

A sword Attributed to Yamato Senjuin



Introduction:

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to study two Yamato blades. A katana attributed to Taima and a wakazashi by Tegai Kanenaga. Thanks to the generosity of a friend I have now been able to spend some time with a third. This is an O-suriage katana attributed to Senjuin. As said previously Yamato works are comparatively rare and as a result there is scarce written about them. The Senjuin School is the oldest of the five which form the Yamato tradition. It was based at a temple located near the Senju valley at the foot of the Wakakusayama in Nara. There are two separate lineages listed in the Meikan both dating back to the late Heian period with founders of either Yukinobu or Shigehiro. However, as is so often the case, there are no signed works extant by either of these smiths. There are very few signed pieces attributable to early Senjuin. Two reside in the Tokyo National museum and are illustrated in Tanobe Sensei's "A journey to the Gokaden". They date to the early Kamakura period. A Ken signed by Shigeyoshi is dated to the fourth year of Genko (1324)

Workmanship of The Senjuin School:

Depending on the reference used the Senjuin School is divided in two or three groups. The Ko-Senjuin, Chu-Senjuin and Sue- Senjuin (The second two are merged in some references). I have listed the features of the ko Senjuin below:

Sugata: - The early Senjuin tachi are slim tapering with koshi-zori and have a ko-kissaki showing all traits of the classic tachi of the period.

Jitetsu: - The jigane consists of itame and nagare along the entire length of the blade. The jihada has a great deal of ji-nie and chickei which is clear and bright. The Nie in Ko-Senjuin blades is often described as a degree brighter than that seen in Yamashiro work and better than that produced by Soshu masters.

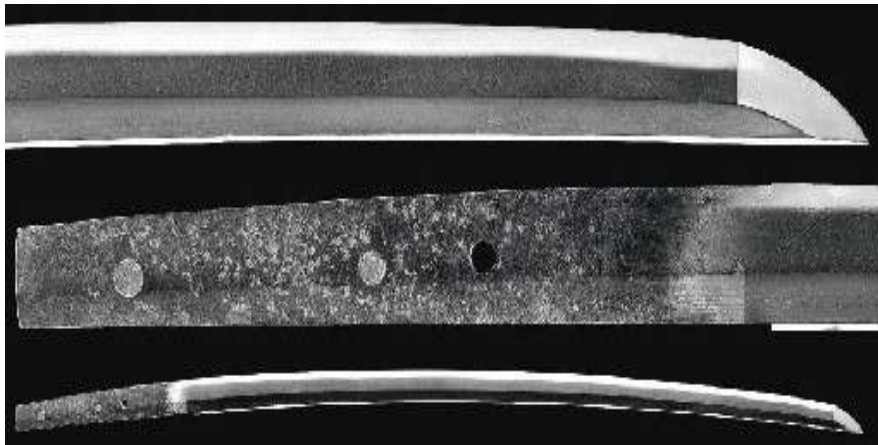
Hamon: - Classic Suguha with ko-midare. The hamon is nie-deki and has a great deal of activity which is constructed around the nagare elements of the hada which are clearly seen in the hamon. Activity includes kinsuji, inazuma sunagashi.

Boshi: - Most commonly Yakitsume but some have a very short kaeri. Strong hakikake are seen resulting in a kaen boshi.

Nakago: - Most blades are O-suriage. Where the original nakago exists they tend to be long and slim.

Mei: - because most blades have been shortened few signed examples exist. As said for previous Yamato Den it is thought that as blades were made for a warrior monk clientele they were seldom signed.

Chu-Senjuin: - Overall structure is similar. Blades become broader and might be described as “stout” or workman-like. The shinogi is high as in other Yamato work. The Shinogi-ji is wide. There is a slight reduction in quality, there is less ji-nie and it lacks the brightness and lustre seen in earlier work.

