction of iron tools helped people to clear the vegetation which covered Ganga basin. It can be supposed that the settlement at Sravasti occurred around this period.

One of the noticeable results of the migration for the people may have been a discovery of various metal and mineral resources, which could have been exploited for, more importantly, trade. Some of the resources could have been found in rare availability at limited localities, making them utilised as trading goods or prestige goods, the distribution of which might be controlled or limited by some kind of social class. Iron ore and semiprecious stones can be regarded as those among such resources.

Another important aspect of this expansion of people is the formation of a network which connected different regions in and around Ganga basin. As far as the content of material culture is concerned, the BRW sites have a cultural uniformity. From the 1st millennium BC, on the BRW/BSW sites formed a single cultural zone, sharing uniform cultural traits. This led the society form a continuous cultural interaction through network, creating a socio-cultural integration along Gangetic plains.

This socio-cultural integration through the maintenance of inter-regional network seems to have been one

of the most influential aspects on the social transformation of North India. By the socio-cultural integration, the society came to need one or more regional centre/s, which might act as a knot connecting both local and inter-regional networks. Through these regional centres, natural resources, commodities and information were transmitted over the regions which were tied up by a socio-cultural interaction.

The social unevenness went towards the reinforcement of the function of regional centres to tie up a society and towards the formation of social elites with social power in a society. It appears that the city formation was one of the results of the social transformation which was backed up cultural integration. This socio-cultural transformation by social marked a major phase in urbanisation of the Gangetic basin.

While the BRW/BSW- people were expanding over the eastern half of Ganga plains, another important factor of material culture, that is, PGW came to the scene around the same time. As far as our present knowledge of researches shows, PGW appeared in a few centuries of the later half of the 2nd millennium BC in the eastern Punjab (Joshi 1993). On the basis of the excavation at Bhagwanpura, it seems likely that the PGW-using people lived in that region side by side with the Late Harappan people. The PGW-using people had a different cultural tradition from that of the Late Harappan, such as ceramic industry, and habitational buildings of wooden huts.

Although the scale of settlements of the PGW-using people and the area in which they settled during this period are yet to be further excavated, the following some centuries of the 1st millennium BC witnessed an expansion of their settlements (fig. 9). With this expansion of their socio-cultural area, they came to have a contact with the BRW/BSW-using people. Some aspects of this cultural contact can be observed in the mutual influences on their ceramic industry and the formation of uniform cultural equipments; except for the differentiation of their fine ware industries.

PGW also formed another cultural interaction. The fact that the same form, shape and painted designs which were the results of the wide-spread exchange of information on the making technique indicates that an information net-work system existed in the PGW distribution

zone as well. Thus, during the early half of the 1st millennium BC, Ganga plains were divided roughly into two regions in which two different information exchange systems of the production and circulation of the fine wares; i.e. BRW/BSW and NBPW, and PGW existed.

It seems likely that the social/interaction from two different directions resulted in the cultural integration of the whole of North India.

Through this process, the social transformation mentioned above was given more impetus to gear up the formation of a new social complexity, i.e., the city formation. As stated above, the increase in cultural contact and subsequent integration might have required centres to control and maintain the contact and the integration of the various regions.

This process of social transformation towards the city formation progressed to a greater extent during the middle of the 1st millennium BC, i.e., PGW/NBPW phase (fig. 10). It seems that there appeared several cities in Ganga basin by this time, as testified by both literary and archaeological evidences.

Furthermore, the process continued towards the end of the 1st millennium BC; then the process came to its peak, fueled by the greater development of trade with Central Asia, West Asia, and even the Mediterranean region through various channels of trade both on land and by sea. The great prosperity of the cities of North India has been attested by many archaeological excavations.

As stated above, the urbanisation of North India began with the activation of migration of people over North India, consequently leading to the constant socio-cultural contacts and integration between regions in North India. The urbanisation process reached to its climax with the formation of states and the great development of trade, which finally covered the whole of the sub-continent.

Urbanisation and formation of a city at Sravasti

Sravasti is not out of this urbanisation process caused by the socio-cultural integration. Immediately after the first settlement at the site, Sravasti became involved in

the social transformation in North India, resulting in the expansion of the settlement during Period II. Rather, there is the most probability that the first settlement at this site occupied some position either in political or economic background of the North Indian society, as this site was located in a strategic point, which connected the Gangetic plain and the Himalayan region, and which was located on the main east-west route, *Uttarapatha*. It seems likely that the significance of Sravasti as a city should be sought as an eminent trading post in the northern tip of the Gangetic plain.

Based on a fact that cities played a significant role in forming and maintaining socio-cultural contacts and integration, it becomes quite clear that Sravasti was the largest centre of the contacts and integration of the southern foothills of the Himalaya. That is, Sravasti gave a cultural atmosphere of North India to this region, by assimilating itself to the culture of Gangetic plains. The fact that NBPW, a characteristic fine ware of North India, which was based on a skillful technique of modelling, surface treatment and firing and which seems to have signified an aspect of the cultural entity of North India, was abundantly found at Sravasti, indicates that Sravasti introduced informations of the techniques of production of NBPW immediately after its creation in the eastern half of North India and was a regional centre for the production, consumption and circulation of NBPW in the southern foothills of the Himalaya.

This constant cultural interaction with North India and North-west India was one of the most influential factors to the development of the city of Sravasti. That is, the impetus of the urbanisation was originated from the cultural interaction with other parts of Gangetic plains. This cultural contact can be attested in every aspect of material culture. More fundamentally, the socio-political and economic impetus for urbanisation was also transmitted through the channel of cultural contacts in North India. After the first settlement at Sravasti set the trend for a cultural interaction with North and North-west India, until the decline of the city.

In relation to the cultural contact and interaction outside the BRW/BSW and NBPW zone, it is much interesting to note that there was a cultural amalgamation between the PGW distribution zone and the NBPW distribution zone. The evidence for this phenomenon can be found in

two points; first, there were mutual influences between them in terms of forms and shapes of pottery; secondly PGW was imported into the NBPW distribution zone though in a much limited way. The former point became visible in the early few centuries of the 1st millennium BC after the PGW extended its distribution zone into the doab region from the eastern Punjab. Some forms of BRW were introduced into the PGW assemblage in this period. Regarding the latter point, discoveries of PGW have been reported from several sites in the NBPW distribution zone⁵. Although some of the sites are much dubious for their identification as PGW, the evidence from Sravasti clearly indicates that PGW was imported into this site (Sinha 1967). Besides, what would be interesting is that some specimens of imitation of PGW are discovered from Sravasti (RP1 124 in Fig. 4/5).⁶

They are slight different from genuine PGW in terms of shape, surface treatment, and firing, but have black painting on the surface. Since it is highly probable that whether they were made by local people, it can be suggested that some demand for the PGW or imitated PGW existed even in the NBPW distribution zone. This fact indicates the existence of an information exchange and a cultural interaction between the PGW and NBPW distribution zones.

