

CHAPTER 1

Prehistoric Period

10. Group of Neolithic
bracelets, necklace,
ornaments, mask and
female figure, made from
stone, bone and shell.
c. 5000–4000 BC.
Max. width: 8.8 cm.

The ancient history of that area of land now called the Korean peninsula cannot be divorced from that of the neighbouring areas, which are present-day China and the Japanese islands. In the Palaeolithic period (before 10,000 BC) no such national boundaries would have existed and early man would have wandered freely. The archaeology of this period in Korea has developed dramatically in the last three decades and it is now established that early man inhabited Korea during the Pleistocene period (up to 10,000 years ago). Pioneers in the field, such as Kim Won-yong and Sohn Pow-key, have been followed by a younger generation of archaeologists and scholars and there are now several scores of known Palaeolithic sites.¹

Homo erectus, known since the discovery of Zhoukoudian near Beijing² to have existed in China about 500,000 years ago, may have arrived in Korea at this time. The sea-level in the glacial periods was low enough to expose the floor of the Yellow Sea, thus connecting Korea and China in this area as well as in the north by way of Manchuria. *Homo erectus* fossils have been discovered in the Liaodong peninsula at Jinniushan, suggesting that early humans could have taken that route from China to Korea,³ and possible *Homo sapiens* fossils have also been discovered in Korea.⁴ Since the straits between Korea and Japan were also exposed at this time, a land-bridge was provided to the present-day Japanese islands, allowing for free movement. A further land-bridge north connected Japan with Siberia through Sakhalin and Hokkaido.

Dating of the earliest Palaeolithic sites in Korea is problematic. The limestone cave at Hukwuri (Komunmoru), southeast of Pyongyang in what is now North Korea, which was excavated between 1966 and 1970, contained stone tools (choppers and scrapers) as well as bones of rhinoceros, megaloceros, monkey, bison, boar, horse, elephant, tiger and cave bear. Remains of both a rat and a horse type which became extinct after the Middle Pleistocene have led North Korean archaeologists to estimate the earliest date of the cave at 400,000 years ago.⁵ Other important early Palaeolithic sites are at Kumgul cave in south-central Korea, Chon'gok-ri in central Korea and Sokchang-ri on the Kum river (map 2, p. 25). The discovery of Acheulian-type hand-axes at Chon'gok-ri between 1979 and 1983 is extremely significant because it disproves Movius's theory, formed in the 1940s, that only choppers and not hand-axes were used in East Asia. (Large, pointed hand-axes have also been found at Dingcun in China.)⁶

Human remains have been found at Middle Palaeolithic (100,000–40,000 BC)⁷ sites such as Turubong in South Korea and Daehyundong near Pyongyang in North Korea. Cave 2 at Turubong had a living floor with a hearth containing charcoal made from pine, alder and maple.⁸ During this interglacial period the climate was warm, and pollen found at Turubong came from a flowering plant. The presence of carved deer-bones and depictions

of deer led Yi Yung-jo to suggest that the inhabitants of Turubong may have engaged in a deer cult.⁹ Other mid-Palaeolithic sites are Chommal cave, Myong'ori open-air site on the South Han river and Kulpori on the northeast coast (see map 2).

Sites such as Suyanggae, discovered as a result of the Chungju Dam project, span the Middle-Upper Palaeolithic (40,000–10,000 BC). An open-air site, it contains well-made hand-axes, rectangular knives, scrapers, tanged points and burins using quartzite, shale, rhyolite and obsidian, as well as microblades, of which the cores seem to have been used as tools. Camellia, pine and larch wood has been identified as well as animal fur.¹⁰ The upper layers at Sokchang-ri, the first Palaeolithic site to be excavated in South Korea starting in 1964, belong to the Upper Palaeolithic and include a dwelling outlined by two lines of stones, with a hearth and five post-holes, suggesting a living area for about ten people.¹¹

