

A Yamato Hosho Tanto (possibly!!)

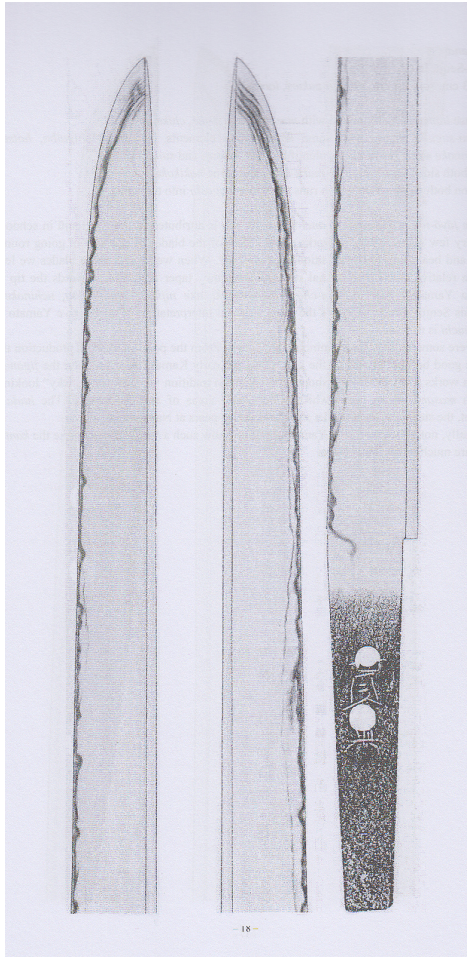
In recent years I have repeated to the point of tedium that I have pretty well stopped collecting swords. Since taking that decision I have actually bought two blades. Neither would be regarded as especially important or valuable. However each contributed something to my diminished collection and offered interesting comparisons to the other pieces within the group. The first I described briefly on the Nihonto message board. It was a smallish mumei shin-shinto katana papered to a Hosakawa school smith by the NTHK (I am still trying to understand that attribution). The second was a small tanto. It is this blade that is the subject of the following notes.

Introduction:

The blade in question is small, thick and with a typical sugata of the mid Kamakura period. It is signed **Yamato no Kuni Fujiwara Sadayoshi saku**. Sadayoshi was a highly regarded smith from the Hosho School. The blade has the look of being a much worn down piece from the late Kamakura period which has been abused and modified throughout its long existence. When I bought it it was not in bad polish but it had been sufficiently messed with to mask much of the detail of the hada. I knew some of its recent history. At one time it had been in the collection of my very good friend and teacher Deryck Ingham. From him it had passed to another friend. He showed it to senior members of the Token of GB who thought it worthy of sending to Kenji Mishina for polishing and possible papering. Mishina san declined to polish it believing it to be gimei. Some years later it was submitted to the NTHK in the second UK shinsa. They also said it was gimei and attributed it to the Shin-shinto smith Gassan Sadakazu, stating that the horimono were typical of his work.

At this point I was shown it. As said above the polish was not bad, but the detail was partially obscured. If it was shin-shinto the maker had either gone to great lengths to age it (it shows much more ware than any of the blades I have from 600-700 years earlier) or it had suffered terribly in it's short life. Also if it was by Sadakazu, who was renowned for his horimono, then this was probably the worst example of his work ever seen. Again the pooriness of the horimono may be the result of decay and attempted restoration. It is possible that the worn down shape and poor horimono were made to order. The blade was signed Sadayoshi and the mei is very close. Therefore it could simply be that the sword was deliberately made this way to deceive the viewer in to believing it to be a Kamakura period work. There was of course the possibility that it could be what it claimed to be. That is a small tanto by a Yamato Hosho smith.

The Yamato Hosho School



A Hosho Tanto from the mid Kamakura period by Sadaoki.

The Hosho School appears to have been the least prolific of the five Yamato traditions. Certainly their extant work is uncommon and examples are rarely seen on the market. The school was recorded as working from early times. There some variation in the way the schools work is described between Nihonto koza, Nagayama and the NBTHK journals. In the majority of descriptions Hosho work is described as follows:

Sugata: - The School made daito and tanto. Both were in line with the standard Yamato shape of the time. Long swords were narrow with ample hiruniku, Tanto were generally small narrow with uchi-zori, they were generally thicker than Kyoto made blades of the same period.

Hada: - Almost exclusively Masame of a very high quality. Koza describes the steel as black with an itame background. The Jigane is covered in bright ji-nie and chickei.

Hamon:- Suguha hotsure in clear and bright ko-nie with inazuma, kinsuji sunagashi, and nijuba. Despite the general narrowness of the hamon there is plentiful activity.

Nakago: - In tanto there is no obvious taper and the jiri is square cut. Yasurime are hagaki.