Summing up the discussions above, it becomes clear that the whole North India became linked of information-exchange and trade, with subdivisions based on various aspects of material culture. This system accelerated the socio-cultural integration of North India.

Sravasti occupies a unique position in this exchange and interaction system. It is located on the border between the PGW and NBPW distribution zones and on the significant route towards the Himalayan region. In this term, Sravasti was a place to which various information and commodities were brought from various regions. It is strongly suggested that the cause for the beginning of the formation of the city should be found in this point. At the present condition of our knowledge, the cultural interaction with the Himalayan region is yet to be clear, but reaching up to the site of Kapilavastu, settlements in Ganga basins built up a stronghold for its cultural contacts with distant regions.

The decline of the city of Sravasti should also be con-

sidered in terms of the socio-cultural interaction and integration in North India. In general, it has been argued that the North Indian society faced an economical stagnation which was caused by the invasion of Ephthalite (White Hun) and by the decline of the Indo-Roman trade from the middle of Gupta rule on. According to the economic stagnation, the regional structure of North India was forced to be changed and reorganised. The former widely integrated socio-economic entity was divided up into several smaller regional units. Thus, it is clear that a strong socio-cultural integration, which was based on a wide socio-cultural interaction, disappeared due to the decline of the economy. The economic decline caused a disintegration of the political unity as well.

As stated above, the decline of the city of Sravasti occurred around the 3rd or 4th century AD prior to the general decline of the urban society in North India. As a matter of fact, it becomes clear on the basis of the description of Fa-hien who travelled in North India in the beginning of the 5th century AD that the whole part of the region of the foothills of the Himalaya, like Kapilavastu, Kushinagara as well as Sravasti, had been already devastated in terms of population. On the basis of this fact, it can be supposed that the foothill region of the Himalaya started to decline in general, as early as the 4th century AD; this observation is reinforced by the archaeological evidence as well. The archaeological evidence from Sravasti accords with this regional situation.

On the basis of these evidences, it can be said that the urban society of North India came to be modified in part as early as the 4th century AD. It is probable that the disintegration of the society occurred due to some reasons, either political, economic or cultural. Sravasti was one of the cities which were devastated in this period. Based on consideration of the fact that the cities in North India were based for their existence on the role as regional centres to connect different regions; the factor which caused desertion of city should be searched for in the decline of the regional interaction. Since the excavations at Sravasti reveal that the habitation suddenly decreased its size in the later part of the Kushan Period, it can be supposed that some kind of factor to make urban inhabitants leave quite

quickly occurred in this period. Such a sudden desertion of the city implies a large scale evacuation of inhabitants, not a gradual decrease of population. A picture which can be drawn by this situation might be that the inhabitants were forced to leave by a political power which controlled this city. This is a matter which has to be discussed later.

Tentative conclusion

In this short paper, we have attempted to discuss the formation of the city of Sravasti in terms of socio-cultural interaction and integration of Gangetic plains, starting from active migration of people along the region to the decline of the cultural integration which caused the devastation of the city of Sravasti.

In order to reconstruct the process of urbanisation in North India, the method of settlement archaeology seems to be quite useful. The detailed study of artefacts is also relevant, based on a hypothesis that any kind of artefacts were endowed with some socio-cultural codes, which enable us to reconstruct a given society by archaeological evidence. In order to trace the process of urbanisation, cultural interaction seem to be one of the most influential factors.

This paper is an attempt to draw some attentions of scholars to the study of artefacts from a viewpoint of socio-cultural interaction and integration which could be partly reflected in various attributes of artefacts, on the basis of the evidence from Sravasti. We would like to emphasise the necessity to interpret attributes of artefacts from some hypothetical perspective which is to be examined by further studies.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express gratitude to Dr. K.N. Dikshit who recommended us to publish this paper. We are also grateful to Dr. R.S. Bisht from the central office of ASI, and Dr. K.K. Mohammad, D.K. Ambastha, D.K. Singh, and N.K. Sinha from Excavations Branch III, ASI who assisted and advised us during the excavations at Sravasti.

NOTES

¹A full report of the Jetavana Excavations was published in 1997 (Aboshi and Sonoda ed., 1997).

²The absolute dating for each period is determined based on the data from other sites.

Regarding the date of BRW/BSW, it is generally suggested that BRW/BSW appeared in the lower-middle Gangetic plains (present Bihar), and then dispersed westwards to the doab region. The authors of this paper believe that the BRW/BSW in the doab region were brought from the eastern region, not from the south, that is, Banas culture.

³On the basis of the typological analysis of NBPW, it can be suggested that those from Area A show older elements, and those from other areas have relatively later elements. The detailed discussion on the typology of NBPW will be made on another occasion. What we would like to point out here is that the later group of fine NBPW of Early NBPW phase shows elements which become more eminent in the Late NBPW phase. The earlier group consisted of elements which cannot be observed in the Late NBPW phase.

⁴Although the shapes of BRW in the doab is quite similar to that of Banas culture, the existence of dish in the doab region indi-

cates a gap between the two. Rather, the origin of dish should be found in the BRW/BSW complex in the lower-middle Gangetic region. Typological study of BRW/BSW in the lower-middle Gangetic region shows the process of BRW/BSW from the lower-middle Gangetic region to the western regions.

⁵Although several pieces of GW from Kaushambi are said to be PGW (Sharma 1960), they are hardly identified with genuine PGW in terms of paintings, as far as we judge from the published photographs. Similarly, the sherds from Vaishali which are reported as PGW are also doubtful with their identification. Genuine PGW are confined in terms of its distribution to the upper-middle Gangetic region (doab region) westwards.

⁶Beside with the illustrated specimen (RP1124), a limited number of imitated ware of PGW has been found from our excavation. All of them are from the stratum of Period II, that is, Early NBPW phase. Furthermore, some techniques of modelling which is peculiar to PGW are observable in some specimens of GW, similarly indicating the cultural exchange between the PGW and NBPW zone. No genuine PGW has been found from our excavation (though the earlier.) Excavation by K.K. Sinha yielded genuine PGW sherds from Sravasti.

