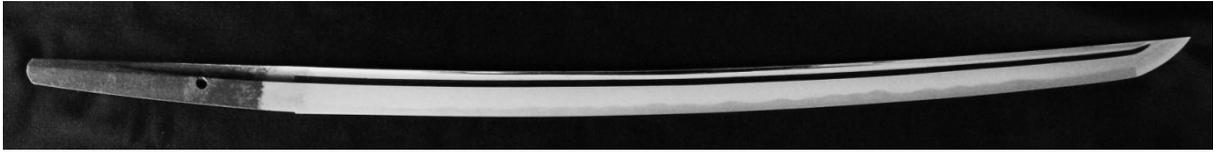


A sword By Yamato Tegai Kanenaga



Earlier this year I was given the rare opportunity to study a Yamato blade in detail. This resulted in an article which was published on the Token of Great Britain Website. It describes in detail a beautiful blade attributed to the Taima School. Some 3 months later I have now been given the chance to spend some time with another Yamato blade. As mentioned in the previous article the Yamato tradition is based on five schools, Senjuin, Hosho Taima, Shikkake and Tegai, working in or around the temple complex in Nara.

The Yamato tradition is perhaps the least studied and least understood in western groups. This is in part because they are comparatively rare. The majority of those seen are from the Tegai School and of those the most common originate from the Sue Tegai classification. These were made at a time when differences between the Yamato schools and of the other traditions in general, were becoming blurred. Increased demand also meant that quality was on the decline.

The result of this is, I think, that Yamato work is generally underrated. Opinions of those when asked range from the negative “they are boring” to the marginally more enthusiastic “They are workmanlike and functional”. I have rarely heard them described as a thing of beauty. However if you look a little deeper in to the school and beyond the boundaries of sue-Tegai, a different image starts to emerge.

There are examples of Ko-Senjuin work such as the blade from the A.Z. Freeman collection which sold in the 1990s which are absolutely stunning. In the article previously referred to I mentioned the quality of Taima work which is regularly compared to the Soshu master Yukimitsu. Tanto by Hosho Sadakiyo and Sadayoshi are stunning and the early works of Shikkake Norinaga are greatly cherished for their beautiful hada and prominent nie. I have always regarded the Tegai School with least enthusiasm. I think this in part was because as mentioned above the majority of pieces I had seen, which still wasn't many, were later works and lacked both individuality and quality. When you start to look more deeply you see the work of the Schools founder, Kanenaga, being described enthusiastically and the quality of his jigane with its abundant and very bright ji-nie, being compared favourably with Yamashiro work of the same period. He was an extremely good smith.

The Tegai School:



An O-suriage katana attributed to Shodai Kanenaga 包永

Fred Weisberg has written an outline of the Tegai School which can be found on his website www.Nihonto.com. In it he describes in detail the characteristics of the school and the schools origin. I have summarised some of this information below:

The Tegai School name was based on the fact they worked by the gate Tegai-Mon of the Todaji temple in Nara. The first generation Kanenaga working in the late 1200s is regarded as the founder.

The Tegai School worked continuously through the late Kamakura period until the end of the Nambokucho. There then appears to have been a gap in production. Work resumed a little later in the Muromachi period. Swords made in the later Muromachi period became known as Sue-Tegai. These later works had a number of differences from the earlier examples.

The Tegai School is perhaps the one most associated with typical Yamato characteristics (possibly because there is a greater number of Tegai works on which to base that association).

Sugata:-

The early Tegai smiths produced tachi, later generations also made tanto. I get the impression they made fewer Naginata than for example, the Shikkake School, but that is an impression rather than known fact. The Tachi were textbook Yamato. They are shinogi-zukuri, and iori mune. The few extant ubu blades exhibit Koshi zori which is quite deep and some show saki zori. The shinogi is high and generally the shinogi-ji is moderate to broad. There is often hira niku. The blades look powerful and robust. Hence the "workman like" label often applied. However at their best and even when O-suriage they look very well proportioned and elegant of form.

