

Real-Life *Kantei* of swords #17, Yamato Swords

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Introduction

There is already much written about Yamato swords from a *kantei* and smith perspective. This article will not attempt to add anything new to the dialogue about this era or try to bring up any new theories or controversial hypotheses, however we will physically compare blades from the five primary Yamato schools to try to understand how these blades received the attribution they have. As has been previously written, the schools are identifiable and distinctive, but we think the six blades examined do not necessarily bear that out.

The six-*mumei* blades we will examine comprise a *Juyo* level Senjuin *katana*, a *Juyo* level Taima *katana*, a *Juyo* level Hosho *katana*, a *Tokubetsu Hozon* level Tegai *katana*, a *Tokubetsu Hozon* level Shikkake *katana* and a *Tokubetsu Hozon* level Hosho *wakizashi*. All of these are in a single private collection, so hands on examination, and side-by-side comparative analysis was completed. At first glance, the Taima and Hosho *Katana*(s) appear very similar, the Hosho *wakizashi* is completely different and the Senjuin blade appears to be a blade of much older construction than the others and unique in structure and design. The intent of the article is to try to put some clarity around the attributions of these blades.

Yamato characteristics and history of the five schools

Common characteristics of blades from Yamato Province are a high *shinogi* line, a broad *shinogi-ji*, conservative *hamon* generally a *nie* based *suguha* in form and a *yakitsume boshi* with *hakikake*. The typical *sugata* is *tori-sori*, however *koshi-sori* is also found. The *mune* is always a high *iori*. The blades are utilitarian in appearance and rarely have horimono. Nagayama Kokan (Nagayama (1995), page 155) states, “*The boshi [in the mid to late kamakura] becomes hakikake, kaen [flame] or yakitsume. The kaeri is usually short. Midareba are also present, indicating that the Yamato tradition was affected by the Soshu tradition*”. He continues by saying, “*Yamato tradition was affected by the Soshu tradition, which was to become the dominant style after the close of the Kamakura period*”. Another interesting aspect of some Yamato blades is the use of double *hamon* (*kuichigaibai*). In the Gordon Robson Glossary (Robson (2005)), he describes “*Kuichigaiba: Overlapping tempering, i.e. areas where the temper line is interrupted and a second line, beginning somewhat forward of or behind the first, continues at a lower level. It looks as if a narrow finger of tempering is extending in the hamon.....Yamato smiths, particularly those in the Tegai School*”

Most Yamato blades are unsigned and undated. However, each school also has some unique characteristics that can help us in identifying the origin of the blade and time-period of production. A brief history of each school will help clarify the differences in style and points used in *kantei*.

Senjuin School is the oldest school and was founded in an area east of Nara and linked to a temple by Wakakusa Mountain. Senjuin blades, particularly early ones, show many of the characteristics and *sugata* of Ko-Bizen or Sanjo school blades, with a curvature tending to *koshi-sori* and a *jihada* with flowing *itame* (*itame nagara*) *hada* with *masame* found along the *hamon* and some *nie*. The *hamon* has plentiful activity and is *suguha* in form, but sometimes mixed with *ko-midare*. The *boshi* is characteristic Yamato *yakitsume*, but may have larger *nie* elements from the *yokote* forward, and *hakikake*.

Nagayama Kokan (Nagayama (1995), page 157) describes the blades as, “*the hamon is suguha hotsure, mixed with ko-choji and ko-midare. The nie is highly reflective and rather rough. Activity such as uchinoke, kuichigaiba, kinsuji and inazuma are attractive and readily visible. The nijuba looks like yubashiri. The boshi is yakitsume, nie kuzure and kaen. The nie is highly reflective and tends to become rougher from the yokote towards the tip*”.

Taima School is one of the more obscure of the Yamato Schools, founded in Taima village and linked to the Taima-dera (temple) a branch of the Kofukuji. The smith Kuniyuki is recorded as the founder of the school and worked during the Shoo period (1288-1293). The *sugata* of Taima blades is typical of those found in late Kamakura or early Nambokucho period. They tend to be *tori-sori*, with a high *shinogi*. They have very refined *jigane*, which appears wet and dark with prevalent *chikei* and frosting (*ko-nie*). The *jihada* is comprised of tight *ko-itame* or *ko-mokume* and may have *masame* flowing throughout the blade, which is most notable in the *hamon*. There will be *ko-nie* and *chikei* appearing in the *jihada*. The *hamon* is *suguha*, with some *ko-midare* features and considerable horizontal activity, such as *uchinoke*, *kinsuji*, and *nijuba*. *Nie* may be scattered along the *nioi-guchi*. Earlier blades show a strong Yamashiro influence and later ones tend to have Soshu characteristics. In general, the blades are very rare, refined and subdued.

Shikkake School forged swords in the Kishida Domain of Yamato Province. The smith Nagahiro is considered the founder, but the first smith with identified works is Norinaga. Norinaga is recorded to have worked between 1270 and 1340, although the only dated works of his are from 1319 onwards. The *sugata* of *Shikkake* blades ranges from middle to late Kamakura in *tori-sori*. The smiths forged in tight flowing *ko-itame nagare* with *ji-nie* and *chikei* appearing in the *jigane*. The *itame* may tighten and shift to *mokume* as it moves towards the *shinogi*. *Masame* may also appear in the *hamon* area and is a feature referred to as *Shikkake hada*. The *hamon* will be *ko-gumone* or *ko-midare* with much activity appearing along the *nioi-guchi*. The *boshi* is typical Yamato *Yakitsume* with *hakikake*, but sometimes has a short *kaeri*. Earlier *Shikkake* works are considered more refined with a tighter and wet *jigane*.

Tegai School is one of the most well know and longest lasting of the Yamato schools. Tegai School was founded near the Todaiji temples where smiths worked near the western gates. Due to the extensive period for Tegai blade production, the *sugata* of the blades vary by era, and generally tell the age of production. However, most blades are typical Yamato with *tori-sori*, high *shinogi* and utilitarian appearance. Tegai smiths forged in *mokume hada* and may have some *masame* towards the *hamon*. They tend to have narrow to medium *suguha* or *o-midare hamon* and often have *kaichigaiba*. The *hamon* has much activity such as *uchinoke*, *nijuba* and *ashi*. The *boshi* may be a little different from the typical Yamato *yakitsume* and possess a small turn back and short *kaeri*, but generally have *hakikake*. Tegai blades lasted well into the Muromachi era and have considerable variability compared to other Yamato blades.

Hosho School was in the Takaichi District of Yamato Province and known for its construction of blades in *masame hada*. Hosho *sugata* is typical of mid to late Kamakura style in *tori-sori*. Blades generally have a narrow *suguha hamon* with *nijuba*, *kuichigaiba* and abundant *nie*. The *boshi* are typical Yamato style *yakitsume* with *hakikake*. Because the smiths forged in *masame*, it is typical to see *hadaware*, or somewhat loose appearing *jigane*. However, the finer blades show none of this and may have long well delineated horizontal lines of *chikei* in the *jihada*.

The school's name derived from a group of swordsmiths who worked during the late Kamakura period in Yamato province and had the family name of Hosho. The founder of the school was Kunimitsu who lived around the Koan Era (1278). His sons, who were also notable and principle smiths of the school, were Hosho Goro Sadamune, Saemon no jyo Sadayoshi and Fujiwara Sadakiyo. They were famous for their work in *masame hada*. As is typical of most Yamato swords, very few signed blades exist. The Hosho School in particular, has very few long swords in existence (*tachi/katana*), however there are several *tantos* and a few signed ones as well.

