

Hitakami and the Emishi Horse Archers

The following essay is based on a symposium on the Ainu and Ancient Japanese history published in 1982. In this particular section Tomio Takahashi, a well known professor who devoted his life to studying Tohoku history, presented a paper on "Hitakami," thought to have been located in what is now the Kitakami river in Iwate prefecture. From a historical perspective the Kitakami river was home to the most feared Emishi "confederacy," the Isawa, so it is central to any discussion about the people. This discussion centers on the Emishi culture, in particular the mounted archer, in comparison to what is known of later Ainu culture. Takahashi believes the inhabitants of Hitakami were by and large an Ainoid people.

In the *Nihon Shoki*, an account of the "eastern barbarians" is mentioned by Takahashi because it is the earliest account that mentions the country called Hitakami and the inhabitants there. This account is said to be from the second century, but the chronology is [not reliable](#) (taken from W.G. Aston's translation):

"Takechi no Sukune returned from the East Country and informed the Emperor, saying:--'In the Eastern wilds there is a country called Hitakami. The people of this country, both men and women, tie up their hair in the form of a mallet, and tattoo their bodies. They are of fierce temper, and their general name is Yemishi. Moreover, their land is wide and fertile. We should attack them and take it.'"(p.200)

The account is a fairly accurate description of the geography of the Tohoku plain surrounding the Kitakami river. However, the real evidence comes in the form of a shrine north of what is now Miyagi prefecture, the Hitakami shrine. The shrine is also mentioned in a work called *Sandai Jitsuryoku* in connection with the Hitakami river god. In local tradition which Takahashi believes is accurate, Hitakami river was somehow corrupted or changed to Kitakami river. Furthermore, the reputation for going against authority tagged on the inhabitants of this country matched the historical reality that in this remote region court authority was non-existent. The expression *michi-no-oku* (deep road) used by the inhabitants of Kyoto referred to this region.

He tackles the question of the name of the inhabitants *Emishi* and *Ezo*. The name *Ezo* began its use about the middle of the Heian period, (the eleventh century) and originally *Ezo* is a corruption of the Ainu word *Enju* which means "man." The ancestors of the Ainu were *Ezo* with one qualification (p.36). In order for the word *Ezo* to be descriptive of the Ainu, the limits must be placed on the northern Tohoku region and Hokkaido. This historical limitation comes from the usage of *Ezo* during the middle Heian era as the particular name for inhabitants of that region. Takahashi is not convinced that *Emishi* is equivalent to *Ezo*, however, believes that unequivocally *Ezo* = Ainu ancestors. The word *Emishi* on the other hand was used by the court about all inhabitants of the east who were outside the imperial court's jurisdiction and control, and is thus not a name for a single ethnic group.

In the northern Tohoku region before the name *Ezo* came into usage, the *Emishi* designation is reliably the ancestors of the Ainu. But this name also included other groups who were not Ainu ancestors. This is the important distinction that Takahashi makes. In between this far northern region and the Kanto there were peoples that were racially in between the Yamato and Ainoid people who were also called Emishi which I have covered extensively elsewhere. The further north one traveled the ethnic stock became predominantly Ainoid, and that cultural differences with Yamato Japan were more pronounced.

The evolution of the word *Emishi* began as a description of anyone in the eastern part of the archipelago who were not under court authority. The kanji used was *kebito* or literally "hairy people," but spoken as *Emishi*. Another word that was used to describe the native peoples was *dochakumin* or aborigines. This word was used along with Emishi by the Yamato court when they encountered the various tribes who were eventually conquered. Takahashi believes that the word Emishi changed its meaning over the centuries from being a general term about all the native *dochakumin* to those who lived in the east to the more specific usage of the people who resisted their authority in the north generally, and in Hitakami in particular (pgs. 41-3).

The Emishi could be seen as people who were primarily hunter-gatherers in contrast to the Yayoi inhabitants of the Empire who were agriculturalists. Besides a primary focus on hunting and gathering which was generally true of the Emishi, the cultural differences were great between them (p.46). He compares the Yamato-Emishi conflict with other "civilized-barbarian" encounters, from the Chinese Empire's view of the southern peoples as "barbarians" to the Greek view that those who spoke a tongue other than their own were "barbarians" (pgs.46-7). Recent archeological work has forced a reassessment as it seems that agriculture was much more widely practiced by the Emishi than what had been believed before.

During the eighth century Yamato court records indicate that there was an extensive trade that had developed between the people of Yamato and the Emishi. The Emishi traded their fine horses for military equipment that had been converted into agricultural implements. The former also sold slaves to the people of Yamato (pgs.38-9). The Kyoto nobles were condemned by the court for pursuing this trade because of its potential for undermining national defense! The court believed that by using agricultural implements the Emishi had the potential to become as powerful as the Yamato. They also did not like the idea that military equipment made by the state was being converted and traded to the Emishi. What is of note here is the

existence of Emishi horses that were so good that nobles (and commoners) were willing to defy the state's ban on this trade. In the two decrees they reveal it is clear that not only did the Emishi possess horses they practiced farming as well.