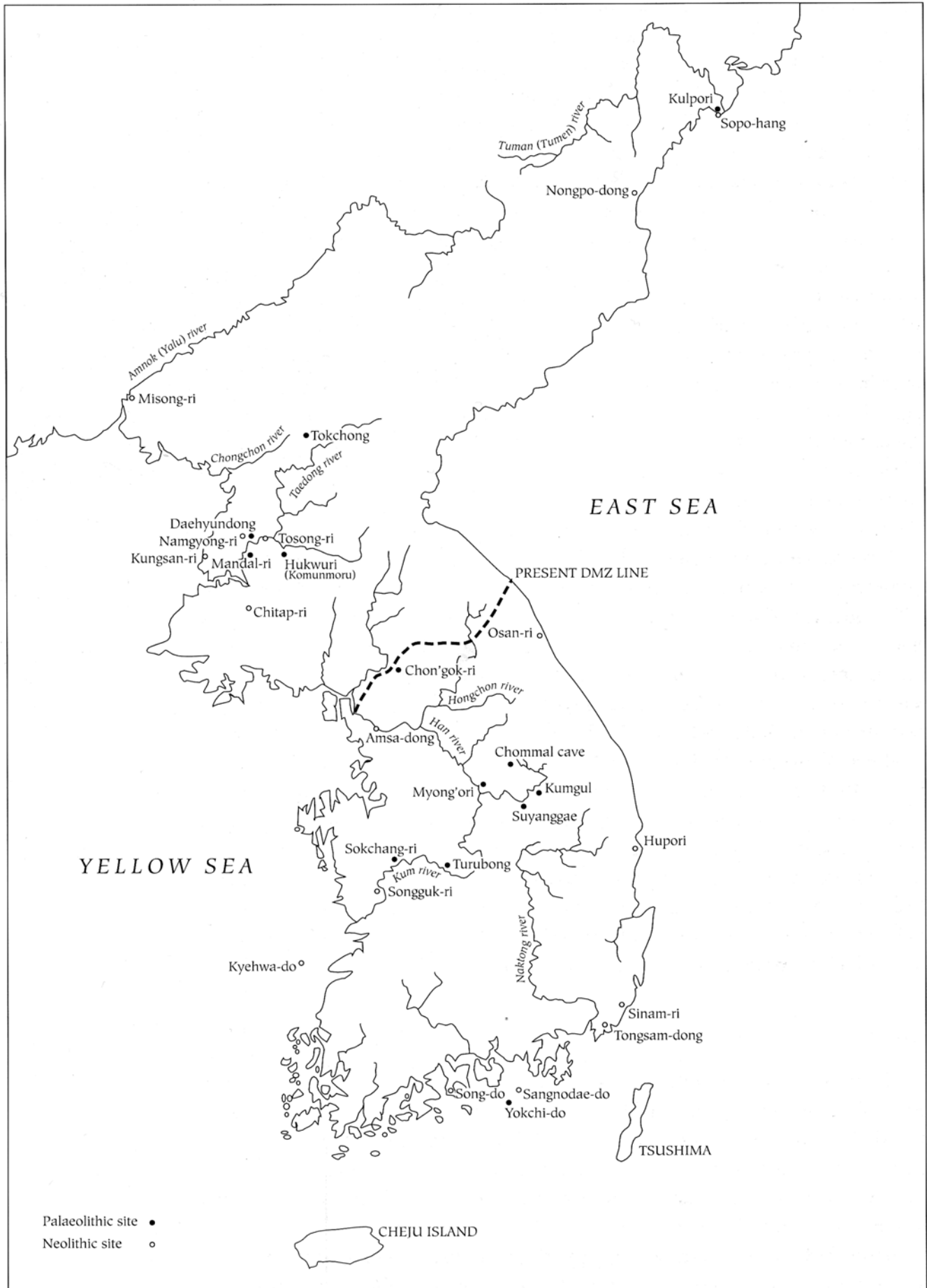
The use of obsidian and quartz for making blade tools, worked antler and bone and smallish dwellings with hearths and post-holes are features of this time. It seems likely that people lived in family groups rather than larger communities, finding their food by hunting and foraging in the deciduous forests. As for the tricky question of Korean Palaeolithic art, it is far from certain whether there are any extant examples, although Sohn Pow-key maintains that the deer pecked out of rock at Sokchang-ri are late Pleistocene because they portray particular grey deer and reindeer which became extinct when the climate grew warmer.¹²

