The “Prehistoric” and “Protohistoric” Home of the Ainu

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Abstract

The Ainu are an indigenous people who today live on Japan’s northernmost main island, Hokkaidō. Very few of the Ainu speak their ancestral language, though other parts of their traditional culture survive through a thriving community of indigenous artists and craftspeople. In this paper, I will examine one of the various “myths” about the Ainu in historical and so-called “pre-historical” times: their distribution in the Japanese archipelago. I show that the popularly accepted notion on this issue does not hold up to ethnohistorical scrutiny.

Keywords: Ainu, archaeology, ethnohistory, philology, Urheimat

1 Introduction

The Ainu are an indigenous people who today live mainly on Japan’s northernmost island, Hokkaidō. Essentially no Ainu maintain an “indigenous” lifestyle, though many maintain their traditional rituals and art (HKS 2010, pp. 20-21). The only (possibly) extant variety of the Ainu language, the Hokkaidō dialect group, is critically endangered if not extinct (Bugaeva 2011, p. 520).

It is still widely accepted that the Ainu are an indigenous people of northern Japan (cf. Hudson 1999a, p. 74). While there has been known but debatable mentions of supposed precursor cultures to the Ainu in various Old Japanese texts, only recently have some instances of actual Ainu words been “discovered” in those texts (Vovin 2005; HKS 2010, p. 3). This paper will examine the philological, archaeological, and historical evidence to attempt to determine exactly where the Ainu lived in the “prehistory” and “protohistory” of the Japanese Archipelago.
2 Philological Evidence

We can gain some insight into the situation by taking a fresh look at the philological evidence. While the record for Ainu itself starts essentially with folklore collected starting from the 19th century CE, evidence in Japanese and in other languages is quite a bit older.

2.1 Old Japanese

The oldest attestations of any form of Ainu comes from Old Japanese. The Old Japanese corpus is has many *hapax legomena*, words with unclear etymology, and poetic set phrases. To attempt to deal with this, There are, however, explanations to be found for some of these mysterious words, such as those found in *Fudoki* and the *Man’yōshū* (Vovin 2009).

*Fudoki* are a collection of descriptions of the various provinces of Japan compiled in the early 8th century CE (Vovin 2005, pp. 5-6). While they are mainly written in Classical Chinese, and only one survives completely intact, the poems which survive all seem to be in the local dialect for the region (Vovin 2005, pp. 5-6). While it may not be surprising to yet again find Ainu words, it is very surprising that they turned up not only in the *Fudoki* pertaining to Eastern Japan¹, but also in *Fudoki* pertaining to Kyūshū (Vovin 2009, p. 29).

While a macaronic text like the one described in the following section on Classical Japanese would be ideal, we instead find just individual words in these Old Japanese texts (Vovin 2009, *passim*). For example, in Book 17 of the *Man’yōshū*, one debated word was *nötö*, apparently some sort of place name or a poetic epithet added to a place name (Vovin 2009, pp. 9-10). A simple explanation is that Old Japanese *nötö* is actually Ainu *not*, meaning “peninsula” (Vovin 2009, p. 9). Perhaps a more convincing example is the unclear Eastern Old Japanese word *siⁿta*, which appears in several poems of the *Man’yōshū* (Vovin 2009, pp. 24-27). Old Japanese did not have a phoneme /h/ (Vovin 2005, pp. 36-37). Either /s/ or /k/ were used in its place in loanwords from Korean and, in this case, Ainu (Vovin 2009, p. 27). Eastern Old Japanese *siⁿta* is thus explained as Ainu *hi-ta* [time-LOC], meaning “when” (Vovin 2009, p. 27).

So why is this surprising? If the Japanese are migrants from the Korean peninsula, then their point of entry to the Japanese archipelago would have been through Kyūshū, circa 900 BCE (long-scale chronology) to 300 BCE (short-scale chronology)

¹In a discussion of Japanese geography, east and west are interchangeable with north and south.
(Shôda 2007). If the Ainu—or a precursor culture to the Ainu—were ever that far south, one might have expected them to have assimilated to Japanese in that timeframe—anywhere from a little under a millennium to over two and a half millennia. Yet, we have clear cases of Ainu words found in Old Japanese texts. Most of these are from the Eastern Provinces, where we might expect Ainu speakers at this time, but some are from Kyūshū, as well (Vovin 2009, p. 34).

