

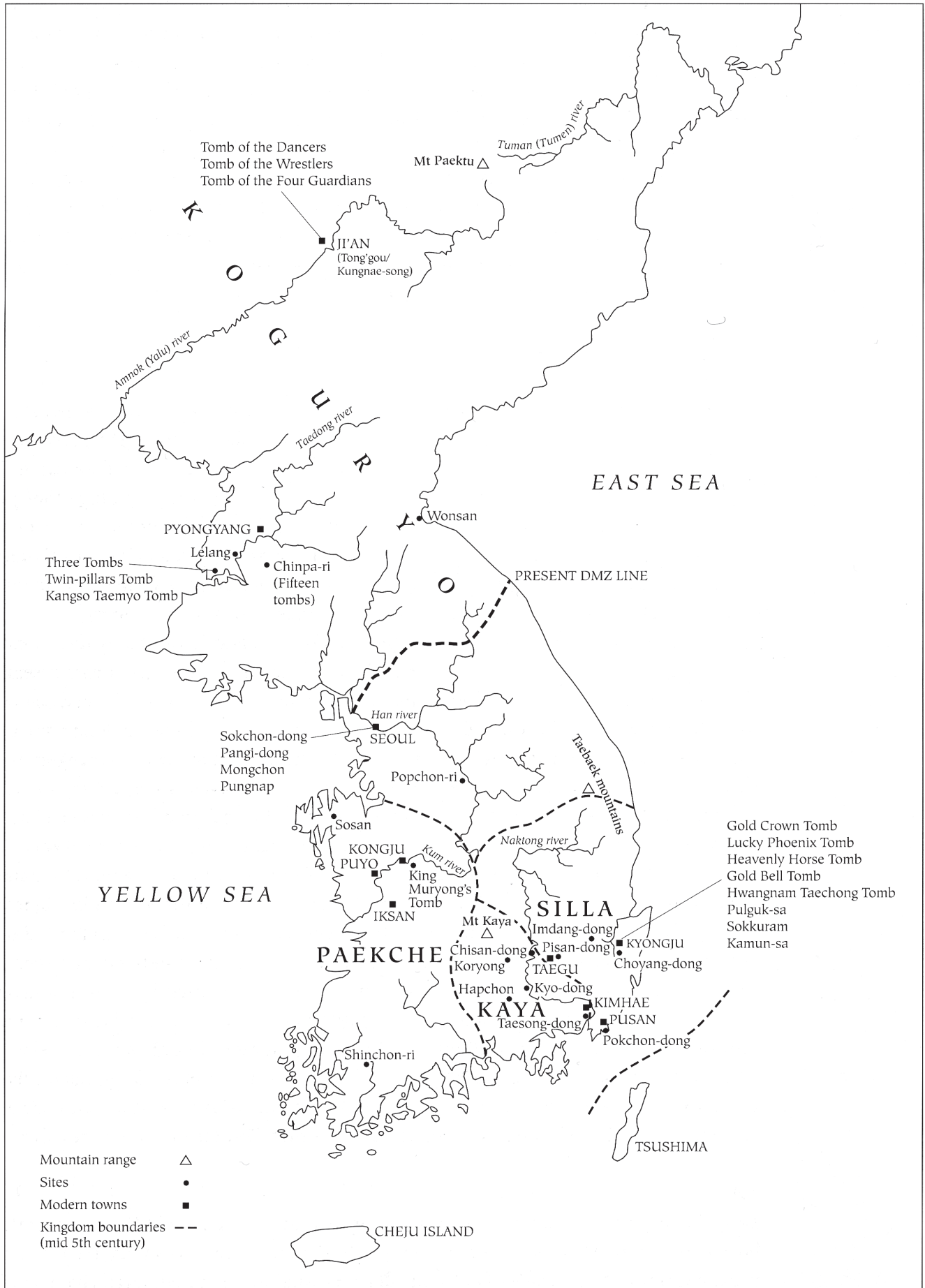
# Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla Period

**A**lthough the first part of this period is usually called the Three Kingdoms period (c. AD 300–668), Korea was in fact at first divided into four. Koguryo controlled the largest area, in the north; Paekche controlled the southwest. Kaya or Karak was the name given to a confederation of political powers in south-central Korea around the Naktong river basin and present-day Pusan, but it could not be called a kingdom and in AD 532 was conquered by and absorbed into Silla, which occupied the southeast (map 4, p. 44). Silla went on to unify the majority of the Korean peninsula in 668 and from 668 to 935 ruled as Unified Silla.

