## The Honjō Masamune



The Sōshū 相州 (also called Sagami 相模) tradition was established by Shintōgo Kunimitsu 新藤五国光 in the late Kamakura period. His known swords with inscribed dates show that he was active at least between 1293 and 1334 AD. Kunimitsu's *hamon* are *suguha* in *nie*, his *jihada* has much *jinie* with swirling *itame* forming *kinsuji*. Among his pupils were two of the most famous names among Japanese sword smiths: Yukimitsu 行光 and Masamune 正宗.

Masamune had enormous influence on sword making throughout the country. His success was in part due to the fact that he carefully selected his iron, forging together different kinds of steels to give improved strength and hardness. He also successfully tempered blades at a higher temperature than anyone before him, resulting in brilliant *nie*. The high temperature usually causes the blade to become extremely hard and brittle; however, he is also credited with "inventing" stress relief, thus avoiding those undesired effects.

The *jigane* is complex with varied hues in the *jihada*, rich in *jinie*, with both bright and dark pools of *chikei*. The *hamon* is predominantly *notare* with *midareba*, deep and intense with varied lines of *inazuma*, *sunagashi* and *kinsuji*. The effect is not unlike the work of Yasutsuna of Hōki 伯耆安綱 in its extremes of activity, and it is thought that Masamune may have consciously emulated him.

Although Masamune worked mainly during the Kamakura period (1185 ~ 1333 AD) when one of the characteristic of swords was the pronounced tapering down of the width towards the point, *chū-kissaki* and *koshi-zori* or deep *torii-zori*, he also produced swords at the beginning of the Nambokuchō period (1333 ~ 1392 AD) and consequently we see swords of him with an overall wide *mihaba*, shallow *torii-zori* and *ō-kissaki*.

Because blades actually signed by Masamune are exceedingly rare, a theory was developed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Masamune never existed at all. In the sword books of the Muromachi period, the scarcity of signed blades by Masamune is accounted for by the explanation that his work was so absolutely distinctive that there was no need for a *mei*. However, it is more likely that the reason lies in the fact that Masamune was employed by the Kamakura *bakufu* (administration); many of his swords were made for the use by the *shōgun*, and it would have been presumptuous and contrary to all normal practice - at that time - for him to have signed them. Another reason is simply that *tachi* were of such great length that they have been later cut down to a convenient size for wearing in *uchigatana-koshirae*, and have therefore lost the inscriptions that were on the original *nakago*.

A number of signed *tantō* are extant which are demonstrably by the same hands. Those blades that still retain his signature are inscribed with two characters - MASA 正 MUNE 宗 - except the *tantō* "Daikoku Masamune" that bears the signature "Masamune *saku* 正宗作".

Masamune is perhaps the most famous of all Japanese smiths. The distinguished scholar and statesman Kanera Ichijō (1402 ~ 1481 AD) recognized Masamune as one of the great men of modern times, and praised him as a smith whose blades were equal in quality to the sharp weapons of the Buddhist guardian deity Fudō himself. Masamune's *hamon* is usually described as refined and leisurely at the same time, his *kinsuji* looking like lightning in the clouds, and his *nie* like bare patches in partially melted snow.

There is not much known about Masamune the man - at least not much verifiable. But we know his real name: according to the *Nihonshi Kojiten* 日本史小辞典, he was born Okazaki Gorō 岡崎五郎. He's supposedly the son of Tōsaburō Yukimitsu 藤三郎行光, therefore also called Kōmitsushi (when the character for "child 子 [of]" is added to "Yukimitsu 行光", the resulting three Kanji are read "Kōmitsushi 行光子"). No explanation is given as to when and why he chose Masamune as his art name. He evidently later became a lay priest (*nyūdō* 入道), and therefore is commonly called Gorō Nyūdō Masamune 五郎入道正宗.

However, the thesis that Masamune was the son of Yukimitsu is nowadays refuted by scholars, it is much more likely that they were fellow students of Shintōgo Kunimitsu.