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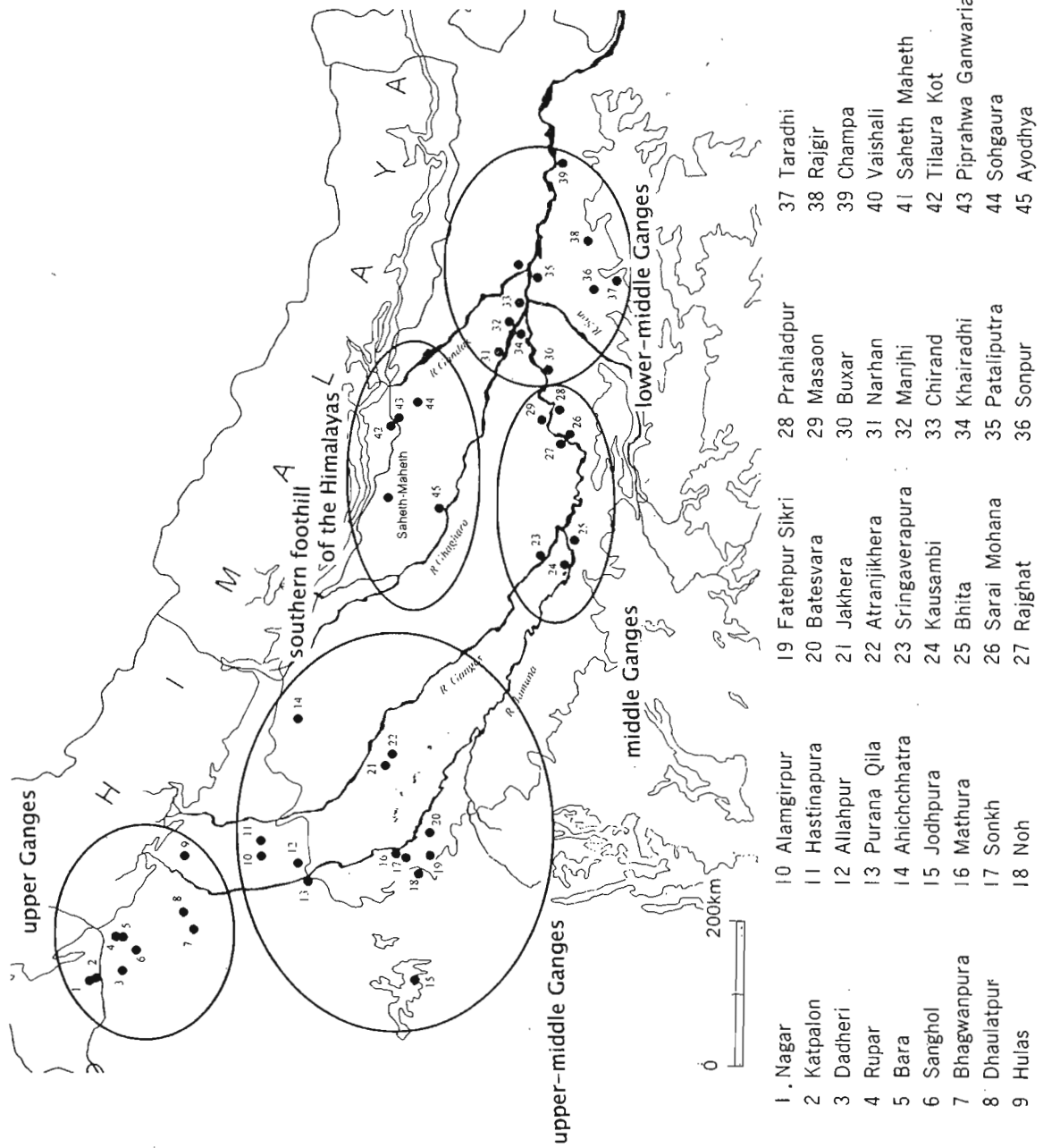


Fig. 1. Ancient sites in Ganga Valley.

