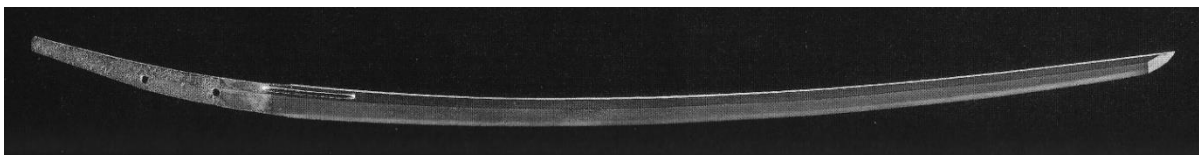


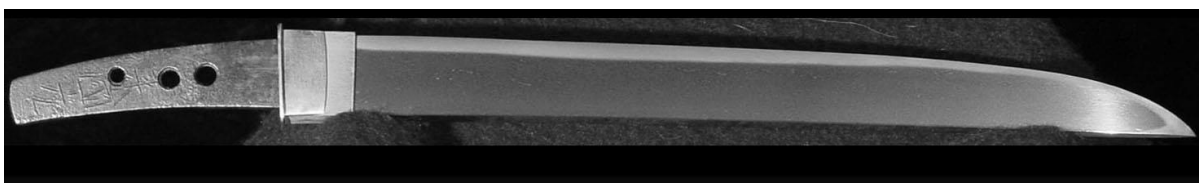
A study of the Yamashiro tradition (山城伝) and it's legacy



Sanjo Munechika 三条宗近



Awataguchi Kunitomo 粟田口 国友



Rai Kunimitsu 来国光

Introduction:

Defining the Yamashiro tradition of sword making is challenging. Most texts describe them of being of elegant form, standard sori and sugata with suguha hamon and ko-itame hada. All will confirm that early Yamashiro work is of very high quality. The proportion of famous and highly regarded smiths coming out of the Yamashiro tradition is very high perhaps only being surpassed by those originating in the early Soshu-Den. What I would define as the true Yamashiro School lasted for approximately 200 years spanning the Kamakura and Nambokucho periods. Offshoot schools which show Yamashiro characteristics last a little longer. But as with other schools the unique features of Yamashiro work become lost and indistinct as one progresses in the Muromachi period and in to the Momoyama.

I have been given the opportunity to look in detail at five swords. In date they range between the early Kamakura to the early Edo. I have also taken examples described in other works to illustrate some of the features discussed.

I have attempted to describe these swords and how they exhibit some of the finest of the Yamashiro traits and traditions which have influenced so many other schools and smiths.

The swords under examination are:



Awataguchi Norikuni 栗田口 則國



Rai Kuniyuki 来国行



Nobukuni 信国



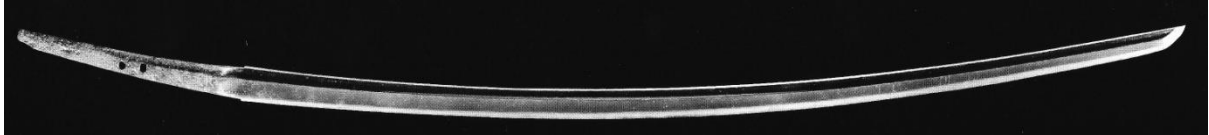
Enju 延寿



Hizen Tadayoshi 忠吉

An introduction to Yamashiro Den:

The Sanjo Munechika School:



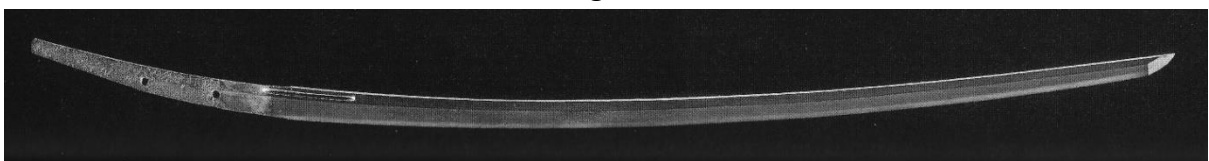
Sanjo Munechika 三条宗近

Perhaps the most famous Yamashiro smith indeed one of the most famous swordsmiths of all time is Sanjo Munechika. Although there are few extant works attributed to Munechika he has been appreciated since early times with one of his works listed as one of the five great blades of Japan. His reputation has been further enhanced and brought to the notice of a broader audience through the popular Noh play Kokaji. This tells how Munechika was commissioned to make a sword for the emperor but lacked an assistant to help him. He visits the Inari shrine where a small boy appears and offers to assist him. As they work the boy transforms into the fox god Inari and they complete the work. The blade was signed on one side Munechika and the other "little fox".

