

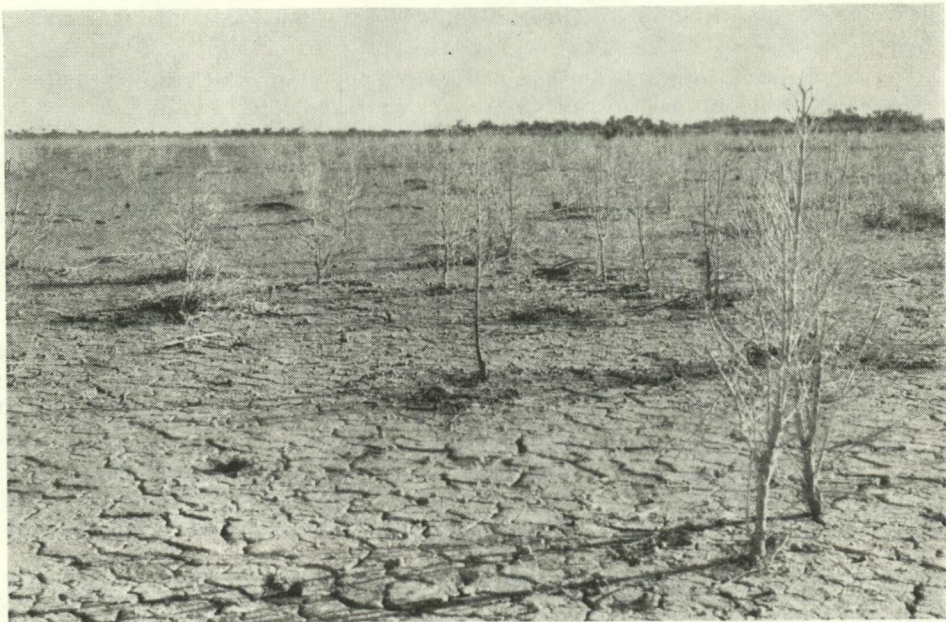
## KURUMI: POSSIBLE ABORIGINAL INCIPIENT AGRICULTURE ASSOCIATED WITH A STONE ARRANGEMENT

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In early November 1971 the authors recorded an Aboriginal site in the North Eastern Goldfields region of Western Australia. Local Aborigines were deeply concerned about the integrity of this site because of prospecting and mineral claim pegging in the area.

*Kurumi*, the name given to this site, is a term referring to both the seed-producing food plant and the actual seed of the plant associated with the site. It is a site of significance to Aboriginal people living in the Leonora-Mt Margaret-Laverton area and, to a lesser extent, to other people of the Western Desert. The site itself consists of two stone arrangements on and adjacent to a clay pan, one of the few fresh water storages in an area of major salt lakes, including Lake Darlot. This region has been previously reported as being of particular significance and traditional importance to its Aboriginal inhabitants. (Elkin 1945:115; Berndt 1943:59; 1964:257; Tindale 1936:170.)

Of the two stone arrangements associated with this site, the first, on the west of the pan itself, consists of approximately thirty small piles of stones, varying between fifteen to twenty, to as few as three or four stones per pile. There is a recognizable line of stones extending along one side of this site, and two isolated stones are embedded in the clay pan, as shown in the accompanying diagram.



KURUMI  
Photograph by W. C. Dix

The second arrangement lies in an easterly direction from the first. It consists of a large heap of stones in a single pile, being approximately two metres across, and one metre high. Sand has built up around this pile, and there are no signs of any recent cleaning or maintenance activity. Within a few metres of this central pile, as shown on the accompanying plan, are further small piles of stones, all roughly similar in size. This arrangement is on a well-vegetated sandy ridge protruding into the clay pan.

In the vicinity of these arrangements, a quantity of flaked material as well as fragments of a grinding stone were found as surface deposits, suggesting long-term camping in the area around this site. The stone arrangements are primarily made with a type of banded chert, brown in colour when broken. Most of the stones used in the arrangements are encrusted with calcrete, presenting the appearance of limestone.

Informants described the general meaning of this site in the following manner. The stone arrangement first described represents a woman preparing a damper out of *Kurumi* seed for the people camped beyond the windbreak. A man (the larger of the two isolated stones) is helping with the chore. After enjoying this satisfying meal, the men move across to the second arrangement where an important ceremony is held. This second site is said to represent a group of dancers, surrounded by a series of camp fires.

