

Swords of the Yamato tradition

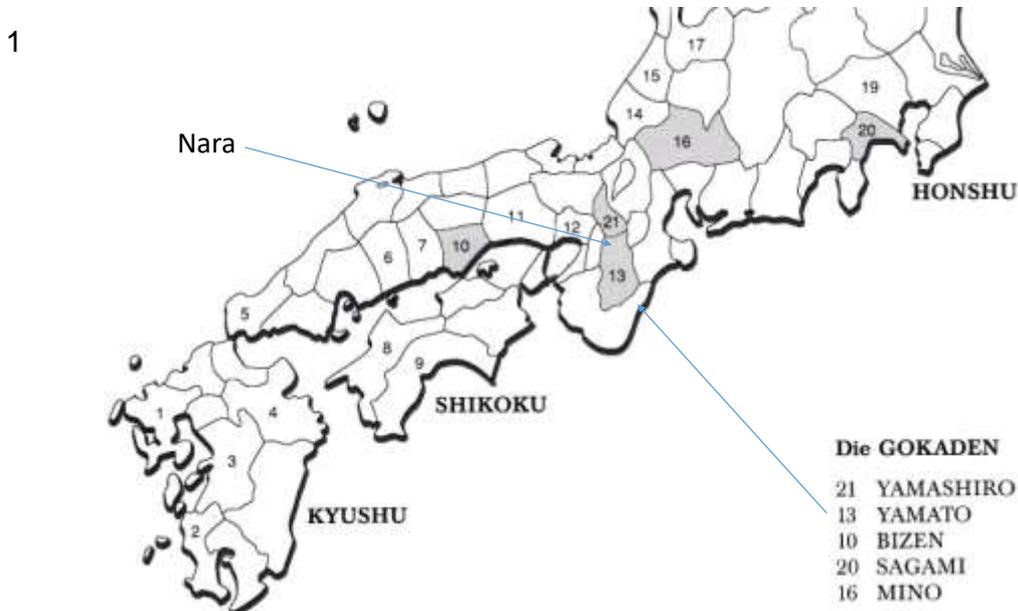
In 2014 Mike Hickman-Smith and I gave a presentation about Yamato swords at the two day event organised by Ian Chapman and held at Chiddingstone Castle in Kent. Since that time I haven't seen any further presentations or articles on the subject so feel it may be time to look at this much misunderstood tradition again.

It is fair to say that perhaps more than any of the other Gokaden traditions Yamato work divides opinion. They are generally highly respected by martial artists but less so by the Art sword collectors. Some of the most commonly heard opinions include:

- Yamato swords are utilitarian.
- Yamato smiths produced functional weapons.
- No top tier smiths came from the Yamato tradition.
- The hada tends to be coarse
- They are boring and lack artistic merit.

I hope in the following pages to at least make people relook at Yamato work and reassess their opinions.

Background:



Yamato is regarded as the oldest of the Gokaden. There are records of swords being made in the province as early as the 7th century. The earliest recorded sword smiths worked in the 8th Century Nara and early Heian periods. The earliest named smiths were Amakuni and Amakaru. Amakuni is said to have forged the Kogarasu-Marū. However there is no accurate

material which confirms this early date of manufacture and these smiths are generally regarded as mythological.

There are two signed and dated Senjuin works in the National museum from the mid Kamakura period (1270).

The great majority of their work was produced to supply the powerful standing armies of warrior monks which were established to protect the increasingly wealthy and influential Temples.

One might ask why religious institutions required standing armies. My understanding is that their rise to power and influence was the result of a very early example of tax evasion. Temples did not pay tax to the government. Other wealthy landowners did. By gifting lands to temples Daimyo were able to avoid heavy taxes and take a proportion of the wealth generated by the land. As the lands owned by the temples increased they became a desirable target for battling clans and therefore needed to protect themselves. As their standing armies increased they also became valuable potential allies and carried an increasing degree of political influence.

As the Temples were the prime customer base for Yamato smiths it is logical to establish their forges within the Temple precincts which is what they did.

The Yamato tradition comprised of 5 main schools, these were Senjuin, Taima, Shikkake, Hosho and Tegai. These Schools were established in and around the Temple Complex in Nara and take their names from either the villages or temples where they were located.

