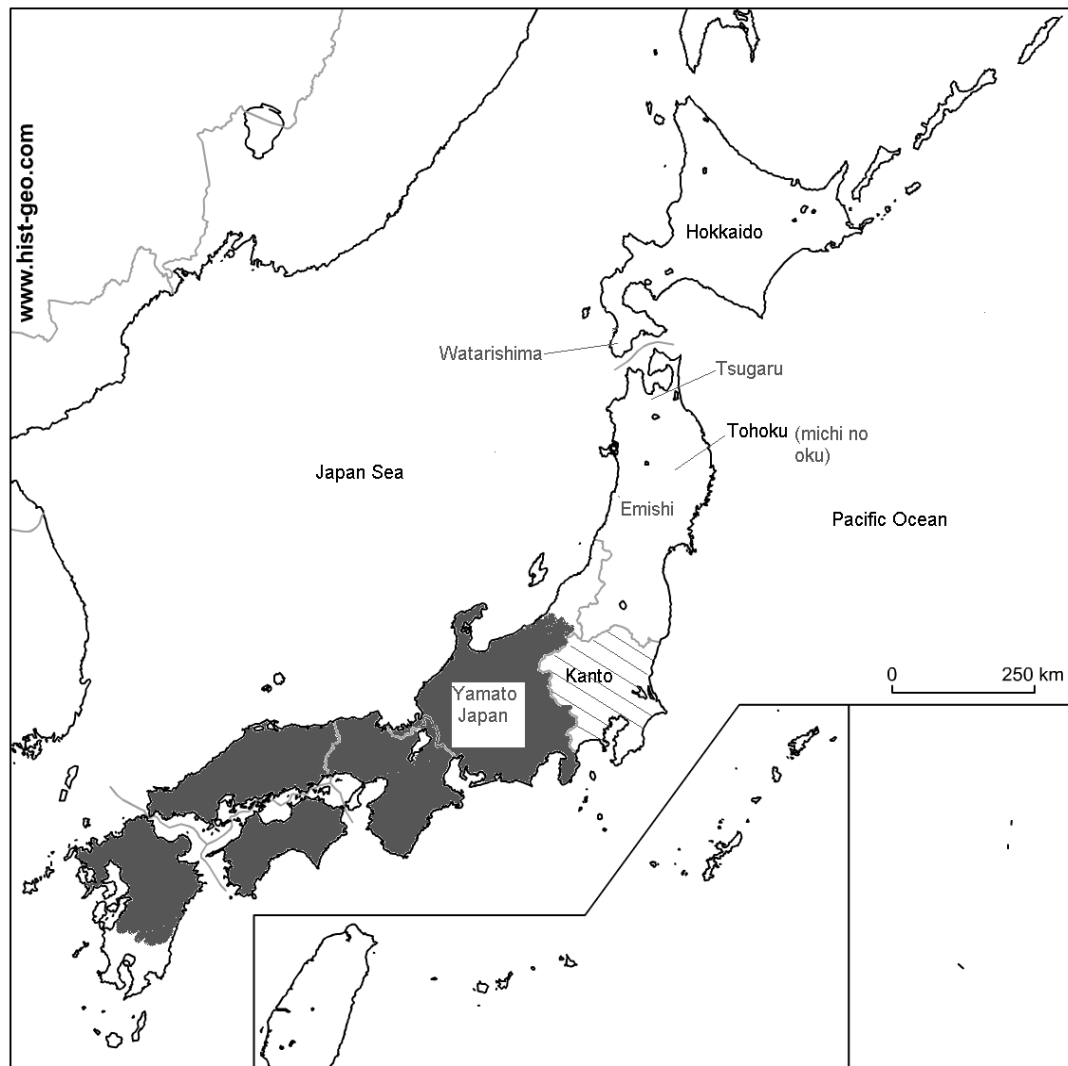


Emishi, Kofun Culture and the expansion of Yamato

The Expansion of Yamato into the Kanto

The Yamato state is thought to be either a continuation or successor to the semi-historical state of Yamatai and Queen Himiko, a centralized state that had been spoken of by the Chinese historians of the Han dynasty. Yamato was made possible by the advances during the Yayoi period that saw to the spread of wet-rice cultivation, that in turn spurred population growth and centralized power. Expansion was a continuous component of the Japanese Yamato state that aggressively incorporated outlying regions into its orbit, such as remaining Jomon peoples like the Kumaso in Kyushu and the Emishi in the Tohoku as well as rival Yayoi states in the Kinai and Kanto regions. The Yamato kingdom and its history is tied to the beginnings of the Japanese speaking state that is identified also with the Yayoi. It has been through physical anthropology where a particular group of people through their remains began to be associated with what was originally the Yayoi pottery culture.