Kim Won-yong writes of a 'cultural hiatus' of several thousand years between the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic and suggests that the Palaeolithic population migrated north. Nelson, however, thinks it unlikely that the Korean peninsula would have remained uninhabited. The question of the existence of a Mesolithic period (10,000–?6000 BC) depends somewhat on terminology, with small stone tools sometimes being described as microliths. Chinese, Korean and Japanese sites containing microcores and microblades have been discovered, those in Korea including Chommal cave and Yokchi-do.¹³ Im Hyojae suggests that this period may be clarified by excavations at Kosan-ri on Cheju island, as this site belongs to the pre-Neolithic period, which he calls the 'Palaeo-neolithic' period. Finds here in 1994 of small stone arrow-heads shaped like equilateral triangles, made by chipping and flaking, as well as plain brown pot sherds, are quite different from mainland Korean products and show some similarities to finds in Japan at Kamikuroiwa in Ehime Prefecture and at Kita Matsuura in Nagasaki Prefecture, which have radiocarbon dates of 10,085±320 BP (Before Present) and 12,400±300 BP respectively. The similarity is not surprising; close links were facilitated by a lower sea-level at that time, resulting in the two land masses which are now modern Korea and Japan being physically closer together.¹⁴

Neolithic

Although the culture of the Neolithic period (c. 6000–1000 BC) is generally defined by the beginnings of an agricultural way of life, as in China, the Korean Neolithic is, rather, defined by the appearance of pottery among a population that subsisted mainly by hunting, fishing and gathering. It was only in the late Neolithic in Korea that agricultural food production was adopted.¹⁵ As a result of excavations in northeast China during the 1980s and 1990s, it has become apparent that the early Neolithic in Korea has close links with that area, particularly with eastern Liaoning province and the Liaodong peninsula.¹⁶ For example, flat-bottomed pottery decorated with Z-shaped patterns found in North Korea at

Map 2. Principal Palaeolithic and Neolithic sites in Korea.



Misong-ri is similar to that of the Chinese Lower Xiaozhushan culture (on Donglu island, east of the Liaodong peninsula). Moreover, flat-bottomed North Korean bowls decorated with dotted and slanting lines and herringbone patterns and tempered with steatite, found at Tosong-ri, are very similar to the Chinese Middle Xiaozhushan culture.¹⁷

Settlements

Hundreds of Neolithic sites have been discovered on the Korean peninsula which, on the basis of pottery types, fall into four regional groups: northwest, northeast, west and south. The earliest Korean Neolithic sites of all have been located at Osan-ri, on the east coast in Kangwon province (see map 2, p. 25). The radiocarbon dates are clustered between 6000 and 4500 BC. Neolithic settlements in Korea generally occur along river valleys or on the coast, the northern groups developing along the Amnok river (for which the Chinese name is the Yalu) and the Tuman (Chinese: Tumen) river, the western group south of the Chongchon river, being concentrated around the Taedong and Han river valleys, and the southern group developing along the Naktong river and on islands off the south coast (see map 2). These village sites are characterized by hand-made pottery and chipped stone tools which were usually found in or around semi-subterranean dwellings with central hearths. Each village contained only a few houses but the villages tended to be clustered. Coastal sites are generally sited just above the present high-tide line, but some sites may have disappeared under the rising sea-level. The Neolithic period in Korea is sometimes called the Chulmun period, because of the comb-patterned pottery by which it was originally characterized. However, since other types of pottery have been discovered in Neolithic Korea, this is now rather a confusing term, as the comb-patterned pottery is limited to the Mid-Late Neolithic and to certain areas. The name Chulmun can therefore only be used as a very general term for a long and varied period, as is Jomon in Japan, and it will not be used here.¹⁸

Tools and ornaments

Stone, bone and shell tools and implements excavated from Neolithic sites are evidence of the way of life at this time, one which depended primarily on hunting and fishing. No wooden tools have been preserved and there are many more stone than bone ones, the latter having been preserved only in shell-mounds. Stone arrow-heads and larger spear-points are widespread, made either of slate or of obsidian (particularly in the northeast). Some are polished, with six faces. Stone axes are frequent, large polished nephrite examples being found at Hupori on the east coast and smaller nephrite or agate ones at Kungsan-ri in central Korea and Kye-hwa-do island off the southwest coast. Domestic grinding stones and pestles and mortars, cutters and scrapers are also widespread but spindle whorls are more frequent in the north. Agricultural tools found in the very north and at Amsa-dong include large, flat chipped stone implements with large tangs which have been identified as ploughshares and which resemble those found in China.¹⁹ Also, hoes made of antler and stone have been found at Kungsan-ri. Thin hoes or axes made of river pebbles are a feature of central Korea, while reaping tools such as stone sickles have been reported at Chitap-ri and Osan-ri.²⁰