Another famous work by Munechika is the Mikazuki-Munechika, crescent moon Munechika, so called because of the unusual crescent shaped uchinko within the hamon which are said to resemble the crescent moon.

The Munechika School was continued by his son, grandsons and students some working in the Kyoto Sanjo area others in Gojo, thus the Sanjo and Gojo Schools. The work of the school may be typically described as slender wazori blades with fumbari a high shinogi and chu-kissaki. The hada is ko-itame with some masame and o-hada, which is densely covered in ji-nie and with faint jifu utsuri (dark patches within the jihada). The hamon is suguha and ko-choji in ko-nie deki. There is a great deal of activity within the hamon with plenty of ashi and yo and nijuba is seen. The ko-nie is bright and beautiful and there are many kinsuji, yubashiri and Tobiyaki.

The Awataguchi School:



Awataguchi Kunitomo 粟田口 国友

Following on from the Sanjo and Gojo Schools the Awataguchi School came to prominence in the early Kamakura. Awataguchi lies on the main road that runs from Kyoto to Omi province and from very early times swordsmiths settled and worked there. The term Awataguchi-Mono has become established to define masterworks of this school which are characterised by highly refined and noble workmanship. Kuniie is recorded as the founder of the school although none of his swords have been identified. It is the work of his six sons which have come to define the school and established its reputation for excellence. The brothers were Kunitomo, Hisakuni, Kuniyasu, Kunikiyo, Arikuni and Kunitsuna. Their workmanship was said to be very similar and of the highest quality. Kunitomo, Hisakuni and Kuniyasu were amongst the Gobankaji (smiths invited to forge swords with the retired Emperor). The lineage was continued with Kunimoto's son Norikuni (also a Gobankaji smith) and his sons and grandson Kuniyoshi, Kunimitsu and perhaps most famous of all Yoshimitsu who is regarded as one of the greatest makers of tanto of all time.

Awataguchi work is defined by their unique hada. Named Nashiji (pear skin) hada it is an extremely fine ko-itame covered in ji-nie and chickei. Some blades also include areas of itame and O-hada. The hamon is a classic suguha or suguha combined with ko-midare in ko-nie deki which shows nijuba and kinsuji. Overall the hamon may be described as quietly noble and refined.

The Rai School:



Rai Kunitoshi” 来国俊

The Awataguchi School flourished in the early to Mid Kamakura period after which perhaps the best known of all Yamashiro Schools came to prominence: the Rai School.

The founder of the school is listed as Kuniyoshi, but none of his works are extant. It is recorded that he was a Korean immigrant, but this is not confirmed. In one text the term “Raigoku” appears meaning “came to Japan” and it has been suggested the name of the school originated from this. However, in another text it has been suggested that Rai Kuniyoshi is the same smith as Awataguchi Kuniyoshi and that he was the founder. The earliest confirmed work of the school is that of Rai Kuniyuki and he is regarded as the actual founder of the school although he did not use the “Rai” character. He was followed by a very distinguished lineage starting with Kunitoshi and Rai Kunitoshi (now largely considered the same smith) and Kunitoshi's sons Kunimitsu and Kunitsugu. A contemporary of Rai Kunitoshi was Ryokai. I cannot find clear confirmation of his relationship to the former but his work differed from what might call typical Rai work. Ryokai was responsible for the

formation of the Nakajima Rai school Echizen Rai group all of whom produced classic swords of the Yamashiro style.

