

Ezo Ana Kofun and Emishi Society

The *ezo-ana kofun* were created about the seventh century and lasted till the ninth century as burial mounds. These kofun differed considerably from the [zen-po-koen-fun](#) in being much smaller (a few meters as opposed to a hundred meters or more) and later in time. In fact, most archaeologists had thought that the *ezo-ana kofun* were created by the Emishi. However, despite the traditional name, this is no longer clear in areas outside the Emishi heartland (see [Tohoku Kofun population page](#)). Along with *yoko-ana bogun* which this type of tomb resembles, these types of tombs are found in the Tohoku. This particular study is based on tombs found in the foothills near the banks of the Kitakami river during the time the Emishi held undisputed power over the region.

The earlier *zen-po-koen-fun* or keyhole mounds in the Tohoku are thought to have been created by ancient Japanese settlers thought to be from the Kanto, and were modeled after the ones in the Kinai region and date from as early as the fourth through sixth centuries AD. The later *ezo-ana kofun* contrasted from the earlier ones in that they were produced in areas inhabited by the Emishi, and were undoubtedly from the same time period when they lived in these areas. These tombs are invaluable storehouses of information into the culture of the Emishi as they did not leave any written accounts we know of. This is because they never achieved the specialization in their society that would call for a literary class.

The Emishi had a separation by occupation. They are thought to have had two basic groups: the farmers and the warriors much like the Merovingian Franks of Europe. We know this because there are two types of tombs. Those which have been found with agricultural implements and those found with military equipment. The former tombs outnumber the latter tombs, so it seems that there were more farmers than warriors in this society. The warrior's tombs were very small in comparison to the kofun of the ancient Japanese, indicating that this society did not produce extremes of wealth and status. There seems to be no centralized King for example. From these findings we know that they had developed warrior bands that were composed of more or less equal individuals much like the warrior bands that formed among the plains tribes of North America. We can surmise with a degree of certainty that like the plains Indians the leadership was vested in either charismatic individuals or "first among equals," probably chosen due to experience and ability much like the chiefs of the Native American tribes.

Not all members of Emishi society built tombs. The agricultural tombs were probably created by village chiefs while those of the military were chiefs of warrior bands. This is markedly different from the ancient Japanese kofun which was made by a military "King", a very powerful regional ruler who stood at the apex of a hierarchical social structure. Ancient Japanese tombs were never created by farmers. In Emishi society in contrast "farmer chiefs" were recognized.

We know from these tombs that they had use of manufactured iron implements that are just as sophisticated as any produced among the ancient Japanese. These were either produced by the Emishi, or were modified versions created from iron implements and swords that came via trade from the Japanese. A few metal working sites have been discovered in the Tohoku. In fact, these fine iron swords the *warabite-to* differed from anything manufactured in Japan or the continent. These swords were single bladed and used for slashing from above, an ideal weapon for a horse mounted soldier. These made their way south to the Japanese who then were influenced by its design to eventually produce the samurai sword. Some sources have claimed that swordsmiths of Emishi descent were employed in later feudal Japan, but this is speculation that cannot be verified. What is known is that the design was incorporated by the Japanese in the creation of the later samurai sword.

There were also other types of ancient Japanese swords that were prized and preserved by these chiefs which is a good marker for the trade that took place between Japanese controlled areas and the Emishi. There were round pommel swords, square pommel swords and "three ring" pommel swords. These have been found along with what is thought to be the indigenous *warabite-to*.

Also, from these tombs horse equipment has been recovered as well as a few *keiko* and *tanko* style armor. Equipment was buried in the tombs with the dead in order to provide for them in the afterlife. Both *tanko* and *keiko* armor have been recovered from tombs along the frontier between Japan held areas and Emishi territory. From this we can reconstruct the style of armor used by the Emishi though it is not certain if some of these tombs were Emishi tombs. There was a lag in the adoption of different types of armor from the Japanese due to trade constraints and supply. Whether armor was actually produced by the Emishi is unknown. It is thought that they were most likely items of trade, and were also given as gifts by the Yamato to allied Emishi (*fushu*), but many also came into their hands through battle (see [Appendix E](#) for further discussion).

Horse equipment, some of very fine manufacture, and some of rudimentary manufacture have been found in these tombs. Harnesses of metal, and leather goods like belts have also been recovered and thought to have been made locally. It is not clear whether the horse equipment are trade items or made by the Emishi. But it does confirm without a doubt that these chiefs were horse riding warriors, and that horses were highly valued.

From the farmer's tombs, agricultural implements have been found that show that this was a society that based itself on the growing of a number of crops, from rice to millet, barley and broom corn. They were not solely dependent on rice cultivation like the ancient Japanese. In fact, their diet was in many ways better than the majority of ancient Japanese because it was much more varied with a higher protein content. Studies have

been done on Jomon and Yayoi teeth, and the latter had much more frequent incidences of carries, some very severe, due to the reliance on a glutinous rice based diet. For most farmers living under the Japanese state their diet consisted of rice with very little protein. The Emishi diet was filled with protein and other dry grains such as barley and millet.

From these tombs it is also known that Emishi society was not just confined to the Tohoku but had penetrated Hokkaido as well. There have been a number of sites in Hokkaido that date from the same time period that show the same kind of grave goods. Not only does this show that the cultural area of the Emishi encompassed both north and south of the Tsugaru strait, but also that trade and the movement of people was unhindered between Honshu and Hokkaido at this time. This is another piece of evidence that shows that a close relationship between the Emishi on the one hand and the later Ainu on the other existed. They were not the same since the later Ainu were confined to Hokkaido, but there is a definite ancestral relationship with the Emishi. It also shows that Hokkaido was not historically isolated from Honshu, particularly the Tohoku, but was at one time connected.

A major issue that has emerged in regards to these type of tombs is whether or not these were made by the Emishi. There is still considerable uncertainty in this regard outside the region of the Kitakami river. The reason, as I have shown on the Tohoku kofun population link above, is that recent studies in areas clearly thought to have been under the control of the Emishi seem to show that pre-Japanese Yayoi ancestors made up the majority according to the skeletal remains from these tombs. This particular study is based on the tombs found in the Kitakami region, known as the heartland of the Emishi during their wars with Japan, so undoubtedly these tombs were made by the historical Emishi. It is unknown what type of population predominated here, whether Jomon or Yayoi, as there is as yet no comprehensive study done on the skeletal remains from these tombs (and according to the authors of the Tohoku kofun study the skeletal material is scant from tombs from this area). It is assumed that the population here was predominately Jomon, but this is not verified. Despite this these tombs are Emishi given the geographical and temporal setting, and sheds light on their society.

References:

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Kuji, Tsutomu. "Emishi dokujii no yugo-teki na kofun bunka" in *Emishi: Aterui no tatakai*. Tokyo: Hihyosha, 2002. Some sections are very accurate being based on current research such as the section cited. Other sections are close to being fiction.

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