Senjuin. Linked to a temple to the east of Nara close to Wakakusa mountain.

There was also a second branch of the Senjuin School which appeared at the end of the Kamakura period and founded by Ryumon Nobuyoshi near the village of Uda.

Taima. Linked to a branch temple of the Kofukuji in Taima village.

Shikkake. Worked in the Kishida district.

Hosho. Worked in the Takaichi district.

Tegai. Affiliated with the Todaiji temples and worked at the Western gate to the temple area.

The lifespan of the Yamato tradition is comparatively short ranging from the mid Kamakura period to the end of the Nambokucho. Although it is true that there are blades produced later than this date with Sue-Tegai and Sue-Senjuin attributions I think it is reasonable to say that by this time Yamato work was, in the same way Bizen and Mino works were, being influenced by the popularity of Soshu workmanship and were attempting to reproduce it. As

a result the true Yamato characteristics were severely diluted to the point of becoming indistinguishable from other works of the time.

To summarise: Although the Yamato School is identified as the oldest of the Gokaden its productive period was actually quite short. During that time the greater majority of their production was used to arm the warrior monks associated with the various Temples in and around Nara. This client base was regarded as relatively low class and illiterate. This is a reason given for so few Yamato blades being signed. It also helps explain their reputation as utility weapons rather than being regarded as art swords. By the end of the Nambokucho, as with so many other traditions, quality decreased and individual features that identified Yamato blades were lost.

The well known sword scholar Han Bing Siong gave a presentation in 2000 where he studied the number of Juyo swords attributed to Yamato school smiths

- **10,000 Juyo swords studied**
- **40% were Bizen**
- **40 blades were signed by Osafune Kagemitsu .**
- **156 were mumei Yamato**

Taking the above points in to account it is therefore not surprising to find that Yamato work is relatively uncommon. If you consider that by far the greater majority of Yamato production was employed in various civil wars throughout their existence by low ranking warrior monks it is not surprising that few survive. The lack of signed works also makes accurate attribution difficult. The examples that do survive and are most commonly seen are the later "Sue" designated works which are generally of lower quality. I believe that this combination of factors has resulted in Yamato work being generally underrated. Certainly it does not figure with anything like the prominence of the other four traditions of the Gokaden. I hope to illustrate in the following why I believe this view is less than accurate.

General characteristics of Yamato Den:

Summarising descriptions given in Nagayama's Connoisseurs Guide and Nihonto Koza by Dr. Sato (translated by Harry Watson) we are told the following:

- **Masame hada**
- **A raised shinogi line**
- **A broad shinogi-ji**
- **Suguha hamon**
- **Yakitsume boshi with hakikake**

I have said previously that many texts tend to over simplify or exaggerate features to help students learn. Unfortunately this is the case here. Within the Yamato tradition there is a broad range of features. Jigane can have abundant or scarce ji-nie. Boshi can be ko-maru, or O-maru as well as Yakitsume. To illustrate this, another study by Han Bing Siong looked at a number of Juyo Yamato blades and quantified the number that had predominantly masame hada. The results of that study are listed below:

- **Senjuin 3 out of 80**
- **Taima 2 out of 159**
- **Tegai 1 out of 48**
- **Shikkake 5 out of 82**
- **Hosho All**

As can be seen only Hosho blades showed this strong masame hada construction.

Based on this and assessment of other examples describe in the NBTHK monthly sword journals the only consistent common features I have seen that helps identify Yamato work are the high shinogi and broad shinogi-ji. However these features can be and often are very subtle and they emphasise the need to really study sugata in detail before moving on to other aspects of a blades structure.

Individual characteristics of the five schools:

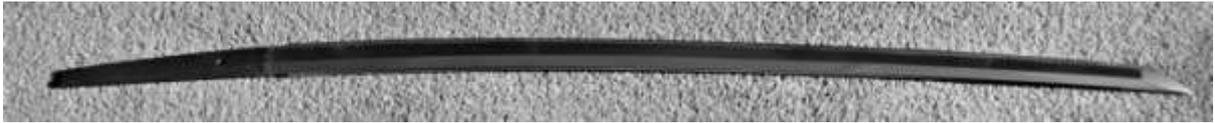
Senjuin:

As stated above the Senjuin school is regarded as the oldest of the five schools with two signed blades dates equating to the mid Kamakura period. Works of this school are further divided in to ko-Senjuin, Senjuin and Sue-Senjuin and in addition there is the branch school established by Ryumon Nobuyoshi in the village of that name.