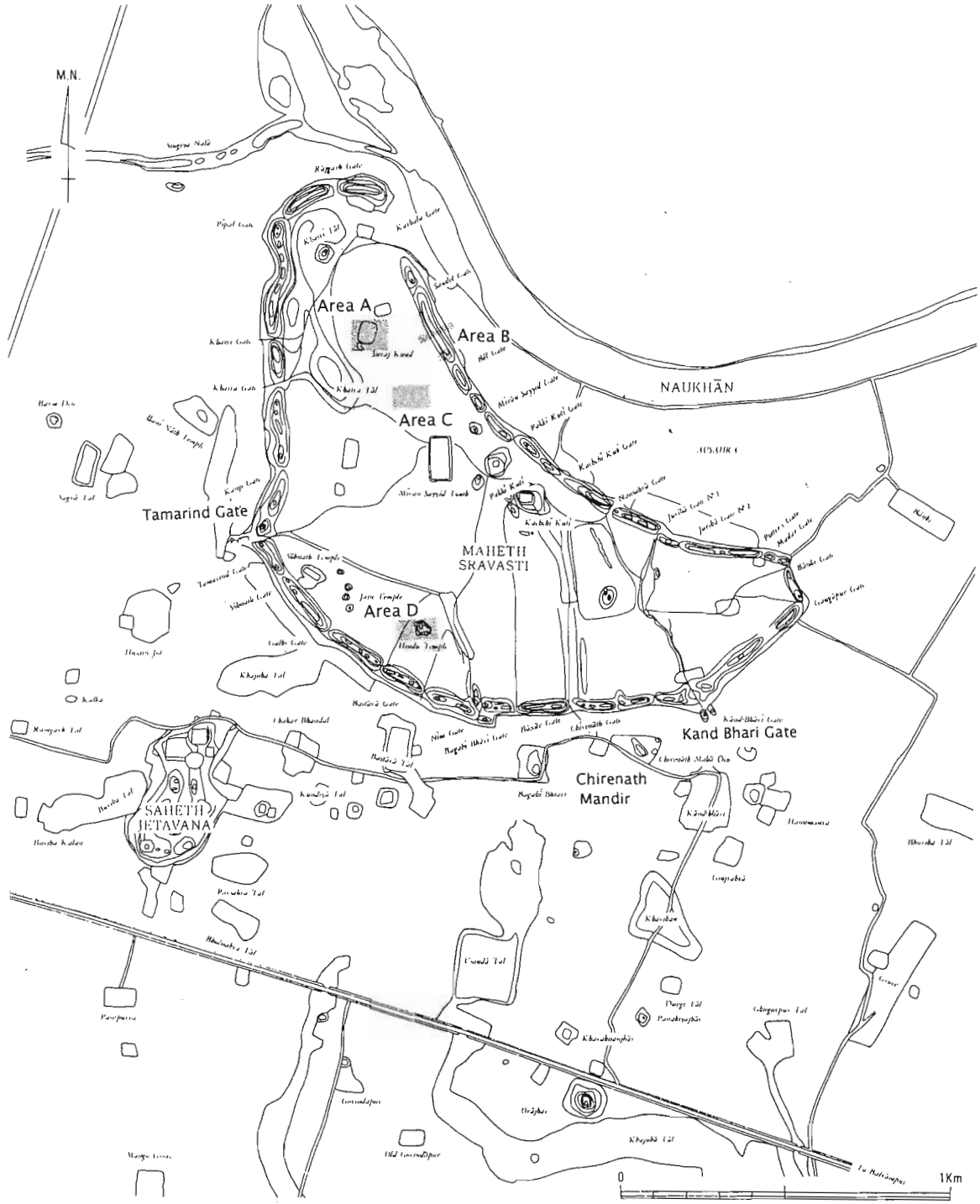


Fig. 2. Site plan Sravasti.

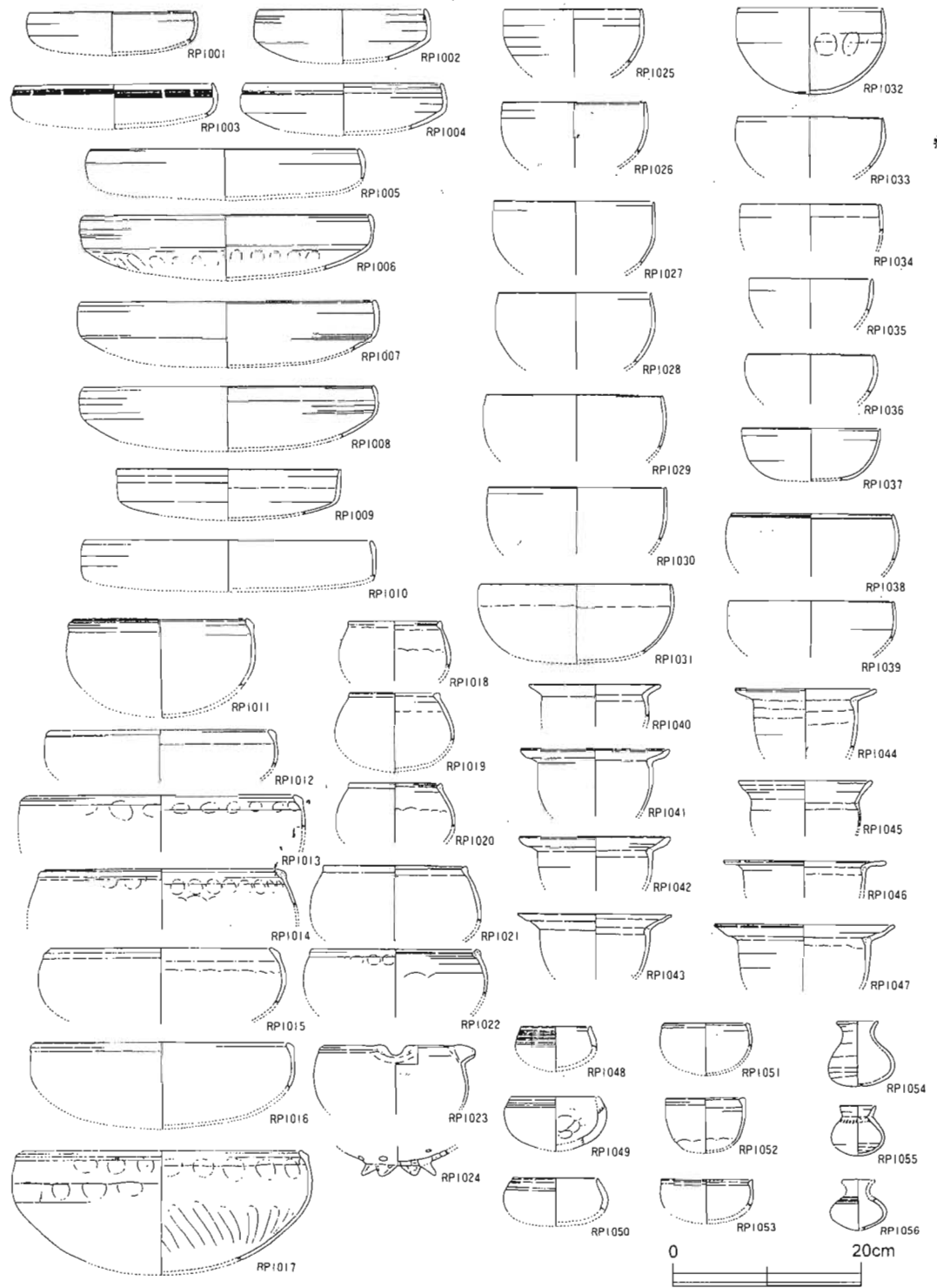


Fig. 3. Pottery-types - BRW/BSW - from lowest level of Area A.