In the first half of the ninth century the strongest connection between the Emishi and their horse riding skills is made: a court order gives a clear glimpse of how fierce the Emishi were as archers. It literally states that one Emishi fighter could defeat ten of the Yamato soldiers, particularly noting their skill with archery and horse riding (p.39).

However, the Emishi as horse archers presented one of the thorniest issues among scholars during the time of this symposium. However, more [recent evidence](#) makes this more palatable. It is still true that if the Emishi of Hitakami can be identified as the ancestors or kin of the later Ainu of Hokkaido how is it that no traces of horses and horsemanship exist among the Ainu? Takahashi believes that they had lost the horse riding tradition when they moved to Hokkaido. Some could easily dismiss this except for the undeniable fact that Ainu type names are used among those who lead the Emishi armies of the ninth century. The Emishi of Tohoku were either Ainoid themselves or they were linguistically affiliated with them. If they were linguistically affiliated it can be argued that they were a related group. There were most likely regional differences among them, and that those who lived in Tohoku learned to use horses.

Emishi Horseman A.D. 750

He elaborates on what had happened to the Emishi after the tenth century. In the most important aspect of government, the areas of modern Aomori, northern Iwate and northern Akita prefectures did not have (or there is no evidence of) a regular administration after the conquest of the Emishi in the ninth century by Tamuramaro. This is indication that rice cultivation had reached its limits in these areas. The projection of court armies in these areas occurred even as early as the seventh century with Abe Hirafu's invasion, however, even with the final subjugation of the Emishi in the ninth century these areas remained a frontier for the local government. Perhaps in this region the Emishi, now known as Ezo, and Yamato people lived side by side in relative peace. The



portrayal of the Ezo tribes after the ninth century conquest in standard histories is one of acceptance of Yamato rule in the entire region (pgs.50-1). This is of course disputed by recent archeological evidence that in fact, in these northern areas the remaining independent Emishi/Ezo fought one another at least in the mountainous areas where they established forts in Aomori.

The greatest mystery of the Emishi-Ezo connection is again considered with clear alternatives (pg.52). When the Ezo are mentioned in the first part of the medieval period they are clearly the Ainu without horses! They live in Aomori prefecture and Hokkaido, and they are not the fierce Emishi horse archers encountered by the Yamato armies of the ninth century. There are three alternatives to consider: 1) the Ainoid peoples of the Tohoku were horse archers, and the ones in Hokkaido were not; 2) the Ainu were *not* descendants of the Ezo of Tohoku, but were people of Hokkaido exclusively; 3) the ancestors of the Ainu lost their horse riding culture sometime between the tenth and eleventh centuries. Whatever the case may be, the Ainu of the later periods of Japanese history were not a horse riding people.

Takahashi presents an intriguing theory about the Emishi-Yamato connection that has been verified in part recently (pgs.53-7). 1) The Emishi came from Hokkaido and gradually spread into most of Honshu, particularly in the Kanto and Tohoku areas. 2) The Yamato people brought horses with them from the continent, and were themselves a horse riding tribe of continental origin. 3) The Emishi eventually stole or traded for horses when they came in contact with the Yamato people as the latter moved north. 4) The Emishi of Tohoku eventually became very good at raising fine horses and adopted horse archery. This pattern is paralleled among the Native American Plains tribes who adopted the horse from the Spanish to settle the plains, and then became some of the most feared and skillful horse riding warriors.

The utter lack of evidence for the existence of horses in Hokkaido during the Satsumon and later culture could be accounted for in this theory, however, there are problems. For example, trade between Honshu and Hokkaido are evident in the change of Ainu utensils from stone to metal ones in the eighth century (p.53). However, if trade in metal utensils occurred then why not the transfer of horse riding technology? Another point brought up by Takahashi is his belief that the Ezo of Hokkaido may have rode horses bareback like the American Plains Indians, and that this could account for the lack of horse riding equipment found in archeological sites during later periods. The problem is not only the lack of horse riding equipment, but the lack of horse remains and bones in Hokkaido from later time periods (p.54).

However, the finding recently, as I have detailed in the web page [Ezo Ana kofun and Emishi society](#) is that similar tombs have been discovered in Hokkaido that have been discovered in the Tohoku that culturally ties together both regions during the time of the Emishi ascendancy in the Tohoku. It is only after the start of the medieval period during the pre-Satsumon when the evidence of cultural change shows no evidence of a horse riding culture north of Honshu.

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If the ancestors of the Ainu had fought as horse archers in the Tohoku in the ninth century how could they have lost interest in horses by the medieval period? It is hard to understand why they would give up raising and riding horses in Hokkaido. In Honshu they never gave up horse riding. The Ezo of north Honshu became part of the horse riding culture of the Japanese samurai. Their descendants made up the armies of the Abe and Kiyowara of the eleventh century. Their martial traditions of horse archery are not contradicted by the Yamato armies who adopted Emishi style fighting according to William Wayne Farris (1992). There are still unanswered questions about the separate course that Hokkaido culture took after the effective conquest of the Tohoku, however, this does not in any way take away from the culture the two areas seemed to share earlier.

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Kenjiro 2007.11.22 (revised 2009.10.25)