

Who Were the Emishi?

The question regarding 'who were the Emishi?' historically comes down to: were they ancestors of, or related to the Ainu? Or were they related to the Japanese? The short answer is that they were related to both as ancestors to different degrees, but are neither of the two, though they were the cultural and ethnic predecessors of the Ainu. This sounds complicated but true, and draws from what is currently known from studies done in physical anthropology, archeology and history. The Emishi and later Ainu are related to each other in an ancestor-descendant relationship since it is thought that the Ainu emerged from them later in Hokkaido from Emishi who had moved there from the Tohoku during and after the Japanese conquest, and long after the Emishi were gone as a separate people in northern Honshu. Also, according to [recent studies](#) the Emishi, and the areas under their control, included among them Kofun people living near the frontier who sided with them against the central Japanese state. The Emishi shared an ethnic and cultural relationship with the Ainu, and incorporated frontier Kofun people who were not part of the Japanese Yamato state though they were ethnically similar to other Kofun Japanese. And when the Emishi of north Honshu were incorporated into the Japanese state after their conquest they also left their traces in the modern Tohoku Japanese population. What needs to be emphasized is that the population among the inhabitants of Japan during that distant time period was very different ethnically and culturally from the population in modern Japan. We must not see this through the lens of the modern relationship between the Japanese and the Ainu, otherwise, we are in danger of anachronism, of reading the present into the past. The modern separation between the Ainu and Japanese occurred much more recently during the Matsumae rule of southern Hokkaido. What follows is a summary of when the Emishi were first mentioned in history, and traces this through the archaeological and skeletal evidence used recently to refine our modern understanding of these people.

Unlike modern Japan, in the seventh century, all of Hokkaido and the northern half of the Tohoku (northeast) region of Honshu was not part of its geography: it is thought the Emishi lived in this area, mainly central to northern Tohoku and southern to central Hokkaido; the Ashihase lived in northern and central Hokkaido. By the seventeenth century, the Japanese inhabited all of Honshu and the southern edge of Hokkaido, and the descendants of the Emishi of Hokkaido, known as Ezo before the Meiji period (mid-nineteenth century), lived in all of Hokkaido as well as Chishima (Kuril islands), and Karafuto (Sakhalin) and are known today as Ainu. Little is known about what happened to the Ashihase by the early modern period. They are thought to have been displaced or absorbed by the Emishi and Satsumon ancestors of the Ainu.

The Emishi are first mentioned in Japan's earliest history books which were written in the early eighth century in the form of the short *Kojiki* and the much larger *Nihon Shoki*. The contents in the books regarding the earliest ages may or may not be accurate so the reader needs to be discerning in using these sources. I have used these sources for pages on this website when I believe there is some important historical information that is possibly true after filtering out the myths and accounting for inaccurate time lines. However, most scholars believe that the information becomes more reliable after the mid-seventh century.

There were three ethnic groups in ancient Japan: Japanese, Emishi and Ashihase (possibly Okhotsk related to the Amur people). The first time that the Emishi are written about by Japanese writers in the *Nihon shoki* they are classified as rebels and external enemies of the Japanese state. This is a Japanese court centric view, but are the only written records about them, except for references from the T'ang and Sung Chinese sources, and reflects the Japanese viewpoint which is itself influenced by the Chinese view of a division between the civilized world (themselves) and the "barbarians." The Japanese needing legitimacy for their own empire used the Emishi for propaganda purposes when they visited the T'ang Chinese, namely that they too had to deal with external barbarians. Of course to the Chinese the Japanese were seen as eastern barbarians themselves. The Japanese divided the Emishi into those who had submitted themselves to Japanese rule as allies and subjects, and those who were outside their authority (*iteki*). Those outside imperial authority were seen as "barbarians" beyond the frontier who needed to be brought under the civilizing influence of the state. *Michinoku*, the name the Japanese had given for the Tohoku, literally translates as "deepest road" with the connotation of a far away place: the Emishi were seen as inhabitants of this far away land, beyond the frontier. To understand the Japanese perspective on the Emishi this propaganda shared with other East Asian states, particularly T'ang China, needs to be understood.

The Ashihase were thought of as even further away, a foreign people altogether, and it is not clear who they were; however, recent research offer clues that the relationship between the Ashihase and the Emishi mirrored the relationship between the Japanese and the Emishi. That is, just as the Japanese were completing their conquest of the Tohoku region, Emishi began to consolidate more of Hokkaido. The Ashihase were most likely an Amur river people who were definitely East Asian hunter-gatherers who moved south from Sakhalin into Hokkaido and were either displaced or conquered and absorbed by the Emishi of the Satsumon culture. The Satsumon consolidated their hold about the same time that the Tohoku Emishi began to migrate into Hokkaido (see especially Yamaura 1999:42-45, and [Crawford](#) that the Satsumon culture probably emerged from the Tohoku Emishi. Satsumon is a name of a culture that is ancestral to the Hokkaido Ainu).