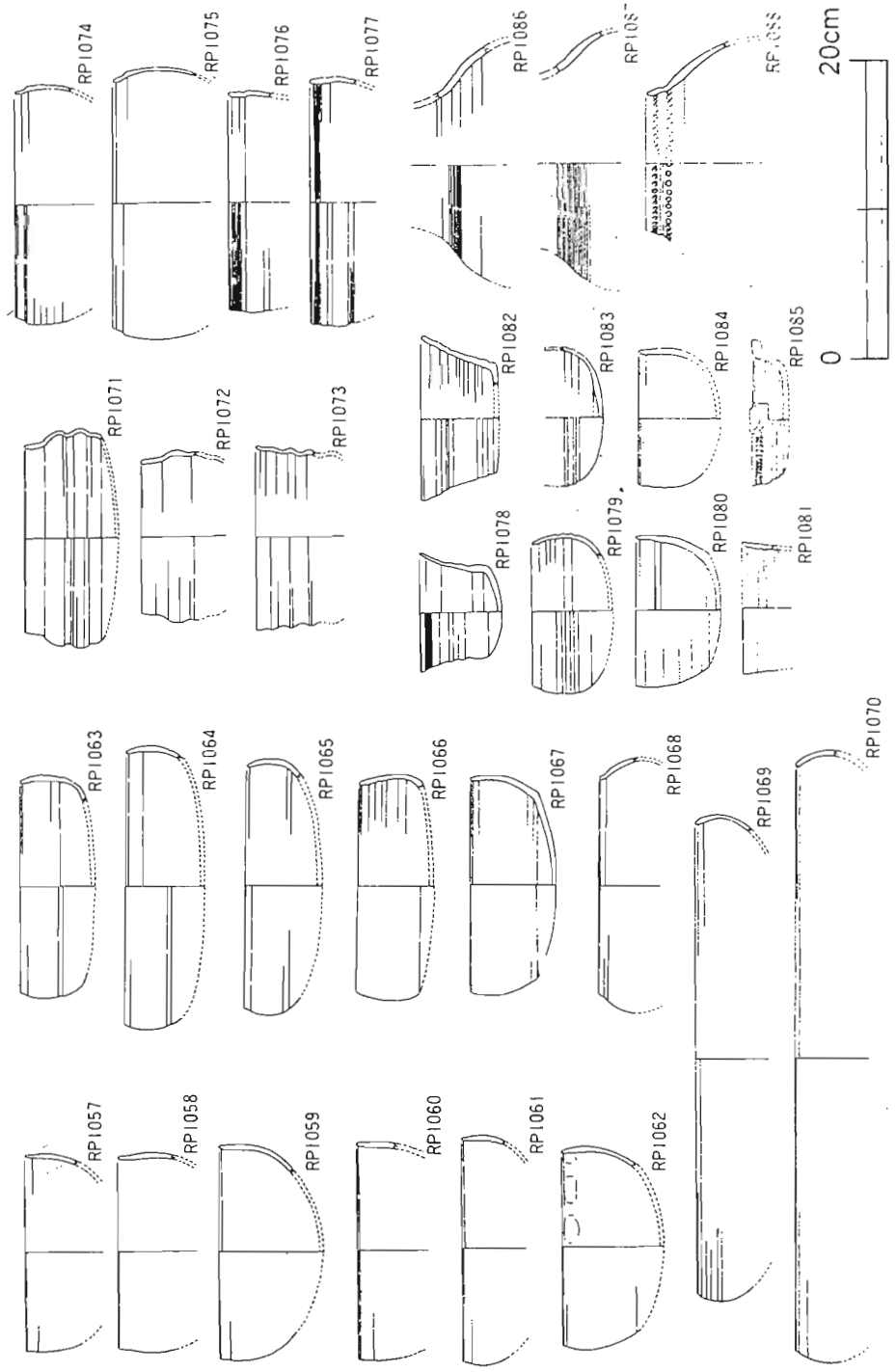


Fig. 4. Pottery types BRW/BSW - Lowest level of Area A.

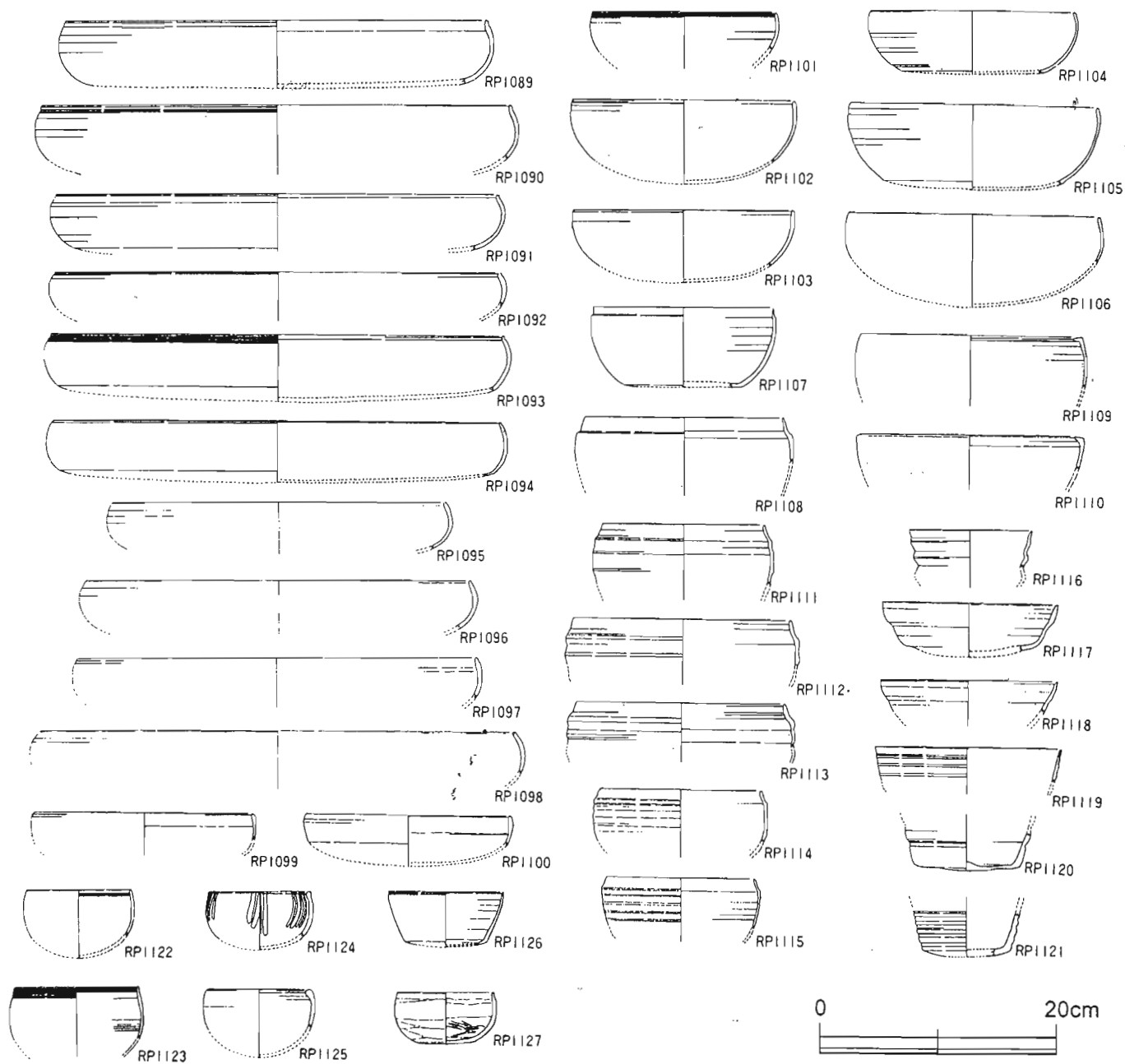


Fig. 5. Early types of NBPW from Area A.