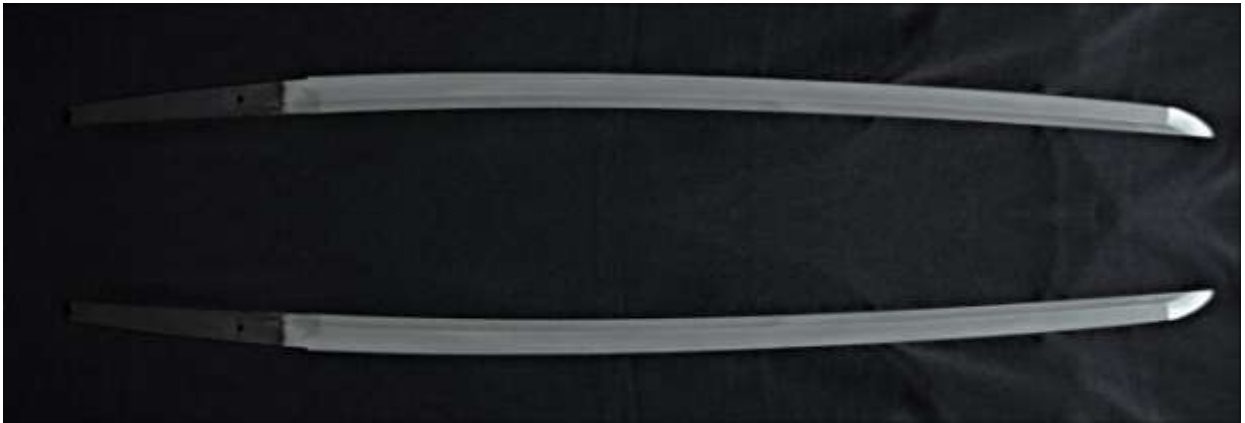


Sue- Senjuin: - At the end of the Kamakura period and progressing in to the Nambokucho differences between the various Yamato Schools become blurred as most attempted to recreate at least some of the popular features seen in Soshu work. Sue Senjuin and Sue Tegai lost many of their distinctive features and quality suffered.

One of the goals I set myself when writing this piece was to try and identify what it was in the study sword that defined it as a Senjuin work. While looking for key features I came across a comment in Tanobe Sensei's previously mention Gokaden work. He states that “If a blade appears to be no later than Kamakura in date, exhibits clear Yamato traits but can't be clearly attributed to any of the four other Yamato Schools it is usually attributed to Senjuin.”

I had originally thought that Tegai was the most representative of general Yamato characteristics but based on this it seems that Senjuin is seen as the foundation or standard representation of Yamato work

The Sword:



Description: - An O-suriage katana. It is Shinogi zukuri and iori-mune. The Shinogi is high and shinogi ji wide. The iori-mune is relatively high. There is hira Niku. There is little difference between mihaba and saki haba. There is an extended chu-kissaki

Nagasa: 69.8cm Sori: 1.2cm

Motohaba 3.0 cm sakihaba 2.2cm

Kasane 0.6cm.

Jigane:- A combination of Itame, Mokume and nagare with patches of O-hada. The nagare becomes more prevalent as it runs in to the hamon. There is no ji-nie or chickei evident.





Hamon: - Suguha hotsure in nie deki. The nie is small and bright. There is a great deal of activity within the hamon with long streaks of sunagashi, inazuma and kinsuji. All of these activities follow the weld lines of the hada which remains clearly visible within the hamon.





Boshi:- The boshi is Yakitsume with very dark and clear hakikake creating a very clear Kaen Boshi



Nakago:- The nakago is O-suriage with one mekugi-ana and the remains of another (probably the original) in the nakago-jiri. The nakago has been well reshaped and has an excellent deep brown patina.



Comment and attribution:-

This is an extremely robust sword. The original length, the lack of taper and extended chu-kissaki suggests a date of manufacture of the late Kamakura period. The scarcity of ji-nie would support this timing and places the blade in the Chu-Senjuin era. Based on Tanobe Sensei's comment mentioned earlier we would therefore expect the blade to exhibit standard Yamato features. The jigane and hamon are what I would describe as classic Yamato. The incredible activity within the hamon and the extended nagare becoming more like masame as it runs through the hamon give the impression of dynamism and power. The high shinogi and broad shinogi-ji also create an impression of powerful functionality

Conclusion: -

This is a very good sword. While it lacks some of the finer points identified in the Taima and Tegai blades previously examined it is extremely well made and in very good condition. While the overall shape might be considered functional and utilitarian, the combination of size, the clear hada and activity within the hamon all add to the overall impression of quiet efficient functionality.

It is often said by enthusiastic Yamato collectors that they enjoy the robust nature and functional look of Yamato blades. They were first and foremost efficient cutting weapons made for battle. This example clearly illustrates those characteristics. For a fighting blade of this nature to have remained in such good condition for more than 650 years says a lot for the craftsman who made it and to those who have carried it through its long life.

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Reference material:

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The Connoisseur's book of Japanese Swords **Kokan Nagayama**

Nihonto Koza - **Sato (Afu Watson translation)**

Koto kantei and kantei supplements 1 and 2 **Markus Sesko**

www.nihonto.com **Mr Fred Weisberg**