Restoration:

Having done a pretty brutal verbal assassination of this sword the reader might well ask why I was interested in it. There was sufficient visible to suggest there was a lot more lurking than could be seen immediately. I also thought, for reasons I am still unable to explain, there was something fascinating about this small piece of steel. It was very clear from discussion with others that this was not a good financial proposition. While the price agreed for it was, I believe, reasonable to both parties, it was questionable as to whether there would ever be any possibility to recover the additional investment needed to polish the blade. However as many colleagues on the Nihonto message board continue to affirm we are not in this for investment, we try to learn appreciate and preserve and while I had/have no illusions that I would be other than well out of pocket should I choose to sell this work later on, I believed the cost was a price worth paying to be able to study and investigate further.

I decided to send the blade to Ted Tenold. I have seen many examples of his polishing and was extremely confident that he was the right person for the job. I felt he would offer a candid opinion as to what could be done and whether it was worth doing, but more importantly, if he did take on the task he would handle it sympathetically, drawing out what was yet to be seen without changing the character of what was already there.

Having looked at it Ted again pointed out that it would be unlikely that I would recover the restoration costs (which were extremely reasonable) and wanted me to be sure I wanted him to continue. I did. Over the following months Ted kept me updated regarding progress. Interestingly as he progressed with it he became in his words, “more than a bit smitten with it.” We had many mail discussions about what it might be. While not dismissing the possibility of it being a Hosho work he also suggested the possibility of it being by one of the Ryokai offshoot schools. He had recently seen other examples from this school which he believed shared a number of this blades characteristics.

Some 6 to 7 months later it arrived back from its trans-Atlantic journey. I was extremely pleased with what arrived via FedEx just before Christmas.

The Sword:



Tanto signed Yamato no Kuni Sadayoshi saku, before and after polish

Description:

Dimensions:

Sugata 19.5cm Sori 0.0cm

Motohaba 1.7cm Sakihaba 1.8cm

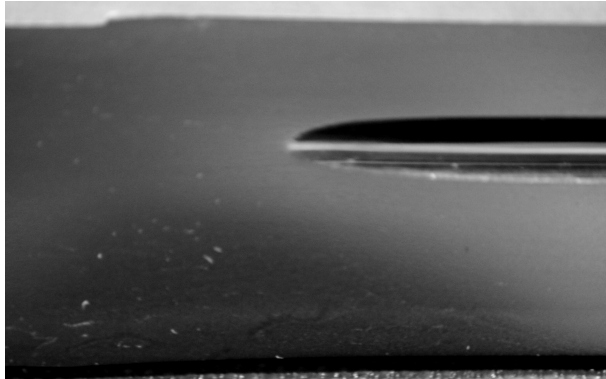
Kasane 0.65cm

Jigane: Almost exclusively masame hada running the entire length of the blade. There is a great deal of activity in the form of elongated chickei and lines of dark blue steel. Areas of minute ko-nie cover much of the blade.



Masame hada running through the hamon*

Hamon: Ito-suguha in nie with patches of ko-nie. Within the hamon there is activity in the form of kinsuji, inazuma and sunagashi.



Kinsuji in the hamon*

* Images of hada and hamon were taken prior to being polished, but still show the characteristics described. The blade is currently away having a koshirae made for it on its return these images will be updated.

Horimono: Hatahoko on one side koshibi on the other. The hatahoko may be a later carving

Boshi; Ko-maru with elongated return

Nakago: Slightly suriage and modified with Ha agiri Kurijiri and hagaki yasurimei.

By any measure this is an interesting work. It has seen considerable wear and modification. The hada and hamon appear to be Hosho work. This opinion is based on the shape and dimensions of the masame which is extremely close to the few illustrated examples of tanto by Sadayoshi, Sadaoki and Sadakiyo I have found.

However there are also some significant differences. The shape of the nakago and the nakago-jiri are atypical, but this may be the result of slight shortening.

The return on the boshi is much deeper than one might expect from this school's work. In fact until I found a Sue-Tegai example from the Muromachi period I didn't think this type of return existed in Yamato pieces at all. The overall shape differs from the one illustration of a Sadayoshi I have found but resembles some works by both Sadakiyo and Sadaoki.

To try and understand these differences I attempted to reconstruct the possible original shape. I based this exercise on a similar example by Sadaoki. I estimated the line of the Ha before the edge had been reduced (there is a clear dip in the edge where some damage appears to have been removed). When you do this it is apparent that the nakago would have needed to be reshaped as part of the restoration. If this wasn't done the overall shape would look very strange. I think it is possible that it is this alteration that has resulted in the unexpected shape of the nakago today.

The koshi-bi horimono shows some reduction from the blade being polished down. Such ware is not evident on the other side. While quite healthy this horimono is clumsily cut. Another explanation is that it has been unsympathetically restored. My feeling is that this is a later addition, possibly carried out at the same time as the modifications to the nakago.