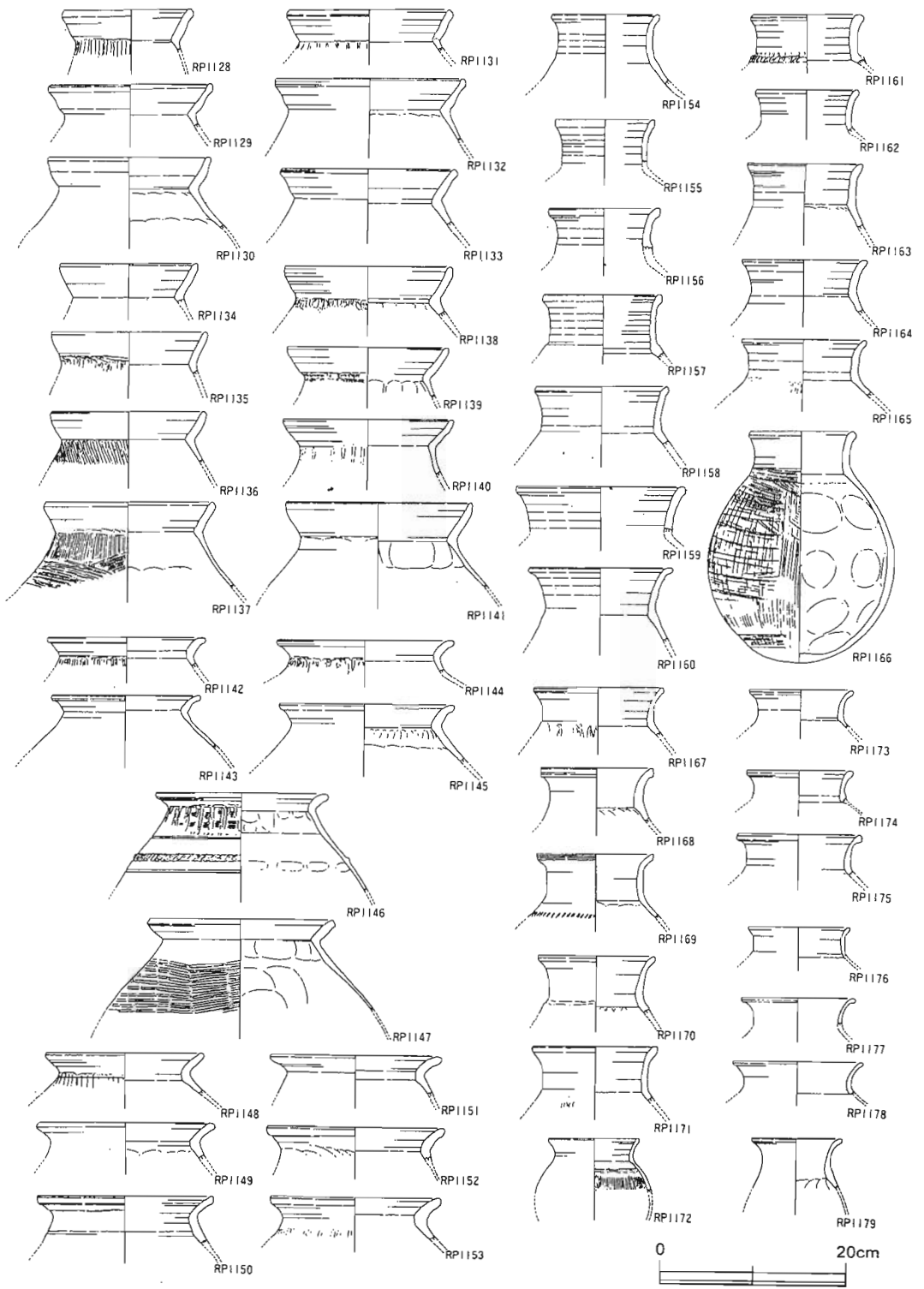


Fig. 6. Pottery fro Period III Area A.