Descriptions of the kantei Swords

Senjuin katana – middle Kamakura (figures 1 -2)

We will start with the *Senjuin katana*, since it is the least like the other swords. As stated in the Juyo Zufu, “it shows true Japanese attributes, and even among the 5 schools of Yamato (old Japan), it has a special old coloring, which is typical of what *Senjuin* produced swords are known for”. This sword appears to be much older than the other swords in the collection and has a coloration and *jihada* different from the others. Upon closer examination, the *Senjuin jihada* possesses larger flowing *itame*, and no *mokume*. Except for the *boshi* and the activity in the *hamon*, the blade stands apart from the other Yamato blades. As stated before, it is a strong healthy blade, but with a much older feeling *sugata* than the others.

The Juyo Zufu description recorded is:

NBTHK - 39th Juyo Token

Sword Name: Den *Senjuin* - *mumei*

Size: Length 72.6 cm, curvature 1.9 cm, width 2.85 cm, point width 1.7 cm, point length 2.8 cm, tang length 21.5 cm, tang curvature 0.1 cm

Form: Sword with ridges (*shinogi zukuri*), *iori mune* style, somewhat thin (*ya ya hosomi*), high *shinogi*, blade base curve is high (*koshi-sori*) with a medium point (*chu-kissaki*).

Forge: *Itame hada*, flows throughout the blade, with steel grain centered, frosted surface and whitish spots appear (*shirake fu no utsuri datsu*).

Hamon pattern: *Suguha* with *hotsure*, *nijuba* and small frosting (*ko-nie*). The *hamon* has brushed sand (*sunagashi*) and lines near the cutting edge (*kinsugi*).

Blade tip: The *boshi* has stronger *Nie* than anywhere else and is brushed like a burning flame (*Kaen* style *Hakikake*)

Tang: Signature removed (*mumei*) greatly shortened (*o-suriage*), the extremity of the tang (*saki kiwa*) is a shallow *kuri jiri*, file marks (*yasurime*) are *kiri* style and there are three *meguki ana*.

Explanation: There is a *Senshudo*, celebrating the *Senshu Kanno* in the West Mountain range's Mount *Wakakusa*, in *Nara*. Since the latter part of the *Heian* era, *Senshuin* sword production assisted in the prosperity of this area, which gave birth to the smiths *Yukinobu* and *Shigehiro*. However, there are no swords attributed with certainty to the smiths *Yukinobu* and *Shigehiro*, and only a few famous swords from this school. This sword is one that had the signature removed, however, in the *Jiba* there are white reflections, it shows true Japanese attributes, and even among the 5 schools of Yamato (old Japan), it has a special old coloring, which is typical of what *Senjuin* swords are known for. As for the age, it can be no younger than the end of the Kamakura era (1185-1333).

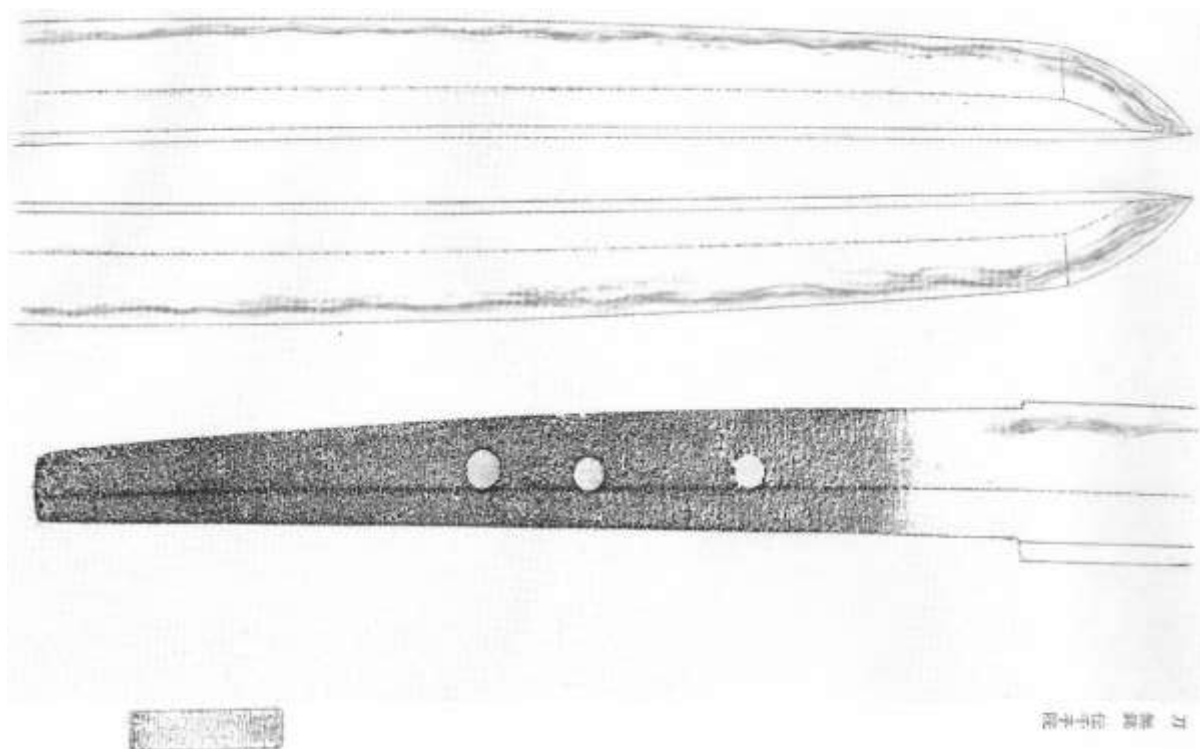


Figure 1 – Senjuin Juyo Zufu oshigata and shape of katana



Figure 2 – Kissaki and kitae of Senjuin blade, please note nie-utsuri below shinogi

Taima katana - late Kamakura (figures 3-5)

This is a spectacular blade. Superlatives aside, it is a beauty to hold and examine at every level. The blade is robust and thick with a *jigane* that can be described as wet and refined. It is clearly not a *chirimen* or *konuka* type of *jihada*, since it is comprised of flowing *itame* and *masame* mix, but with the same level of tightness and refinement that you would find in *chirimen* or *konuka jigane*. The *jihada* flows with linear lines of *chikai* and is covered in extra fine *ko-nie*. This is what the Juyo Zufu refers to as “strong frosting”, but could be interpreted as some form of *nie utsuri*. The *habuchi* is clear and strong and the *hamon* is full of activity, as is the *boshi*. The blade is greatly shortened from its original length and lacks curvature (*sori*), so it is difficult to determine its original *sugata*. The conundrum on this blade is the fact that it closely resembles the Hosho katana, a point that to be discussed later.

The Juyo Zufu description recorded is:

NBTHK - 26th Juyo Token

Sword name: *Taima*

Size: Length 64.9 cm, Curvature: 0.5cm, Base width: 3.0cm, Tip width: 1.9 cm, Length of tip: 3.5 cm, Tang length: 9.2 cm, minimal tang curvature

Form: Shinogi sword, roof shaped back ridge (*iori*), wide body, minimal curvature (*sori*) and medium point (*chu kissaki*).

Forge: Ko-itame hada, flows throughout in a very strong form, being clearly defined.

Hamon: Narrow straight yakiba with bean like pattern (*hoso suguha* mixed with *ko-gumone*), at the upper half there is a large criss-cross straight lines of *nie* and *nioi* nibbled away (*kuichigaiba*), with small new moon shapes and temper spots (*uchinoke*, *yubashiri*) showing clear frosting (*nie*), near the base has deep *nioi*.

Temper line at tip: Some midare patterns are visible.

Horimono: Carved in both sides with a groove to the end of the tang.

Tang: Shortened tang with the signature removed (*o-suriage*), Kiri tip, file marks (*yasurime sujikai*) on tang, one filled *meguki ana* and one open *meguki* in center of the tang.