Pointed stone weights found at Osan-ri may be plumb bobs and, together with the large stone fish-hooks found there, suggest that the inhabitants engaged in sea fishing. The stone

fish-hooks are mostly made of a thin stone cylinder which was probably tied to a wood or bone point in a V-shape. Similar ones have been found at Tongsam-dong, near Pusan, and in Siberia. At Tongsam-dong, many bones of large fish are evidence of a healthy diet: shark, sea-bream, tuna, cod (as well as sea-lions and whales). All shell-mound sites are of course essentially rubbish dumps, the shells being evidence of the large numbers of shell-fish consumed. The top layer at Tongsam-dong produced harpoons, fish-hooks, spatulas and awls, suggesting a fishing-centred way of life.²¹

The human face and body were already being portrayed in the Neolithic period in Korea, as can be seen from a small shell mask found in the top layer at Tongsam-dong, featuring three holes which resemble a mouth and two eyes (see fig. 10). This mask is similar to one reported to have been found in Japan.²² Another mask found at Osan-ri is made of clay, with a pinched nose and the eyes and mouth poked in with a finger.²³ The small stone figurine of a nude female excavated near Pusan at Sinam-ri is the only one of its type found so far (see fig. 10, centre bottom), although pinched clay figurines of both humans and animals were found at Nongpo-dong in the northeast.²⁴

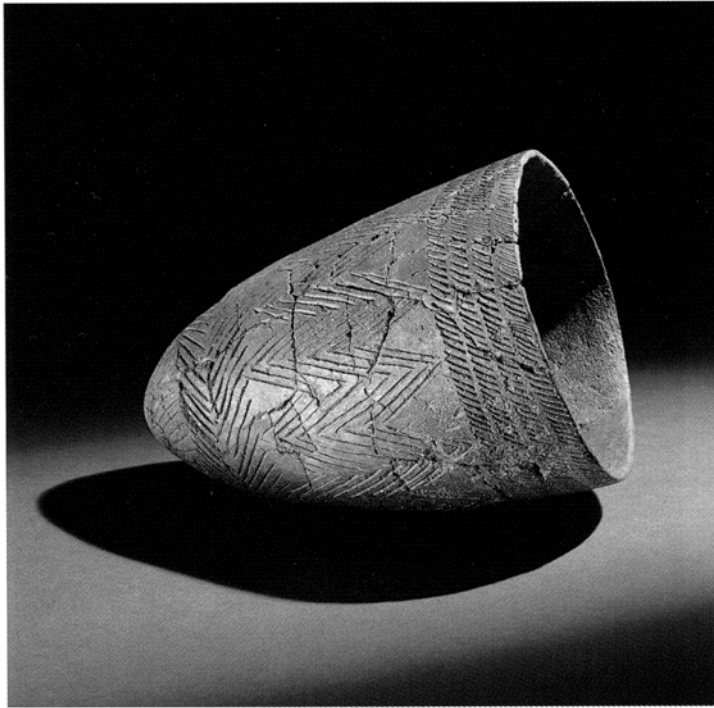
Pottery

From the Tuman river in the far northeast down the east coast to Kangwon province, as well as in the northwest around the valleys of the Amnok

and Chongchon rivers, the pottery produced in the early Neolithic is flat-bottomed, thin-walled and brown. It was generally tempered with sand or sometimes ground shell. Decoration was incised on the middle or upper part of the body and the lower half was undecorated. The lower layers at Osan-ri in Kangwon province and at Sopo-hang in the far northeast (also known as Kulpori when referring to the Palaeolithic) (see map 2) provide the earliest examples, dating to between 6000 and 4500 BC.²⁵

Pottery with incised decoration includes a type where the decorative patterns are confined to the rim (*kuyonmun*), such as at Osan-ri. Raised design pottery, called *yunggimun* in Korean, is also characteristic of the northeast during the early Neolithic, having been found first at Osan-ri. Yunggimun includes pinched, raised decoration, plain raised lines and raised and impressed lines. The other main type of pottery from this period and region is that with incised square spiral decoration, which is found in the far northeast along the Tuman river.²⁶

Flat-bottomed, yunggimun pottery is also found in the southeast at shell-mound sites, the most famous of which is Tongsam-dong on Yong-do island in Pusan bay. Yunggimun is also dominant in the southwest, as at Song-do in South Cholla province, dated to around 4500 BC. Although it is possible that the yunggimun tradition passed from north to south, this is not yet certain.²⁷



11. Comb-patterned pot with pointed base, excavated from Amsa-dong, near Seoul. Neolithic period, c. 4000 BC. Ht: 25.9 cm.