It was under this state that the identity of the nation of Japan was formed, however, it was not in any sense Japan as it is today because its territory was smaller. Starting out from the central regions it encompassed the inland sea, western Japan and northern Kyushu before expanding east towards the Kanto and the Tohoku. The Japanese island of Honshu was not unified by one political entity but was divided into a hodge-podge of states dominated in the west and central region by Yamato and its line of kings.



During the Kofun Age (3rd through 6th centuries AD) the areas under Yamato control (dark gray on map) expanded both northeast and southwest. The Kanto plain (represented by the cross-hatched area) came under the hegemony of Yamato at the end of the period as the Kofun states in the region became vassal states of Yamato. The Tohoku region was outside of Yamato's jurisdiction, and the Emishi people fought against the Yamato state for centuries. Other place names on this and subsequent web pages are mentioned here. Dark lettered names are current usage while gray lettered names are ancient place names.

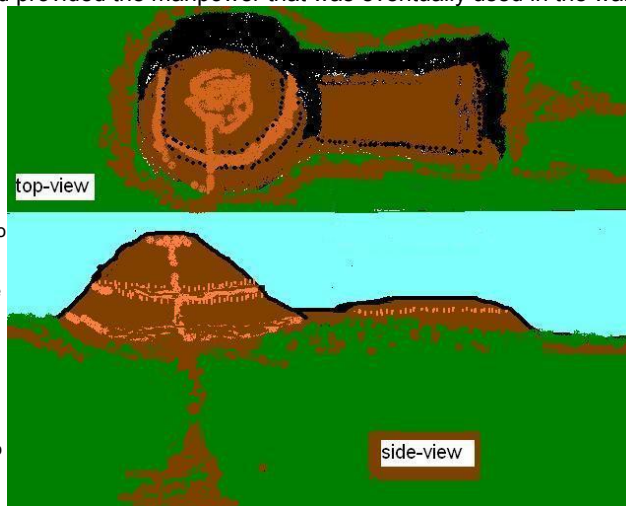
The so-called "55 nations of the hairy men of the East" were an ancient people with a way of life and culture distinct from and often in conflict with Yamato, and resided in what is now the Kanto and Tohoku. However, by the fourth century A.D. a type of culture called the Kofun, named after the large burial mounds, had spread from the Yamato heartland in central Japan to the Kanto and Tohoku regions. The Yamato had not taken direct political power over these areas, but the widespread adoption of Kofun even in the frontier regions meant the successful dispersal of a similar culture. It is in this context that we seek to understand the Emishi with greater clarity through new studies in archeology and physical anthropology.

The nature of the Kanto states is not very clear, but increasingly the evidence points to a people who had both Yayoi and Jomon attributes. By the fifth century AD states such as Kenu (in present-day Musashi) were in comparison with Yamato and other Kinai states fairly well organized and strong militarily speaking. They were never conquered militarily by the Yamato, but were gradually absorbed through hegemonic alliances to the point that the court of Yamato was able to compel the people of these states to fight in their armies starting in the seventh century AD against the Emishi of the Tohoku. What ever happened to the Jomon people in the Kanto? According to recent studies (see [The Emishi and Physical Anthropology](#)) the Jomon people may well have been the majority of the population in the Kanto when the Yayoi people first moved in.