The Nobukuni School:



NOBUKUNI 信国

The Shodai Nobukuni was believed to be the son or grandson of the Rai Smith Ryokai. It is also recorded that he studied under the Soshu Master Sadamune. In fact, there is a Juyo Bukansai blade that had originally papered to Sadamune but was re-attributed to Nobukuni in the higher paper. I think this gives an indication of the quality of the Shodai's work. As one might expect his work shows elements of both Yamashiro and Soshu. Producing mainly wakizashi and tanto he made blades with strong hada which "stands out" combined with Shoshu-esque midare and togari-ba hamon. He also produced blades with suguha hamon which had a smaller and much tighter ji-hada. The manufacturing dates of the first and second generations run from the middle of the Nambokucho into the Oei period. After the first two generations the quality of forging is said to decrease. However, the later generations were noted for their inclusion of fine Horimono. Many generations followed with other branch schools adopting the Nobukuni name as a title in their mei.

The Enju School:



Enju Kunimura 延寿国村

The founder of the Enju School was Taro Kunimura. Originally from Yamato he studied under Kuniyuki, eventually being adopted by him and becoming his son in law. He moved to Enju establishing a school producing in the style of the Rai School. Later smiths of the Enju School include Kunisuke, Kuniyasu and Kunitoki and all worked in a similar style. At its best Enju work may be considered equal to Rai. However as with so many schools as the progressed in to the Nambokucho their workmanship declined, and they largely disappear.

Regarding Enju workmanship, the Sugata, jigane and Hamon are very much in line with the Rai tradition. Their jigane is said to be slightly weaker and rather than nie utsuri seen in Rai utsuri in Enju if there at all is described as shirrake (patches of faint, whitish utsuri). One kantei indicator which differentiates Enju from Rai is the Boshi. In Enju it is most commonly O-maru whereas Rai is ko-maru.

The Hizen Tadayoshi School:



Hizen no kuni Tadayoshi 肥前国忠吉,

There is much written about this very prolific and popular school which produced swords of a consistently high quality through many generations and maintained a standard form throughout their long history. Although not directly related to the Yamashiro tradition, Hizen work developed to include many of the features associated with Yamashiro workmanship. I hope this will be more clearly illustrated in the example of the Shodai's work described later in the text.

Originally, working in the forge of Hizen Munetsugu, Shodai Tadayoshi produced copies of Bizen and Shizu masterpieces. Following his first trip to Kyoto to study under the master Umetada Myoju, one starts to see a greater move towards what was to become the iconic Hizen form. This was continued after his second trip and subsequent name change and developed more completely with his son Omi Daijo Tadahiro.

Hizen blades are noted for their elegant sugata which did not typically follow trends through the Edo period and maintained a classic form. Their hada developed in to the iconic "Konuka" (rice grain) which comprised of fine ko-itame with ji-nie. They produced various hamon forms but by far the most common was suguha with a thick, belt like nioiguchi and infused with ko-nie.

The Swords

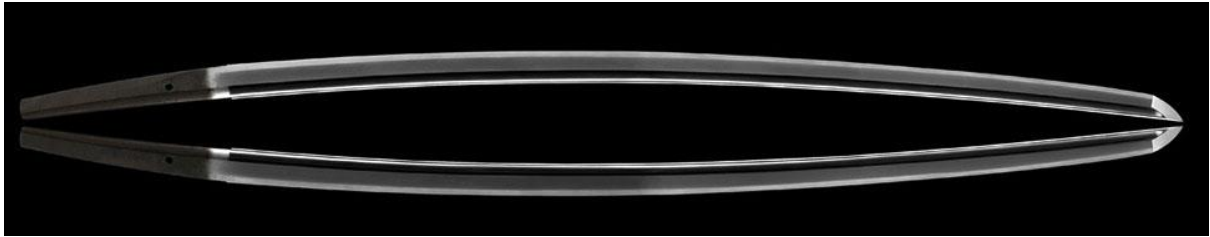
A daito by Awataguchi Norikuni:



O-suriage Norikuni.

The blade is shinogi-zukuri and iori- mune. It has a slight koshi-zori. It has deeply cut bo-hi

The sword is an O-suriage tachi with a nagasa of 68.5cm. it has a very worn but just discernable shu mei to Norikuni. The blade is stored in a shirasaya with a sayagaki by Tanobe Sensei confirming the attribution and describing the blade as a masterwork of Awataguchi Norikuni. In 2011 the blade was awarded Hozon papers with the same attribution. To date the sword has not been submitted for higher level papers.