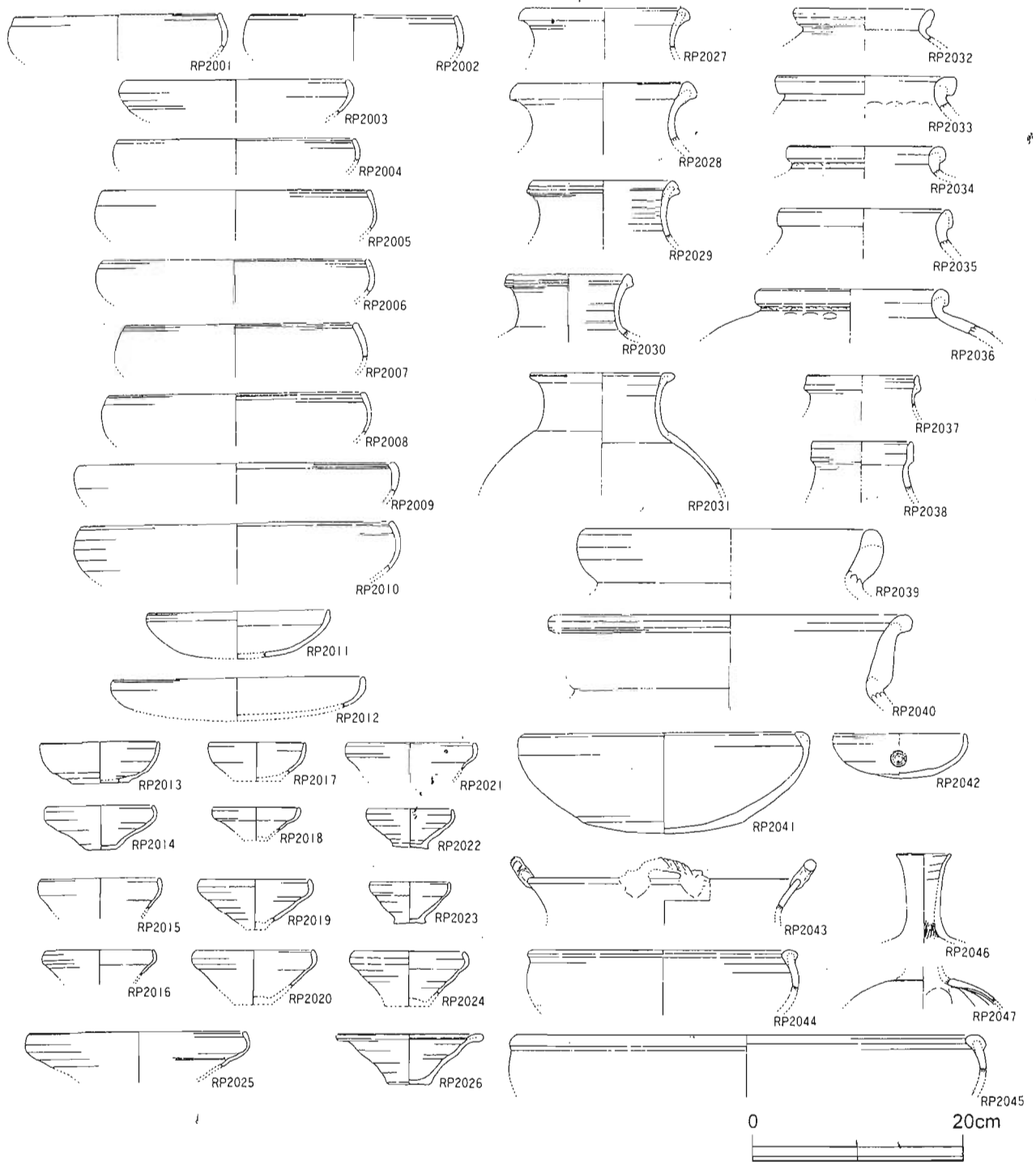


Fig. 7. Pottery from Period III from Area A.

