

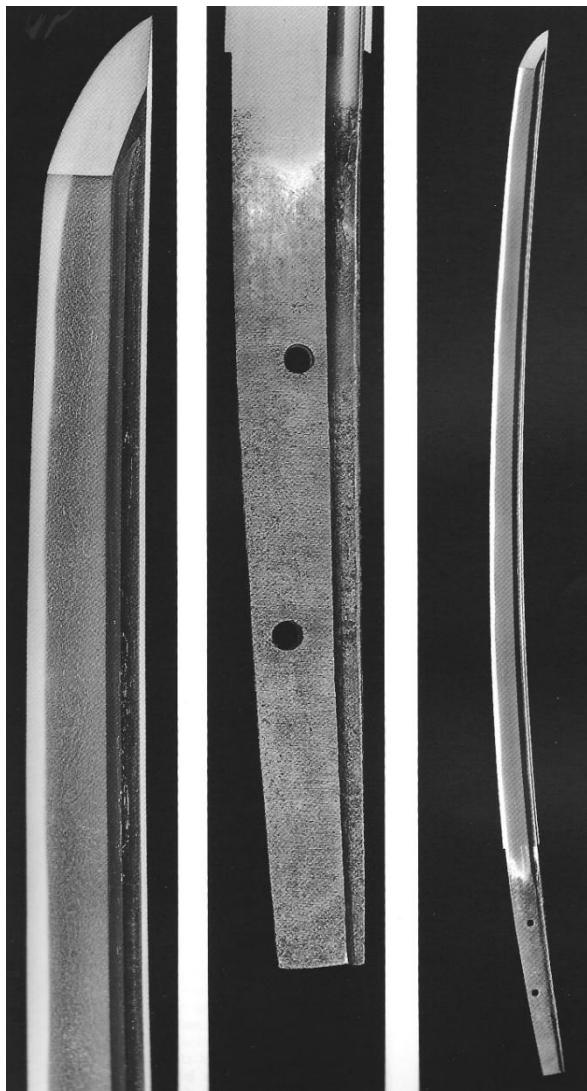
A Katana attributed to Yamato Taima.

Introduction:

Thanks to the generosity of a good friend and long time collector I have been given the opportunity to study an extremely interesting blade. The sword was purchased some years ago in Japan from a well known dealer. It has been awarded Tokubetsu Hozon papers by the NBTHK who attributed it to the Yamato Taima School. The following offers a brief outline of the school and a more detailed description of what I believe to be an extremely beautiful sword.

The School:

Fig1. A Tokubetsu Juyo blade attributed to Taima



(illustration from Chrisities 2001 sale of the Manno Art Museum)

Taima is one of the five main line schools within the Yamato tradition. The others are Senjuin, Tegai, Shikkake and Hosho. In a joint presentation given together with Mike Hickman-Smith at the Chiddingstone Castle meeting in 2014 we mentioned that, in comparison with the more prolific traditions of Bizen and Mino, Yamato swords are rare. In the year 2000 the respected sword scholar

Han Bing Seong presented a paper in which he studied the number of Yamato swords within 10,000 Juyo blades. Of this group 40% were Bizen. 156 (1.6%) were mumei Yamato. Of those blades I believe the majority are attributed to the Tegai School of smiths. By whichever measure one chooses Yamato Blades are uncommon, those attributed to Taima extremely uncommon. Personally I have seen more Hoshō blades (regarded by some as the rarest) than I have Taima. Until recently my experience of Taima blades was limited to catalogue illustrations and one or two blades seen in cabinets in Japan. This limited exposure convinced me that they were beautiful, but until now I had never had the opportunity to study one in hand for any length of time.

It is assumed the Taima School belonged to the Taima-Dera a branch of the Kofukuji and located in the village of Taima. Kuniyuki is regarded as the founder of the Taima School. He is recorded as working in the Shō period (1288-1293). Tanobe Sensei, in his definitive work "A Journey to the Gokaden" mentions that several blades attributed to Taima Kuniyuki by the earlier Honami appraisers have strong nie and kinsuji the deki coming close to Soshu. Some are reminiscent of Yukimitsu. However Kuniyuki's earlier works appear to have more in common with the quieter Yamashiro style. He concludes his description with the comment "In any case works with an attribution to Taima require very exact and sensible judgment"

From this it appears (at least to me) there are two traits in Taima work. Kuniyuki's earlier work shows a Yamashiro (Kyo) influence. Later Taima pieces show more Soshu characteristics.