Sugata:

Nagasa: 68.5cm Sori: 1.8cm Motohaba 2.5 cm sakihaba 1.8cm Kasane 0.5cm.

The shinogi is not high. Despite being shortened the blade maintains an elegant shape with an even tori-sori curve. The kissaki is small and slightly ikubi in appearance. There are deep bo- hi running from the kissaki through the nakago. The overall appearance is of quiet understated elegance which one immediately associates with blades of the early and mid Kamakura period.

Jigane:

In several references Awataguchi hada is described as “the finest” I am not sure whether this refers to the extremely fine pattern or just that it’s the best. In my own very biased opinion both are accurate and are clearly demonstrated in this blade. On first inspection the jihada is deceptively bland appearing almost muji. However closer inspection reveals an extremely fine and consistent ko-itame which is covered in fine ji-nie and small bright chickei. Awataguchi hada is called nashiji (pear skin) and although many have attempted to emulate it with good result none have quite achieved the mastery seen in Awataguchi work. Some blades, as in this case, are virtually pure nashiji, others combine this with elements of O-hada. The result is exquisite and incomparably beautiful.



Nashiji hada

Hamon:

On the sayagaki Tanobe sensei describes the blade as having a classical-elegant yakiba. The hamon is a narrow suguha with very slight midare. It is clear and bright comprising predominantly of ko-nie. There is considerable activity within the hamon. There is a great deal of ko-nie which cascades from the habuchi down to the cutting edge maintaining the frosted appearance described in relation to the hada. In addition, there are frequent bright lines of kinsuji throughout the length of the blade. In some areas small and tight lines of sunagashi can be seen within the hamon.



Suguha hamon

Comment:

Works by Awataguchi Norikuni are extremely rare. At the last count only 7 signed examples had been awarded Juyo status or above and only 3 of those were long swords. This blade, although mumei, has received the same attribution from 3 sources. Comparing this blade to the signed national treasure example the attribution is easily understandable. Obviously a very personal opinion but this is without doubt the most beautiful sword I have had the opportunity to study. It is now 800 years old but remains stunning. It encapsulates all of the features one would hope to see in an Awataguchi blade of this period.

A Daito attributed to Rai Kuniyuki:



The blade is shinogi-zukuri and iori- mune. It has a slight koshi-zori. It has deeply cut bo-hi .

Sugata:

Nagasa: 66.5cm Sori: 1.8cm Motohaba 2.72 cm sakihaba 1.75cm Kasane
0.65cm.

The shinogi is not high. Attributed to Rai Kuniyuki by the NBTHK as far as I am aware it has never been submitted for higher papers. Made some 30 or 40 years after the Norikuni described above, when one places the blades alongside each other the similarities are very apparent. Kuniyuki was said to be the son of the founder of the Rai School Kuniyoshi. Kuniyoshi may have been Korean, but another source suggests he was a member of the Awataguchi school. When considering the proximity in place and time of the two school their similarity should not come as a surprise. There are deep bo-hi running from the kissaki through the nakago. The overall appearance is of quiet understated elegance which one immediately associates with blades of the early and mid Kamakura period.

Jigane:

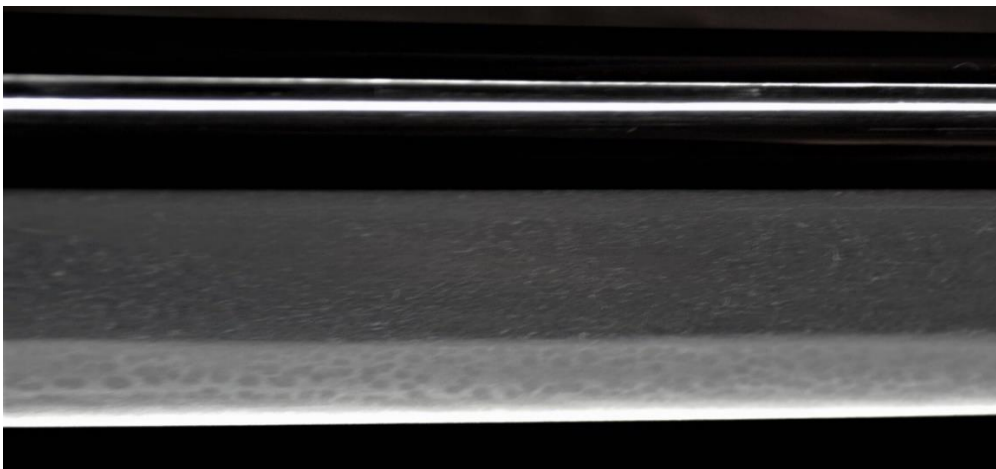
The ko-itame hada is mixed with O-hada and is covered in ji-nie. Although not as strong as can be seen in the Awataguchi blade (this may be the result of a different polishing technique, although both blades are in excellent polish) there is activity in the form of chickei and nie-utsuri as well as very fine ji-nie. In addition there are subtle differences in the steel colour which add to the sinuous natural beauty of the jihada and which is reminiscent of the work of Norishige (although a great deal less visible). When rotating the blade in a suitable light source the full beauty of the jigane can be seen. It is of a very high quality.





Hamon:

The hamon comprises of a gentle midare with fairly broad nioiguchi and a great deal of ko-nie interspersed. There is activity within the hamon including a feature regarded as a kantei point for Kuniyuki “warabide choji” (fern choji). The hamon compliments the jigane and nagasa beautifully.



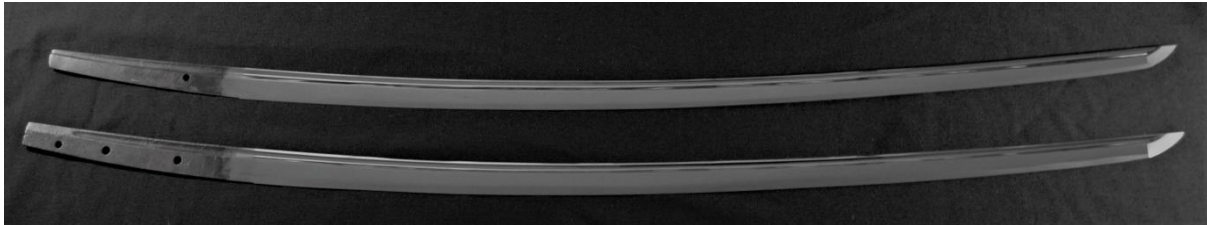
Hamon clearly showing the warabide Choji indicative of Kuniyuki’s work.

Comment:

This is a magnificent blade which clearly illustrates many, if not all the features associated with Rai Kuniyuki. Although a little less refined than the previous example the ko-itame hada of this piece is beautiful and again the combination of sugata, hada and hamon result in a

work that is truly outstanding. Sitting this alongside the previous blade the lineage and progression are immediately apparent and clear to see.

Note: - In both the above blades the shape is a very important factor in the overall aesthetics of each piece. Both have beautifully carved bo-hi which although deep are flawless. Although the Rai Kuniyuki is a more substantial blade than the Norikuni, both combine an elegant sugata and hamon to produce a very sophisticated end product.



1. Awataguchi Norikuni
2. Rai Kuniyuki

A Sunobi Tanto by Nobukuni:



The blade is suriage, iori-mune and hira-zukuri. There is a two-character mei at the base of the Nakago "Nobukuni" The kuni character partially obscured by pitting. Although this sword has never been submitted to shinsa the workmanship, mei and shape suggest a work by one of the first three generations. If so the likely date of manufacture would be firmly within the Nambokucho period, between 1350 and 1400.

Sugata:

Nagasa: 28.5cm Sori: slight Motohaba 2.7 cm Kasane 0.5cm.