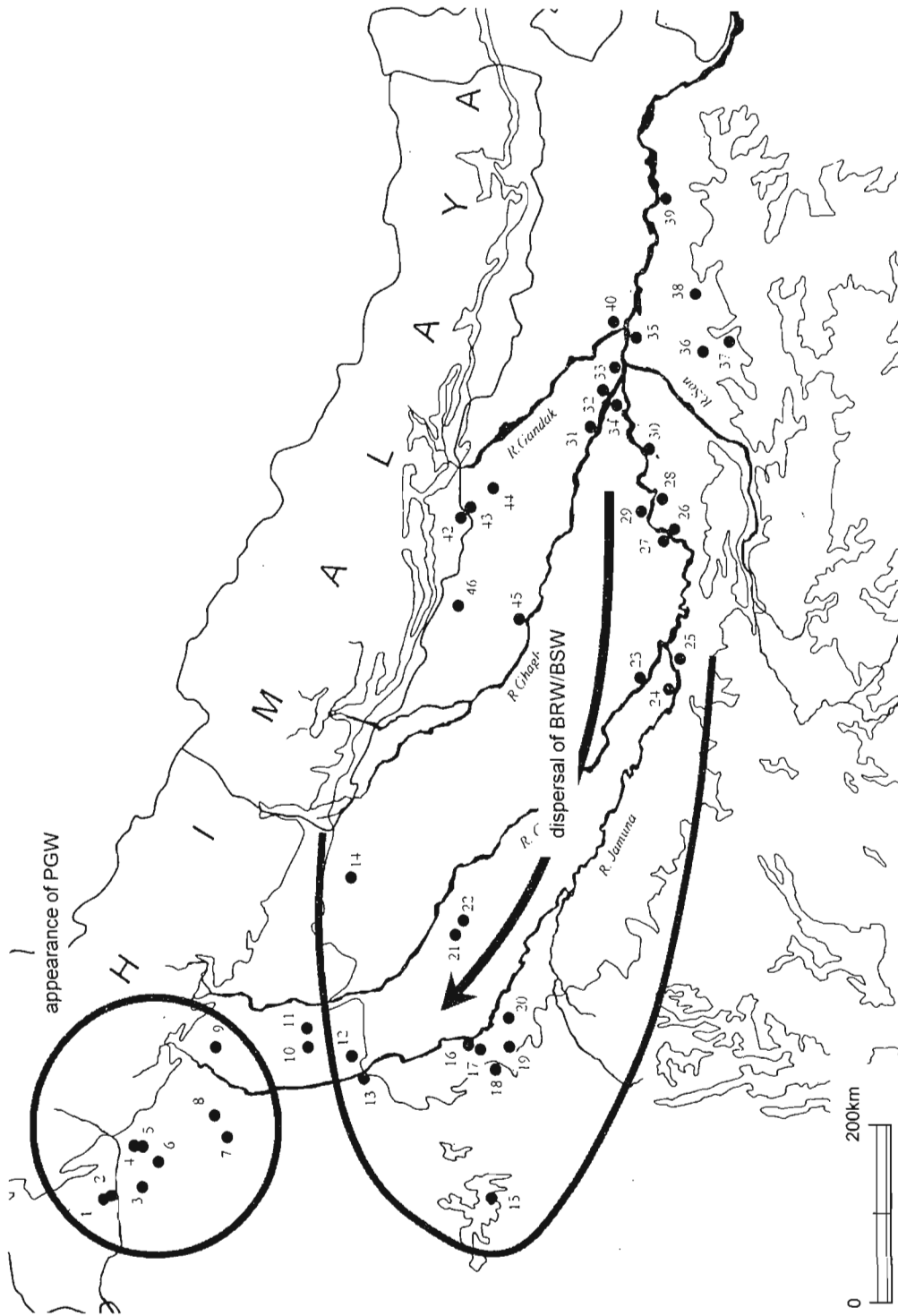


Fig. 8. Dispersal of BRW/BSW

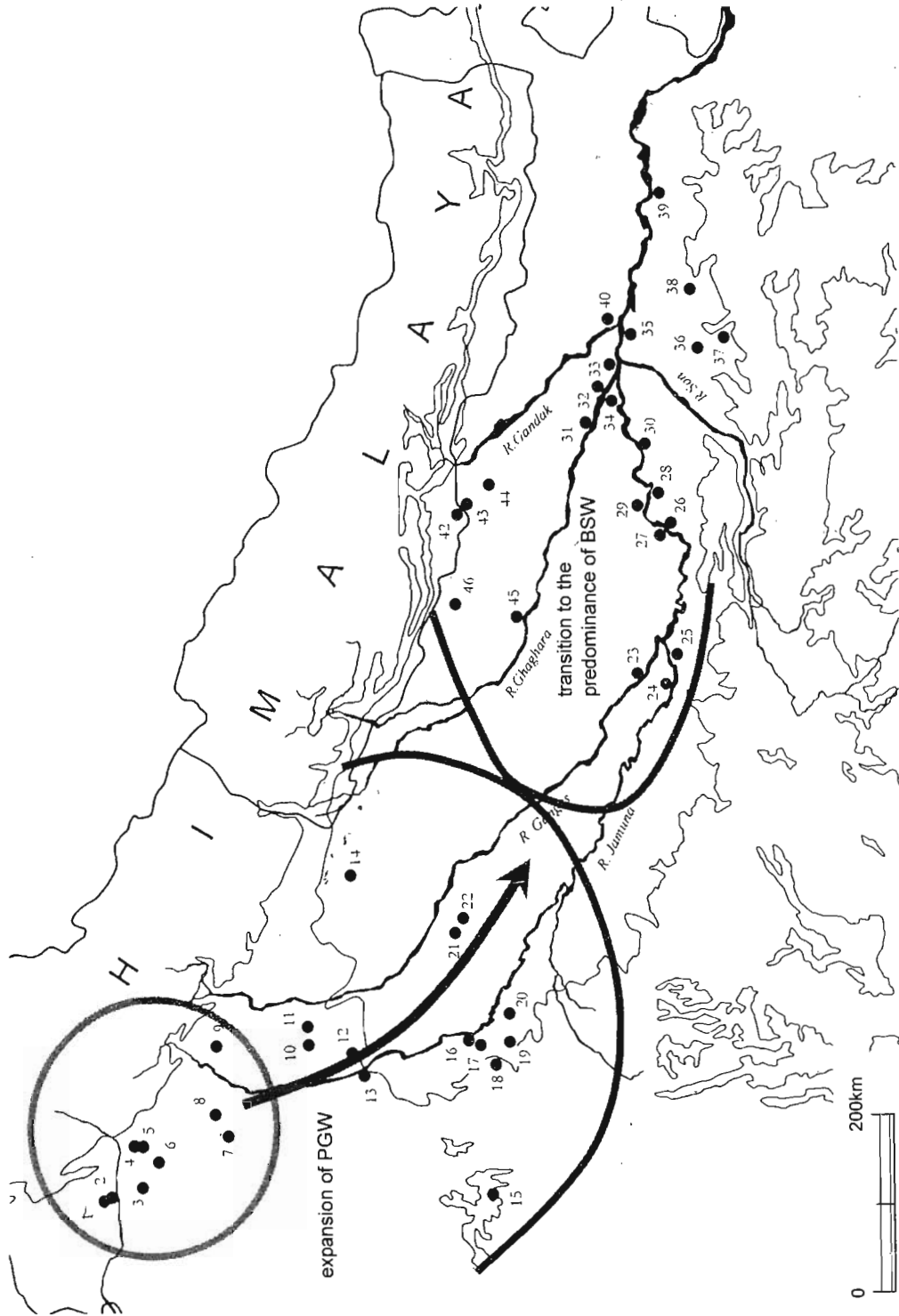


Fig. 9. Figure showing increase in the number of settlements.

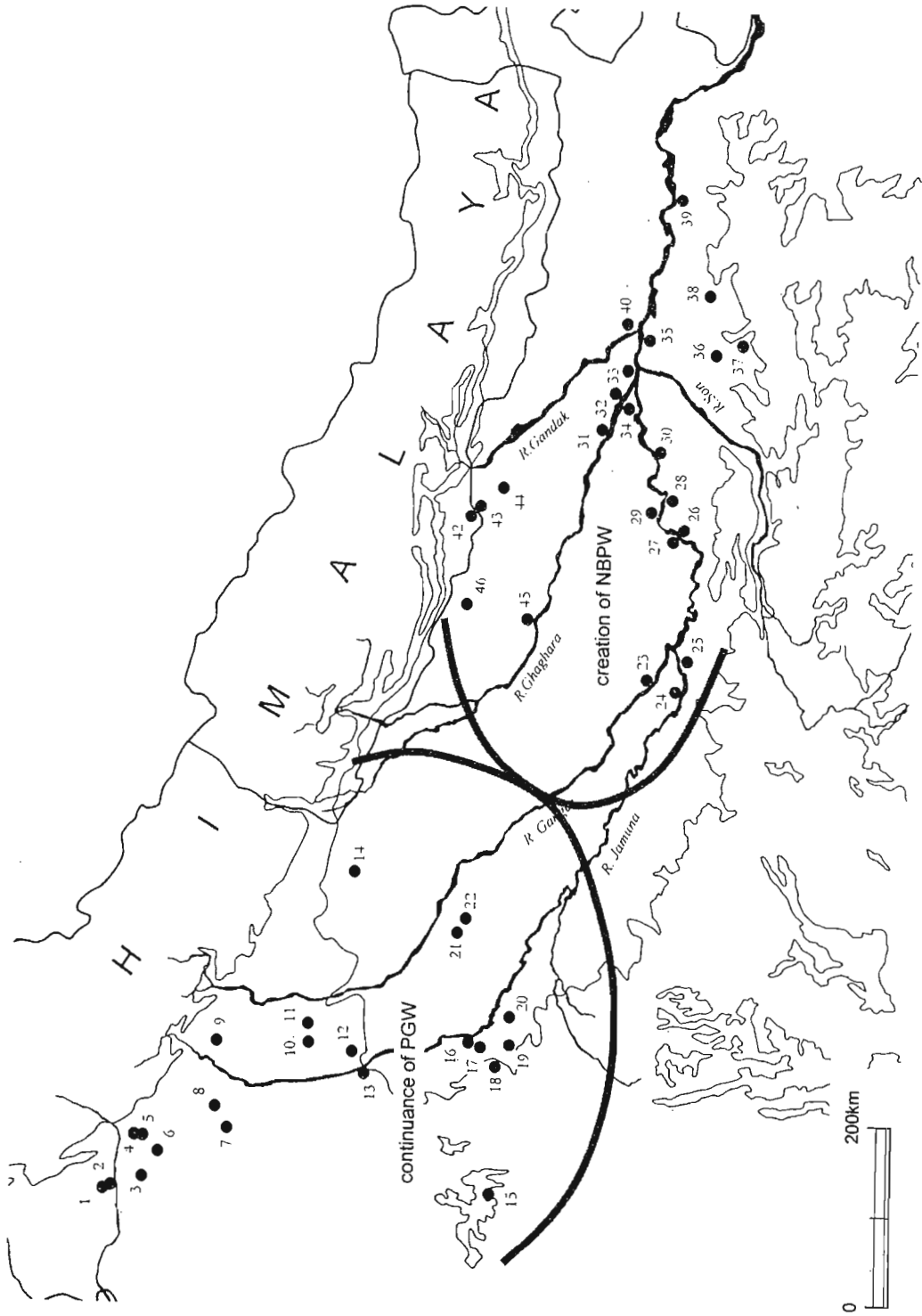


Fig. 10. Area of Creation of NBPW.