The "Kyoho-Meibutsu-cho" (list of famous things) lists only 8 Yamato blades of which 5 are Taima.

A number of years ago I spent an evening with the late and much missed Michael Hagenbusch. I asked him if he had to choose one sword from his fabulous collection which it would be. He handed me a tanto which had been designated Tokubetsu Juyo status and attributed to the Soshu smith Yukimitsu. It was probably the most beautiful sword I had ever seen. In Markus Seko's Koto kantei volume, page 33 he quotes a saying from olden times which translates as "If it isn't Yukimitsu go for Taima". In short: when your bid on Yukimitsu is not correct after the first round of a kantei bid on Taima in the second. Yukimitsu was a contemporary or Student of Masamune and is generally regarded as one of the greatest exponents of Soshu Den and sword making in general. The comparison with his work gives the observer some idea of how good Taima blades can be.

Characteristics of the School

Sugata: Overall shape is generally in line with what you would expect from a Yamato blade of this period. They are robust with a high shinogi and hira-niku. They are relatively thick with tori-zori and a steep iori mune.

Ji: The jigane is a combination of itame and mokume with masame running through. The masame tends to be particularly prevalent at the hamachi and towards the monouchi. The shinogi-ji is predominantly masame. The hada is clearly visible and is covered in chikei and ko-nie. It is beautiful.

Hamon: A fine hotsure sugu or ko-midare in ko-nie. There is sunagashi, inazuma and kinsuji. Sometimes the nie can be larger forming ara-nie which Tanobe Sensei suggests is more typical of Tegai Kanenaga (a possible reason for the words of caution previously mentioned in the quotation

from "A Journey...". The Nie is clear and bright. The nioi-guchi is narrow near the hamachi but broadens towards the monuchi.

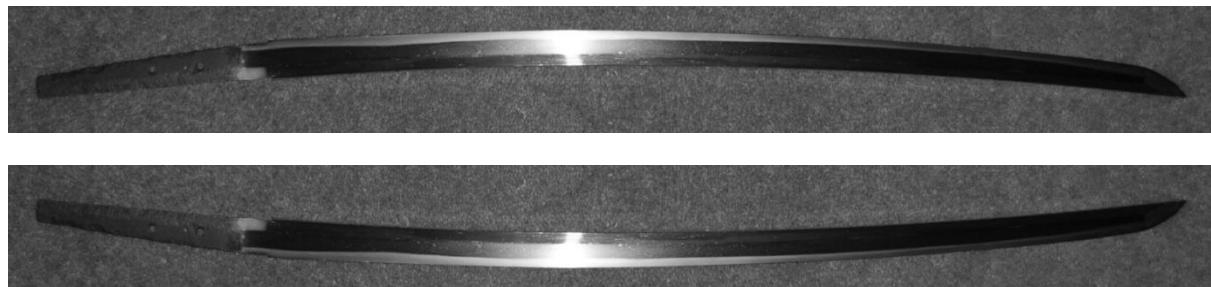
Boshi: exhibits hakikake in ko-nie and is ko-maru with a very short turn back.

Nakago: Most extant works are suriage or O-suriage so no original nakago-jiri survives. Where original Yasurimei are seen they are either kiri or a gentle katte-sagari.

So in conclusion Taima swords may be regarded as of typical sugata for Yamato blades of this period. The separating feature is the ji-hada which is regarded as very close to Soshu style and rich in activity.

The Sword:

Fig.2 O-suriage Yamato Taima blade



The blade is an O-suriage katana. It was assessed by the NBTHK and attributed to the Taima School. It was awarded Tokubetsu Hozon papers. As far as the current owner is aware it has never been submitted for higher level papers.

Description:

Nagasa: 68cm Sori: 1.6cm shinogi zukuri iori-mune

Motohaba 3cm sakihaba 2.2cm

Kasane 0.6cm.

Looking at the overall shape of the sword it is very much what I would expect a Yamato sword of this period to look like. Below I have put alongside an Awataguchi blade dating from the early Kamakura and a Chu Aoe blade which the NBTHK dated to the end of the Kamakura period. The similarities between the Taima and Aoe blades can be clearly seen. Both have started to show the increase in dimensions seen as manufacturing progressed from the generally smaller elegant sugata of the mid Kamakura but have yet to reach the oversized dimensions of the Nambokacho. Despite being O-suriage the Taima blade retains an elegant sugata but at the same time is robust and powerful. The kissaki is an extended chu-kissaki. Taking the overall shape in to account I believe it reasonable to date this blade to the last 30 years of the Kamakura period (1300-1334).