2.2 Non-Japonic, Non-Ainu Sources

One of the oldest texts to clearly mention the Ainu is not Japanese, but Latin. Fr. Aloisius Froes, a Christian missionary to Japan, wrote the following in a letter to other Jesuit missionaries in China and India in 1565:

Japoniae terrae in Septentrionem adiacet amplissima sylvestrium hominum regio, leucas ab urbe Meaco trecentas. Bestiarum pellibus induuntur, toto hirti corpore, ingenti barba, mystacibus maximis quas pixillo subrigunt potaturi. Vini gens aida in primis, ad bella ferox, formidolasa Japoniis.² In praelio sauciati, salitisa quibus ablunt vulnera, id unum genti remedium est. Speculum gestare dicuntur in pectore; ad caput gladios alligant sic, ut in humeros manubrium desinat. Sacra habent nulla, caelum dumtaxat venerari soliti sunt.³ (von Siebold 1859, p. 98)

There is no evidence, as far as I am aware, that the Jesuits in Japan ever went far outside of Kyōto. While it would not be out of character for the Jesuits to go out into the hinterlands for their missionary work, with the sheer distances involved, I

²The English translations I found disagree with one another. While von Siebold (1859, p. 98) agrees with me, Hakluyt (1889, pp. 233-234) says that they are “much feared by the Japanese.”

³While there are two existing translations: Hakluyt (1889) and von Siebold (1859). I felt they had issues, so I have chosen to use my own translation:

There is a spacious country of wild men north of the land of Japan, 300 leagues from the city of Meaco. They are clothed in the skins of animals, their whole bodies are covered with hair, they have huge beards, and they have large mustaches which they lift with a wooden stick when they are drinking. They are a tribe primarily passionate for wine, they are fierce [in going to] war, [and] are scared of the Japanese. When they are wounded in battle, they wash their wounds with salt water, that is the only remedy the people have. It is said they carry mirrors in their breast; they tie swords on their head thus, so that the hilts stop at their upper arms. They have no religious rites other than their custom of praying to heaven.
believe that Froes’ information about the Ainu is second-hand information gained from the Japanese. Some parts appear to be entirely in line with both Japanese and later Western descriptions of the Ainu. For instance, the Ainu are known for being “hairy”, and they do have so-called “mustache-holders”, called *ikupasuy*, which are indeed used to lift up a man’s mustache when he is drinking (though their main function is to flick alcohol in religious rituals as an offering to the spirits).

While the Ainu did probably use salt water as a disinfectant (and it is still used as such in modern dentistry, for example for the same purpose), to say that it was their only medicine is perhaps a bit hasty. For example, the Ainu used greater celandine (*Chelidonium majus*) in various ways, one of which was to topically treat warts (Batchelor and Miyabe 1893, p. 202). Pharmacological research shows that *C. majus* may indeed be effective in inhibiting proteins important to papilloma viruses, which causes warts (Rogel et al. 1998, p. 1645). This is not to say that the Ainu had anything akin to a germ theory of disease or a knowledge of pharmacology; many of their traditional plant-based medicines were thought to work by driving out the evil spirits which cause disease (Batchelor and Miyabe 1893, *passim*).

The claim about their religious rites, to me, really shows that this information was second-hand. In the summer of 2011, I took part in a dig by the Baikal-Hokkaidō Archaeology Project run by the University of Alberta and the University of Hokkaidō on the island of Rebun, which is located off the northwest coast of Hokkaidō. During my time there I got the chance to participate in a *kamuynomi* (literally, “pray to the gods”), run by members of the Ainu Culture Center in Sapporo. Further, both the ethnographic record about the Ainu as well as the folklore record of the Ainu from the 19th century speak of many religious rites, some of which we only know the name of. For example, Nakagawa (2000) discusses a ceremony called *ukewehomsu*, which was never recorded, but is believed to have been some sort of funeral rite conducted when there were no bodies (2000, p. 61). So to say that the Ainu have no religious rituals other than prayer is a little off.

One claim that deserves special mention is the claim of distance. Von Siebold (1859) says that there are 17.5 of Froes’ *leucas* (translated above as “leagues”) to a degree (1859, p. 98). If this measurement is a straight line, it would place the Ainu as living further north than Hokkaidō, in the northern half of Sakhalin and in the Kuril Islands. The Ainu did probably live 17 degrees from the capital, Kyōto, at this point in time—on the various Kuril Islands and Sakhalin, but it is likely that they lived even closer as well.