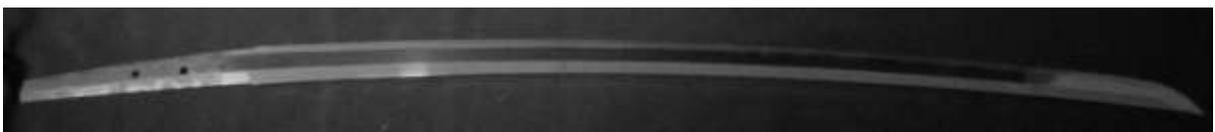
In his definitive work on the Gokaden Tanobe Michiro sensei states that “If we see a sword that is obviously Yamato in form with a sugata from the Kamakura period, but which does not have any of the features which clearly identify it as one of the works of the other 4 schools we attribute it to Senjuin. If the shape suggests a later date (Nambokucho) We attribute it to Ryumon Nobuyoshi School.”

I believe this suggests that Senjuin is effectively the foundation of the Yamato tradition and therefore all of the general features described as yamato characteristics are derived from Senjuin blades. Conversely there are no unique characteristic that differentiate it as definitive Senjuin work.

I have seen very few Senjuin pieces. The best was undoubtedly a Ko-Senjuin long sword in the A.Z. Freeman collection which was a magnificent work with exception shape and jigane.



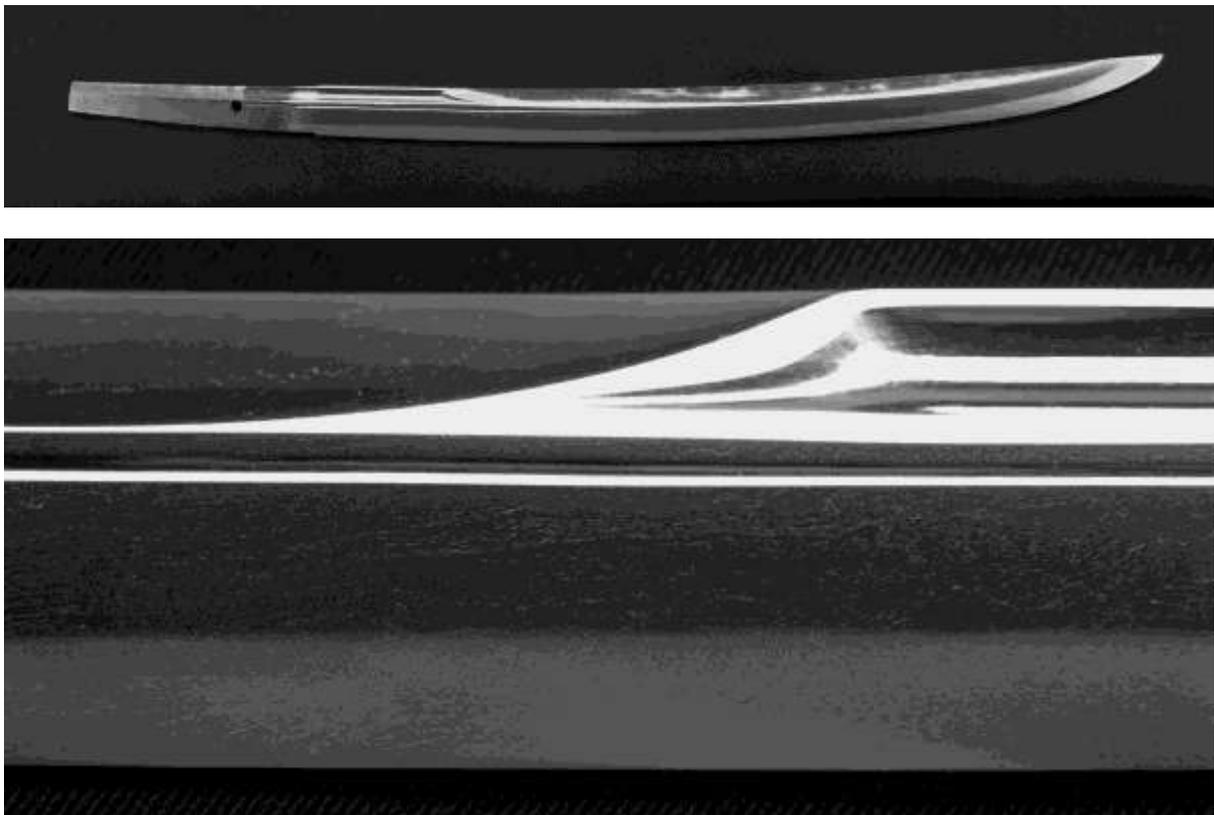
Taima: For many, me included, Taima works (also written as Taema) are the finest of the five schools. The shape largely conforms to the standard Yamato form with high shinogi and wide shinogi-ji and the overall sugata is in line with the norms of the time. The Jigane is exceptional. It comprises of a beautiful ko-itame enriched with very bright ji-nie. The hamon based on suguha or a gentle midare in ko-nie deki is full of activity. It is often said that if your first guess in kantei is for the famous Soshu master Yukimitsu and wrong go for Taima in the second round. This tells us that at its best Taima work may be indistinguishable from the work of one of Masamune's contemporaries. It is incredibly beautiful.