The yagi-bushi 八木節 (bushi is an old fashioned, story-telling song) gives a colorful description of Masamune's life. The story goes that Yukimitsu, while passing through Kyōto, had an affair with an innkeeper's daughter, resulting in little Masamune. Being born out of wedlock, Masamune is teased by the kids in the neighborhood, and decides to look for his father. He travels to Kamakura where he tries to become an apprentice of Yukimitsu, who has a hard time choosing from all those who apply for being his student. Masamune shows him the tantō that his mother gave him, and Yukimitsu recognizes it as his own work - he had left it with Masamune's mother as a farewell present.

This apparently made up Yukimitsu's mind, and he embraced the son he never knew of and saw before, making him his apprentice. Unfortunately they didn't live happily ever after: Yukimitsu died, and Masamune became Kunimitsu's student.

Well, so much for an interesting story at the camp-fire ...

Swords by Masamune were very highly regarded throughout Japanese sword history, and 39 are listed in the *kyōhō meibutsuchō* (not counting *yakemi* [see below]). The *daimyō* of the Edo period saw it as a matter of prestige to own a *tantō* by Masamune or Awataguchi Yoshimitsu 粟田口吉光. When a new *shōgun* succeeded his predecessor, it was the custom to present him with a sword made by Rai Kunimitsu 来國光 or Shintōgo Kunimitsu 新藤五國光, since Kunimitsu 國光 can be interpreted as "may the country prosper" (or rather "shine"). At important birthdays like the 61<sup>st</sup>, 70<sup>th</sup> or 77<sup>th</sup>, swords from the Enju 延寿 school or Toshinaga 俊長 were presented; those *mei* can be taken to mean "long life".

The demand for blades by above mentioned smiths obviously couldn't be met by the already existing swords, and therefore forgeries became abundant. However, the underlying idea behind this was that "it's the thought that counts", not the intention to maliciously deceive the receiver of the gift. This doesn't mean that a sword buyer didn't fall for a *gimei* now and then, but the *daimyō*, for example, usually had no qualms presenting a probable forgery to the *shōgun*, who accepted the blade without showing the bad taste of questioning its authenticity, and mostly presented it back to the giver on a suitable occasion.

Important swords were constantly exchanged as gifts, used as bribes, or given as rewards. Receiving a sword from ones lord was an honor beyond its monetary value. Toda Ujitetsu 戸田氏鉄, one of the generals of *shōgun* Tokugawa lemitsu 徳川家光, was once given the choice between a *tantō* by Masamune, and an increase of his annual stipend by 30,000 *koku* (one *koku* 石 is 180 liters of rice, the amount needed to feed one person for a year, and used as a means to calculate income) - Toda unhesitatingly chose the *tantō*.

"*Meibutsu* 名物" are items that are recorded in the *kyōhō meibutsuchō* 享保名物帳 ("genealogy of famous things of the Kyōhō era"), compiled by Honami Mitsutada 本阿彌光忠 in 1719 at the

behest of *shōgun* Tokugawa Yoshimune 徳川吉宗. It was the first time that other items than tea utensils, lacquer work, paintings and ceramics were listed as *meibutsu*; the swords recognized as such are described in three volumes and an appendix:

- 1. (上) 68 swords by the sansaku 三作 ("three [greatest] makers") Yoshimitsu 吉光 (Tōshirō 藤四郎), Masamune 正宗 and Yoshihiro 義弘 (Gō 郷),
- 2. (中) 100 swords by other smiths
- 3. (下) 80 yakemi 焼身 (blades that lost their hamon due to being exposed to fire), and
- 4. (追記) 25 additional blades.

All swords in the *meibutsuchō* are made not later than the Nambokuchō period, and only about one hundred of them are still in existence today. The high number of blades that are forged in the Sōshū tradition reflects the popularity those swords enjoyed with the *daimyō*. It can be safely assumed that more than a few swords with doubtful attributions are listed, or that in other ways don't merit their status as *meibutsu*, because the Honami were under a lot of pressure to be generous in their evaluation. It would have been extremely difficult for them to offend any of the high-ranking owners by declaring their sword a fake, or of inferior quality.