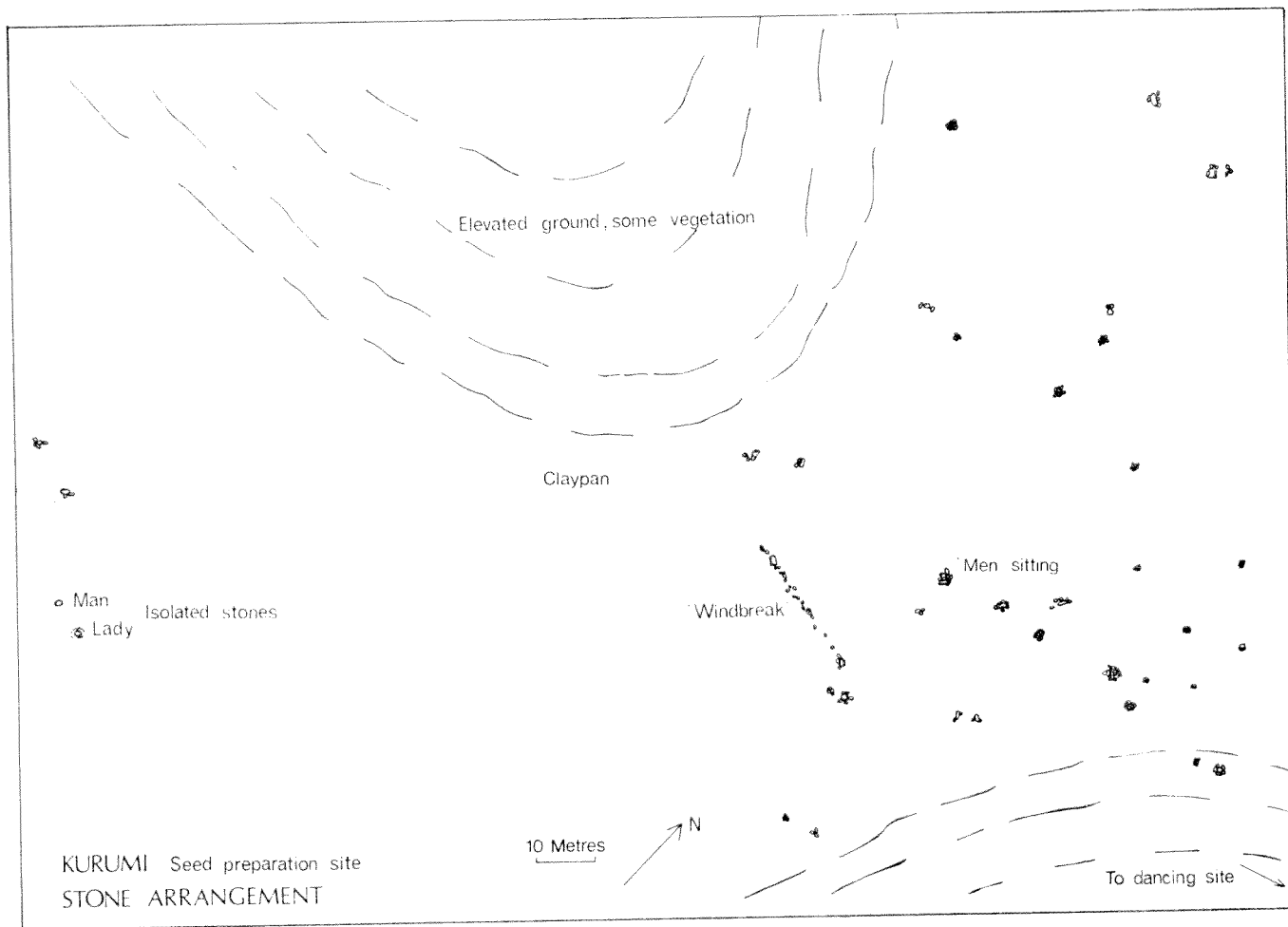
Various relationships to well-known mythological tracks and figures were mentioned. Because of a similarity in pattern, the banded chert used in the first arrangement is said to be related to the better known stones of religious significance found in the same area. However, these mythological associations are of some importance to living people, and will not be discussed in this paper.