Fig.3 Shape comparison



Top: O-suriage Yamashiro blade C. 1220

Middle: O-suriage Taima blade C. 1300-1320

Bottom: O-suriage Chu-Aoe blade c. 1330

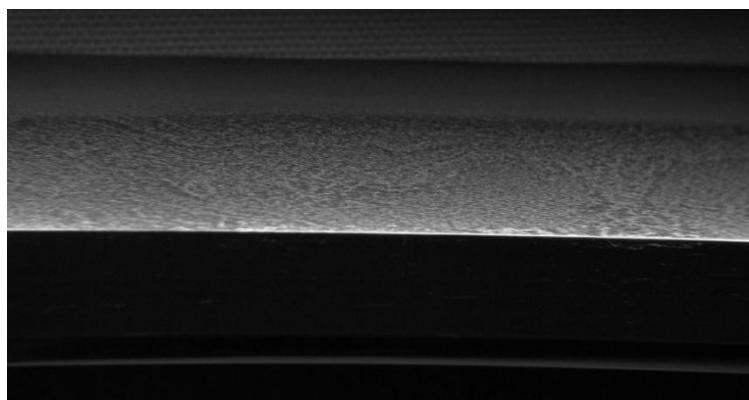
Other characteristics of the shape are in line with what one would expect from a Yamato blade of this period. The shinogi is high, there is hira niku and the shinogi-ji is slightly broad. The lori mune is relatively high. All of these features tend to reinforce the Yamato attribution.

Moving on to the jigane I confess I am going to struggle to describe it adequately. It is quite simply stunning. It is however deceptive, I am reluctant to use the term course as it suggests something negative which is not what I am trying to say. When I first looked at it in a single light source the hada appeared to be almost 3 dimensional with sinuous valleys and troughs running throughout the ji. As I re-orientated the blade within the light source it transformed in to a beautifully clear combination of itame and mokume, with masame running through it close to the hamon. In translations of NBTHK journals one often comes across hada being described as “stands out” and perhaps that better describes it than course. However it is described it is beautiful. As you continue to look it becomes increasingly interesting. At first sight the strength of definition within the jigane hides some of the activity but as you look more closely the ji-hada is alive with chikei and ko-nie. The combination of these features make it is easy to understand the association with Soshu workmanship mentioned previously.

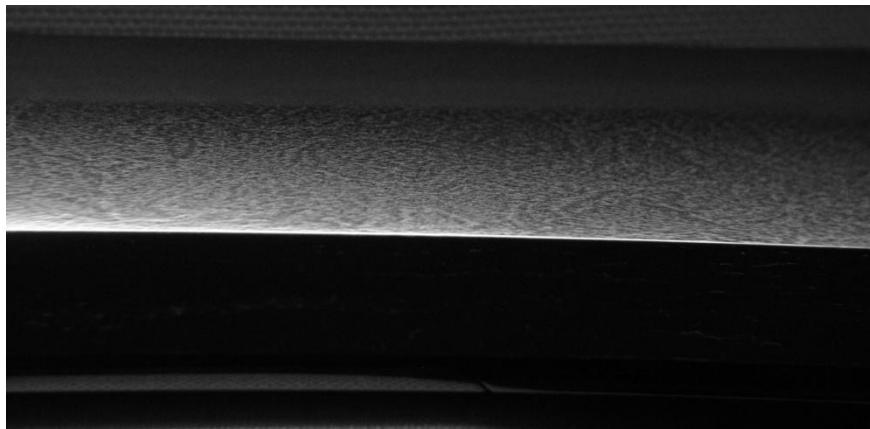
Other features which support the Taima attribution is the presence of masame at the hamachi and monouchi and also the presence of masame within the shinogi-ji (identified as an important kantei point in some texts).

