

Chapter III

KOREAN PREHISTORY

Outside of Korea and Japan, very little attention has been paid to Korean prehistory. The reasons for this are to be found in the difficulty for non-Asians of reading primary sources in Korean and Japanese, the inaccessibility of many publications, and the lack of a synthesis of Korean prehistory in any European language. In addition to these factors, interest in the prehistoric periods in Korea itself is a rather recent phenomenon, and there has not been anything like the archaeological activity that has taken place in Japan and China.

It is not my purpose here to review the history of Korean archaeology; such a review may be found in Sample (1967:4-32, 1974:2-7). It is worth repeating here, however, that well-organized excavations of prehistoric sites have been rare, that publication, if any, is frequently in small Korean journals only rarely with English summaries, and that the information is therefore not readily available.

Given the handicaps imposed on Korean archaeologists, including lack of specific training in anthropological archaeology, there has been surprising progress in prehistoric archaeology in Korea, but much remains to be done. It has been scarcely fifteen years since the first excavations of prehistoric sites by Koreans. A few Korean archaeologists have begun to read widely in Western publications and to apply new method and theory to Korean prehistory. Nevertheless, the tradition of Confucian education combined with a heritage of interpretation by Japanese archaeologists from a less

scientific era have produced opinions which are less critical than they might have been.

Not enough recent research has been accomplished to make a synthesis of Korean prehistory possible at this time. The tragic split of Korea into two separate and non-communicating sovereignties adds to the difficulties. Nevertheless, to put the Chulmun Period in its proper perspective, a brief review of the archaeological sequences in Korea will follow. The sequence is not yet definitive, but it is a trial ordering of the data which future research will refine and possibly rearrange. The Han River sequence is based on published and unpublished site reports, discussions with Korean archaeologists, re-analysis of previously excavated artifacts, as well as my own fieldwork.

Archaeological Sequences

As just mentioned, the sequence of prehistoric periods is not yet firmly established, especially the relationship of Chulmuntogi and Mumuntogi. Although in the Han River valley Mumuntogi is found above Chulmuntogi in the few sites where both occur, the reverse is reported from Tongsamdong near Pusan (Sample 1967, 1974). Part of the difficulty lies in the lumping together of unassociated undecorated pottery types into one category, as Sample's work demonstrates. The concept of Chulmuntogi should also be refined. As this problem is unresolved, the sequence as given can be understood to apply to the Han River valley, but not necessarily to the rest of Korea.

Preceramic Sites

No preceramic sites are known in the Han River valley. The nearest preceramic site is that of Sokchangni, some 100 km. south of Seoul, on an upper terrace of the Kum River. Pebble chopping tools are characteristic of the lower layer of this site, with

retouched blades in the upper layers. Radiocarbon dates generally fall between 30,000 and 20,000 BP (Sohn 1967, Sohn et al., 1971: 12). Two later dates have also been obtained: 6590 ± 220 BP (Valastro and Davis 1970:278) and 2990 ± 120 BP (Yang 1970:351), but Sohn believes that the samples must have been contaminated by repeated flooding of the river. Other preceramic sites have been found on the Tuman River in North Korea, and in a few other locations in the south (Sample and Mohr 1964).

Chulmuntogi Sites

In general, all prehistoric handmade decorated pottery in Korea is designated Chulmuntogi and is thought to belong to the same widespread horizon that includes comb-impressed pottery from Siberia and Eastern Europe. The Korean pottery is usually decorated with parallel incised lines, although other techniques of marking the unfired clay are also used in various regions. Stone artifacts include ovate "hoe-axes" (Figure 4), net sinkers (Figure 5), grinding stones, and polished slate points.

The Chulmuntogi found in central Korea, both in the Han River sites and farther north in Hwanghae Do (province on the Yellow Sea, immediately north of Kyonggi Do), is considered to be classic Chulmun (Figures 6-9). Other Chulmun pottery differs in some respects. Kim divides Chulmun into four groups: west coast, south-east coast, northwest and northeast (Kim WY 1967:101). The west coast group contains the classic Chulmuntogi, with conical bases, sand and mica tempering, and incised decorations. Southeast coast Chulmun includes rows of raised bosses and fillets, and the entire pot is not necessarily decorated. Some of the pots have flat bottoms. The northeast Chulmun is tempered with grit and made of a sticky clay which fires to a dark color. The pots in the northeast always have flat bases and are often decorated with concentric semi-circular rows of punctates. Northwest pottery also