Explanation: While it does not have a signature, it appraised to be *Taima*. Signed swords from the *Taima School* are very rare. Many are unsigned. They show shadowy steel, with strong frosting (*nie*), and many common *Soshu* attributes. This sword shows an attribute of *Yamato* in the temper line, with frosting working throughout it. Appraised as the *Taima School*. The blade is excellent.

On the *Shirasaya* is a *Tanobe-san Sayagaki*, which states:

The era is the end of Kamakura, the sword surface has temper lines, with significant Yamato attributes, with fine white crystals showing, with a variety of flow throughout, being a serious expression of the same school. Chinchinjuju (extremely rare).

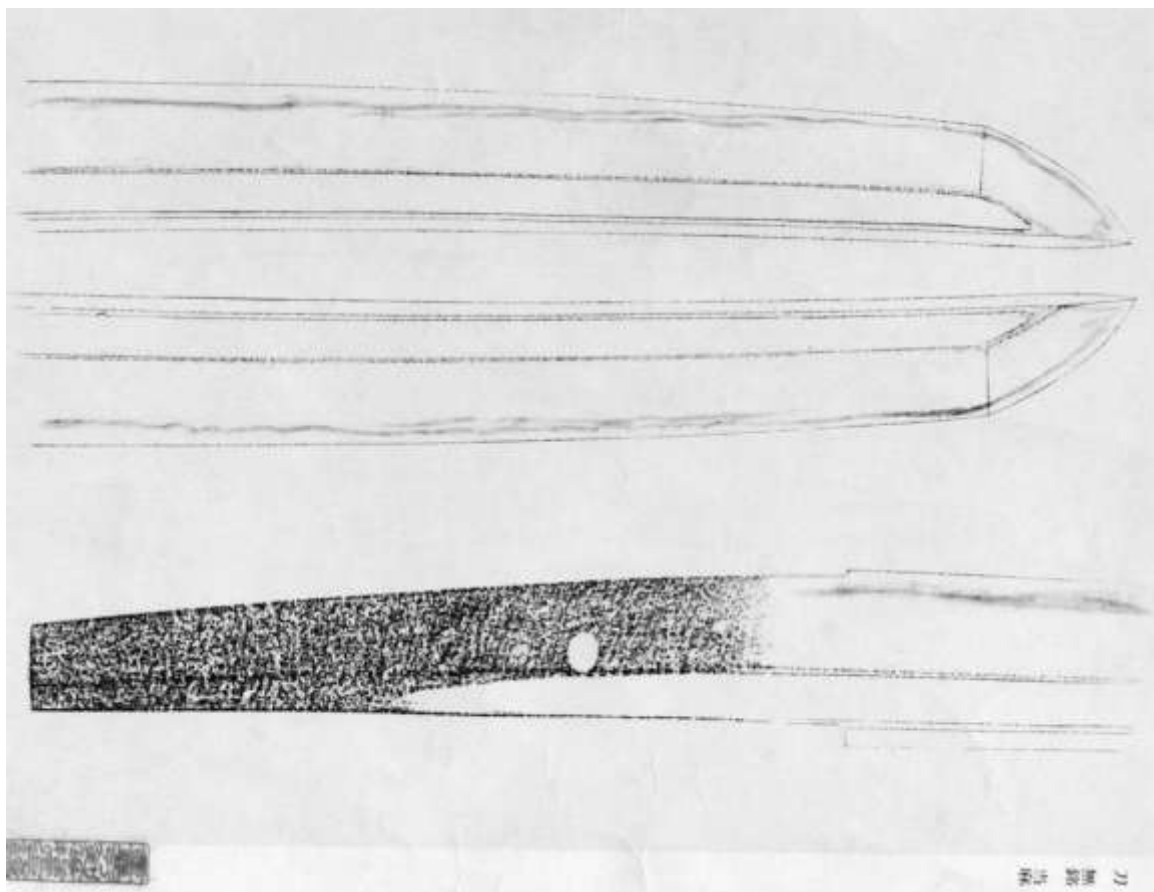


Figure 3 – Taima Juyo Zufu oshigata and shape of katana

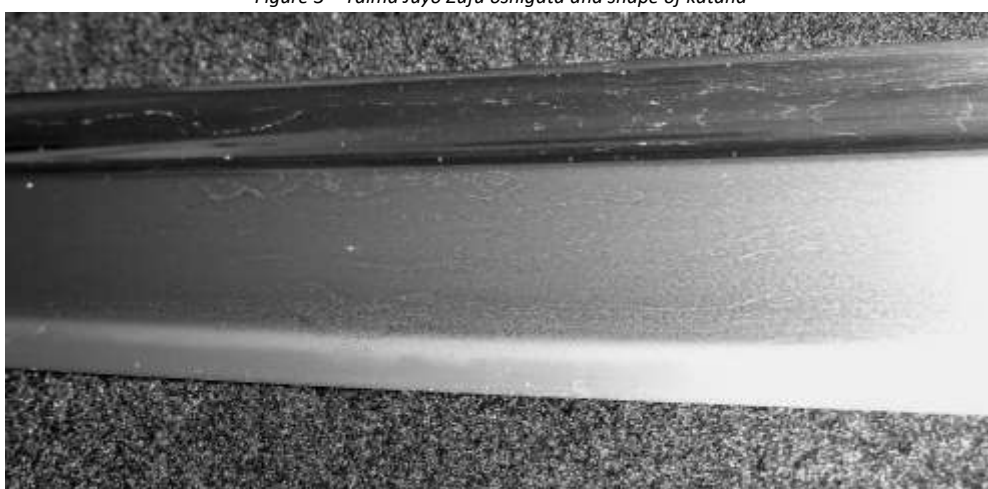


Figure 4 - Fine nie particles and linear chikei lines, please note the nie-utsuri below the bohi

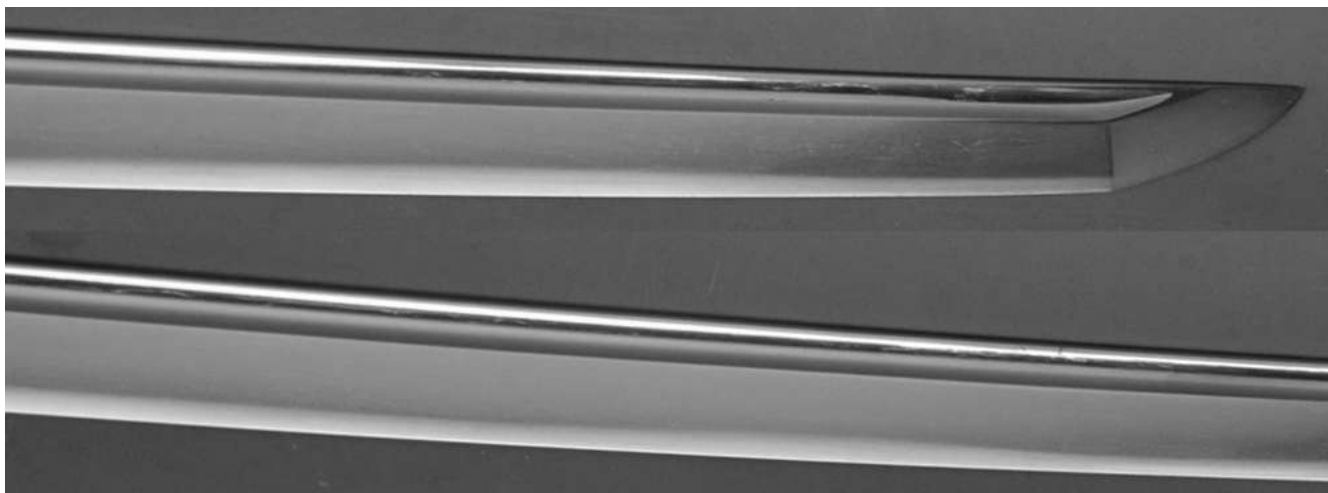


Figure 5 – kissaki and bohi of Taima blade

Shikkake katana – late Kamakura (figures 6-7)

The Shikkake blade is also unique in some ways to the others. Although the *sugata* is like the other Yamato blades, the *jigane* is different. This blade has a very refined *jihada* of *mokume* and a *masame* mix in the *hamon* area. The *boshi* is atypical for a mid to late Kamakura Yamato sword and has a small turnback (*ko-maru* with short *keari*), but profuse *hakikake*. The other attributes of the blade, such as *suguha* to *midare hamon* and plentiful activity in the *hamon* are typical of Yamato School blades.