The Kanto states were fairly advanced and populous enough that any direct invasion from Yamato and its allies was not an option. Instead, alliances were formed between Yamato and key states in the Kanto, such as Kenu, that together provided enough power to threaten any states that tried to resist. They often backed one or another clan chief during internal wars such as that between Upper Kenu and Lower Kenu. By playing off one state against another, and even one family within a state against another, the Yamato state gained ascendancy in the region. A policy emerged that was later to play a decisive role in the conquest of the Emishi, and was simply known as "using the barbarian to subdue the barbarian." It is crucial to understand that the Yamato state based in the Kinai region saw the Kanto states as frontier states, not too far removed from the "barbarians" of the Tohoku.

In this particular history we are seeing the tail end of hundreds of years of expansion that had reached the Tohoku region, the modern prefectures of Fukushima, Miyagi, Yamagata , Akita , Iwate, and Aomori. The expansion east to the Kanto was a crucial process that took place in the fourth through the sixth centuries, and provided the manpower that was eventually used in the war of conquest against the Emishi.

Zenpo-koen-fun (literally "front-square, back-round" mound). The cylinder like objects placed on the Kofun are haniwa or clay figures, a practice common in the Kinai and Kanto plains. These types of Kofun were the largest made, and consisted of a round mound and a square front, and looks like a keyhole from above. For the longest time the occupants of these Kofun were interpreted as being politically connected to the Yamato state as vassal states. These types have been found in Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures, and as far north as Iwate prefecture in the Tohoku as well, and are quite widespread throughout the Kanto plain. Recently, it is no longer clear whether or not all of these can be interpreted as having had subordinate ties to Yamato. The ones in the Tohoku may well have been made by independent chiefs who copied the form as a way of displaying their power to other regional chiefs, and even those with ties to Yamato may have been temporary allies.



Kofun States of the Tohoku

Yayoi agricultural methods were introduced in some areas of Tohoku region such as in present day Aomori and Miyagi prefectures way before the historical expansion of the Yamato state in the second century AD. Though they did not rely on rice agriculture as heavily as the Yayoi, the Jomon adapted it to their way of life, and non-rice crops such as barley and millet were also grown. Moreover, the regions that were contested in the Tohoku had in the fifth century previous to direct Yamato rule produced some large burial mounds, though not as numerous as those found in the Kanto region, and certainly smaller than found in the Yamato heartland. Even by Kanto standards, very large Kofun such as the 168 meter Raijin yama Kofun were erected in what is now Miyagi prefecture (near Sendai) during that time.

The inescapable conclusion is that the Kofun culture had made its impact on the Tohoku people before the Yamato had established any political authority in the region. To produce these large

structures a considerable amount of organization and centralization had to take place, so the level of social organization had to go beyond what a hunting and gathering society could sustain. A hierarchical class society had to emerge in order to handle the labor requirements that the building of a large Kofun required. It seems that rice cultivation had to be in place to sustain the density of population and hierarchy necessary for Kofun society.

If it were as straightforward as one more populous and developed culture supplanting another based on small scale agriculture and hunting there would not be as many questions about the nature of the Tohoku Emishi. That the Kofun society had made its way into the Tohoku region makes a straightforward interpretation more difficult. This is where physical evidence becomes invaluable.

Were they made by primarily Jomon, or by Yayoi people who had previously moved into the area? It seems that they were made by culturally Yayoi immigrants from the Kanto. But these Yayoi immigrants had unique population characteristics that distinguished them from the Yayoi of western Japan. Just as we saw in the Kanto plain, the Kofun people of the Tohoku were of the same group sharing characteristics midway between both Jomon and Yayoi populations, thus showing that the Kanto Yayoi peoples were most likely the immigrants who came into the Tohoku. Clearly, as in the Kanto, these Kofun were made for some powerful local chieftain or family that held the area under their control. What was their relationship to Yamato if any? Whatever happened to these states that produced these Kofun that once existed in the Tohoku?

Can it be definitely said with confidence that the Kofun states of the Tohoku were not nascent Emishi states? The most recent studies (see page on the [Tohoku Kofun population](#)) that show the population of areas that were known places where warfare had broken out between the Emishi and the Japanese show that perhaps the former did include non-Japanese Yayoi immigrants who defined their identity as *Emishi*.

