



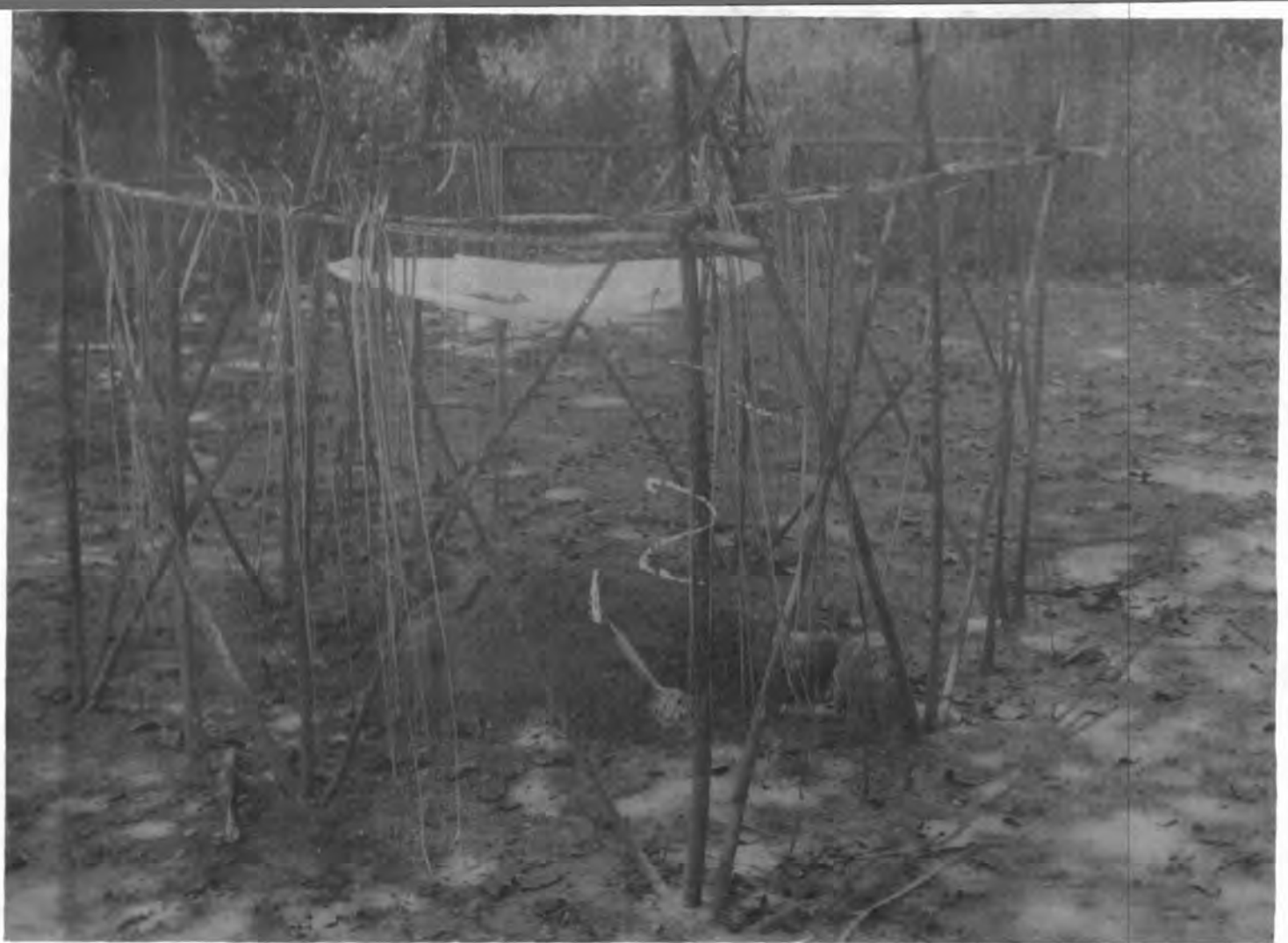
years ago. Evidence of human activity comprises scatters of tools made of quartz and chert in the habitation areas. All organic remains, such as bones and plant material, have been weathered away. But it is possible to affirm with a fair degree of certainty that these earliest sites were inhabited by humans of the Pithecanthropus (*Homo erectus*) group and that by 125,000 years ago they would have been anatomically very close to modern *Homo sapiens*. Migrant groups would have been moving to and fro between what is now South India and Sri Lanka via the land link across the Palk Strait during periods of low sea level which are known to have occurred at frequent intervals over the last 800,000 years. Studies on Sri Lanka's environment during this period suggest that it was never optimal for a hunting and gathering subsistence base (unlike the African savannas) which would have placed limitations on overall population densities and the size of the communities. It is unlikely that the latter would ever have exceeded a few nuclear families comprising perhaps 10 to 15 individuals leading a nomadic existence on their annual round of foraging activities according to seasonal fluctuations in food and water resources. Sri Lanka, hence, would not have attracted human migrations from India to any appreciable degree (at least in its more recent prehistory). It is more likely to have been a refuge area for relict groups from peninsular India. New genetic material would have been squeezed south at frequent intervals to be deposited in Sri Lanka as a final repository beyond which it cannot move (except perhaps as a backwash into India again to be stomped on confrontation with communities exploiting regions with relatively higher carrying capacities).