NBTHK Tokubetsu Hozon 28th January 2011

Shikkake mumei

Measurements: *nagasa* 69, *sori* 1.2cm, *motohaba* 2.8cm *sakihada* 1.7cm, *Kasane* 0.7cm

Shape: *shinogi-zukari*, *iori-mune*, *high shinogi*

Kitae: *mokume and masame hada*

Hamon: *suguha based ko-nie with choji, sunigashi, uchinoke and much activity.*

Boshi: *ko-maru- short kaeri and hakikake*

Horimono: *none*

Nakago: *o-suriage, four meguki-ana, kasane 0.75cm*

Description: *Blade in Shirasaya with Edo era Koshirae with Goto fittings and patterned silver higaki yasuri style habaki. This blade is in excellent condition with Juyo level polish.*

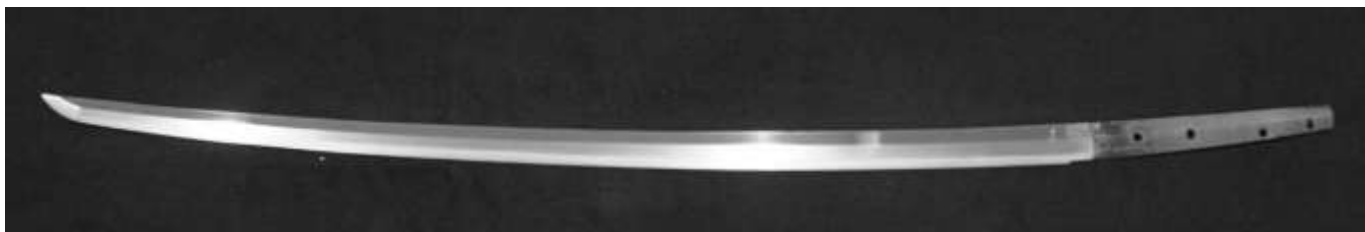


Figure 6 – The shape of the Shikkake katana



Figure 7 – Kissaki and kitae of Shikkake katana

Hosho katana –middle to late Kamakura (figures 8-9)

This blade presents the greatest challenge for *kantei*. Originally, Sato Kanzan and the NBTHK attributed it to Den Enju, however after passing *Juyo shinsa*, it was reassigned to Den Hosho. To be fair with the Sensei Sato Kanzan attribution, the *sayagaki* was written when the blade was out of polish.

As stated before, the blade looks very similar to the Taima Blade, except for the fact it exhibits more curvature. This blade shows *koshi-sori* although it is difficult to see this from the photograph. However, when you hold the blade in your hand you can feel the *koshi-sori* very clearly. The *jigane*, *hamon*, faint *utsuri* and activity in the blade are nearly identical. Both blades possess long linear *chikei* lines. The only significant difference in the blades is the level of frosting in the steel; the Hosho Katana does not have the same amount of *ko-nie* as the Taima blade. Aside from the difference in *sori*, both blades have a *sugata* typical of middle to late Kamakura. The NBTHK designated this as Den Hosho.

The Juyo Zufu description recorded is:

NBTHK - 63rd Juyo Token

Sword Name: Den Hosho mumei

Size: Length 61.8cm, Curvature: 1.7 cm, Base width: 2.7cm, Tip width: 2.0cm, Length of tip: 3.6cm, Tang length: 17.7cm, tang curvature 0.1cm

Form: shinogi zukuri, lori mune, mihaba has an average width. There is a small difference between the measurements of the saki haba and moto haba

The sori is deep and the kissaki is medium

Forge: Tight ko-itame. There are long Chikei lines and faint nie utsuri

Hamon: Suguha. There are ko-ashi. It has nie sprinkled and has a little sunagashi and uchinoke. The nioi guchi is bright and very clear

Temper line at tip: Deep with curve back (sugu maru) and brushed hakikake. It has Kinsugi and is bright and clear

Horimono: On both omote and ura there is a bohi

Tang: o-suriage, the tip of the nakago is kiri (straight). The yasurime (above is Kiri) the yasurime (below is sugikai) There are three mekugi ana and the sword is mumei.

Explanation: Due to the extant works, we know that the Yamato Hosho School was located in the Takaichi district of Nara. They were active between the end of Kamakura period and the Nanbokuchō period. The most heard of notable smiths of the school are Sadamune, Sadayoshi. Other excellent smiths include Sadakiyo, Sadaoki, and Sadamitsu. All include the character 'Sada-貞' in their swordsmith name. The workmanship of this school is the jigane is generally displays masame-hada, the most prevalent characteristic that distinguishes the Hosho School from among the five schools of the Yamato tradition. This sword has a standard width, with difference between the width of the moto and saki-haba. It has a thick kasane, with a deep koshi-zori displaying a shape of the Kamakura period. The flowing hada has abundant ko-nie, and the hamon is a uniform suguha. Additionally, the boshi has strong hakikake, displaying Yamato characteristics, confirming it as a work of the Hosho School. Notably, the bright ji and ha of this superior work confirm it to be by the same group of smiths.