The *meibutsuchō* basically only states the owner of a sword, its nickname, and length; after that follows a brief history of the sword. The following entry is the one of the so called Honjō Masamune 本庄正宗:

rendered into modern Japanese

《庄内之城主を大宝寺と云(う)、議信老、景勝卿両代之内、侍太

、其家の侍頭を東善寺右馬之介と申。 辻将に本庄越前守重長と言者有。

悠懸(け)

居たる所

へ東善寺味方之

体にて首を提

重長手負ながら東善寺を討留

(め)、

甲を割たる故欤こぼれ有。米り近々と寄り重長が甲のこ

御隠居之刻家綱公へ上。

島津兵庫殿拝領、

家康公へ上る。

御分け物

磨上

長さ弐尺壱寸五分半

amended, analogous translation

Gyobutsu 御 物 Honjō Masamune ("gyobutsu" nowadays refers to items in the possession of the imperial family, but in the Edo period it meant property of the shōgun). Suriage, nagasa 2 shaku 1 sun 5½ bu.

Mudai 無代 (no value given)

Honjō Echizen no Kami Shigenaga 本庄 越前守重長 was one of the generals serving under Uesugi Kenshin 上杉謙信 and Uesugi Kagekatsu 上杉景勝. During one of the Uesugi campaigns, Shigenaga attacked and overthrew the Dewa Shōnai 出羽庄内 castle which was held by Daihōji Yoshioki 大宝寺 義興. After the siege, while Shigenaga was sitting on a foldable camp stool at Yasugahara, he was approached by Tōzenji Umanosuke 東善寺右馬介, a retainer of Daihōji, under the pretense of showing him some captured heads. Umanosuke attacked Shigenaga, and managed to cut the latter's helmet in half - seriously wounding him before he was finally overcome and slain by Shigenaga. The sword that was used in the assassination attempt sustained a couple of chips on the edge (hakobore) from cutting Shigenaga's kabuto. Shigenaga later sold it to Toyotomi Hidetsugu 豊臣秀次 for 13 mai. Hidetsugu presented it to Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉. It then went to Shimazu Yoshihiro 島津義弘, who gave it to Tokugawa leyasu 徳川家康, who gave it to Tokugawa Yorinobu 徳川頼宣, who presented it on the occasion of his retirement to Tokugawa letsuna 徳川家綱.

As explained above, this sword was called "Honjō Masamune" because of its former owner: Honjō Echizen no Kami Shigenaga 本庄越前守重長 ("Shigenaga" is also sometimes written 繁長). It had not only sustained a couple of chips on the edge (*hakobore*) from cutting

Shigenaga's *kabuto*, but also had nicks on the *mune*, *kirikomi*, from parrying other swords; those battle marks were not completely polished out, but are traditionally not shown in an *oshigata*.

How it came into the possession of Umanosuke in the first place is unknown - the original owner certainly wasn't in the condition to answer questions anymore. After Tokugawa letsuna 徳川家綱 received the sword, it became one of the treasure swords of the Tokugawa, and was symbolically presented to each succeeding *shōgun* when he took office. On May 29, 1939 it was designated as a *kokuhō*, or national treasure. (But technically speaking, it isn't a *kokuhō* anymore. In 1950, all former national treasures were re-assigned as *jūyō-bunkazai*, and had to be re-submitted to regain their *kokuhō* status. The designation of the 14 pre-war *kokuhō* that went missing after WWII is therefore void.)

The description of the sword at the time of its designation reads as follows:

長さ六五・ニセンチ 反り一・七センチ

鎬造、庵棟。反りは浅い。身幅広く、重ねうすく、切先はのびる。鎬幅はせまく、 鎬筋は高い。地は小板目つまり、こまかに地沸え、チケイ入り飛焼交る。刃文は 小沸深く大乱れに小乱れ交り、金筋かかり 足入る。切先の刃は浅く乱れこんで返る。 彫物はない。茎は大磨上げ、尻は剣形。 目釘孔は一個。元に大きい刃こぼれ、 その他にも刃こぼれと棟に切込みがある。

拵は桃山時代の打刀拵で、柄は黒塗鮫に 藍革巻き、三双の桐の目貫と、鐔・縁には 菊と桐、小柄と笄には桐の金色絵を 施している。 Nagasa 2 shaku 1 sun  $5\frac{1}{2}$  bu (65.2 cm / 25.6 inches), sori 1.7 cm (0.6 inches).