Jitetsu:-

The early works show a very tight, beautiful ko-itame. In some cases this might be mistaken for Rai work but generally it is not quite as beautiful as the best Yamashiro pieces. The hada has a great deal of bright ji-nie. There is sometimes a hint of masame and this becomes more obvious in later works. Kanenaga in particular is noted for the clarity of his hada.

Hamon:-

The majority of Tegai blades exhibit a chu-suguha hamon in nie-deki with uchinoki and nijuba. Some smiths, including the Shodai Kanenaga made other variations including a gentle midare with ko-gunome or ko-notare. There is activity such as inazuma, kinsuji and Yubashiri. The hamon can also be hotsure. They are all nie based and the nie is very clear and bright in some areas it can become ara nie

Boshi:-

The classically described Yamato boshi is yakizume and this is the case with the majority of Tegai blades. The boshi is nie based. Some are ko-maru and do have a very short kaeri. Some also exhibit hakikake.

Nakago:-

Ubu tachi are very rare. Those that do exist have a long nakago which is kurijiri. Yasurimei are takanoha. However the majority of long swords are suriage or O-suriage.

Mei:- Because so many pieces were shortened few signed works remain. It has also been suggested that even when ubu Yamato smiths did not regularly sign their work. Those signed pieces that do exist are ni-ji mei. The majority extant signed pieces are by Kanenaga and his Mei generally appears at the bottom of the shortened nakago on the lower edge of the blade.

As mentioned above when the Tegai School started producing again as Sue Tegai their work exhibited many of the more general features associated of the broader Yamato Den, and indeed other schools of the period as they began to blur distinction in an attempt to recreate the much favoured Soshu trends of the day.

Sue Tegai smiths continued to produce blades with a high shinogi which was combined with a broad shinogi-ji. Their hada became more ko-mokume combined with masame. It appeared whitish (early Kanenaga steel was described as dark or blackish). There was little ji-nie. The hamon is narrow and tight with little activity it consists of nioi with a little ko-nie. The most common boshi is ko-maru with a longer kaeri than seen on earlier work. The majority of the blades are o-suriage and mumei.

As seen with the majority of Schools in the muromachi period the quality of workmanship declined as smiths struggled to meet demand in very unsettled times.

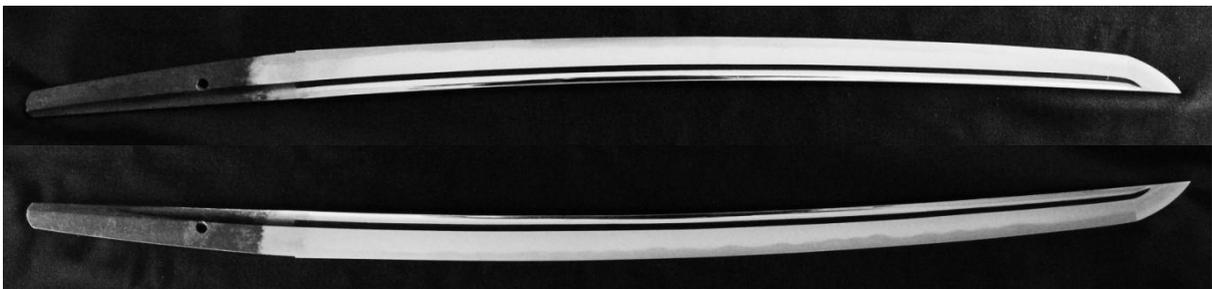
The Sword:

Description:

Nagasa: 51.5cm Sori: 1.0cm

Motohaba 3.0cm sakihaba 2.6cm

Kasane 0.5cm.