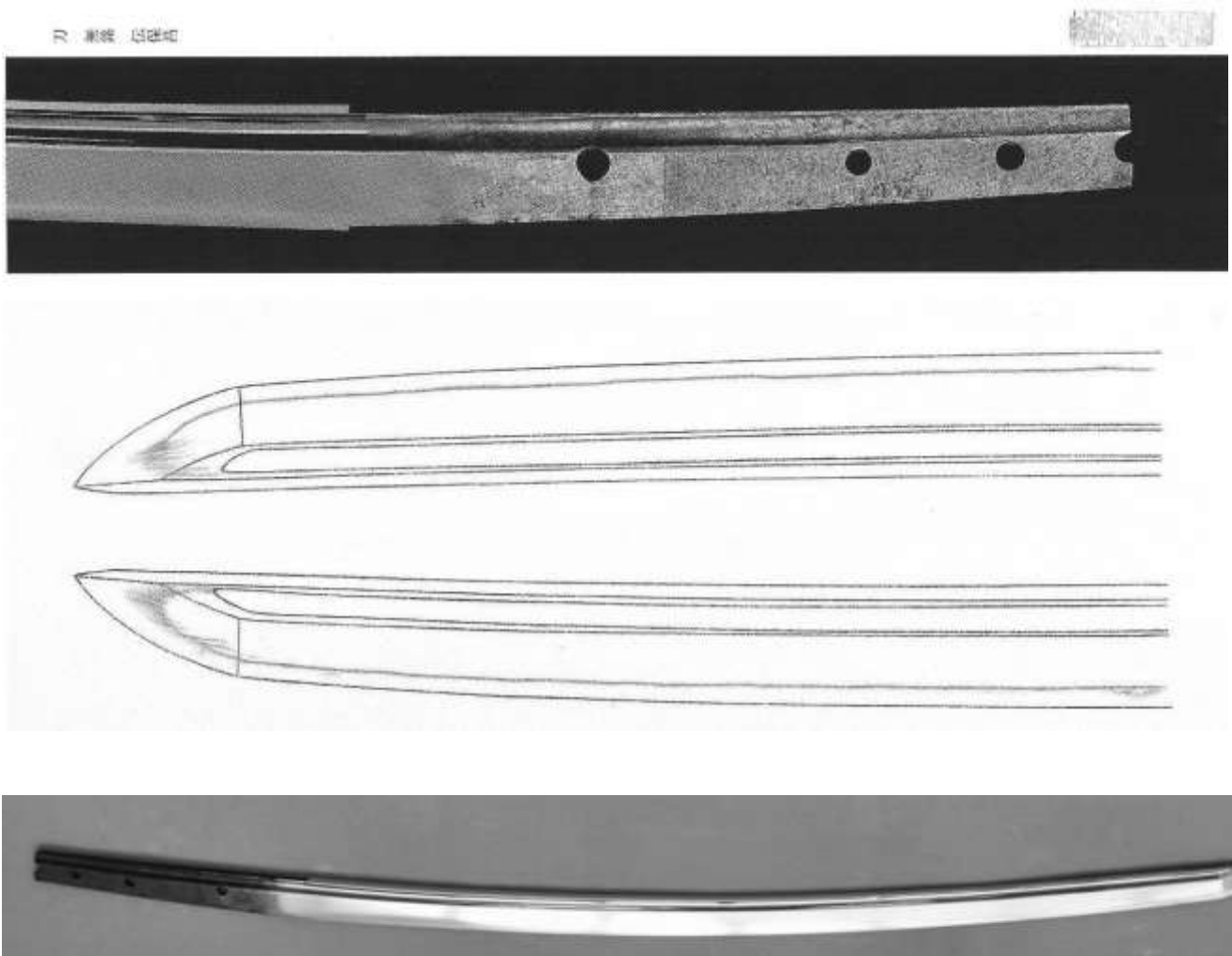


Figure 8 –Juyo Zufu sayagaki and shape of Hosho katana

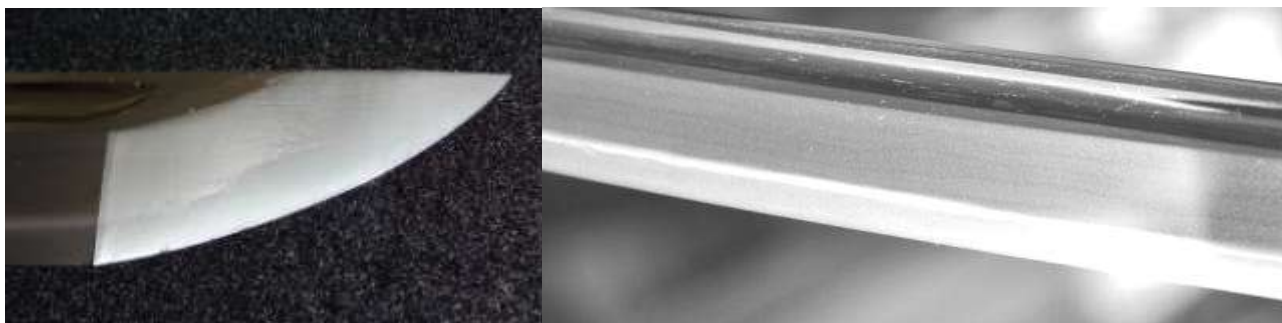


Figure 9 – Kissaki and kitae of Hosho katana, please note the linear chikei lines and utsuri below bohi.

Hosho wakizashi – middle to late Kamakura (figures 10-11)

This *wakizaki* is perhaps the best example of a Hosho we have seen. It possesses all the typical characteristics of the school and is exceptional in its forging. Contrary to the published data, the blade is 100% *masame* without *ko-itame* and possesses long linear *chikei* lines flowing along the forging folds. There is only a couple of very small openings in the *jigane* (*hadaware*) and the *habuchi* and *boshi* are very strong and distinct. The attribution to Hosho Goro Sadamune may be questionable, but it is understandable considering the superb quality of the blade and beautiful *masame*. The NBTHK designated this as Den Hosho, which is understandable given the nature of the *jigane* compared to a typical Hosho blade. However, consider the description of Nagayama Kokan (Nagayama (1995), page 165) about the characteristics of Hosho Goro Sadamune: "*The jihada is pure masame from the bottom to the top and, in the kissaki area; the masame hada becomes parallel to the fukura and reaches the mune*". This is exactly what we observe in this blade so perhaps the attribution to Sadamune is correct. Note, however, that Nagayama Kokan (Nagayama (1995), page 165) says that the workmanship of Hosho Sadayoshi is identical to this.

NBTHK Tokubetsu Hozon 2nd September 1988

Den Hosho mumei

Measurements: *nagasa 49.4cm, sori 0.8cm, motohaba 2.64cm sakihaba 1.75cm, asane 0.63cm*

Shape: *shinogi-zukari, iori-mune, high shinogi*

Kitae: *masame hada*

Hamon: *suguha like ko-notare with deep nioi-guchi and much ko-nie. In the ha is found hotsure and kinsuji.*

Boshi: *hakikake and Yakizume with much nie.*

Horimono: *none*

Nakago: *o-suriage, two meguki-ana, kasane 0.65cm*

Description: *Blade with old shirasaya with Kanzan Sato Sayagaki and two-piece gold nuji habaki.*

This sword published in the June 2008 edition of Ai-To magazine. The description provided of the sword is the following:

(Picture Description)

Wakizashi mumei Hosho (Sadamune)

Late Kamakura – about 700 years before ZEN.

Nagasa: 49.4cm

Moto haba, 2.64cm
Saki haba, 1.75cm
Moto kasane, 0,63cm

(Explanation)

The sword is shinogi zukuri, the moto haba compared with moto kasane is normal (amane futsu), the sori is moderate (Koroai) and it has a medium kissaki. The kitae is ko-itame mixed with masame and is very compact. There is jifu and chikei. The hamon is ko-notare and chu suguha and very tidy. The nioi guchi is calm, gentle and soft. The hadas sprinkled with ko-nie, hotsure and kinsuji. The boshi is yakitsume with hakikake and kinsugi. The nakago is suriage with a kiri tip; it has kata sagari yasurime and two mekugi ana.

There is jifu and chikei with beautiful energy. Both the ji and ha are clear, serene and skillful. It is an important work. Sword is late Kamakura, Yamato HoCho. Sato Kanzan sensei sayagaki concludes: HOSHO GORO SADAMUNE, both ji and ha are sound. However, this is an opinion. Has a gold plated double habaki. Signed: Sato Kanzan Showa 63.