Shinogi-zukuri, iori-mune, wide mihaba, thin kasane, extended kissaki, shinogi-ji narrow, high shinogi. Ko-itame-hada, fine ji-nie, chikei and tobiyaki. Hamon in ko-nie forming ō-midare and ko-midare, having kinsuji and ashi, bōshi is midarekomi. There are no horimono, the nakago is ō-suriage, the shape of the nakagojiri is kengyō, and there is one mekugi-ana. There is one big hakobore at the moto, and several smaller ones along the ha, as well as kirikomi on the mune.

The koshirae is a Momoyama period uchigatanakoshirae, the tsuka has black same, indigo-blue deer leather tsukamaki, the menuki are three kiri each, the tsuba and fuchi have a kiri and kiku motif, the kozuka and kōgai kiri in gold.

However, the sword is said to have had the original length of 2 shaku 8 sun (84.9 cm / 33.4 inches) when Umanosuke attacked Shigenaga. Additionally, another description in the  $T\bar{o}ken$  to Rekishi 刀剣と歴 magazine of the NTHK from 1912 gives some more information about the shape koshirae:

拵へは慶長頃の物らしく、頭は角 藍にて巻掛け大菱、鍔は直径二寸の金なり、目貫は丸に桐の紋、絽塗の鞘にて鐺なし、紫の下緒、笄付、いかにも古雅なる拵へである、総丈二尺八寸五分あり。

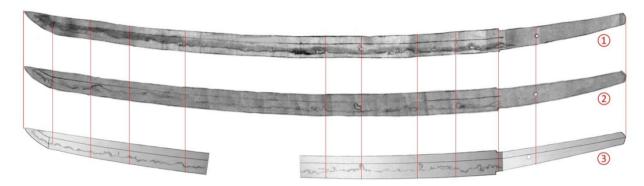
The *koshirae* looks like from the Keichō period, the *kashira* is made of horn with the indigo-blue deer leather *tsukamaki* crossed over it *makikake*style, large *hishi*. The *tsuba* has a diameter of 2 *sun* (6 cm / 2.4 inches), the *menuki* are *kiri-mon* in a circle, the *saya* is black lacquer without a *kojiri*, the *sageo* is purple, there is a *kōgai*. The *koshirae* is of classical elegance and 2 *shaku* 8 *sun* 5 *bu* (86.4 cm / 34 inches) in length.



digitally rendered image of how the koshirae might look

Oshigata are not included in the *kyōhō meibutsuchō*, but there's a collection of them made by the sword smith Ōmi no Kami Tsuguhira 近江守継平 (*nidai* 二代), who was the keeper of arms for *shōgun* Yoshimune at that time. The *oshigata* of the Honjō Masamune was drawn in ink, and doesn't seem to be very accurate - *oshigata* back then weren't as sophisticated as they are nowadays. It was reprinted in the 1928 book Tsuguhira *oshigata* 継平押形, taken from the collection of the Honami 本阿彌 family. It seems, however, that some lines were re-drawn, probably due to derogation of the old paper, and fading of the original drawing.

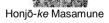
But there are at least two other *oshigata*, one by Honami Kōtoku 本阿彌光徳 (published in the *Ōsaka gyobutsu meibutsu tōken oshigata* 大坂御物名物刀釼押形), the other one of unknown origin, privately owned in Japan. Both are much more detailed than the Tsuguhira *oshigata* (but probably also not 100% superimposable), as the following comparison shows:



1 unknown origin 2 Kōtoku oshigata 3 Tsuguhira oshigata

As stated above, the Honjō Masamune lost its signature - if it ever had one due to ō-suriage, shortening. The sometimes heard rumor that it is signed is probably due to there being another Honjō Masamune: an *ubu zaimei tantō* owned by the Honjō family. Not a *meibutsu*, it's called the Honjō-*ke* Masamune 本庄家正宗. An *oshigata* can be found in limura Kashō's 飯村 嘉章 *Yūmei Kotō Taikan* 有銘古刀大鑑 and some other books.