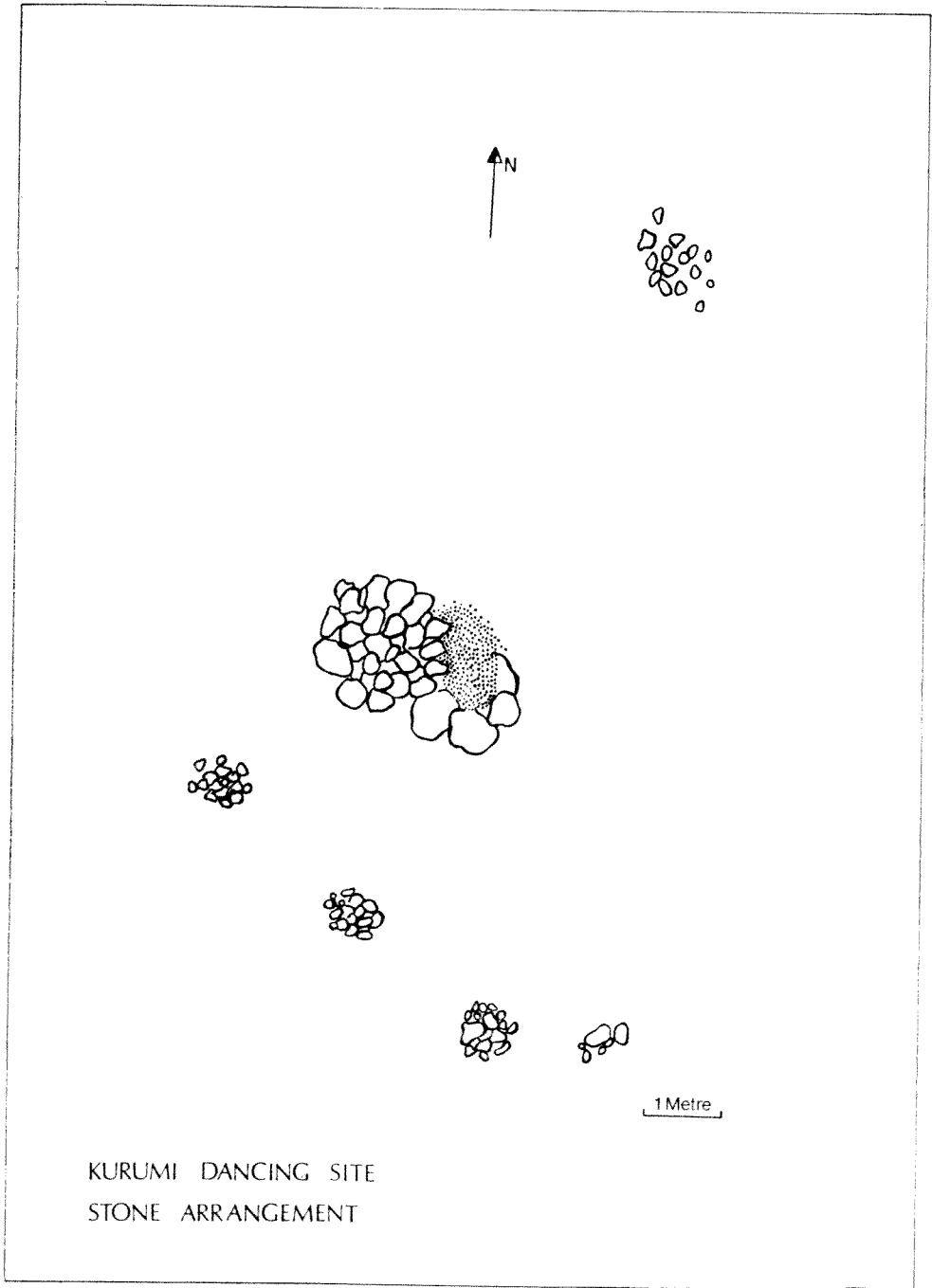
A detailed and complete explanation of this site has yet to be recorded, and this task may prove to be impossible because of the existing relationship between the current custodians and their site. Many sites in this area are not well understood by their custodians in traditional terms, in contrast with other areas of relatively unbroken custodial succession.

The rapid social disintegration and patterns of migration which closely followed first contact with Europeans involved in many cases newcomers to an area quickly assuming custodial rights and obligations to specific sites which they imperfectly understood. Complete new traditions were not invented, and these sites have remained at this fragmentary level of understanding. Because of these factors, the meaning now associated with a particular site may well be at some variance with older traditions. However, regardless of what may be the current explanation, the continuity of a site's importance generally remains unbroken through the administrations of successive custodians, and this pattern expressed may be much older than just the recent chaotic contact period.

Of particular ethnographic interest is the association of these stone arrangements with a specific food plant and its product seed, i.e. *Kurumi*. Informants stressed the importance of this relationship, and stated that a damper prepared with this seed was of superior quality and importance. They produced a quantity of the seed, carefully stored in an old meat tin, and demonstrated various methods of grinding, used to produce a variety of types of flour. Also, informants pointed out dried specimens of the plant still *in situ* in the clay pan, as shown in the accompanying photograph.

In addition, informants stated that seeds were carefully scattered in the cracks of the clay pan to ensure that after the next heavy rains, a bountiful crop would be produced. This reference to a type of incipient agricultural activity is fascinating in this Australian context, but must be considered in the light of the relative sophistication of the informants. They have a small garden next to their camp well, including







both native and domesticated plants, and have been taught some aspects of successful irrigated gardening. However, they insist that the sowing of *Kurumi* seed in the clay pan was traditional behaviour, taught to them by their ancestors. A survey of several surrounding clay pans failed to locate any other clay pans where this plant could be found.

Samples of seed and a dried specimen of the plant itself from the clay pan have been tentatively identified as *Tecticornia arborea*, but firm identification awaits a living specimen. This region has had a few years drought, and return visits to the site have yet to provide a living specimen of *Kurumi*. However, recent heavy rainfall in the area suggests that an example may be soon obtainable, and a firm identification will be noted.

*Kurumi* is now a protected area under the Aboriginal Heritage Act, and its exact location is recorded with the Registrar of Aboriginal Sites.

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