

Ainu Trade Networks

Ainu established trade networks that extended south to northern Honshu and north to the Sea of Okhotsk. From around the thirteenth century, Ainu from Hokkaido moved into southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands for trade. They traded with communities along the lower Amur River to the west and on the Kamchatka Peninsula to the northeast, exchanging sable furs and items such as lacquerware and iron from Wajin (ethnic Japanese) merchants for silk, glass beads, and other goods.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Wajin from Honshu set up their own trade settlements along the coast of southern Hokkaido. The Matsumae, a prominent family that governed much of Ezo (Hokkaido) during the Edo period (1603–1867), were given control over trade with Ainu and set up formal trading posts. These trading posts served as hubs for the exchange of goods such as preserved salmon, furs, and bear-derived medicines. The Matsumae's trading monopoly gradually shifted the balance of power, and Ainu became increasingly marginalized.