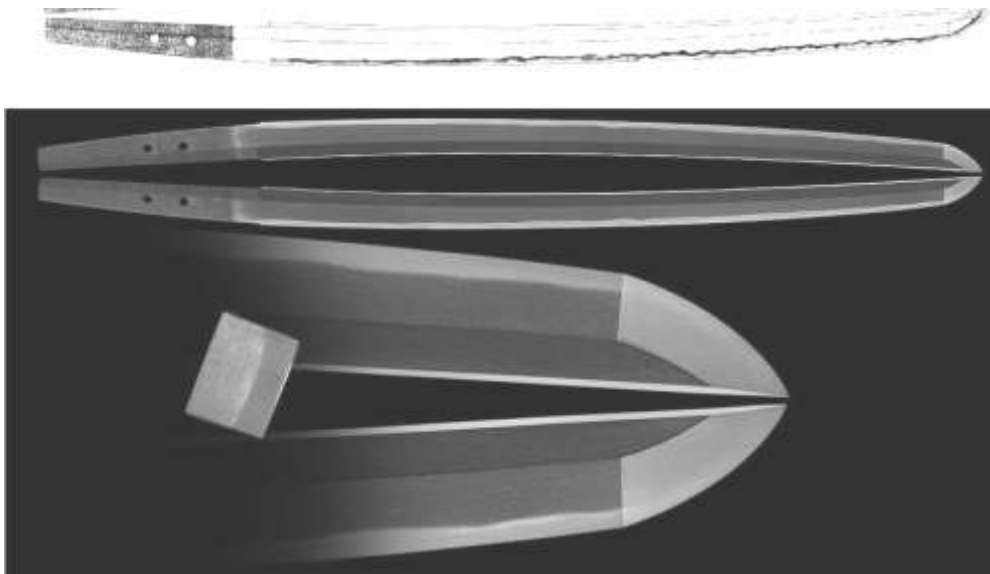


Figure 10 – Details of the Hosho wakizashi

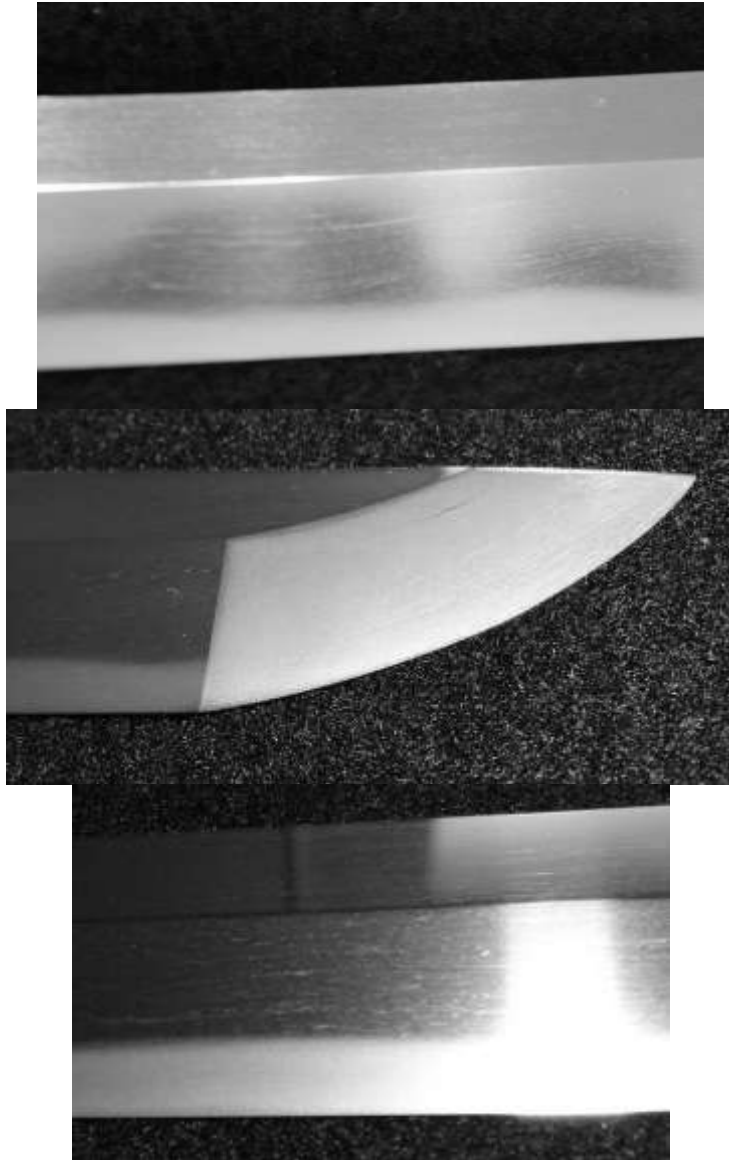


Figure 11- Kissaki and kitae of the Hosho wakizashi, please note it is masame throughout the jigane

Tegai katana - Nambokucho period (figures 12-13)

The Tegai katana presented here is a typical example of an early Tegai blade. It possesses most if not all the classic Yamato characteristics, such as *suguha hamon* with much activity, *yakitsume boshi* with *hakikake*, some faint *utsuri* and Yamato *sugata*. Where this blade presents some unique characteristics is in the *jihada*. The *jihada* is a very refined and wet looking tight *mokume*, which at a glance could be thought of as Aoe *chirimen jihada*, however as pointed out by a previous publication, the *boshi* is typical Yamato, not Aoe.

A Tanobe-san *sayagaki* states:

Yamato no Kuni Tegai - o-suriage mumei nari. Nanbokucho-ki no do-ha no saku to kanseraru (appraised to be Nanbokucho period work of the same school). Jiha tomo ni sono tokushoku wo meiji seri (the jiha along with the other characteristics displayed).

Nagasa 2 shaku, 1 sun, 3 bu, ari kore, Kanji Mizunoto-mi (June 2013) Tanzan Nabemichi Shiki (Kao)

There is also a description from a Japanese Sword Journal (we believe Ai-To, issue unknown) which describes the sword as:

“The Tegai smiths tempered fine jitetsu from the Kamakura to Nambokucho period. At first glance, it looks like the work of the AOE School, but the boshi is that of the Yamato School. This blade jitetsu looks like the work of Kanenaga.” (Ai-To magazine, date unknown)



Figure 12 – The shape of the Tegai katana and full oshigata

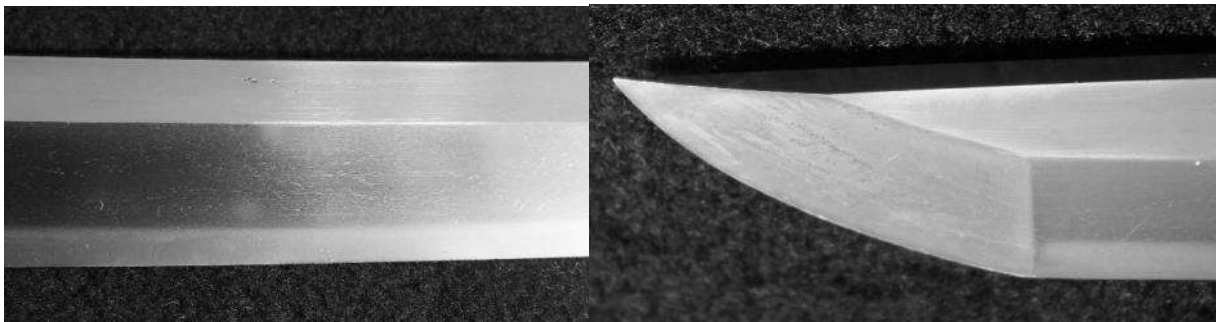


Figure 13 – Kissaki and kitae of the Tegai katana

Sword Specifications

Below is a table of the characteristics and specifications of the swords we will examine.