Jigane:

As one might expect from a smith who was the son or grandson of the Rai smith Ryokai and subsequently trained under the Soshu master Sadamune, the jigane is a beautiful combination of Yamashiro like ko-itame and Soshu o-Itame/nagare. The hada is tightly forged with sporadic ji nie. The quality of the jigane confirms this as a likely early Nobukuni work. In later generations the quality was said to deteriorate, albeit from a very high starting point. The combination of ko-itame and nagare is particularly attractive in this blade. The ji-nie is not particularly bright when compared to the previous works but this may be a result of the polish rather than the steel.



Hamon:

The hamon is hotsure suguha. The nioiguchi is broad and bright with a great deal of ko-nie creating a frayed appearance between hamon and ji-hada. There is a great deal of activity within the hamon including sunagashi and kinsuji. There are also small areas of nijuba. The boshi is strong and clear in jizu form.



Comment:

Prior to seeing this piece, I had not taken the opportunity to study the Nobukuni school in any detail. I am glad this blade gave me the reason to do so. It is a very fine work. It is a beautiful blade which clearly illustrates the lineage of the Nobukuni group. The Jigane is a combination of fine ko-itame as seen in Rai work together with a more sinuous nagare one might more typically associate with Soshu. The hamon has the beautiful “frayed appearance one associates with early Yamashiro work. The sugata suggests that it is mid to late Nambokucho, this combined with the quality of the hada suggests this to be the work of one of the early Nobukuni smiths (Shodai, nidai or sandai)

An O-Suriage Wakizashi attributed to Enju:



The blade is O-suriage, iori mune with a smallish chu-kissaki.

Sugata:

Nagasa: 46.5cm Sori: 1.0 cm Motohaba 2.61 cm sakihaba 1.83 cm Kasane 0.56cm.

It is always extremely difficult (I find it so) to judge the age and original form of a blade which has been so heavily modified. Based on the current dimensions, the hada and hamon and the attribution to the Enju school I believe this is the top of a tachi blade made in the mid Kamakura period (1320).

Jigane:

A tight ko-itame hada which is rich in chickei and ji-nie. There is little or no evidence of the plain Enju hada (areas of plain dark steel not dissimilar to Rai-hada) which so often appear in Enju work. The Jigane is lustrous and the chickei and ji-nie shine out and then turn black as the blade is re-orientated in a single light source. Altogether the hada is extremely fine.



Hamon:

Suguha in ko-nie deki with bright ko-nie running through the compact nioi-guchi. The hamon has a great deal of activity with ashi and inazuma clearly visible.



Comment:

I have had the opportunity to study this work for many years. It has been seen by numerous collectors in Europe and the USA and the consensus is that had it a ko-maru boshi rather than O-maru it would be attributed to Rai, probably Rai Kunimitsu. Enju work is extremely variable. As with many schools the quality deteriorated in later generations. I have had the opportunity to see many Enju works over the past 40 years and this is without question the best example I have seen. The hada is beautiful with a great deal of activity and the suguha hamon absolutely full of kinsuji, inazuma and sunagashi. I believe this to be an exceptional early work from the mid Kamakura.

A Suriage Wakizashi by Shodai Tadayoshi



The blade is a suriage wakizashi, it is shinogi zukuri and iori-mune with a chu kissaki. The blade has been attributed to Shodai Tadayoshi made in the early Edo period (between 1615 and 1620)

Sugata:

Nagasa: 48.5cm Sori: 1.8 cm Motohaba 2.8 cm Sakihaba 1.9 cm Kasane 0.6cm.

The blade is suriage. It has 3 mekugi-ana and a two-character mei at the base of the nakago.



Jigane:

The hada is a very fine and consistent ko-itame This blade falls somewhere between the

nashiji hada seen in the Awataguchi and the ko-itame of the Enju. Overall, the blade has a great deal of ji-nie which becomes brighter and larger as it progresses to the monouchi. There are also small chikei running the length of the blade. The quality of the forging and the brightness of the nie based activity are outstanding.



Hamon:

The hamon is a very gentle midare based on a suguha foundation. The nioi-guchi is extremely clear and bright and has the typical “belt like” form associated with the early Hizen smiths. Running throughout the hamon is a great deal of activity comprising of very bright nie which cascades through the nioi-guchi and creates clouds of nie on the border with the ji. There is kinsuji in the lower half of the blade. As it progresses towards the monouchi the nie becomes larger and brighter in areas it forms nijuba and kuichigai-ba. it is a very complex and beautiful hamon which despite its complexity looks uncontrived and natural in form.