A further complication is whether the distance is over a straight line or whether it is following a road, with bends and curves. We can check this with an informal experiment. Google Maps lists the average distance by car on Japan’s current high-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Average Distance</th>
<th>Froes’ Leucas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sendai</td>
<td>835 km</td>
<td>172 leucas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aomori</td>
<td>1133 km</td>
<td>233 leucas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tappikaitei</td>
<td>1196 km</td>
<td>246 leucas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hakodate</td>
<td>1248 km</td>
<td>257 leucas</td>
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<td>Sapporo</td>
<td>1557 km</td>
<td>320 leucas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asahikawa</td>
<td>1678 km</td>
<td>345 leucas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kushiro</td>
<td>1807 km</td>
<td>371 leucas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakkanai</td>
<td>1916 km</td>
<td>394 leucas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The average distance by car from Kyōto Station to various train stations in Northern Japan, according to Google Maps, and the approximate equivalent in Froes’ leucas.

The way system from Kyōto Station to various stations in Japan’s north, listed in Table 1.

The distances in Table 1 should be relatively efficient routes which may not have been available to travelers at the time, many of whom would have traveled by sea. Here, I have assumed that if 17.5 leagues are in one degree, then there are approximately 4,860 meters to one league. I have also rounded my approximation of Froes’ leucas to the nearest integer.

This is a much closer to what we know of in the 18th century than the straight line distance given above, which would put the Ainu much further to the north. Here, the Ainu are still a bit farther north than they would have been at this time, as Sapporo didn’t begin to be settled by the Japanese in any large number until the mid to late 1800s (SMY 2011).

2.3 Classical Japanese

The Ise Monogatari is a collection of tanka⁴ and explanatory narratives by an unknown author—though parts are reported to have been written by Ariwara-no-Narihira, compiled sometime in the late 9th century CE (Vovin 2002, p. 7). It probably represents a kind of transitional form of Japanese, between Old and Middle

⁴Tanka are poems consisting of five lines, which (usually) contain 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables, 7 syllables, and 7 syllables.
Dan⁵ XIV of the *Ise Monogatari* is regarded as mysterious in Japanese philology, as two lines are seemingly gibberish. It is important to reproduce at least a translation in its entirety, as the context is important:

むかし、おとこ、みちの国にすずろに行きいたりにけり。そこなる女、京の人はめづらかにやおぼえけん、せちに思へる心なんありけり。さて、かの女、

中々に
恋に死なずは
桑子にぞ
なるべかりける
玉の緸ばかり

歌さへぞひなびたりける。さすがにあはれとや思ひけん、いきて寝にいけり。夜深く出でにければ、女、

夜も開けば
きつにはめなで
くたかけの
まだきに鳴いて
せなきやりつる

といへるに、おとこ、京へなんまかるとて、

栗原の
あねはの松の
人ならば
都のつとに
いざいはましを

といへりければ、よるこぼひて、「思ひけらし」とぞいひをりける。⁶

(Sakakura et al. 1969, pp. 93-94)

⁵A *dan* is essentially a chapter in the *Ise Monogatari*.

⁶*Helen McCullough’s translation:*

Once a man found himself in Michinoku in the course of his wanderings. A girl of the province, who was probably unaccustomed to meeting people from the capital, fell head over heels in love with him and sent him a poem as countrified as she was:

Far better it were
to turn into a silkworm,
even for a while,
The parts in question are the second line and the first word of the third line of the second poem: these are, outside of received wisdom on the matter, gibberish in Classical Japanese. The poem is:

(1) Yo mo ak -eba / kitunifamenade / kita kake -no / evening also dawn -COND / ?? / ? rooster -GEN / 
madaki n -i nak -i -te / se -na -wo yar too_early COP -INF cry -INF -SUB / male_beloved -DIM -ACC send
-i -t -uru
-INF -PFV -ATTR
‘When daybreak arrives, / I’ll toss him into the cistern– / that pesky rooster / who raises his voice too soon / and drives my lover away.’

Glossing is mine, translation is from McCullough (1990, pp. 45-46).

There are several interpretations for the mysterious second line, including foxes eating the rooster, throwing the rooster into a well, among others (Vovin 2011). Vovin, however, has proposed a novel solution to these lines: they are not Japanese at all, but instead, we have a macaronic poem, written mostly in Japanese but with a little over a line of Ainu (Vovin 2011).