. The ji-nie is less prevalent and clear than one might expect in Hosho work but again this may be the result of the blade being heavily polished over time.

The shape and structure of the hada, even the long clear chickei type inclusions forming an almost Nijuba effect are seen clearly in this work and several of the illustrations I have found of swords by other leading Hosho smiths. However Hosho work is rare so there are few illustrations (I have only found 6) and I don't remember ever seeing an authenticated Hosho blade in hand.

So what are the alternatives?

1. The sword is a small tanto by the Yamato Hosho Smith Sadayoshi

Arguments for:

- The jigane, hada and hamon show all the attributes one would expect to see in the work of this smith.
- The yasurimeiri are correct for the school
- The mei looks very close to that of Sadayoshi (to my poorly trained eyes)

Arguments against:

- The nakago is the wrong shape
- The boshi is not typical of Hosho work or indeed any other Yamato school.
- It has been viewed twice by experts (NTHK and Mishina san) admittedly in less than perfect polish, but both declared it gimei.

2. The sword is a Shin-shinto copy by Gassan Sadakazu.

Arguments for:

- Opinion of the NTHK based on the style of the horimono.

Arguments Against:

- If this was truly an attempt to reproduce a Hosho work by one of the finest Shin-shinto smiths why did he not accurately reproduce the nakago and make the boshi in the correct form? If this was a copy it was made to deceive (it has the original smiths mei) why make such a basic mistake in its structure.
- Sadakazu is renowned for his horimono. While this may be stylistically similar it is nowhere near the quality of his work.
- The steel just does not look Shin-shinto. Sorry this is subjective but the jigane just looks old. It has that soft sinuous line and sprinkling of ji-nie and chickei that I have only ever seen in older Koto work and never in Shin-shinto pieces.
- Every one who has seen it in full polish has believed it to be older rather than later.

3. It is a slightly later copy by another school (Chusai Ryokai)

Arguments for:

- While having the attributes of the Hosho school they lack the brightness and clarity often described in this schools work. While this may be the result of ware it could also be smiths of equal skill working with lesser material.
- The darkness of some of the steel the long, extended chickei and interspersed areas of masame with itame are seen in Ryokai schools work
- Chusai Ryokai smiths were known to make Yamato copies.
- The style of boshi is seen occasionally on later (early Muromachi) Yamato work. If this were a Ryokai copy it would also be from this period.

Arguments against

- As with the Shin-shinto theory the differences in nakago and boshi appear to be very basic errors for someone trying to reproduce Hosho work. The smith had done the difficult bit in making the hada and hamon but failed in what should be straight forward detail.

Conclusion:

I have now looked at this sword for 2 or 3 months before I sent it to be polished and a month since its return. I have shown it to as many people as I could to gain additional opinions. To date I have not reached a definitive conclusion. I am not sure I ever will. Today I believe the following to be the closest I can get to an attribution.

1. I believe this to be a koto blade made between the mid Kamakura period and early Muromachi so between 1280 and 1430. I have discounted the shin-shinto theory. I think that opinion was made when there was not sufficient detail to see in the hada and was based on the style of horimono. No one else who has seen it has believed it to be a late copy.
2. There is no doubt that this blade has suffered in its life. As a result of damage and reshaping the machi have been moved up. I believe at that time the nakago was reshaped to improve the look. This was necessary because there was significant loss from the ha (probably the result of removing a chip or heavy corrosion)
3. I suspect the horimono were added at the same time or after the nakago was modified.
4. The blade exhibits every feature the common English speaking texts identify in Hosho work. While not as bright and clear as described this may be attributable to the many polishes this sword has received.
5. While not dismissing the possibility of it being a Ryokai school copy I have not seen sufficient examples to draw comparison. As Ted suggested the quality of workmanship is similar the main difference is the material available to the Choshu smiths compared to the Yamato schools.

And at that point I stop. I don't know who made it. I know that it has a hard life and is perhaps a shadow of what it once was. But it remains beautiful .The activity in both hada

and hamon is fine, delicate and clear. The pure masame is a thing of great beauty and the colour of the steel is incredible. I have invested far more in it than I am likely to recover and am now compounding that problem by having a simple koshirae made for it. In Ted's words I am smitten by this small piece of steel. I look forward to continuing the investigation in months to come.

Acknowledgements:

As always I am much indebted to Ted Tenold for his time and thoughts in discussing this blade and the fantastic job he did on the polish.

I would also like to thank all of my local colleagues who have looked, considered and offered opinion.

Reference works referred to include:

Nihonto Koza vol. 1 Afu Watson translation.

The connoisseurs book of Japanese Swords by Nagayama

The NBTHK kantei Koto volume translated and published by Markus Sesko.