Comment:

This blade has been the subject of many years of study. It is far from what one has come to associate with the Hizen Tadayoshi School. It is important to remember that the Shodai was very experimental and in his early years produced copies of various schools including Rai and

Enju. This blade exhibits many of the features which would later become hallmarks of the Hizen school. However, the prominent nie in both jihada and hamon make it unusual. After a great deal of research and discussion I believe this blade to have been a special-order work made for presentation (The Nabeshima Daimyo often presented blades to visiting dignitaries.). The very tight ko-itame hada is testimony to the Yamashiro influence.

Conclusion:

The Yamashiro smiths were producing swords for the Imperial Court and the nobility of the late Heian and Kamakura period. With such a high profile and discerning clientele they were obliged to use the very best raw materials available to them and to employ their talents to the fullest. These requirements meant that their output was relatively low, but their reputation for high quality established early in their history. Their reputation was further enhanced through their association with the retired Emperor Go-Toba as part of the Goban Kaji. During their time within the Gobankaji they came into close contact with masters from both Bizen and Aoe and information was exchanged and shared. As with many other schools Yamashiro smiths travelled to other locations. Perhaps most importantly of all was the Awataguchi Master Kunitsuna who was summoned to Kamakura by the incumbent Shogun to help establish what was to become one of the most famous and brilliant traditions in sword making history the, Soshu Den.

Other smiths such as Kunimura originally from Yamato and eventually settling in Enju and Ukai smiths from Bizen spent time in Kyoto. The influence of their time there is clearly evident in their subsequent work. The swords under review here show some of this development. At its core the primary Yamashiro feature, of beautifully forged steel is combined with additional traits of other schools and to meet the changing needs of the population. However, the influence of Yamashiro can be traced from the very earliest days of sword manufacture through Japanese history to the present day.

The late, much respected, collector Michael Hagenbusch often said "Jigane is key". I have often quoted him in presentations relating to sword construction and characteristics. His argument was that other than shape all other features that we look for and admire in the Japanese sword depend on the quality of the jigane. Equally this quality depends on the raw material used and the skill of the smith to combine it into the final product.

Many texts record that Yamashiro Jigane, especially that produced by the Sanjo and Awataguchi Schools was the finest ever produced. If one looks at the sword schools influenced by the Yamashiro tradition the common feature in all is the quality and fineness of the jihada. This is not only apparent in the blades examined here but in others where the Yamashiro influence is recorded such as the early Soshu work of Shintogo Kunimitsu, the Ukai School of Bizen and the Bitchu Aoe School. A noted feature of all their work is the fineness of the jigane. This begins with a very fine ko-itame hada, often this is combined with itame, mokume or O-hada. It also includes a great deal of activity in the form of ji-nie

and fine chickei. This activity often spills over in to the hamon where inazuma, kinsuji, nie are seen. The result is very subtle but complex, combining jigane and hamon to create a beautiful surface pattern incorporating all those elements most appreciated by the student today.

The influence of Yamashiro-den is immense, and an understanding of their work can greatly enhance both enjoyment and understanding of the fascinating field of study.

Bibliography and references:

As always when compiling a work of this nature I attempt to cross refer several references and follow what appears to be the majority view. I have listed these works below. However, any errors appear in the above text are purely my own.

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Images:

Thank you to the gentlemen below for allowing me to use some archive images from their respective sites.

Mr. Fred Weisberg www.nihonto.com

Mr. Ed. Marshal www.yakiba.com

I would like to thank my friends and colleagues, The Reverend Timothy Kay, Mr. David Fuller, Dr. Graham Curtis, Mr. George Miller and Mr. Charles Bowman for sharing their thoughts and ideas when discussing the above swords.

I am also very grateful to the late Mr. Michael Hagenbusch and Mr. Darcy Brockbank with whom I enjoyed numerous conversations and debates relating to several of the blades discussed above. Both gentlemen made an immeasurable contribution to our understanding of this very complex subject. Both are greatly missed.

Paul Bowman

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