In Ainu, we can analyze these lines as something other than gibberish:

than to be tortured to death
by a foolish passion

He must have pitied her in spite of her crudity, because he went to her house and slept with her. He left in the middle of the night, whereupon she sent him this:

When daybreak arrives,
I’ll toss him into the cistern–
that pesky rooster
who raises his voice too soon
and drives my lover away.

Presently, the man sent word that he was returning to the capital. His poem:

Were it but human–
the pine tree of Aneha
at Kurihara–
I would tell it, "Come and be
my keepsake in the city:"

The girl was overjoyed. "I am sure he is in love with me," she said (McCullough 1990, pp. 45-46).
...k- Ø- etune =wa Ø- monak -te, /
...1.SG.SUBJ- 3SG.OBJ- hate =and 3SG.OBJ- be_awake -CAUS, /
kotan...

house...

‘...I hate [it], and it makes him wake up, / [as] the house [rooster]...’

Glossing here is mine, not that of Vovin (2011). Vovin adds the marker i- before the verb monak, which he stated was a 3rd person object marker. In a later personal communication, he said that this was an oversight; i- is not the 3rd person object marker.

While the phonetics may seem a bit of a stretch at first, they are all in line with the regional variety of Japanese spoken in Kurihara, as well as how Ainu loanwords behaved in older varieties of Japanese. Eastern Japanese dialects such as this example would have raised the mid vowels /e/ and /o/ to /i/ and /u/, respectively, in non-final syllables (Vovin 2011). O in Ainu is not rounded (phonetically something along the lines of [ɤ]), so it was most likely interpreted first as /ə/ in Eastern Old Japanese (Vovin 2011). /ə/ then regularly merged with /e/ in Eastern Old Japanese after labial and velar consonants (Vovin 2011). Finally, syllable-final consonants in Ainu are dropped when they were borrowed into Old Japanese (Vovin 2011).

We have further reason to believe this poem, at least, is influenced by Eastern Old Japanese: sena (“male beloved”) is a dialectal feature; in the standard language of the time, seko (id.) would be expected (Vovin 2011).

Further, at least for the word kuta, we have good evidence that it is indeed Ainu. The oldest manuscript versions of the Ise Monogatari include an annotation which described how the people in the North call their houses kuta (Vovin 2011). Interestingly, this is a semantic mis-match: kotan means “village”, not “house”; the typical Ainu word for “house” is cise. However, this sort of semantic shift is not unknown—Vovin brings up several examples in Indo-European languages where “house” has become the word for “village” and vice-versa (Vovin 2011).

Vovin’s reading of the second poem is:

Even if the daybreak would arrive,
I would hate it,
as the house rooster
made [him] awake crying too early,
and send my beloved away (Vovin 2011)

Vovin feels that this interpretation of the poem much better accounts for the sudden departure of the man, as well as his biting response, where he calls the
woman not human, which echoes earlier descriptions of the Ainu in the protohistoric texts such as the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, where the Ainu were referred to as *tuti-kumô*, literally “earth-spiders” (Vovin 2011). The fact that there is a Japanese-Ainu macaronic poem in the earliest work of Classical Japanese also leads to the implication that the Ainu were still in the Tōhoku region as late as the 9th century CE.

## 3 Anthropological Evidence

Two subfields of anthropology can provide us with evidence about the distribution of the Ainu. First, biological anthropology, through genetic studies, can give us large-scale—but indirect—clues about the ancestry of the Ainu. Second, archaeology gives us much more direct evidence, though evidence that is subject to the positives and negatives of needing to be interpreted.

First, however, several terms need to be introduced. *Jōmon* is the term given to the neolithic in Japan, specifically to a culture which used knapped stone tools and made corded ware pottery (*Jōmon* literally means “cord-patterned”) (Hudson 1999b, pp. 3-6, 39). The *Jōmon* people were also likely horticulturalists, growing millet (Hudson 1999b, pp. 104-106). The *Yayoi* culture is the first culture to practice true agriculture in Japan. The dating of the transition between *Jōmon* and *Yayoi* is currently under debate, with new radiocarbon dating pushing the transition back to around 900 BCE, while more traditional approaches based off of interconnected changes in pottery morphology place it around 300 BCE (Shōda 2007). *Epi-Jōmon* refers to those areas—especially ones outside of Eastern Japan—that did not adopt wet rice cultivation Hudson (1999b, p. 198). The *Satsumon* culture followed the Epi-Jomon culture in southern Hokkaidō from 700-1300 CE, and has it’s own unique pottery style (Fukasawa 1998, p. 23; Hudson 1999b, p. 67). Finally, the *Okhotsk* culture—also in Hokkaidō around the same time as the Satsumon culture—appears to be genetically unrelated to the *Jōmon*/Epi-*Jōmon*/Satsumon cultures, coming from the Amur River Valley in what is today the Russian Far East (Hudson 1999b, p. 67).

