

## **Study of a Juyo Blade.**

### **1. Introduction:**

I have recently spent some time studying a sword which has been designated Juyo-Token by the NBTHK. In my 10-15 year sword studying career I have not had the chance to look at too many Juyo swords "hands on" so I used this opportunity not only to enjoy what I hoped to be a beautiful sword, but also to understand better why this had received Juyo status and what did that really mean.

Some years ago I received a phone call from Deryck Ingham. He was very excited and told me with great enthusiasm that he had managed to purchase a Juyo blade. I confess at the time I didn't even know what one of those was, I'd heard of a smith called Jumyo and thought it might be one of his. A rapid scan through the beginners guide soon put me right. That sword was named "Ishigiri," a nagamaki naoshi by Unji from the A.Z. Freeman collection which now, along with the other of Derycks Juyo swords (A Yamato Shizu blade from the same source), resides in the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds. Regrettably neither sword is currently on display. When they are they are well worth the visit.

At the time Deryck bought his swords there were probably fewer than 10 Juyo swords in the UK. The term carried a mystique and aura that most of us could only dream of. Thanks to improvements in communication technology and knowledge, awareness and availability have increased. Today it is possible to buy swords of Juyo and higher status over the internet. Swords with asking prices of close to \$100,000 appear regularly on upmarket sites in the USA and Japan. So what does it mean when a sword receives a Juyo Certificate? Well in pure commercial terms it typically doubles the price tag on a sword when compared to a sword by the same smith or school with a Tokubetsu Hozon designation. It also makes the sword a commercially more desirable and safer purchase. You are more likely to get your money back should you decide to sell and it is easier to be confident in the quality of the blade that you may be buying unseen.

But what does it mean for a sword to pass the Juyo Shinsa?

To quote the NBTHK website definition

### **"Juyo Token**

**1) Blades made in a period from Heian to Edo, having Tokubetsu Kicho, Koshu Tokubetsu Kicho, Hozon or Tokubetsu Hozon papers, of extremely high quality workmanship and state of preservation, and judged as close to Juyo Bijutsuhin, may receive Juyo Token paper.**

**2) Blades that meet the criteria given above and made in or before Nambokucho may receive Juyo Token paper even if they are mumei. Blades made in Muromachi and Edo periods, as a rule, have to be ubu and zaimei to receive Juyo Token paper."**

So to become Juyo a blade must exhibit high quality workmanship and be in an excellent state of preservation. Based on the above if it is Shinto or later and Suriage it will not other than under exceptional circumstances be awarded Juyo status. Even unsigned Koto blades have to be in excellent condition, and there must be no doubt or ambiguity regarding the workmanship relating to period, school or smith.

**The sword under review is a Naginata Naoshi mumei Wakazashi papered to the Yamato Shikkake School.**

## **2. The Yamato Shikkake School.**

The Shikkakae School is one of the five main schools of Yamato. As with all Yamato schools Shikkake swords are regarded as conservative and traditional. There is some discrepancy in old reference material regarding the working dates of the earliest smiths. The School was said to be have founded by Nagahiro but none of his work survives. The first master smith identified is Norinaga. His working dates vary from 1270-80 to 1340. There are two dated swords by him, one in the Boston Museum dated 1319 and inscribed with his age 48. The second is an heirloom of the Tokugawa and is dated 1340 and his age as 69 years old. So it would appear reasonable to assume that he was working in the late Kamakura and early Nambokucho periods. There were believed to be six generations signing Norinaga. The Nidai is listed in the Meikan as working in the Gentoku period (1329-1332). As is often the case the quality of work is said to have deteriorated markedly after the first two generations.

### **Workmanship of the early Shikkake Smiths:**

**Sugata:** Typical Yamato Sugata for both Tachi and Katana, with high shinogi iori mune which is high, Tori sori. The Shikkake School also made Tanto and Naginata. The sugata of later generations is described as inferior.

**Jitetsu:** The hada is a mixture of Itame and Masame. There is Chikei, abundant Nie and occasionally Yubashiri is seen. The Ji-nie is thick and bright (some sources describe it as brighter than in Soshu work).. Most notably the Hada tends towards Masame as it enters the hamon. This is identified as a significant feature of Shikkake work (often described as Shikkake Hada) and an important Kantei point. In later generations the hada becomes more open and blacker. There is also less Ji-Nie present

**Hamon:** The Hamon is Nie-Deki again the Nie is described as bright and clear. Suguha and Ko-Midare are most common. There is a great deal of activity including, Nijuba, Kinsuji Sunagashi and Hakkake. With later generations the amount of activity decreases significantly.

**Boshi:** In earlier works with strong Nie Suguha yakizume is most common. Midarekomi is also seen. All are hakikake.

To summarize, Shikkake swords exhibit typical Yamato Sugata. The hada combines Itame and Masame and earlier works are rich in Chikei and Ji-Nie. A unique Shikkake feature is the tendency of the Hada to become more clearly Masame as it enters the Hamon. The Hamon is based in Nie and has a great deal of activity. The Boshi has little or no turn-back. It always exhibits Hakikake. One source describes the Hakikake as resembling an old mans beard. The early generations (Shodai and Nidai) have “An air of antiquity” and there are some excellent pieces amongst their works. The quality of Shikkake swords fell away with later generations, the sugata was poorer, hamon more open with less nie and lacking activity.