In the northernmost regions where rice cultivation had initially developed, such as in what is now Aomori, by the seventh century AD, rice was no longer cultivated. The colder climate made intensive rice cultivation difficult there. So there is evidence that at least in the northernmost parts of the Tohoku the hunting and gathering lifestyle made a comeback. Throughout the mountainous interiors of the Tohoku the Jomon people, ancestors of the Satsumon, still retained their light agriculture and a hunting and gathering way of life. To see this in perspective then, the Kofun society emerged in certain locations in the Tohoku, but existed side by side with those who still practiced a hunting and gathering way of life.

[Emishi Migration](#)

Some of the answers to the above questions are beginning to be explained through recent archeological studies. Kimio Kumagai's (2004) research suggests that the Emishi are not the ones to have created the Kofun in the Tohoku. They lived at times side-by-side with either the pre-Yamato Japanese or the proto-Japanese people represented by the *gozoku* or great families who had penetrated into the Tohoku region as early as the fifth century AD to create the Kofun there such as the Raijin-yama Kofun. They erected Kofun as far north as central Iwate (Tsuno-zuka Kofun), but his studies have shown that these large Kofun were exceptions rather than the rule. Therefore, to say Kofun society had impacted the Tohoku like it did the Kanto is misleading. With these notable exceptions, he argues, the Kofun culture did not appreciably affect the central Tohoku regions northwards. Rather, there was a counter migration from the north by the inheritors of the Jomon tradition, now known as Epi-Jomon culture that brought the Emishi further south in the Third through the Fifth centuries AD.

This migration of the Epi-Jomon pottery culture (known also as Latter Jomon) spread from either southern Hokkaido or northern Aomori and impacted cultures as far south as southern Miyagi. The evidence is the emergence of a particular pottery culture that emerges earlier in the north and begins to spread to the south.

If this is true it changes the entire picture of the Kofun age in this region. It would mean that two movements of people converged in the ancient Tohoku. The Kofun states from the pre-Yamato Japanese moving from the south to the north, and the counter movement of people of Jomon ancestry moving from north to south. Of all explanations this would seem to make the most sense. It makes sense because it would explain why the region was conquered by the Yamato state, and why the Tohoku was treated like foreign territory in contrast to the Kanto. It would also mean that the Kofun states that had emerged in the Tohoku before the conquest were isolated states of Japanese speakers in the region. That would also explain the sudden emergence and disappearance of rice cultivation in the northern Tohoku at an early date. The disappearance coincides with the migration of the Jomon peoples from the north.

This seems to answer the question as to whether the Kofun states of the Tohoku were Emishi states--the answer seems to be no, but the evidence is unclear. It is true that the Emishi lifestyle (those who appear in the *Nihon-gi*) contrasts quite a bit from people living under the Kofun states.

They were more egalitarian and relied on hunting, gathering and light agriculture. However, it cannot be ruled out entirely. The reason being the relatively large forces involved in the fighting between the Emishi and the Japanese that point to an agrarian base to support the forces, and a fair degree of organization that a local Kofun society could sustain. Could a lifestyle primarily based on hunting and gathering have sustained this type of organization? However, the main Epi-Jomon re-migration may have taken place into the mountainous interior and in the northern areas where Kofun culture along with rice cultivation had the least hold.

Hokkaido

The Tohoku was merely one of the last phases of the political expansion of the Japanese state, the last being the incorporation of Hokkaido in the nineteenth century. The huge difference between the two last phases is that the Tohoku was colonized gradually over the course of hundreds of years, whereas in Hokkaido the seclusion policy of the Matsumae had kept the Ainu population relatively isolated from the Japanese until the nineteenth century, when with the Meiji Restoration and the dissolution of the Matsumae domain settlers poured into the island. The contrast between the populations of Japanese and Ainu was a result of years of seclusion of the latter population, whereas in the Tohoku, Japanese colonists (and others) took hundreds of years to settle there, and within a couple centuries after the conquest there was very little cultural and in many cases physical differences between them. However, even today, the Tohoku Japanese have more Jomon characteristics than any other area of Japan with the exception of Hokkaido and southern Kyushu, and can be seen in the heavier beards, curly or wavy hair and lighter complexions of some of the Japanese who originate from this region.

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