Name	<i>Nagasa</i>	<i>Sori</i>	<i>Boshi</i>	<i>Motohaba - Sakihada</i>	<i>Kasane</i>	<i>Jihada</i>	<i>Hamon</i>	<i>Horimono</i>	<i>Utsuri</i>
Senjuin Katana	72.6cm	1.9cm	Hakikake, yakitsume	2.9cm – 1.7cm	7.5mm	Flowing itame	Suguha, sunagashi, chikai, uchinoke, jifu	none	Shirake like utsuri
Taima Katana	64.9cm	0.5cm	Ko-maru, short kaeri and Hakikake	3.0cm – 1.9cm	7.5mm	Flowing tight Ko Itame mixed with masame	Suguha, sunagashi, chikai, uchinoke, yubashiri	Bohi both sides	Faint utsuri
Shikkake Katana	69cm	1.2cm	Ko-maru short kaeri and Hakikake	2.8cm – 1.7cm	7.5mm	Mokume and masame mix	Suguha with ko-nie and choji, sunigashi, uchinoke and ashi	none	none
Hosho Katana	61.8cm	1.7cm	sugu-maru and Hakikake	2.7cm – 2.0cm	7.5mm	Flowing tight ko itame mixed with masame	Suguha, sunagashi, chikai, uchinoke,	Bohi both sides	Faint utsuri
Hosho Wakizashi (o-suriage)	49.4cm	0.8cm	Hakikake with nie, yakitsume	2.7cm – 1.8cm	6.5mm	masame	Suguha with ko notare, ko-nie, kinsuji, hotsure	none	Faint utsuri
Tegai Katana	64.7cm	2.0cm	Hakikake with nie, yakitsume	2.9cm-1.8cm	7.5mm	mokume and itame mix	Suguha, sunagashi, chikai, nijuba, uchinoke, yo, ashi	none	Faint utsuri

In examining the above chart and from a “paper *kantei*” perspective there appear to be many similar characteristics of these blades and they seem to fit into the standard Yamato characteristics. However, closer physical examination of the blades reveals several differences in the color and refinement of the *jigane* and complexity of the *hamon*.

Comparison of the swords

Observing the swords side by side, you immediately notice the following. (See photo of swords *sugata* side by side - figures 14 - 15) The Senjuin blade possesses the characteristics of an old style tachi. The *sugata*, *boshi* and *jihada* all give the appearance of middle Kamakura. The Tegai blade represents a classic late Kamakura - early Nambokucho Yamato blade and is a good example of Yamato *jigane*, *hamon* and *jihada* activity. The Hosho *wakizashi*, in our opinion, represents the textbook example of a Hosho blade. It possesses typical Yamato *sugata* and *boshi*, with nearly 100% *masame jihada*. It is exceptional in the tightness of its *jigane* and clearness of the *jihada*.

The interesting analysis is the Hosho and Taima *katana*. Side by side, they are almost identical. They are both exceptionally well-forged blades and possess the *sugata* of a late Kamakura sword, but it is the *jigane* and *jihada* that present the conundrum. Both swords have exceptionally tight *ko-itame*, with very long *chikai* lines that follow what appear to be *masame* folds. They appear forged with tight *itame* in a *masame* pattern. They both possess faint *utsuri*, which is unusual for the Yamato School. The *jigane* of these blades is exceptionally clear and wet looking. It shimmers in the light. The only difference we can see in the *jihada* is the presence of very fine *nie* above the *hamon* line (*nioi-guchi*) of the Taima blade. We believe this should be classified as *yubashiri*, which is common in Kamakura era Yamato blades. We think the term frosted best describes this activity. However, the Hosho blade also has a frosted look to the *jigane*, but not the easily visible and distinguishable *nie* particles. Without doubt, both blades are exceptionally well forged and worthy of the Juyo designation. However, neither truly represents the classic description of their schools. This may explain the “den” designation of the Hosho blade.