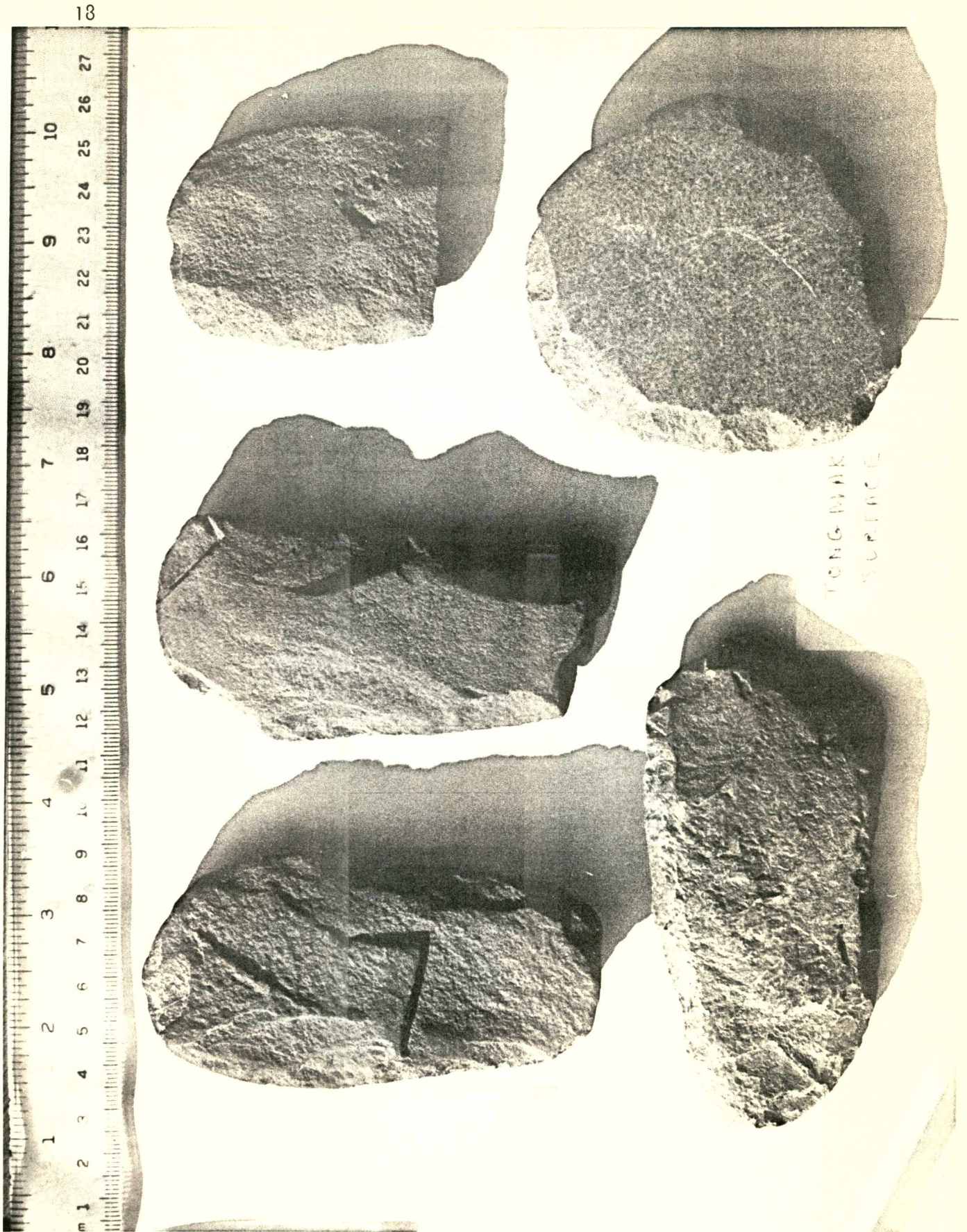


Fig. 4. Stone "hoe-axes," Tonqmak

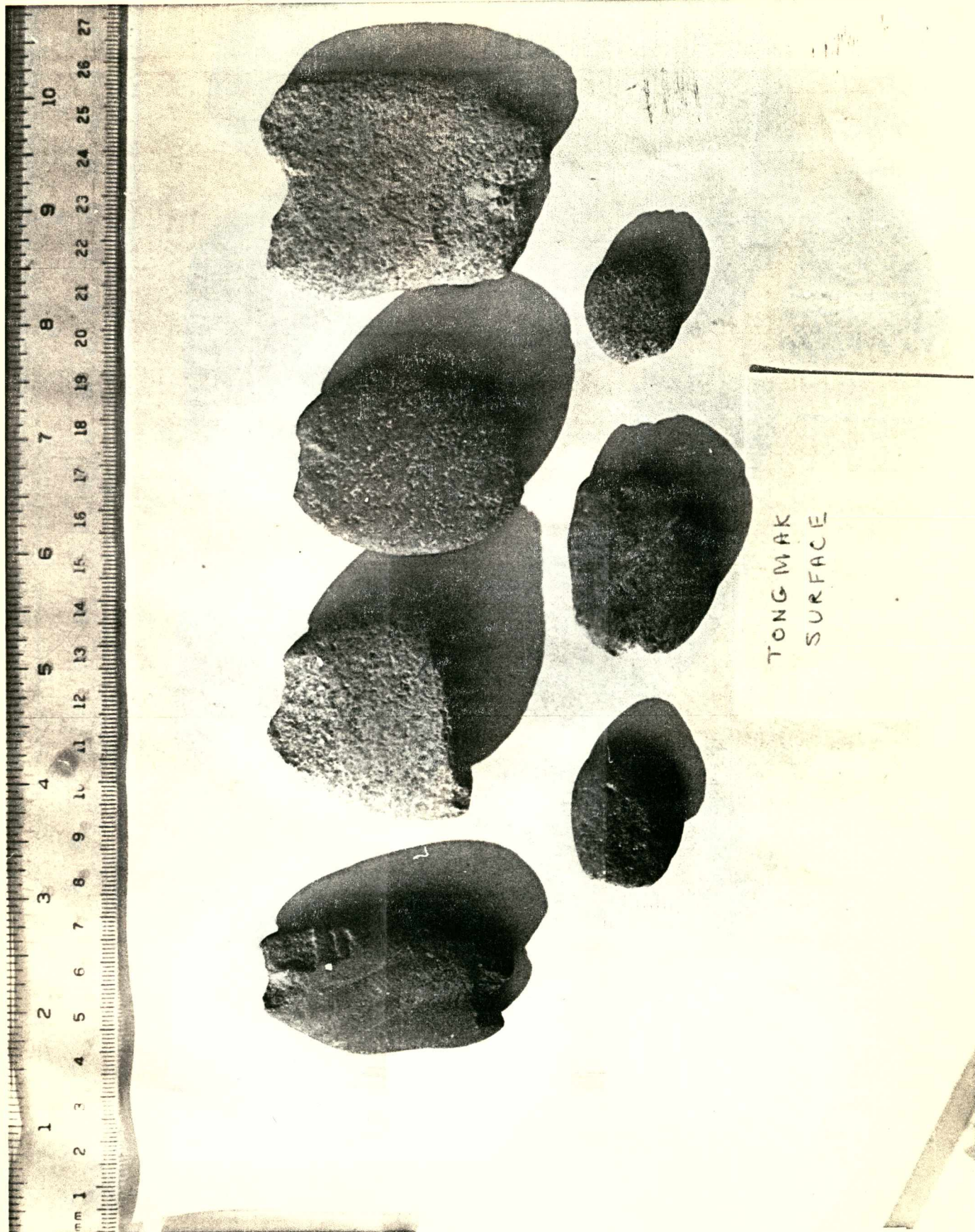


FIG. 5. Stone Pebble Sinkers, Tonmak



TONG MAK
PIT IV

Fig. 6. Sherds, Tonqmak Surface

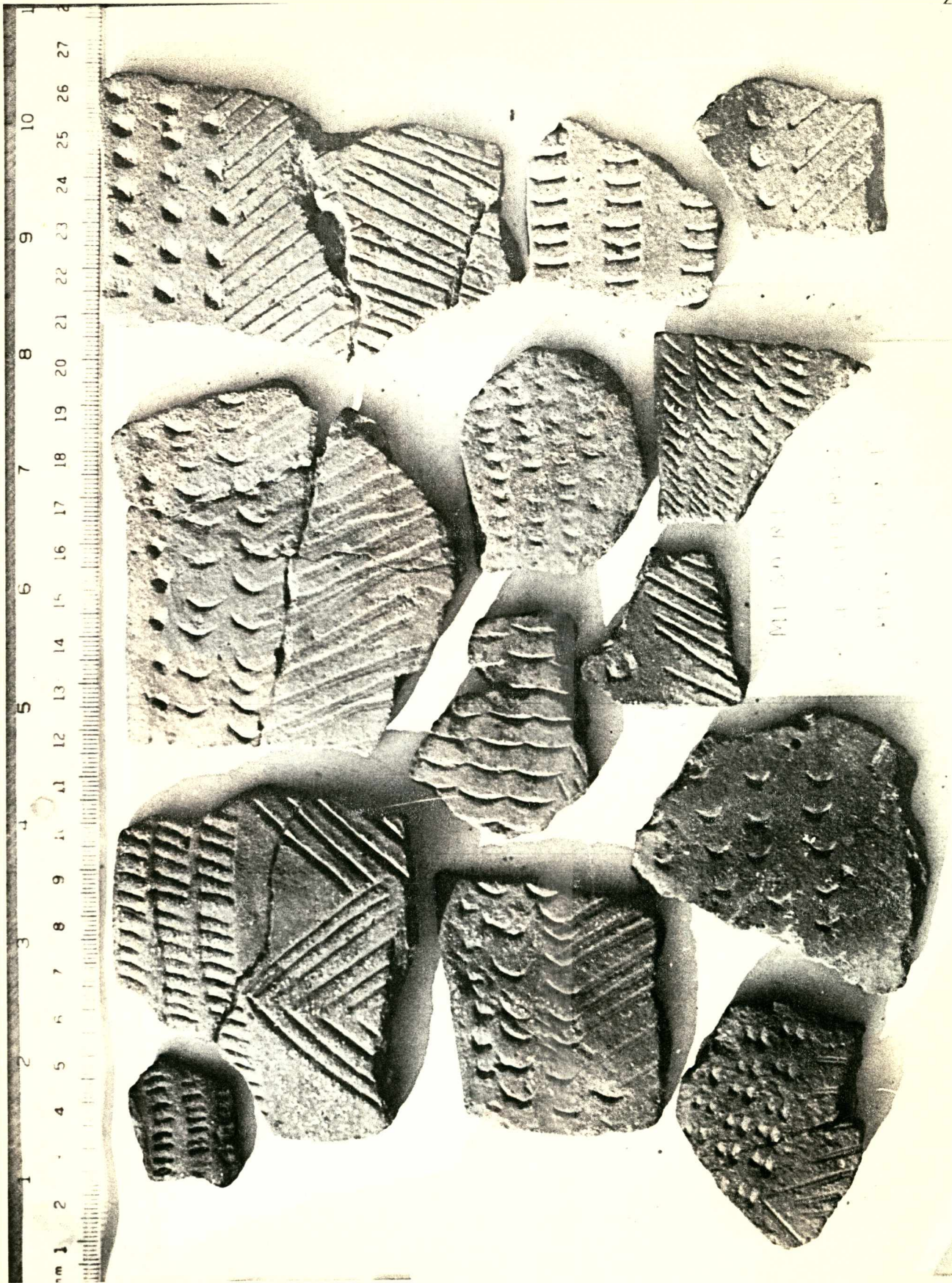


Fig. 7. Sherds, Misari Surface

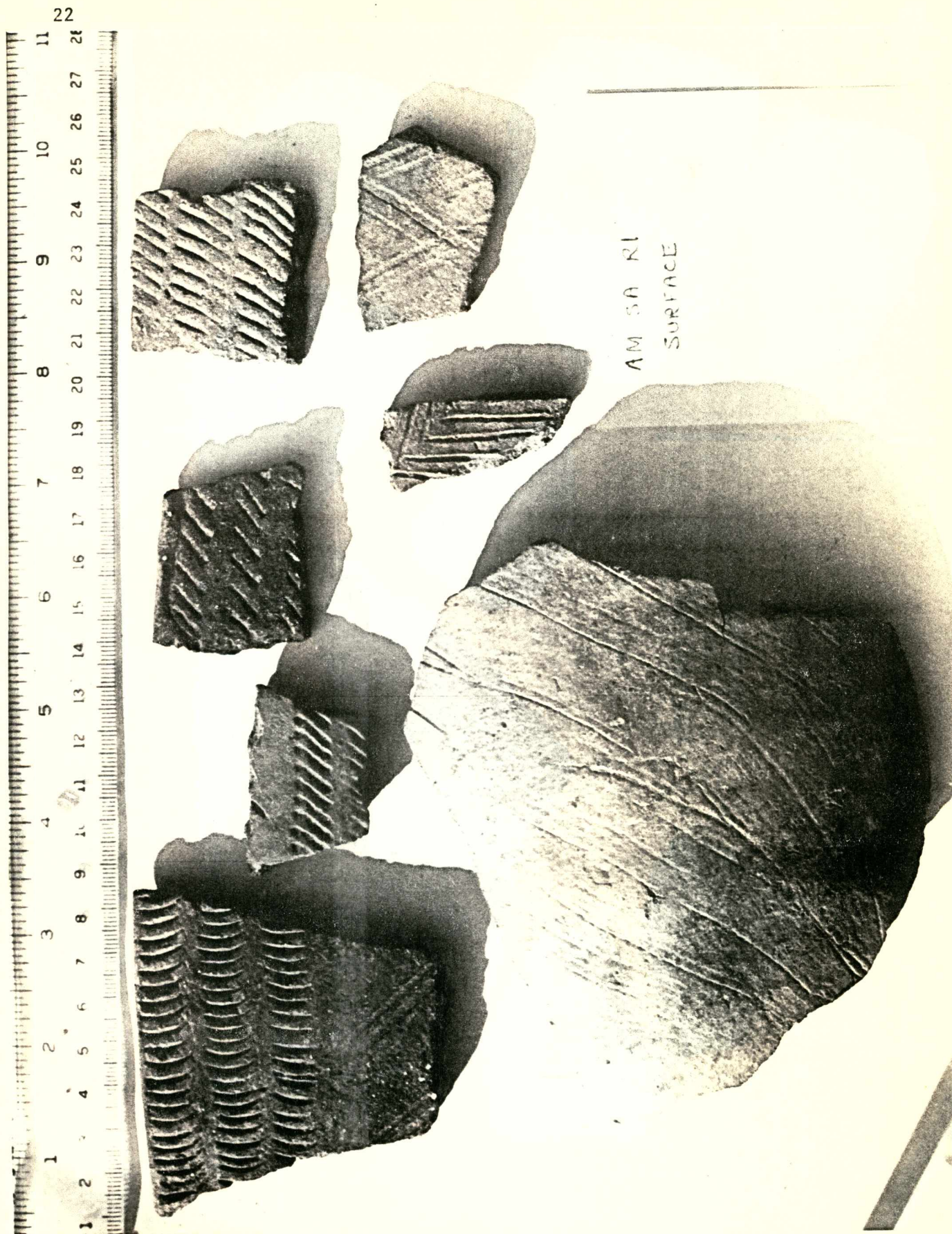


Fig. 8. Sherds, Amsari Surface

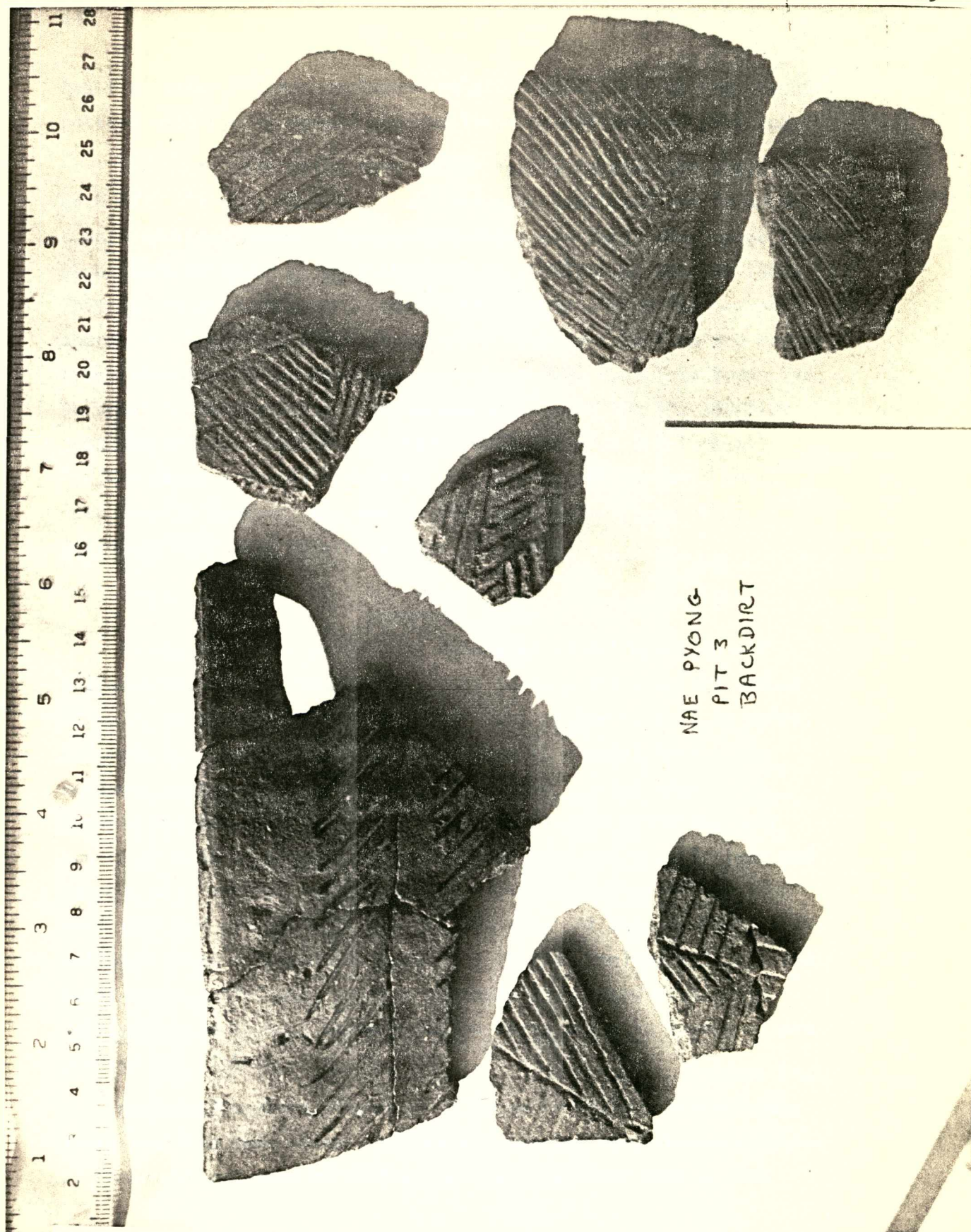


Fig. 9. Sherds, Naepyung Surface