Shikkake:

Early Shikkake work is described as being very similar to Taima. Generally the hada is regarded as being a little weaker in that it includes less ji-nie and the nie is less consistent, bright and well formed. Other distinguishing characteristics include the jigane becoming more strongly nagare or masame as it passes in to the hamon and the hakikake in the boshi is very strong. While these features can be seen in other schools they are more pronounced in Shikkake.

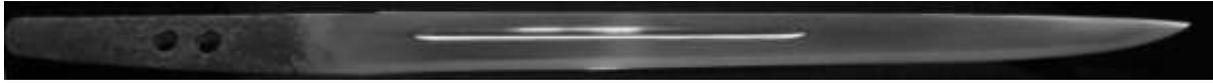
The earliest signed works are by Norinaga and it is believed there were several generations using that name. As with so many schools the quality declined in later generations and it is the work of the first two that best show the quality achieved by this school.



Hosho:-

Hosho is perhaps the most easily identified of the five schools. The jigane is shows very strong masame combined with ko-itame but it is the masame that predominates. I have seen very few Hosho works and there are smiths from the Shinto period such as Kunikane who produced a similar hada. As is often the case the strong masame construction can and does cause some opening of the welds to appear but this is generally felt to be acceptable for works of this school. The hamon tends to be a narrow hotsure suguha with a great deal of ko-nie, kinsuji and inazuma. I have seen very few Hosho blades those that I have seen are

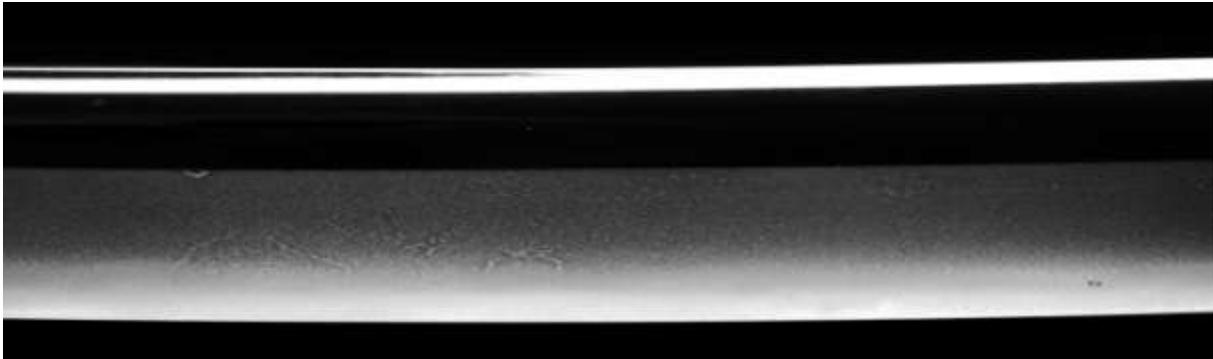
extremely beautiful. The jigane sparkles with ko-nie and the interaction between the ko-itame and strong masame is exceptional. Early smiths such as Sadamune, Sadatsugu and Sadayoshi made tanto which are excellent examples of the schools style.