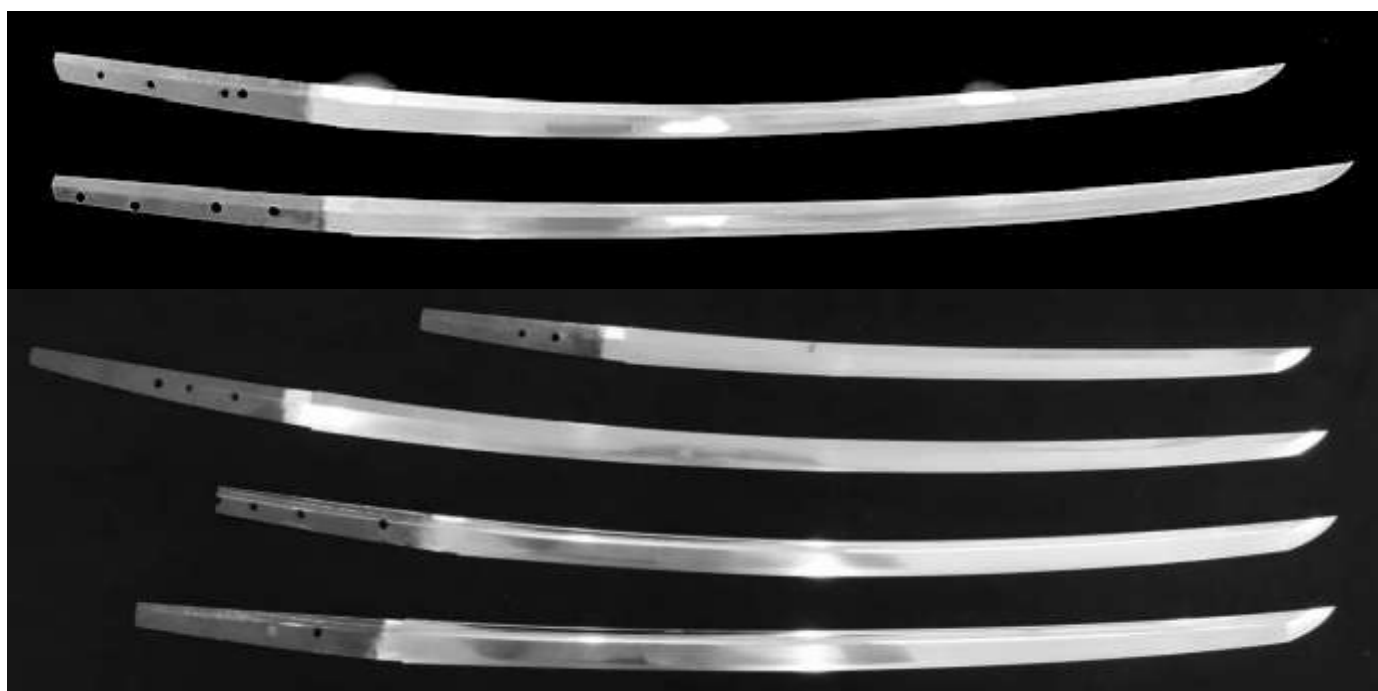


Figure 14 - Top to Bottom: Tegai, Shikkake, Hosho, Senjuin, Hosho, Taima

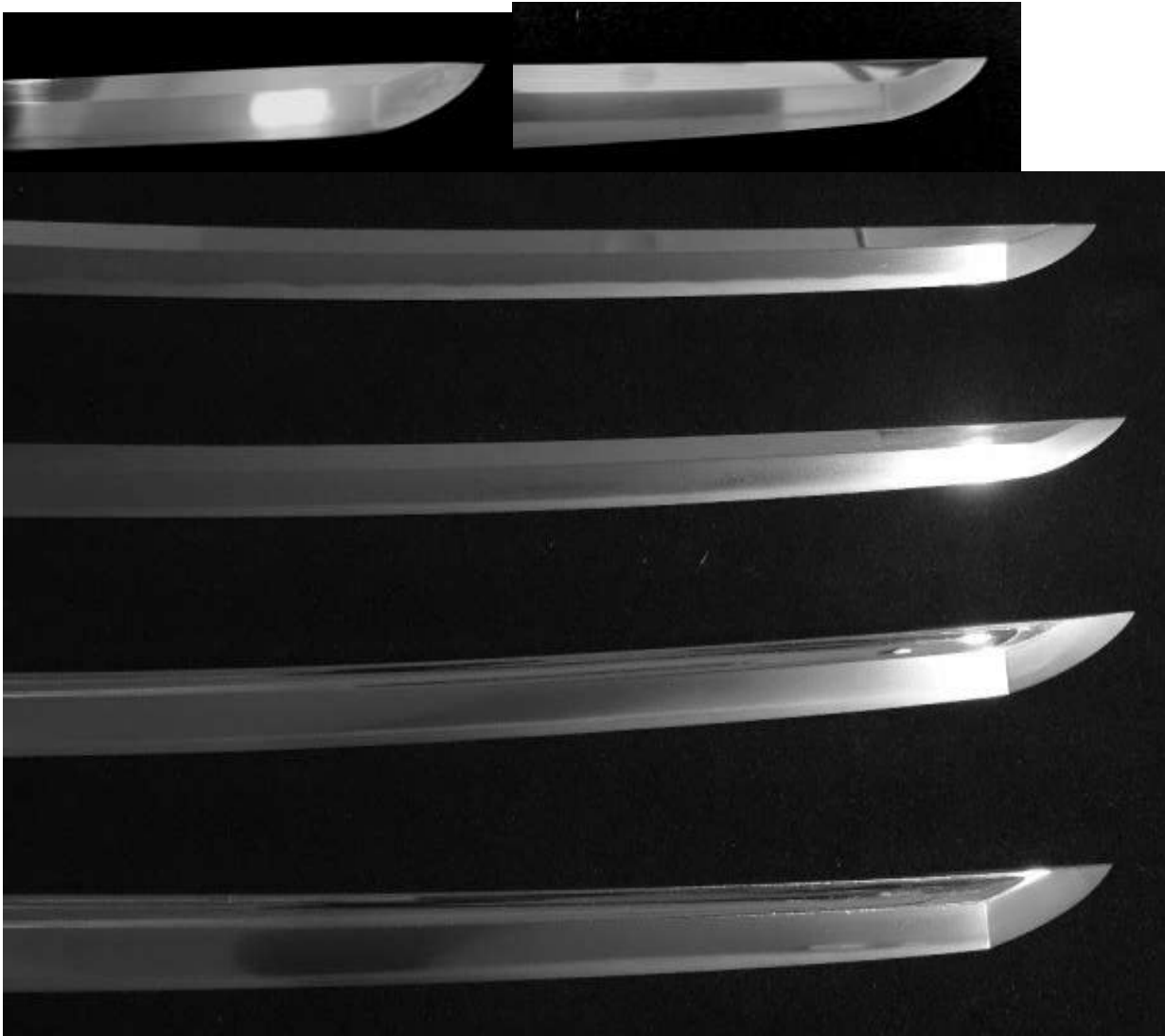


Figure 15 - Top to Bottom: Tegai, Shikkake, Hosho, Senjuin, Hosho, Taima

Conclusion

In comparing the six swords there are some obvious Yamato characteristics on all the swords. All the swords have a high *shinogi* line, a broad *shinogi-ji*, conservative *sugaha hamon* based in *nie* and a *boshi* with *hakikake*. The *hamon* of all the swords has abundant activity of a variety typical of Yamato Schools. The *sugata* of all the blades is typical of mid to late Kamakura. In addition, the Hosho blades are both forged in predominately *masame*, which extends into the *boshi*, and the Shikkake blade has typical Shikkake *jigane* comprised of a refined *mokume/masame* mix. Based on these observations, the attributions of the blades seem very straight forward and conclusive. However, there are a few characteristics that are not commonly associated with Yamato. The one that is most perplexing is *utsuri*. *Utsuri* is normally associated with Bizen blades, however five of these six blades have *utsuri*.

In doing a quick view of Yamato blades found in the NBTHK Kantei books, we found several that had *utsuri*. Also, in Sensei Tanobe NBTHK Special report “A Journey to the GoKaden” section on the Yamato Schools he states, “Works from before the Nambokucho period have frequently clearly visible *nie-utsuri* whereas blades from the Muromachi period show rather a *shirake-utsuri*.” (Tanobe- Part 1: The Five Schools of Yamato (Senjuin, Taima, Tegai)– page 4) What should be noted is that Yamato blades have *nie-utsuri*, rather than the *utsuri* commonly found in Bizen blades. This fact is easily understood when you consider that Yamato blades are hardened in *nie-deki* and are known for their very fine and powerful *nie* structures, ranked above Yamashiro, but below Soshu Schools.(Tanobe- Part 1:The Five Schools of Yamato(Senjuin, Taima, Tegai)– page 4) Bizen blades, on the other hand, are hardened in *nioi-deki*, therefore their *utsuri* structures are different than Yamato blades.

When looking at Yamato *utsuri*, it is often weaker in appearance than the typical Bizen *utsuri* and can easily be mistaken for frosting on the blade. (very fine *ko-nie* scattered above the *hamon* line) Whether this is identified as *nie-utsuri*, or frosting is subject to the opinion of the viewer, but it is clearly a feature found in finer Yamato blades. Also, in some cases we have seen Yamato attributed swords that have *shirake-utsuri* identified on the blade. We are not sure if this a weaker form of *nie-utsuri*, but in any case, it will be comprised of fine *ko-nie* particles. We believe the main difference between the scattered *ko-nie* being frosting or *nie-utsuri* is if there is a defined line of dark hardened steel (*antai*) between the *hamon* and *nie* particles that delineates it as being a line of *utsuri* rather than frosting on the blade. Regarding the purpose of this layer of *nie-utsuri*, Sesko argues that it provides an outer layer of hardening (but not too hard) that improves the torsional rigidity of the blade. (Sesko (2013) – Markus Sesko, SOME THOUGHTS ON UTSURI)

In conclusion, although there are very well-defined Yamato characteristics that make it easy to identify a blade from one of the Yamato Schools, variations in *jigane* and *jihada* attributes provide for interesting debate on who made the sword. Due to a lack of historical data and information on Yamato smiths, it is difficult to provide definitive conclusions on the workmanship and features of an individual smiths works. Therefore, the best one can do is associate the blade with a Yamato School. What we have learned from this exercise is that Yamato swords are both complex and unique in many aspects. Although they may not have the flamboyance of Soshu blades, or the recognition of Bizen blades, they are nevertheless, sophisticated weapons of war, with unique characteristics that make them Yamato.

Descriptors used in the article

To assist the reader in understanding the review of these blades, it is necessary to understand the terminology used to describe them. *Nihonto* terminology is often confusing with the use and definitions varying by expert. The terms and definitions we will commonly use are:

Jigane – structure of surface steel

Jihada – texture or patterns found in the surface steel. Shown by the activity (*hakikake*) such as *Nie*, *Chikei*, and the forging pattern, *Itame*, *Mokume*, etc.

Hard and Soft Steel – more related to polishers' assessment of the hardness of the steel, but from a visual perspective, does the steel appear to be excessively hardened with lots of *Nie* and hardened surfaces or not.

Frosting – refers to a layer of very fine *nie* (*ko-nie*), which appears in the *hada* giving the blade a frosted look.

Wet *jigane* – Does the steel seem exceptionally clear and visceral, like dipped in water.

Standout (*hada tatsu*) *jihada* – is the grain structure highly visible, but not random as in rough or loose *jigane*, the assumption being that the smith intended it to look this way.

Tight/Refined *jigane* – the structure of the *jihada* is small and tightly formed patterns. Tight and refined *jigane* would be a superior form of forging, showing great skill of the smith.

Loose or rough *jigane* – does the grain structure seem unusually large, random and not tightly welded. The appearance of the *jihada* may have many large and open patterns in the grain.

Dark and light *jigane* – dark or black *jigane* has a bluish or darker reflection to it, light or white *jigane* will appear whitish and brighter.

Ko-XXXX – refers to small, i.e. *ko-mokume* is small and tightly formed *mokume* patterns.

Nie-utsuri – the cloudy whitish mist that appears above the hamon line. As opposed to typical Bizen *utsuri* which is primarily *nioi* based, *nie-utsuri* is made of very fine *nie* particles with a clear delineation between the hamon line and where the *nie-utsuri* starts.

Although there are many more terms used in describing *Nihonto*, we will limit ourselves to the above terms and descriptions in describing the steel of the blades. (9)

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