### 3.1 Genetics

According to Sato et al. (2009), the primary genetic contributions to the archaeological remains of the Ainu are the Okhotsk people (who are in turn made up of a mix of the ancestors of the modern peoples of the lower Amur River and the ancient Koryak), as well as the Epi-*Jōmon*/Satsumon people (who have some gene
There is also clear gene flow from the Japanese to the modern Ainu, with perhaps 40-60% genetic admixture (Hudson 1999a, pp. 73-74; Omoto and Saitou 1997, p. 442). This means that the modern Ainu share some parentage with the Japanese. The gene flow, however, was two-way, with the Japanese also having some Jōmon genetic contribution (Hudson 1999a, pp. 73-74; Hudson 1999b, p. 60). This also lends further credence to the story from the *Ise Monogatari*, discussed above, in which Vovin proposed that the woman in the story was actually Ainu or part Ainu living side-by-side with both other Ainu people as well as Japanese people (Vovin 2011).

The data and the various debates in the genetics of East Asia, however, tell us little of where the Ainu lived directly.

### 3.2 Archaeobotany

Systematic approaches to collecting and analyzing plant remains were first implemented in the mid 1970s in Japan (Crawford, Hurley, and Masakazu 1976, p. 145). At that point, it was well known that the Yayoi culture marks the sudden appearance of wet rice agriculture to Japan (Hudson 1999b, p. 118). The studies starting in 1970s and 1980s looking at the Jōmon and Satsumon, centered mainly in Hokkaidō and northern Japan, however, revealed a whole different world in terms of Japanese prehistory. The Jōmon culture did have dry rice and millet cultivation, it was not at a level which could be called agriculture, especially when compared to the clusters of rice paddies used by the Yayoi (Hudson 1999b, pp. 108-115, 119) Further, all evidence seems to point that the Yayoi began in Kyūshū and then migrated north (Hudson 1999b, pp. 146-147)

With the understanding of Jōmon/Epi-Jōmon, Satsumon, and Okhotsk culture horticulture, we can actually link these cultures to the Ainu through a new interpretation of the historical record. The Matsumae clan was the first group of Japanese to control a portion of Hokkaidō, around 1590 CE (though their ancestors had been in southern Hokkaidō as early as the 13th century CE) (Fukasawa 1998, p. 3). Unlike other feudal domains, called *han* in Japanese, the Matsumae did not pay tribute to the Shōgun primarily in rice; instead, they provided things including bear pelts, eagle feathers, various marine resources, etc. (Fukasawa 1998, p. 3). The Matsumae themselves did not provide most of these items; the Ainu did (Fukasawa 1998, p. 3). Unfortunately, however, most of the trade records no longer exist, so the true extent of this Ainu-Japanese fur trade is not known (Hudson 1999a, pp. 76-77). The Ainu in the north also likely were involved with Chinese fur traders (beginning in the 12th-13th centuries CE) in the Amur River Valley and on Sakhalin (Hudson 1999a, pp. 76-77).
The extent of the trade networks of the indigenous peoples of Northeast Asia remains to be seen, but recent work in the molecular analysis of bone in humans and animals shows two contrasting points (Weber et al. 2011). In a study of Neolithic hunter-gatherers around Lake Baikal, the analysis shows that their foraging range was actually smaller than one might expect, but that their burial goods show very large scale trade networks (Weber et al. 2011, p. 543). This includes trade from Hokkaidō to Lake Baikal (Andrzej Weber, p.c.).

If the Ainu did not cultivate crops in some fashion, and instead were “mere” hunter-gathers who provided the Matsumae and the Chinese with furs and other natural resources from their lands, one point of the historical record remains puzzling. A fine was imposed by the Matsumae on any Ainu on Matsumae lands who tried to cultivate crops (Fukasawa 1998, pp. 12-13). Often facing famine, the Ainu would still cultivate crops, locating their fields far from their homes (Fukasawa 1998, pp. 12-13). Further, historical accounts by observers from the Japanese mainland considered this activity puzzling, but that it must have some explanation (Takakura 1933, p. 324). These mainland observers were apparently unaware of the Matsumae’s prohibition on cultivation (Fukasawa 1998, p. 13).