Pottery vessels with combed patterns (*chulmun*) and with pointed or conical bottoms are characteristic of the central western area of Korea. In these vessels, the clay body is generally tempered with mica, steatite or asbestos and the surface is decorated with patterns of herringbone or slanted parallel lines, incised with a toothed, comb-like implement. Earlier *chulmun* pottery tends to be decorated over the whole surface of the vessel but over time decoration gradually becomes restricted to the rim area (fig. 11). *Chulmun* appears around 5000 BC and seems to have originated in the area between the valleys of the Chongchon river to the north and the Han river to the south. It then gradually diffused to other parts of Korea between 4500 and 3500 BC.²⁸

The best-known site yielding *chulmun* pottery is at Amsa-dong, on the Han river on the outskirts of present-day Seoul. Amsa-dong is also one of the most important Neolithic dwelling sites (another being at Sopo-hang in North Korea). First discovered in 1925 as the result of a flood, it was systematically excavated from 1967 onwards. Thirty semi-subterranean pit dwellings have been discovered, each about 5–6 m (16–19 ft) long and containing a rectangular hearth outlined with stones. There are post-holes at each corner of the houses, and holes to support pointed-bottomed pottery were found all over the floors of the pit dwellings. It is thought that this and other similar sites nearby may have formed a small community (fig. 12).²⁹ The Amsa-dong site has been made into a museum with some restored houses and a recreation of the inside of a Neolithic house.

The chronology of Neolithic pottery in Korea is still far from certain and the regional divisions appear clearer than the temporal ones. In general, the north is characterized by flat-bottomed pottery. The appearance of *yunggimun* pottery in the northeast seems to coincide with the appearance of *chulmun* pottery in the west, *chulmun* then spreading to the other parts of Korea from 4500–3500 BC, together with the cultivation of millet. Im Hyo-jae considers the period from 2000 to 1000 BC as the Late Neolithic, but Nelson calls this the Megalithic period, on the basis that the appearance of both megaliths and plain (*mumun*) pottery indicates a profound change in society, although the presence of bronze at this stage is uncertain.³⁰

Links with Japan

Korean, Japanese and Western scholars all acknowledge the probability of maritime trade between southern and eastern Korea and Japan during the Neolithic period. Finds of early Jomon potsherds at Tongsam-dong substantiate this, together with obsidian flakes which may have originated in Kyushu. Similar *yunggimun* pottery, moreover, decorated with



12. Foundations of a semi-subterranean circular house, showing post-holes, at Amsa-dong Neolithic village, on the Han river outside Seoul.

plain and zigzag lines, has been found both in Korea at sites such as Tongsam-dong, Sinam-ri and Osan-ri, and in Japan at Fukui cave in Kyushu, on Tsushima island and at several other sites. Since the dates of the Japanese finds, for example those at Fukui cave and Kamikuroiwa, are earlier than 10,000 BC, this could suggest that yunggimun-type pottery may have originated in Japan and spread to eastern Korea. However, it may be that future archaeological work in Korea, such as at Sangnodae island, may prove that Korean pottery is as old as or older than that in Japan.³¹

Kim Won-yong suggests that the emergence of Sobata pottery in northwest Kyushu was influenced by trade with Tongsam-dong.³² Im Hyo-jae, on the basis of finds on Tsushima island at Myutoishi, claims that comb-patterned, pointed-bottomed chulmun pottery was introduced to Japan from Korea in the Neolithic. His argument is that although Japanese-style, mid-Jomon pottery was found in the third layer of excavations at Myutoishi, earlier comb-patterned pottery found in the sixth and seventh layers may be Korean, on attribution of its typically Korean herringbone-patterned decoration.³³ Im also posits the introduction of comb-patterned chulmun pottery from southeast Korea to sites in northeastern Japan, such as Aomori and Uriba, facilitated by the northeasterly flow of the Tsushima current.³⁴ The whole area of early contacts between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese islands is an exciting subject which awaits elucidation by future archaeologists.