Wakazashi signed Kanenaga 包永

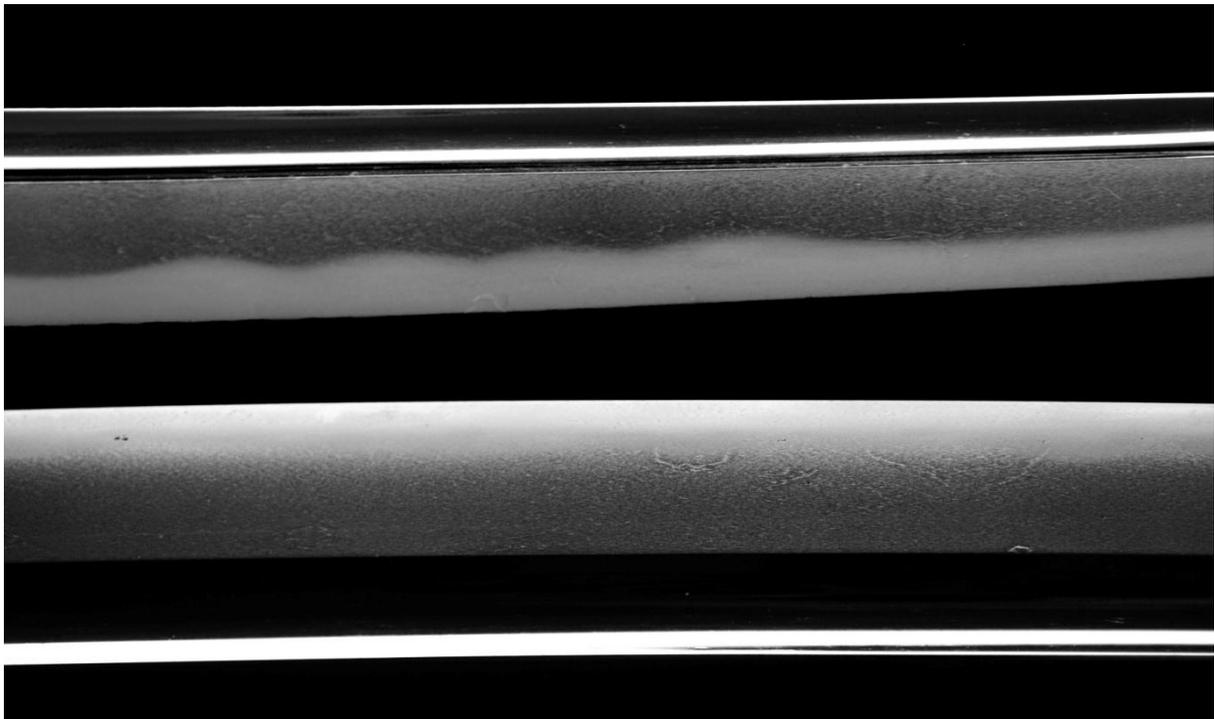
The blade is shinogi-zukuri, lori mune with a shallow zori. The kissaki is an extended chu-kissaki. It is suriage with the edge of what I believe to be the original mekugi ana just present on the nakago jiri.

The shinogi is hi and the shinogi-ji tending towards broad. There is a deep and well cut bo-hi running on both sides from above the yokote all the way through the reshaped nakago. The blade is wide with little obvious tapering towards the kissaki it is also thick. The overall impression is of a very powerful and substantial sword.

The position of the mei and the partial mekugi-ana on the tip of the nakago suggest that the length of the ubu blade was approximately 61-65cm.

Jigane:-

The jigane comprises of a beautiful ko-itame with vary sparse mokume and some nagare. There is no obvious masame. The jigane is clear and bright and is covered in minute ji-nie. There is no larger nie or activity such as chickei evident.