According to archeological findings from the fifth to the seventh centuries AD, the northern half of Tohoku (roughly extending from northern Miyagi prefecture to Aomori) and the western part of Hokkaido formed a single cultural area, and the evidence for this is that many Ainu place names are left in the Tohoku. It goes beyond the discussion of this introduction to go into the [Jomon](#), [Epi-Jomon](#) and Yayoi cultures as they affected the Tohoku region (please follow links to those pages). It is now believed that evidence points to the Emishi tie with the Tohoku Middle Yayoi pottery culture that is heavily influenced by Jomon forms--as these peoples were gradually adopting Yayoi culture from the seventh to the eighth century.

Indirect evidence that shows the relationship between the Jomon, Ancient Japanese and the Ainu come from studies in physical anthropology.¹ In [several studies](#) of cranial and skeletal measurements of past and present Japanese populations there is a historical correlation between the Ainu and Jomon. In these findings, Jomon skeletal remains are most ancestral to the Ainu population. There is evidence of change also in the Japanese population from the middle of Japan outward to the peripheral areas, as in the Tohoku where the Emishi lived, such that the peripheral areas show a closer relationship to the Ainu and Jomon. When the cranial measurements of the Jomon are compared with other East Asian groups, including modern Japanese, they define one extreme deviation from mongoloid or East Asian groups. One could consider them to be a race apart from other East Asians, even when Japanese populations that have closer affinities to them are included with the exception of the Ainu (see Ossenberg 1986:199-215; Kidder 1993:79,101).

When they were first widely encountered by Europeans in the nineteenth century these people contrasted so strongly with the surrounding Japanese population they were thought of as proto-Caucasoid. This belief continued to influence scholars up to the twentieth century. We now know this is untrue. After more than a century of studying their skeletal morphology they have been re-classified as [related to the Austronesian](#). The Jomon defined a northern branch of Austronesians who had lighter skin than the Austronesians in Australia, and from the outside could be mistaken as proto-Caucasoid. However, the modern Ainu are midway between modern Japanese and the Jomon due to assimilation by Japanese, and assimilation of Okhosk making them further removed from their Austronesian origins. As a group though they still retain more of the Jomon inheritance than any other group in Japan.

Even today, the traces of Jomon inheritance can be seen in some modern Japanese populations. In areas furthest from the central areas of Japan, Jomon features are still present according to the same cranial and skeletal analyses above. As a whole there is a gradient from the modern Kinki being least related (the Osaka, Kansai area), to the modern Kanto (the Tokyo area), to the modern Tohoku, to the Ainu people who are most related to the ancient Jomon population. The modern Tohoku population is closer to the Jomon than the modern Kinki group in this gradient. This modern data corroborates the argument, that each area conquered by the continental Asian group who were the Japanese speakers who started from the Kinki region were absorbed by them, so that those who were conquered later still conserved more Jomon traits than those who were conquered at an earlier time. The Emishi and the Ainu were the latest of the Jomon people to be conquered during historical time, and the conquest of the former is the subject of this web page.

The place where the Emishi fit in with the Ainu follows in the descriptions about the former in the historical period. They are known as *mojin* or *kebito* (hairy people) by the Japanese, and contemporary Chinese court historians of the T'ang. The Ainu are known for their abundant hair, both on the torso and limbs, and mostly in their heavy beards. Just as I wrote above it is thought that people ancestral to the Ainu lived in northern Honshu in this time period because of the many Ainoid place names that are left. This coincides with the historical area the Emishi are thought to have settled. The very word Emishi is probably a Japanese derivation of the word "*emchiu*" or "*enju*" which translates to "man" in the Ainu language. The kanji characters for Emishi are identical to Ezo. Before they were known as Ainu in the Meiji period they were known as Ezo.

This is the basic scenario, however, plenty of questions remain. There were two overlapping movements that can be traced archaeologically. One is the earlier movement of Yayoi culture centered on rice cultivation having penetrated to northern Tohoku (Aomori prefecture) by the first century AD. The other is the retreat of rice cultivation from the third to the fifth centuries in the same northern Tohoku areas as the climate changed making rice cultivation no longer viable in far northern Honshu. Is this an initial movement possibly of Japanese speakers, or simply the spread of rice cultivation among Emishi ancestors? Was there also a counter-movement of people from the north, and can this be identified with the Emishi? The other issue is the creation of kofun mounds both the keyhole variety thought of as Japanese, and tunnel tombs which are thought to have been built by both Emishi and Japanese.