Bronze Age

The period between 2000 and 1000 BC, characterized by the introduction of megaliths, stone cist graves and undecorated mumun pottery, is variously called the Late Neolithic or the Megalithic period, as opposed to the Bronze Age proper (1000 BC–c. 300 BC), which is generally thought to have begun around 1000 BC with the appearance of Korean-made bronzes. Most Bronze Age dwelling sites were situated on hillsides, as opposed to the Neolithic riverside villages, and the Bronze Age is sometimes called an age of chiefdoms, which would turn into states in the following Iron Age or Proto-Three Kingdoms period.³⁵

The great change in the way of life which brought about practices such as the use of stone cist tombs, dolmens, mumun pottery, bronzes and agricultural production, including rice cultivation, has been ascribed to immigration into the Korean peninsula from the north of a Tungusic people, sometimes identified as the Yemaek or the Dong-yi ('eastern barbarians'), or linked with the Rong or the Di barbarians referred to in Chinese sources. Several legendary figures are thought to have lived at this time. Of these, the most important is Tan'gun, said to have founded Korea in 2333 BC, who was half-man half-bear and who became a spirit after his one-thousand-year life, at Heavenly Lake on Mt Paektu in present-day North Korea (pp. 4–5). Another story is that the nephew of the last Shang dynasty king, called Qizi in Chinese or Kija in Korean, went into exile in Korea around 1100 BC, founding the state of Choson.

The question of immigration has always fascinated Korean scholars, who regard the ethnic origins of the Korean people as one of the most important questions which archaeological excavations may be able to answer. It is probable that the Manchurian Lower Xiajiadian culture, with carbon-14 dates in the range of the mid-third to the mid-second millennium BC, may be in some way a transitional 'Chinese-Korean' culture.³⁶ And it is the



so-called 'Liaoning dagger' (see p. 34), with its characteristic mandolin shape, that seems to provide a link between bronze production in China and its subsequent development in Korea.³⁷

Tombs

Dolmens (Korean: *ko'indol* or *chisongmyo*) are usually found near villages and, judging from the sorts of burial goods found in them, are thought to have been tombs for people of higher rank, such as clan chiefs. There is no direct connection with dolmens in other parts of northern Asia or Europe, although they seem similar in appearance. Around 200,000 dolmens have been found on the Korean peninsula and 90 per cent of them are located in what is now South Korea. Korean dolmens can be divided into three types: the northern or 'table' type (fig. 13), the 'southern' type which has one large flat boulder covering a pile of stones, and the 'capstone' type, which is a large stone lying flat on the ground on top of a cist burial. Although the northern type is predominantly found in the north of the peninsula and the southern type in the south, this pattern of distribution is not uniform. Southern-type dolmens usually occur in rows, while northern ones often stand in isolation, although sometimes they also occur in rows and groups. Capstone types seem to

13. Northern 'table'-type dolmen situated on Kanghwa island, west of Seoul. Early Bronze Age, c. 1000 BC.

be later and usually cover a stone cist grave, while southern types sometimes cover jar burials and sometimes stone cists. Dolmens are found on Cheju island and other small southern islands, and single standing stones (menhirs) also occur all over the peninsula. At Hwangsong-ri, a pair of standing stones has been interpreted as a male and female, similar to the later Korean folk custom of wooden pairs of *changsung* village guardians.³⁸