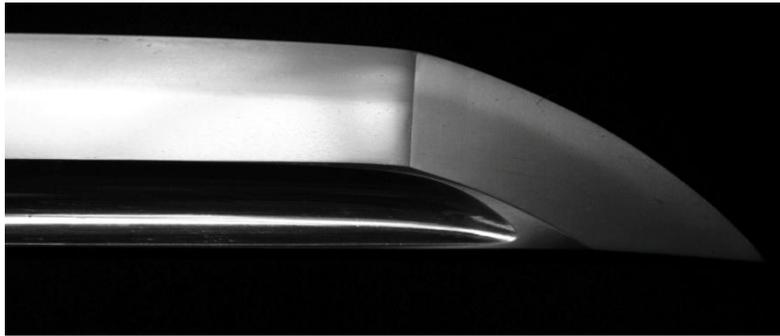


Hamon:-

The hamon is a gentle notare with a broad nioi-guchi interspersed with ko-nie which runs throughout its length. There is ha-hada clearly visible but not a great deal of other activity within the hamon. The hamon varies from side to side.

Boshi:-

On initial examination the boshi appears to be yakizume with a lot of nie. On closer inspection there it is very slightly ko-maru with a very short kaeri. Overall the boshi is broad and healthy and there is no evidence of alteration or loss of steel.



Nakago:-

The blade is suriage with virtually the whole of the original being lost. It has been very well reshaped resulting in the blade retaining an excellent overall form. The nakago retains the top edge of the original mekugi-ana in the nakago jiri and a niji mei Kanenaga 包永 at the bottom below the hi. The nakago is in good condition and has an attractive dark brown patination. There is one mekugi ana. There are no yasurimeji visible.



Conclusion:-

When the current owner purchased this sword it was described as a Sue Yamato wakazashi by Kanenaga. With this in mind I was expecting to see a proficiently made but not very exciting sword, sharing a lot of features with other Sue-school swords of the Muromachi period. What emerged from the shirasaya was a beautifully crafted and magnificently shaped work by a very talented smith. The original dimensions would support the suggestion that the blade was made at some point in the early Muromachi

period. It is a well proportioned wakazashi, originally an uchi-katana. Looking at it in detail it did not have any of the traits of the sue-Tegai group I have mentioned above and which illustrated what I regard as the decline in Tegai quality. The hada had little or no masame, it was ko-itame rather than mokume and it wasn't "whitish" as described in most references. The hamon was not narrow nioi-guchi; it was relatively broad and full of ko-nie.

Although it had more in common with an earlier Tegai blade it lacked certain features you would expect to see in the earliest works. Although the jigane is covered in fine nie there is not the larger bright nie or chickei associated with earlier generations of Kanenaga, nor is there a great deal of activity within the nie-deki hamon. In an early Kanenaga you would expect these to be abundant and clear.

The NTHK papered this blade to the 5th generation Kanenaga working in the Eikyo period, so around 1430. This is a little confusing as Sesko's genealogy of swordsmiths only identifies 4 generations. The 4th was working in the period the NTHK mention. Whether it is made by the 4th or 5th does not greatly matter. The shape ties the blade in to the period and the workmanship has more in common with earlier generations than later. The Sue Tegai label is based on the definition above which places it in the Sue-Tegai timeframe. In reality what we are looking at is a transitional piece produced towards the end of the Tegai period and before the features of the Sue-Tegai style were established. It illustrates the final phase of the quality workmanship of the earlier smiths prior to the decline which occurred later in the 15th century.

This is an extremely rare sword. Of the few Yamato katana and wakazashi I have seen in the years I have been studying I have held one signed Yamato blade in hand; this one. It is not only rare it is an extremely beautiful piece of work in excellent polish and healthy condition. The geometry is extremely crisp and the lines perfect. Like so many Yamato swords it looks extremely sharp (I know this sounds a little obvious but some blades just exude the impression of being incredibly sharp and efficient. This is such a blade) to quote a much over used term it looks magnificent. While the hada may lack some of the activity seen in earlier work it is clear, beautifully forged and very consistent. The flow of the notare hamon complements both shape and hada to create an excellent total. Based on what can be seen I believe the NTHK attribution to be understandable and accurate.

This is a very rare and fine work.

Paul Bowman

May 2019

Reference material:

A Journey to the Gokaden **Tanobe Michihiro**

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

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

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