The tunnel tomb burial sites have recently yielded new information. Further [cranial studies of central Tohoku](#) burial sites during the Emishi era (sixth into the eighth centuries) reveal that the skulls in the region are not all Jomon types, but rather Kofun in nature (related to Kanto Kofun) even though Jomon type skulls are found among them. It is not uniform. There are two possible explanations for this: that ancient Japanese frontier families who moved into the Tohoku early on lived side by side with Emishi neighbors and they saw themselves as locals; or that the Emishi themselves included such families in their ranks. Did the Emishi army include alliances with local *gozoku* (great families)? The most plausible explanation is that they lived in different communities side by side with Japanese settlers particularly in what is now Miyagi prefecture, but that most Emishi included in their ranks Kofun people who had settled in Japan before the time of the Tohoku wars, and that further north the Emishi population had less Kofun influence within their group. This is the only way to explain the degree of difference from one burial site to another in this area: some of these burial sites were clearly Japanese while others were Emishi as noted in the linked study on central Tohoku, and those that look like Emishi tombs such as the Yamoto site show that they included among their members Kofun descendants. These findings are all preliminary as they are fairly recent. As more finds are integrated this picture could change.

Even if the Emishi who moved to Hokkaido were ancestors of the Ainu, they were different culturally from both Japanese and Ainu. They cannot be seen as one or the other. The Emishi had a distinct culture that differed from that of the Ainu. The primary difference was that the [Emishi were horse riders](#), and much of their culture and style of warfare were adapted to the use of the horse. In this regard, the Emishi had a profound influence on the emerging Japanese Yamato state: they essentially forced the Yamato armies to adopt much of their style of warfare in order to beat them, and even the title of Sei-i-tai shogun came from the title of the general appointed by the court to fight them. Second, they were influenced by the Kofun culture through their trade with the Japanese, and had adopted some of its practices such as agriculture. Third, their lifestyle was rooted in their Epi-Jomon culture, and continued the hunting and gathering lifestyle, particularly those living in the mountains. The Emishi integrated influences from both their Epi-Jomon culture with the Kofun culture of their neighbors. Further, many Emishi became subject to the Japanese state, and eventually disappeared as a separate ethnic group once they were conquered, becoming intermarried or absorbed into the Japanese population. There were other Emishi groups that continued to live independent of the Japanese Yamato state roughly north of present day Morioka and Akita in the west. These northern areas continued to be [the frontier](#) between the Japanese cultural area and the Emishi culture well into the medieval period. It was these groups that eventually became known as *Ezo*, the creators of Satsumon ware and ancestors of the Ainu. Furthermore, the southern areas that were ostensibly conquered by the Yamato armies became semi-independent in the tenth century under the Abe and Kiyowara families, as wars for control became a pattern between the Emishi descendants, now within the Japanese cultural sphere and the central government well into the thirteenth century.



The illustration shows Emishi as they may have appeared in the mid-seventh century AD. They have some armor taken either from trade with the Japanese, or in some cases from captive and fallen soldiers. These would include the iron helmets and cuirasses. Weapons were items of trade. Swords, daggers and spears were thought to be of Emishi manufacture: small daggers and *warabite-tou* swords. Bows also were natively produced. They were made of *maruki* wood and some were lacquered (second from right). The tatoos reflect a description given to these people in the *Nihon-shoki*. Their clothing is Ainu in design and execution assuming that this textile culture was shared with their ancestors the epi-Jomon as well (the textile culture was perhaps an earlier precursor to the Ainu). This is not known for certain. This illustration differs from the ones I have recently produced particularly in the *Conquest of Emishi* page and represents an earlier interpretation. However, aside from possibly mature Ainu textile, this is still a valid interpretation as it shows the mixed cultural elements, both textiles from the Japanese Kofun and Nara cultures through trade to animal hides that they produced since the Jomon period. This accurately portrays the physical types ranging from epi-Jomon (Ainu) to a mixture of Yayoi Japanese settlers with epi-Jomon. One note on the belts seen in the center and second to the right figure: these belts were modeled after those that were given to Emishi chiefs by the Japanese Ritsuryo state and are non-native. They were given to show court ranks and used by the Japanese to confer *kimi* status on regional allied Emishi leaders and were found in their tombs. This revision (5/2/2016) of the arms and armor (also done recently on illustrations on other web pages) reflects ongoing research.²

Notes:

1. Indirect evidence in this case due to the sample containing modern Ainu, Jomon, Yayoi Japanese, Kofun Japanese, modern Japanese and various East Asian populations outside Japan. Skeletons from known Emishi location/time periods were not included not from design, but out of the scarcity of available material.
2. Revising these drawings from traditional to digital format has been necessary but a challenge. This one was especially difficult as I had to maintain the style of black on white pen ink using precise shading to retain the effect.

References:

Ossenberg, Nancy S., "Isolate Conservatism and Hybridization in the Population History of Japan" in Akazawa, T. and C.M.Aikens, eds. *Prehistoric Hunter-Gatherers in Japan*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1986.

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