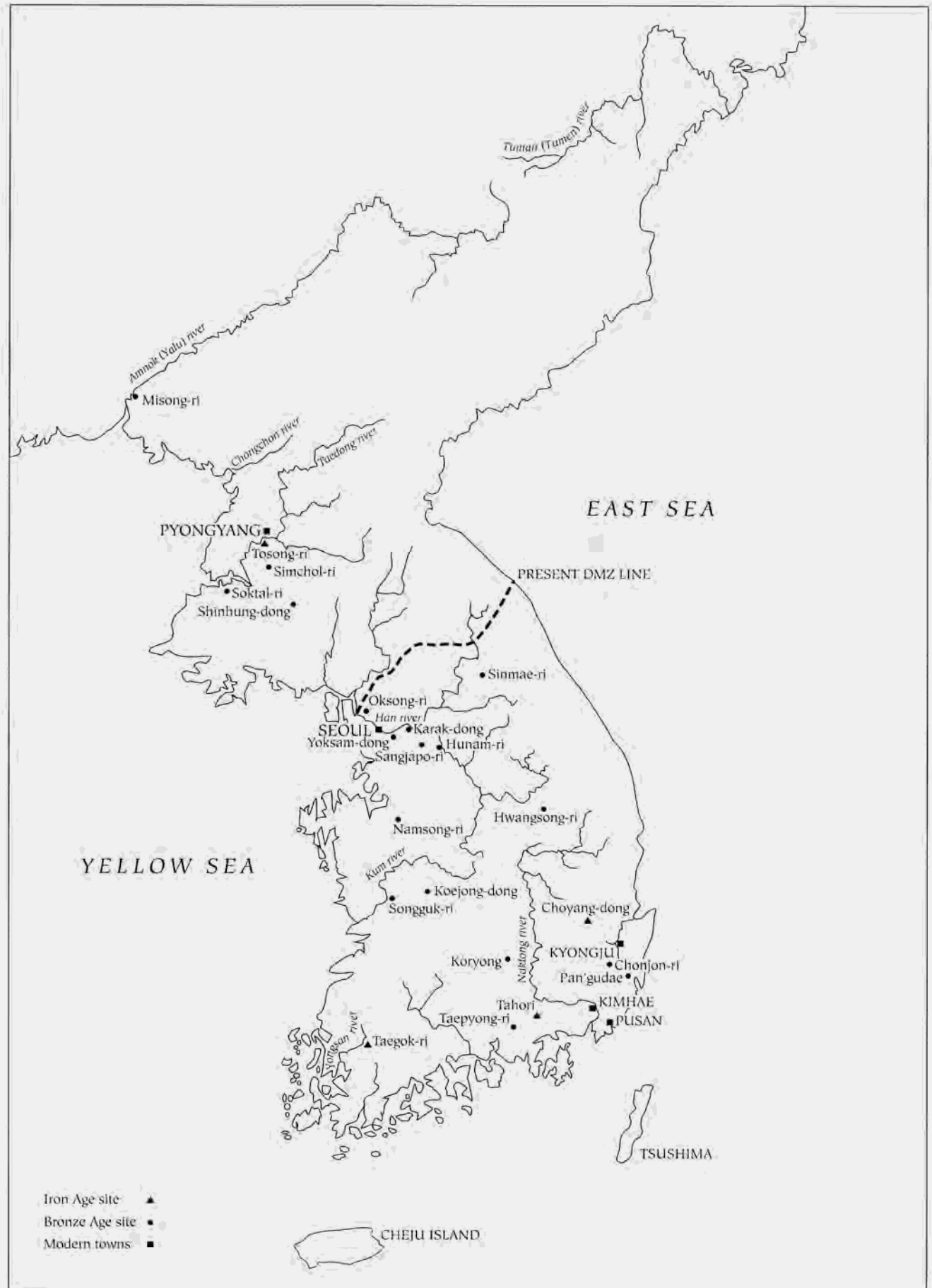
Cists are tombs lined with stone slabs, the most common form of burial in Korea at that time. They are usually about 2 m (6.5 ft) long and 30 cm (1 ft) wide, that is, long enough for adult burials; occasionally small jar-coffins, presumably child burials, are found together with stone cists. The practice of using cist tombs probably came from Manchuria, as it is characteristic of the Tuanjie culture of eastern Manchuria and the earliest Korean examples are in the northeast, close to the Tuman river. Some of these contain unusual spoon-like objects carved with human heads. It may be that the alignment of the cist tombs, which differed from region to region, pointed to different ethnic groups. The fact that curved beads (*kogok*) and tubular beads made of amazonite, bronze daggers and burnished pottery have been found in cist tombs has led to the theory that they represent high-class burials. A particularly long stone cist at Namsong-ri contained over a hundred bronze objects, including mirrors, daggers, a socketed axe, a chisel, a *kogok*, 106 tubular jade beads and fragments of a lacquered birch-bark scabbard. It has been suggested that some of the unusual bronzes found there were a shaman's ritual paraphernalia.³⁹

The relationship between stone cists and dolmens is not clear. Although many stone cists are covered by southern-type dolmens in southern Korea, possibly as a kind of marker, it is thought by some scholars that the distribution of cist burials and dolmens are not connected. Kim Won-yong is reported to have favoured the theory that dolmens were originally more numerous than stone cists but that cists were later adopted for their convenience and relative ease of construction. It has also been suggested that differences in size of dolmen capstones reflected the incumbent's status. The burial goods excavated from cists are greater in number and elaborateness than those from dolmens, suggesting higher social rank.⁴⁰ However, Kim Byung-mo maintains that the difference lies in the fact that cist burials were a northern practice, while dolmens probably originated in South Asia, being related to rice cultivation.