### The Sword.

#### Shikkake Naginata Naoshi Juyo 46

In addition to the Juyo papers the blade also has a Sayagaki by Tanobe Michiro Sensei, Director of the NBTHK. In the sayagaki he confirms the blades Juyo status but goes further describing the sword as “from the beginning of the Nambokucho and A very important treasure”. This is high praise indeed for what is an O-suriage Naginata-naoshi, mumei, wakazashi blade. So what makes it special and can one see why it should have received Juyo status? A thing relatively few Naginata, and even fewer Naginata Naoshi Wakazashis achieve.



fig 1 Naginata-Naoshi by Yamato Shikkake School.

#### **Description:**

**Ha-Watari:** The blade is 17.6 inches. The Kasane is 8mm. the blade is Mitsu-mune. The shape is classic Naginata sugata from the late Kamakura/early Nambokucho period.

**Hada:** The blade is a combination of itame and Nagare hada covered in thick and bright Jinie with Chikei mixed in. As the hada approaches the hamon it tends more towards masame.

**Hamon:** The Hamon is Suguha with deep Nioi and thick, bright nie. There is Nijuba and Sunagashi.

There is Yubashiri in the shinogi-ji with Muneyaki mixed in.

**Boshi:** Yakitsume with considerable hakikake.

Nakago: O-suriage Mumei. Beautiful colour and well maintained.

## What makes this a Juyo Blade?

First and foremost this is an extremely beautiful sword. However we have all seen beautiful blades which have not obtained Juyo status so what makes this different. Taking the points mentioned above from The NBTHK published criteria:

**“Must be of extremely high workmanship and in an excellent state of preservation”**

I believe that you could look at this sword from across a room and the quality and condition would scream at you. It has lost very little metal over its incredibly long history. And there is no evidence of tiredness or ware. The qualities of the hada and hamon are immediately apparent. We have all spent many hours looking at swords in lesser condition trying to identify what we believe to be features and activity “Is that Chikei?” “I think I see Utsuri” have echoed around my sword room for many years as I have groped to identify a blade. With this sword there is no doubt about what you are looking at. The hada is clear and beautiful, the thick Ji-nie bright and evenly dispersed. Chikei are clearly visible throughout the length of the blade. With regard to the hamon there is a lot of activity clearly visible. The Nioi is deep and covered in Nie. The Nie is extremely clear and bright, forming Nijuba and Sunagashi. The Yubashiri and Muneyaki are also clearly visible. In all I believe the blade looks much as it did on the day it was made, some 650-670 years ago.

This leads to the second point. The blade is O-Suriage and Mumei, both of which would count against it in shinsa. The NBTHK confirm that swords made prior to the Muromachi and mumei are eligible for Juyo certification. However as with the requirements for Tokubetsu Hozon the workmanship must be clearly identifiable and attributable to a period, school and/or smith. Looking again at the sword under study:

**Shape:** The Naginata has the elegant, almost gentle sugata associated with blades produced in the Kamakura period. As the Nambokucho progressed swords generally became more robust and larger. In the case of Naginata they became longer, broader and the curve at the kissaki deepened. They just got a lot bigger! So the shape points towards the Kamakura period.

**Hada and Hamon:** As said above the workmanship is clearly visible and of very high quality. When compared to the descriptions of what one should expect of the Shikkake School this sword exhibits every listed feature and they are all clearly visible in hada, hamon and boshi. Having established it to be the work of the Shikkake School, further examination pin-points it more precisely. Established references confirm that the quality of later Shikkake work falls off. This manifests itself as a reduction in activity in the hamon, much less Ji-nie and more open hada.

Taking these points into account this sword can only be the work of the earlier Shikkake School, thus supporting the opinion already expressed based on the shape of the sword.

## Conclusion:

I began this study knowing I was looking at a beautiful sword. I wanted to try and go through the process of assessing the sword to understand why it had been designated as a Juyo. By doing so I hoped to better understand what such designation really meant, not in commercial terms but in relation to quality. The sword in question is extremely beautiful

and in excellent condition. To have survived so many years relatively unscathed it had firstly to have been made of the best material and to the highest standard. It also must have been recognized as an important work and cared for through more than 22 generations. The shape, hada and hamon are all clearly visible and leave the observer in no doubt as to when the sword was made and by whom. Taking these factors in to account it is easily understandable that this sword has obtained Juyo Papers and the comments it did on the sayagaki from Tanobe-san.

### **References:**

In writing this short article I have drawn heavily the sources listed below. In particular I am grateful to Mr. Andrew Quirt and Mr. Danny Massey for allowing me to use images and quote information which appears on their respective websites. I believe the information contained within this piece to be accurate, however any errors which may appear are totally my own.

### **Source material:**

**Nihonto-Koza Koto part 1**

**The Connoisseur's Book of Japanese Swords - Kokan Nagayama**

**The NTHK Novice Guide.**

[www.nihonto.us](http://www.nihonto.us)

[www.nihontocraft.com](http://www.nihontocraft.com)