Specific dates, established partly on ancient histories, have been traditionally assigned to the foundation of each of the Three Kingdoms: Koguryo in 37 BC, Paekche in 18 BC and Silla in 57 BC. The corresponding date for Kaya is AD 42. Modern scholarship, basing itself on archaeological and documentary evidence, is moving towards a re-assessment of these dates. In place of a long undifferentiated stretch of around six hundred years, it suggests two broad divisions into a Proto-Three Kingdoms period, covering the first three centuries of the modern era and overlapping with the later part of the Iron Age (0–c. AD 300), and a Three Kingdoms period from c. AD 300 which ended in AD 668 in the unification of the peninsula under Silla. These issues remain controversial.

Historical sources for this period include Chinese, Japanese and Korean records. The latter comprise the *Samguk sagi* (*History of the Three Kingdoms*) by Kim Pusik and the *Samguk yusa* (*Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*) by Ilyon, a Buddhist monk.<sup>1</sup> Both were written much later, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Their reliability and usefulness is therefore limited as they are not objective records, although they are thought to be based on lost contemporary histories. Chinese records such as the *Wei ji* are also useful as they make frequent references to Korea, and the Chinese histories, in general, provide reliable and organized information stemming from a long historiographical tradition. The Japanese *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* are informative on Japan's early links with Korea, but the dating is not entirely consistent. The Japanese histories, furthermore, have been used in the twentieth century to justify Japan's colonial ambitions towards Korea. Partly because of the unhappy history between the two countries during this century, scholars from Korea and Japan have quite different interpretations of the references in the Japanese histories to contacts between their countries in the early period. There is little doubt that Koguryo, Paekche and Kaya all had close contacts with Japan, which they called 'Wa' or 'Wae'. Trade between Kaya and Wae was motivated by the Japanese need for iron, to be used in farming and warfare. Korea was a source of high culture, technology and luxury items for the

22. Interior of King Muryong's tomb showing the moulded bricks lining the vaulted chamber, based on Liang Chinese tomb design. Paekche, AD 525.



Map 4. Principal archaeological sites in the Three Kingdoms period.

Japanese, who were definitely less developed at that time. However, the *Nihon shoki* portrays the Kaya states as a colony of Japan's Yamato court. Korean sources do not substantiate this view and therein lies the basis of the controversy. It is a scholarly dispute charged with emotions that flow from Japan's use, when it colonized Korea by force in 1910, of the argument that it was reclaiming its historical foothold on the peninsula. Ironically, evidence of much of Korea's early history then came to light during the Japanese occupation thanks to the work of Japanese archaeologists such as Umehara Sueji. However, many exciting new discoveries have been made by Korean archaeologists in the Kaya area from the 1980s onwards, which challenge the Japanese colonial interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Much more objective research is still needed to clarify the relationship between the two countries during the Three Kingdoms/Kofun period.<sup>3</sup>

### Koguryo

The kingdom of Koguryo grew up sometime in the first century BC. Koguryo people were horse-riders and warriors who, according to the Chinese *Han shu*, were the previous Puyo people from the Songhua river area. Alternative suggestions are that they came from Liaoning or that the Weimo (Korean: Yemaek) were their ancestors.<sup>4</sup> Although they posed a threat to the Chinese and there were constant skirmishes between the two, peaceful trade was also carried on between China and Koguryo: Koguryo exported raw materials such as gold, silver, pearls, furs, ginseng, fabric and slaves, while it imported from China manufactured goods such as weapons, silk clothes, head-dresses, books and stationery.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest archaeological sites belonging to Koguryo also illustrate, by their location, the great territory which Koguryo controlled. These sites are at Tong'gou, near present-day Ji'an, a Chinese city on the northern bank of the Amnok river (map 4). Koguryo managed to advance towards the Chinese Liao river basin to the west and the Taedong river to the south, eventually capturing the area of the old Chinese commandery at Lelang in AD 313 and coming into confrontation with Paekche. It was, however, under the famous King Kwanggaeto (reigned AD 391–413) that Koguryo reached its height of expansion. His name means 'broad expander of domain' and his military campaigns are recorded on a large stone stele at his tomb at Kungnae-song, then the Koguryo capital. Kwanggaeto managed to occupy Liaodong to the west, subdue a Tungusic tribe called the Sushen in Manchuria to the northeast, attack Paekche to the south, expanding to the area between the Imjin and Han rivers, and repel a Japanese Wa force attacking Silla in the southeast. His successor, King Changsu (the 'long-lived'), reigned from 413 to 491 and presided over a flourishing Koguryo, moving the capital south to Pyongyang and cleverly maintaining diplomatic relations with both China's northern and southern dynasties. In 475, Koguryo seized the Paekche capital of Hansong (near Seoul) and beheaded the Paekche king, Kaero. By this time, Koguryo had become a centralized, aristocratic state with a statutory law code and a National Confucian Academy and had officially adopted Buddhism as the state cult.<sup>6</sup>

### Tombs

Early Koguryo tombs were cairns consisting of a bed of river cobbles underneath the burial and a mound of more cobbles on top. In the fourth century AD enormous stepped pyramids started to be made of cut stone blocks, containing elevated burial chambers. The