The Matsumae, however, did not only use laws: they also ideologically manipulated the Ainu. The Ainu have an animistic belief system and, as discussed above, they believed that a person contracts a disease when a kamuy (“deity” or “spirit”) is very upset with that person’s behavior (Batchelor and Miyabe 1893, passim; Fukasawa 1998, p. 13). The Matsumae preyed off of this, telling the Ainu that if they cultivate crops, the plague deities will become angry, spread epidemic disease, and completely wipe out the Ainu (Fukasawa 1998, p. 13). This practice continued until modern times, with the Ainu themselves having internalized the Matsumae’s reasoning (Fukasawa 1998, p. 13). For example, an Ainu on Sakhalin in the 1800s—geographically, temporally, and culturally distant from the southern Hokkaidō Ainu of the 1600s—said that they needed to be careful not to plant too many crops, or the plague deities would bring epidemic disease (Fukasawa 1998, p. 13).

If the Ainu were “mere” hunter-gatherers, why then would the Matsumae need to go to such lengths to prohibit Ainu horticulture? Therefore, based on these facts, I think there is a strong case that the Satsumon and earlier cultures of the archaeological record, and the Ainu of the historical and ethnographic record are at least in some way a continuity. As such, it would appear that the gradual switch from

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Footnote: By “Japanese mainland”, I mean the islands of Honshū, Kyūshū, and Shikoku.
horticulture to agriculture starting in Kyūshū with the Yayoi migrants from the Korean Peninsula to the Matsumae feudal domain which prohibited cultivation by the Ainu, we have a link, at least in terms of agriculture, between the Ainu and the Jōmon.

### 3.3 Archaeology

Simply put, the defining change between the Satsumon and the Ainu is that the Satsumon, like the other inhabitants of the Japanese Archipelago—including the Jōmon as well as the Japanese proper—produced various styles of pottery, while the Ainu did not (Hudson 1999a, p. 78). While some might say a culture cannot lose a technology, the Ainu—again, assuming the Ainu have some continuity with the Satsumon—present a clear counter-example.

One major change from the Jōmon culture to the Yayoi culture was not a major shift in pottery decorations, but a completely radical change in pottery shape (Hudson 1999b, p. 120). Jōmon pottery generally took a shape called *fukabachi* (“deep bowl”), with other shapes like *asabachi* (“shallow bowl”) and “teapots” being much less common (Hudson 1999b, p. 120). Yayoi pottery, on the other hand, came in four general shapes: *kame* (“pots”), *tsubo* (“narrow-necked jars”), *hachi* (“bowls”), and *takatsuki* (“pedestaled dishes”) (Hudson 1999b, p. 120). The Jōmon also shared several of these shapes of pottery with these later Yayoi ceramics, but the fabrication and decoration techniques are shared between the Yayoi and pottery from the Korean Peninsula (Hudson 1999b, pp. 121-123). In addition to sharing production and finishing methods, pots manufactured on the Korean Peninsula were occasionally brought to the south of the Japanese Archipelago (Hudson 1999b, p. 123).

While it might not seem entirely in the realm of possibility, we might not want to rule out the Ainu simply forgetting how to produce pottery. My grandfather, an electrical engineer originally from Buffalo, New York, likes to tell a story about the Corning Glass Works in Corning, New York. Apparently, back in the day only three people who worked at the Corning Glass Works actually knew the exact formula to make the glass, and the formula was not written down. While many people were involved in the manufacture of the glass, and they all certainly knew the general idea of what sorts of things go into glass, if all three of the people who knew the “secret formula” died suddenly, their secret would die with them, and Corning could not have made their specific kind of glass. That being said, there are major differences. First, Satsumon pottery manufacturing was distributed at various sites—it should be clear, therefore, that more than just a handful of Ainu knew how to produce ceramics. Second, there wasn’t anything “special” about
Satsumon pottery—there was no standard that had to be replicated over and over on a scale or specificity that one finds after the Industrial Revolution. So did the Ainu simply forget how to make ceramics? Probably not.