Besides the description in the *meibutsuchō*, and later at the designation as a national treasure, both Imamura Chōga 今村長賀 and Honami Kōson 本阿彌



光遜 inspected the Honjō Masamune in 1880 and 1943 respectively. Well known and respected connoisseurs, they didn't find it - its historical value not withstanding - artistically very appealing. As with many other swords owned by powerful people and attributed to Masamune, some doubts about its true maker remain. For instance, although Honami Kōtoku was known for his integrity, and refusing to judge doubtful blades that were submitted by important people, his successors issued 3,000 *origami* and *fuda* with Masamune attributions — a huge number of swords that Masamune never could have forged in his entire life.

However, Dr. Homma Junji 本間順治 (Kunzan 薫山), the leading Sōshū expert of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who examined the sword at Tokugawa lemasa's residence around 1937 during a preliminary survey for the designating of swords as national treasures, writes in his book *Kunzan Tōwa* 薫山刀話 that the *sugata* and *nikuoki* of the Honjō Masamune resembles the *meibutsu* (and *kokuhō*) Ishida-Masamune 石田正宗 (Kirikomi Masamune 切込正宗).

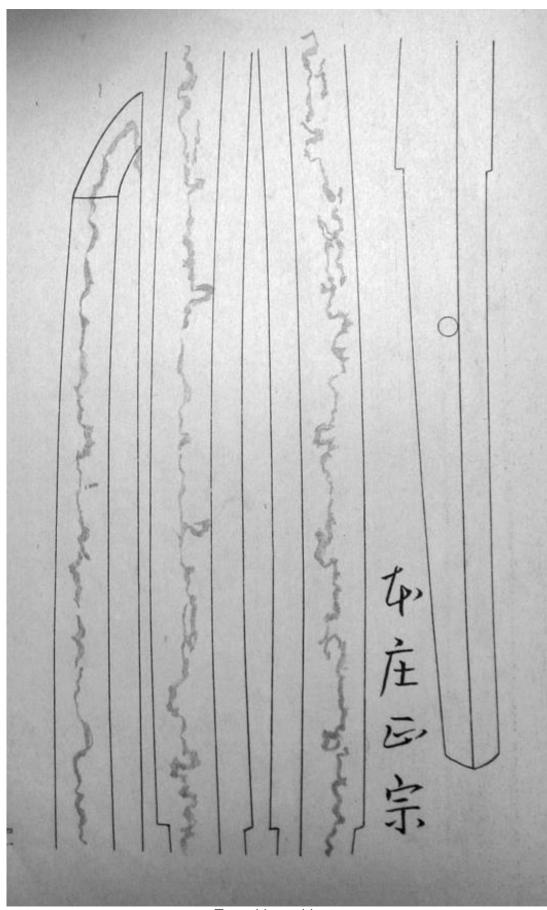




oshigata of unknown origin



Kōtoku *oshigata* 



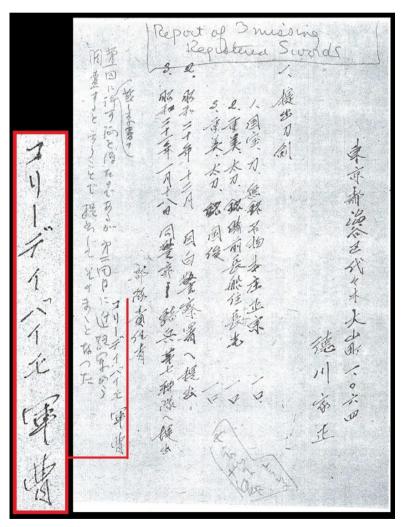
Tsuguhira oshigata

As already mentioned earlier, the Honjō Masamune was among the items handed down from each *shōgun* to the next, beginning with Tokugawa letsuna 徳川家綱. If there was no successor from the main line 徳川宗家, someone from the *gosanke* 御三家 ("honorable three houses", i.e. Tokugawa branches) of Owari 尾張 or Kii 紀伊 (Kishū 紀州) clan (but not from the Mito 水戸 clan) could become *shōgun*. Both Yoshimune 吉宗 and lemochi 家茂 from the Kii clan ruled as *shōgun*. Yoshimune – who also gave the directive for the *kyōhō meibutsuchō* - established three new houses, the *gosankyō* 御三卿: Tayasu 田安, Hitotsubashi 一橋, and Shimizu 清水. Yoshinobu 慶喜, the 15<sup>th</sup> and last *shōgun*, came from the Mito clan, but was adopted into the Hitotsubashi clan to enable him to take office.