has flat bases. Other variants are also found, such as the thicker pottery with evenly spaced grooved lines on the central east coast.

The house pits which have so far been excavated are small, each with a single hearth. Sites are also small and are found on coasts or river banks. Radiocarbon dates are rare; they range from about 6000 BP (Sohn et al., 1971:15) to 2340 ± 120 BP (Kim WY 1969b:6). This latter date, however, comes from a layer with a few incised sherds which are not the same as other Han River Chulmun and may be transitional. Dates from Amsari: about 3000 B.C. (Lim Byung Tae, personal communication), and Tongsamdong: 4020 ± 100 BP, 3980 ± 100 BP, 3930 ± 100 BP, and 3830 ± 100 BP (Yang 1970) are more consistent. Chulmun dates from Shido (one of the islands off the west coast near Seoul), however, are about 1000 years later (Yang 1972). Certainly many more determinations are needed.

Mumuntogi Sites

In the Han River valley the Mumuntogi is different in all characteristics from Chulmunogi. It is very thick-walled (about 12 mm.), tempered with coarse grit, light yellow to buff in color, and made in a variety of shapes, often with a small foot. Appendages such as spouts and lugs are common. Sites with this ceramic are more frequently located on protected hillsides near the river than on river terraces. House pits are usually long and narrow, with several hearths spaced along the center of the long axis (Kim and Lim 1968:25; Kim CG 1968:47). At some of these sites polished slate arrowpoints appear. A typical implement is the semi-lunar stone knife, very similar to those associated with grain cultivation in China. Large polished adzes are also found, as are grooved net sinkers.