Tegai:-

I believe Tegai to be the most prolific and longest lasting of the Yamato Schools. I confess that until recently they were my least favourite of the five. I found the quality of the work extremely variable and the swords generally pedestrian. I thought them worthy of many of the criticisms levelled at them. But then two things changed my mind. Firstly I realised that the greater majority of Tegai blades that survived and were seen on the market were later works falling in to the sue-Tegai description. These blades like many others of the period were attempting to conform to the fashion of the time and had lost a lot of the schools identity. In the process they had also sacrificed quality. Secondly I had the opportunity to study the work of Kanenaga. Kanenaga was regarded as the founder of the Tegai School and there were a number of generations using that name. Examples from the Shodai are uncommon; signed example very rare. Those that do exist are truly stunning. The shape is powerful exhibiting the high shinogi and wide shinogi-ji. The hada is a combination of ko-itame and nagare/ masame which is covered with extremely fine and bright ko-nie. It is said that the nie is actually more beautiful than that seen in Soshu work. The hamon is narrow suguha with a great deal of activity such as nijuba, uchinoki and kinsuji. Again the hamon is nie deki very bright and clear. The blade I studied was a rare example, a signed Kanenaga wakizashi, papered to one of the later generations but it was absolutely exquisite.

So I have had to rethink my opinion of Tegai workmanship and in reality early Tegai work is equal to or in some cases better than much of their contemporaries not only in Yamato but in sword production of the time.



Conclusion:-

In conclusion I would like to revisit the statement made at the beginning of this piece:

- **Yamato swords are utilitarian.**

I think one should clarify what this means. By definition a sword is a utility instrument. It is designed to cut and if it fails to do that it is a poor sword. At its best a sword is a classic example of form following function and at its best it creates something of very beautiful form.

If by Utilitarian we mean unattractive or lacking finesse then yes this could be said of some Yamato blades. But it can also be said of Bizen and Mino Kazu-uchi mono (bundle sword) blades. It has been estimated that close to 60% extant koto works originate from Bizen schools. Amongst this number you are far more likely to see the good examples as well as the less good. Yamato numbers are much lower and in my own experience the majority seen are later works which it is true are less attractive.

- **Yamato smiths produced functional weapons.**

Yes they did and this is a plus not a negative. If they weren't functional they weren't good swords. What they weren't is flamboyant in the same way Bizen and Soshu or as elegant as Yamashiro works were. They were conservative and robust.

- **No top tier smiths came from the Yamato tradition.**

In the past mumei ko-Senjuin work has been attributed to Rai Kunitoshi. Taima blades are regularly compared to Soshu Yukimitsu one of the greatest smiths of all time. Kanenaga of Tegai Sadamune of Hosho and Norinaga of Shikkake have all produced superb work reaching the highest levels of certification.

Kaneuji founder of the Mino tradition and one of the best of Masamune's 10 great students was a Tegai smith.

- **The hada tends to be coarse**

It can be. Masame and nagare can and does tend to open which can make it look coarse or at least prominent. But the range of hada within Yamato traditions is probably more diverse than any other of the Gokaden. At its best it compares with Yamashiro for fineness and Soshu for activity and quality of nie.

- **They are boring and lack artistic merit.**

No they don't just look a bit more!!

I hope this brief paper if nothing else will inspire the reader to look a little more closely at Yamato Den. I believe it is largely underappreciated and too easily written off which I think does it a great disservice. One the first of what I regard as my "important" swords was a Shikkake Naginata Naoshi. At the time it was the most important and most expensive blade I had purchased. It is one I still have and one I greatly enjoy simply because it is a superb example of the swordsmith's craft.