Settlements

Bronze Age villages consisted in general of semi-subterranean dwellings, both round and square, with several hearths, the numbers of houses in each village ranging from tens to hundreds. The villages were almost always situated on hillsides and the inhabitants cultivated the lower slopes. Some scholars call these villages 'walled towns'.⁴¹ Sometimes long-houses are found, such as at Yoksam-dong on the Han river and Oksong-ri in Kyonggi province (see map 3, p. 32). The small village of Hunam-ri, excavated in the 1970s by Seoul National University, is a very early Bronze Age site (about 1200 BC) on a hill slope near the Han river, where fourteen houses were excavated on both sides of the hill. The houses were of different sizes, some with hardened clay floors and some with a lime plaster. The interiors also differed, and objects excavated attest to the village's way of life: chipped stone axes, stone daggers, semi-lunar reaping knives, pottery, net-sinkers and spindle whorls, whetstones, small triangular stone projectile points and grains of rice.

A later and larger village at Songguk-ri, near Puyo, dates to the early Bronze Age (fifth



Map 3. Principal Bronze and Iron Age sites in Korea.

century BC) and was excavated several times from 1974 onwards. Here dolmens, a cist burial, a jar burial and a kiln site have been found, as well as burnished pottery and grains of rice of the *japonica* variety, suitable for a northern climate. Twenty-two semi-subterranean houses were found, both circular and rectangular. There are unusual oval pits in the centre and rows of post-holes down the long sides and burned remains of beams, as well as a ditch and post-holes for a palisade around the edge of the village. Recent excavations in the 1990s have revealed more dwelling sites with wooden fences. The cist burial found here contained a 'Liaoning' bronze dagger (see p. 34), a polished stone dagger, stone arrow-heads, tubular jades, ornamental beads and curved jades or kogok. It was the first time that a 'Liaoning' dagger and a polished stone dagger had been found together in Korea.⁴² Other village sites are at Soktal-ri and Simchol-ri in Hwanghae province, Sinmae-ri on the north Han river and Taepyong-ri near the south coast (see map 3).



14. Above: Detail of rock engravings at Pan'gudae, southeast Korea, showing animals and fish. Late Bronze Age, c. 4th–3rd century BC.

It is thought that rice was imported to Korea from China via Manchuria, because semi-lunar stone reaping knives, characteristic of the Chinese Longshan culture in Shandong, have been found in Korea. The shape of these reaping knives is thought to be peculiar to rice cultivation, in contrast to the rectangular knives common in the Chinese Yangshao culture, which are linked to millet cultivation. However, this is by no means certain. In Manchuria it seems that the cutting edge was the straight rather than the convex side. Hunting and fishing are indicated by the presence of the projectile points and net-sinkers, while pig bones at dwelling sites are evidence of their domestication.⁴³

Rock art

At up to nine sites in southern Korea, around the Naktong river valley, large panels of rock art have been found, usually on the banks of rivers. The dating of these sites is difficult but the consensus of present opinion is that they date to the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age, that is, to the late first millennium BC or early first millennium AD. Some scholars date them to the Neolithic.⁴⁴ The best known are at Pan'gudae and Chonjon-ri near Kyongju. Unfortunately a man-made dam has caused the panel at Pan'gudae to be submerged for a large part of each year. Motifs vary from animals, fish (fig. 14), boats, hunting, fishing, human figures, abstract lozenges and spirals to mask-like figures. The techniques used are pecking, grinding and engraving and there are two styles of depiction of animals and humans: the 'silhouette' style and the 'x-ray' style – the latter showing the bones as if in an x-ray. Sasse suggests the possibility of a link between Korean 'x-ray'-style rock art and that of prehistoric Eurasia and the Arctic circle and compares the depictions of animals at Pan'gudae with contemporary Inuit drawings.

Although much more research is needed to create any sort of chronology for Korean rock art, it seems that the engraved drawings which have V-shaped incisions must have necessitated a metal tool. Identification of the different animals and fish depicted is contentious, with a turtle-like creature also being interpreted as a human. Whales and other