Mumuntogi appears elsewhere in Korea in various assemblages. There are also some sites with pottery bearing some characteristics of Mumuntogi and some of Chulmunogi, such as that from a cave

burial site in Chunchon (Anonymous 1970:24) which has incised or impressed bands, no decoration on the body, and flat bases. A few sherds from the bottom layer at Susongni on the Han River may also be transitional.

At Tongsamdong a pottery unlike any Han River ceramic was found on the lowest level by Sample (1967:299), and the classic Chulmun, called by Sample "Tudo Bold," lay above it. Many sherds from Sample's "Pusan" type also resemble Han River Chulmun. The radio-carbon dates from excavations by Seoul National University show a curious progression of younger dates from deeper levels (Yang 1972: 274-278), although their excavations have confirmed Sample's sequence.

In many sites throughout Korea Mumun is found above Chulmun, and except for Tongsamdong the reverse has not been reported. (See, for example, Henthorn 1968 on the Misongni site, Kim Wy 1967b on the Kungsan site, and Kim Wy 1962b:44 on Shang-ma-shih Island.)

The Dolmen Period

Korea has two types of megalithic monuments, both called dolmens. One is made of a rectangle of upright stones topped by a large slab which tends to be found in the north; the other consists of a large slab at ground level covering smaller stones which is more commonly found in the south. Both kinds of dolmens seem to have been burial markers, although few have any human remains. Artifacts associated with these monuments include bronze weapons, polished stone, Mumuntogi, and rarely a red polished pottery. In the extreme south of Korea and a few southern islands of Japan, flat dolmens cover jar burials. The jars are of the grey check-stamped ware that belongs to the proto-historic period (Kaneko 1966: 12, Kim Wy 1964), but other associated pottery is often plain and coarse. The dolmen period is therefore placed in the bronze age, perhaps beginning about 700 B.C. (Kim Wy 1962c).

In the middle Han valley and its immediate vicinity there are no dolmens, but there are some flat dolmens on the North Han, about 20 km. upriver from the confluence with the South Han, large upright dolmens on Kanghwa island, and a group of plundered dolmens near Naepyeong.

The Kimhae Period

Kimhae is the name of a large shell mound near Pusan which has given its name to a hard grey pottery also called proto-Silla. Iron knives hafted in deer antler were also found at the type-site, along with carbonized grains of rice (the earliest positive evidence of rice cultivation in Korea) and a Chinese Han 漢 dynasty coin of the first century A.D. (Kim Wy 1967c). Presumably this belongs to the time of the "Three Hans" 三韓, a proto-historic period when the small tribes of Korea were beginning to consolidate. Hatada (1967:11) refers to a Chinese document which records that the Korean Han tribes grew hemp, millet, rice, wheat, and pulse, and kept cows and pigs.

The Three Kingdoms

One of the earliest local historical documents is the Sam Guk Sagi, the history of the Three Kingdoms. Each "kingdom" was at first little more than a loose alliance of tribes. In the south-east was old Silla (a union of the Hans tribes) (57 B.C.-A.D.663), in the north Koguryo (37 B.C.-A.D. 668) and in the west, including the region of the Han River, was Paekche (18 B.C.-A.D. 663).

Koguryo was built partly upon the ruins of the Chinese colony of Lolang (Nangnang in Korean) whose rich tumuli have revealed objects of Chinese civilization not elsewhere preserved. Old Silla, too, is known for its large grave mounds and for a thin-walled grey pottery thrown on a wheel. Pedestal bases with excised rectangles

and triangles, wavy parallel incised lines, and dangling leaf-shaped decorations are characteristic of the pottery. Elaborate gold crowns and jewelry are found in the tombs.

The Han River region was inhabited by the kingdom of Paekche ("100 tribes"). The first of Paekche's capitals was on the Han River near Seoul (Kim Wy 1967b). Paekche pottery is hard, grey, unglazed and thin, much like early Silla. It is frequently check-stamped or mat-impressed.

Historic Periods

The Three Kingdoms period came to an end when Silla unified the peninsula under its rule, ushering in the period known as Unified Silla (A.D. 668-935), dominated by a political center in south-central Korea. Ultimately, the decline of Silla was offset by new strength in the north, and the Koryo dynasty took power until A.D. 1392. Following Koryo, the Yi Dynasty began, the longest in Korean history. It was brought to an end by the Japanese annexation in 1910.