Below I have added two illustrations of the hada together with another illustrating the jigane on a naginata-naoshi attributed to Shikkake. The differences (and similarities can be clearly seen)

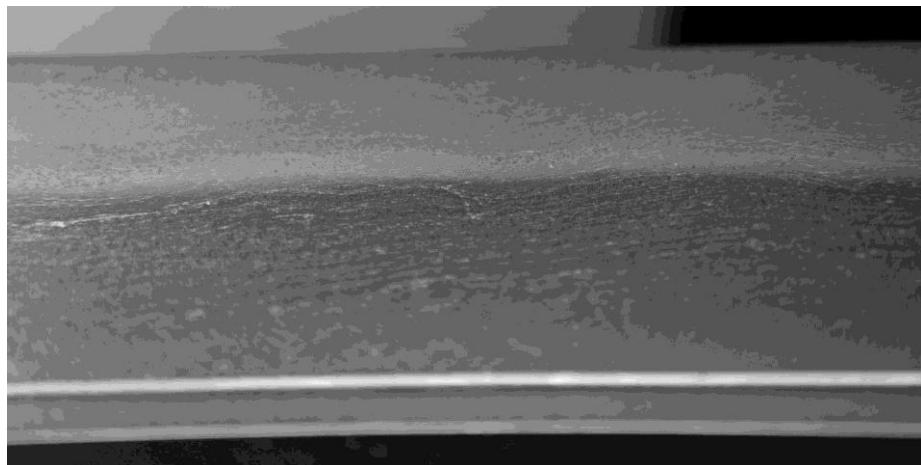
Fig.3 Jigane comparison



Taima 1



Taima 2



Shikkake

The hamon is a gentle midare in ko-nie and is slightly hotsure. There are small ashi and a great deal of activity in the form of kinsuji, inazuma and sunagashi. In places the nie is a little larger without quite becoming ara-nie. The nie is bright and very clear. Unfortunately the polish does not show the boshi very clearly. There is hakikake present in ko-nie. It is also ko-maru with a very small turn back (not totally clear). While not absolutely clear I have no doubt it is present and that a competent polisher could bring out the detail more clearly.

The Nakago is o-suriage and has 2 mekugi ana. To use the Japanese phraseology “The condition of the nakago is regrettable” Unfortunately at some point post shortening the nakago has suffered from what I believe to be water damage. There is pitting over the entire surface which obscures much of the detail. Where yasurimei can be seen they appear to be katte-sagari but it is unlikely these were original. The condition of the nakago is unfortunate but the blade is approaching 700 years old and should be forgiven signs of life. One must remember that Yamato blades were made for the standing armies of the monasteries rather than high art. To see one in perfect condition would in some ways raise more doubts than a blade such as this that has seen action at some point in its long life.

Fig.4. Nakago



Summary:

Earlier I quoted Tanobe Sensei's remark "In any case works with an attribution to Taima require very exact and sensible judgment". This mumei O-suriage blade has received Tokubetsu Hozon papers. To obtain higher level papers such as this the shinsa panel needs to be very confident that their opinion is justified. So how did they reach this conclusion? Firstly the shape points towards a blade of the late Kamakura. The structural features (high shinogi, hira niku etc) point towards Yamato. The bright and clear nie could suggest either Taima or Tegai Kanenaga. However for Kanenaga one might expect to see more ara-nie and the itame within the jigane to be smaller. The final pointer for the attribution is the incredible sinuous hada with its rich activity. It looks like Soshu steel in a Yamato sword. Taking these factors in to account the attribution to Taima seems wholly logical and reasonable.

Conclusion:

Yamato swords are not often seen. Those that are tend to be later work such as sue-Tegai or sue-Senjuin . These swords were made at a time when styles were beginning to become indistinct following the lead of the seki and sue Bizen smiths in creating low cost Soshu look alike blades. As a result I think the quality of the best Yamato work tends to be overlooked. We shouldn't forget that one of Masamune's greatest pupils, Kaneuji, was a Yamato Tegai smith before founding the Mino tradition. At the same time other Yamato Schools were producing some very fine work and none finer than that made by the Taima School.

In case I have left you in any doubt I think this is a stunningly beautiful work. The various elements come together to create that "just right" appearance so often mentioned by Japanese scholars when describing top work. It may be that the condition of the nakago would prevent this blade from obtaining higher papers but to be honest I don't think it matters greatly. There is no reason to doubt the Tokubetsu Hozon attribution and the blade screams quality. I have greatly enjoyed having the chance to look at it (and will continue to for a little more time before it is dragged from my grasping hands!!) It is a very fine blade and an excellent example of a Yamato sword.

Paul Bowman

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