Tokugawa lesato 徳川家達 from the Tayasu clan was adopted by lenobu, and became the 16<sup>th</sup> head of the Tokugawa after the overthrow of the Tokugawa bakufu. Tokugawa lemasa 徳川家正 was lesato's eldest son, and succeeded him as the hereditary 17<sup>th</sup> head of the Tokugawa. Tokugawa Tsunenari 徳川恆孝 is the present (18<sup>th</sup> generation) head of the Tokugawa house; lemasa was his maternal grandfather. Born into the Aizu Matsudaira clan 会津松平家, he was adopted by lemasa, because lemasa's only son lehide 家英 passed away in 1936.



Tokugawa lemasa (1952)



The Honjō Masamune was, along with other swords, submitted to the Mejiro police station 目 白 警察署 in December of 1945 by Tokugawa lemasa, following the order of the occupation forces to surrender all swords. The swords were handed over to a sergeant (gunsō 軍曹), reportedly from the 7th Cavalry Regiment, on January 18, 1946.

The name of the sergeant who took away the swords was taken down (phonetically in katakana) as コリーデイバイモ (ko-rī-de-i-ba-imo); the name was later retranscribed as "Koridie Beimo", and as "Coldy Bimore" by Albert Yamanaka; the latter transcription is the better known and seems to be generally accepted, but would be a very odd name. There is · , which is often used between given and family names of non-Japanese, so it even might be just one, i.e. family name. On the other hand, the first name "Corey" is usually written "コリー" in Japanese, so if we're indeed

looking at a first and family name, it would be a likely candidate for the given name.

Although swords of artistic merit and historic value should have been returned to their owners after examination, quite a few were not, the Honjō Masamune among them. Tokugawa Iemasa complained to the authorities about this, but was told that it couldn't be found, and probably was taken abroad. His letters, and those of other owners of important swords, were answered elaborately and politely, but it seems that no thorough investigation was launched. The complaints about the missing swords were in all likelihood just a nuisance to the American occupation forces, and an embarrassment to the Japanese police; much more important matters had to be taken care of in those days than "some old swords".

What happened to the Honjō Masamune and the other swords is therefore open to speculation, the whereabouts of most remain unknown until today. Although many swords were brought back to the US by American servicemen as souvenirs, those blades were usually collected on the battlefield, given to soldiers as mementos after being surrendered, or simply bought. However, once they were officially recorded, their fate was usually sealed, and they were destroyed, e.g. by shoveling them into a furnace, or dumping them into Tōkyō harbor. On the other hand, it's not unheard of that some of the swords that were reportedly surrendered to the authorities later found their way back to the original - or a new - owner in the confusion and turbulent days after the war.

Although it seems that in Japan nobody is loosing much sleep over the fate of the Honjō Masamune, it is still revered as a sword of legend and mystery in the West. Some people are still trying to track down "Sgt. Bimore", others come frequently up with new (conspiracy) theories, and a few are outright obsessed with it. Some theories are plausible to a certain degree, while others are nothing short of ridiculous. In any case, no compelling evidence was presented so far regarding the disappearance and present location of the Honjō Masamune, so the hunt is still on.



## **Bibliography**

Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie du Japon by E. Papinot
Die Honami-Familie by Markus Sesko
Edo no Idenshi by Tsunenari Tokugawa
Masamune - Nihontō no Tensai to sono Keifu published by the Sano Art Museum
Nihonshi Kojiten published by Yamagawa Shuppansha
Nihontō Kōza Vol. II by Homma and others
Nihonto Newsletters by Albert Yamanaka
Swords of the Samurai by Victor Harris and Nobuo Ogasawara
Tōken · Nihon no Bijutsu No. 6 by Kanzan Satō
Tōken Meibutsuchō by Tadao Tsujimoto
Yūmei Kotō Taikan by Kashō Imamura

## Acknowlegements

I would like to thank Mr. K. Morita, Japan, for providing the *oshigata* of the Honjō Masamune I used in this article, as well as many other valuable contributions, and Mr. Stephen Thorpe for making available scans of de-classified documents of the US Government from the National Archives in College Park, MD.

October 2014 C.U. Guido Schiller