So what happened? To answer this, it is important to look at how the Ainu cook food, especially since it was not by ceramics. By the 12th century CE, the iron cooking pot ruled supreme in terms of cooking vessels in northern Tohoku (Hudson 1999a, p. 78). Notably, these were interior-lug pots, which were found only in Eastern Japan; in Western Japan other designs were more popular (Hudson 1999a, p. 78) At sites dating from the very end of the Satsumon period on Honshū, a few iron pots have been found, including an interior-lug iron pot (Hudson 1999a, p. 75). Only after this were the same interior-lug iron pots found on Hokkaidō (Hudson 1999a, p. 78). Further, iron pots are what the Ainu are documented as using in the 19th century (cf. von Siebold 1859, p. 115).

The Northern Fujiwara clan ruled the north of Honshū in the 12th century CE (Hudson 1999a, p. 76). While some pieces of Japanese literature, such as Matsuo Bashō’s Oku no Hosomichi (“The Narrow Road to the Interior”), gave us some idea that they were at one time incredibly wealthy, it was not until archaeological excavations began in their one-time provincial capital of Hiraizumi that these claims were substantiated (Hudson 1999a, p. 76). In a practice modeled after one in the capital of Kyōto, unglazed bowls were used once for a feast and then thrown out (Hudson 1999a, p. 76). In northern Japan, this type of bowl is fairly rare, but at Hiraizumi 15 tons of these bowls have been excavated (Hudson 1999a, p. 76).

It is also clear that the Northern Fujiwara did not acquire their wealth based off of rice cultivation; millet was a part of not just the Ainu and the Jōmon/Epi-Jōmon diet, but also the diet of Japanese living in northern Japan until quite recently (Hudson 1999a, p. 76). Therefore, it is likely that trade was how the Northern Fujiwara gained their wealth (Hudson 1999a, p. 76). There is, however, no way to directly prove this: no known economic records remain from the Northern Fujiwara (Hudson 1999a, pp. 76-77). Known trade items include gold, horses, silk and cloth, lacquerware, furs, and eagle feathers (Hudson 1999a, p. 77). Horses were likely not raised by the Ainu; instead the Japanese of Tohoku were well-known for their superior horses (Hudson 1999a, p. 77). The items that do stand out as possibly Ainu are the furs and the eagle feathers (Hudson 1999a, p. 77).

Hudson therefore proposes that the most likely scenario is that the Northern Fujiwara introduced iron pots to the Satsumon/Ainu as a part of increased trade for furs and that the Satsumon/Ainu then began to abandon their indigenous pottery in favor of iron cookware (Hudson 1999a, p. 78).
4 Conclusions

According to the philological record, speakers of an Ainu language are present throughout the Japanese mainland in the most ancient Japanese sources. There are large gaps in terms of any texts between end of the Asuka and Nara periods (700s CE) until the mid the Heian period (900s CE) (Vovin 2005, p. 1). Further, basically none of these materials pertain to the north of Japan. Therefore, it is unclear from the philological record how quickly Ainu speakers were assimilated or driven out due, but they may have been as far south as Kurihara in northern Honshū as late as the 9th century CE. Records continue to be unclear about the southern extent of the Ainu until the 19th century CE, when it is clear that there are no Ainu who maintain an indigenous lifestyle left on the Japanese mainland.

From genetic record, it is clear that while the Japanese are descended from mainland Asians, and while the Ainu are descended from the Neolithic inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago, both have mixed with one another since the Yayoi agricultural revolution around 900 BCE.

Finally, the archaeological record allows us to further link the Jōmon archaeological culture with the historical and ethnographical Ainu culture through both archaeobotany and ceramics, as well as the implied trade networks of northern Japan from said material goods.

We can say is that we have strong reason to believe based on linguistic, genetic, and archaeological evidence that the Ainu were linked to various precursor cultures, such as the Jōmon, and certainly inhabited the entire Japanese archipelago at a point in the remote past. Further, the immigration of Yayoi wet rice farmers around 900 CE began a process of out-competition or assimilation of the Ainu until non-assimilated Ainu could only be found on Hokkaidō, Sakhalin, and in the Kurils—the situation when the ethnographic record of the Ainu began in the 19th century.

What we cannot say with much certainty at this point, however, is the shape of the Japanese expansion northwards. By “shape”, I mean the sorts of things we would look for in a history textbook: events with certain dates tied to them. Instead, we are left with a bunch of unclear “no later than” dates, and a relative lack of a historical record on the settlement of northern Japan until around the early 1600s CE, the start of the Tokugawa Shogunate.
References

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