## PREHISTORY AND THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF SRI LANKA

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Humans are known to have an antiquity in excess of three million years in Africa and of over a million years on the Indian sub-continent. It should be borne in mind that Sri Lanka during this period was frequently connected to peninsular India across the shallow Palk Strait, the last severance having occurred a mere seven thousand years ago. Hence humans are likely to have been in Sri Lanka as well at least one million years ago. Unfortunately its humid equatorial climate has not been conducive towards the preservation of traces of the earliest settlements. The oldest securely dated site is some 125,000 years old (Bundala- Patirajawela). But there are localities, as in Yala and around Mankulam, which could have settlements which were inhabited some 250,000, possibly 500,000,

The earliest human skeletal remains to have been found in Sri Lanka date from c. 30,000 BC. They have been excavated from Fahien cave in the western rainforest and they represent the oldest assemblage of anatomically modern humans to have been found in South Asia. However, they are too fragmentary for detailed morphological assessment. Three other assemblages dated to c 14,000 BC from Batadomba cave, 11,000 BC from Kitulgala Beli cave, and 4500 BC from Bellan-bandhi Palassa are much better preserved and have been intensively studied at Cornell University by K.A.R. Kennedy and his team. Their findings indicate a relatively homogeneous range of physical traits throughout this period of some 10,000 years. Furthermore, they affirm that these traits have a markedly



high incidence, in the Vadda phenotype (as known from museum collections) leading to the postulate of a strong genetic continuum from prehistoric 'Balangoda Man' of 14,000 BC to the recent Vedda groups. This remarkable situation suggests that the gone inflows from India during this period would have been relatively homogeneous which in turn could have been reflected in a relatively homogeneous cultural heritage in its non-material aspects, thereby endorsing the concept of an 'indigenous' people of Sri Lanka. Much more work needs to be done on the physical anthropology of these skeletal series, particularly in the field of assessing racial distance through, for instance, studies on DNA.

The 'non-indigenous' people of Sri Lanka would appear to comprise groups who arrived on the island from at least as early as c. 1000 BC with an advanced iron technology and sedentary settlement patterns with an agricultural base. Their physical traits were distinct from those of Balangoda Man, as revealed by Kennedy's work on the bones from the cemetery at Pomparippu. It is postulated that these groups came from further India attracted by an environment well suited for increasing its carrying capacity through the application of iron technology. These sedentary groups developed the distinctive characteristics of Sri Lanka's high culture which achieved its first peak around 250 BC. with major inputs from the urban centres of northern India and trade contacts with the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia and perhaps the Far East. But what is significant is that the 'Indigenous' peoples of the island

were not swamped and totally absorbed by this high culture. Instead, a symbiotic relationship developed between these two discrete cultural groups with mutual respect for each other: the economic basis of one being a hunting and gathering strategy, the other being agriculture based. There has been no question of the 'indigenous' being relegated a low social status, hereby avoiding the need for them to climb the social ladder through assimilation into the mainstream of high culture. It is perhaps significant that a similar development has occurred in various parts of India, for instance in the interaction between the Chenchu adivasis and the centres of Hindu high culture in Andhra Pradesh. This cultural phenomenon appears to be unique to the Indian sub-continent and Sri Lanka. It is a manifestation of the tolerant belief systems that constitute the hallmark of Indian culture.

1992 - *The prehistory of Sri Lanka : an ecological perspective* . Colombo : Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka

