

EXAMINING THE ORIGIN OF SOSHU-DEN - by Adrian Schlemmer

Introduction

The hidden and secret truth of the origins of the Kamakura Soshu-den is known to few sword connoisseurs. This article will outline how recent archaeological evidence combining with little known old book information and stylistic evidence is shedding new light on the origin of Soshu-den.

Historical Background of the Ōshū Emishi

Nagayama Kokan says "In the campaigns of Zenkunen (1051-1062) and the Gosannen 1083-1087) large, fierce battles were fought against rebels in the Ōshū (奥州) districts (the northern part of Japan's main island of Honshū) ¹

These rebels were from the people of the Ōshū district and were called the Emishi (蝦夷). The *Nihon Shoki* mentions the "Emishi" (愛瀨詩) who Jimmu and his armed forces (the Yamato) defeated before he was enthroned as the Emperor of Japan. The *Nihon Shoki*, also states that Takenouchi no Sukune in the era of Emperor Keiko proposed that they should subjugate the Emishi of Hitakami no Kuni (日高見国) in eastern Japan.

The Emishi were composed of two main populations, the Jōmon Ainoid who were the majority and a smaller group the Kofun, united by a common Ainoid language distinct from the Yamato. These two populations were not distinguished by contemporaries, but rather by present-day physical anthropologists. Historically, they were seen as one group by their contemporaries the Yamato. Consisting mainly those who were descendants of the natives (the Jōmon) who also had in their population those of mixed ethnicity, most likely descendants of early colonists from the mainland (the Kofun). In addition, the contemporary Yamato for their part looked upon the Emishi as foreigners and barbarians whose lands they desired to conquer and incorporate into the Japanese state. ²

The first major attempts to subjugate the Emishi in the 8th century were largely unsuccessful. The imperial armies, which were modelled after the mainland Chinese armies, were no match for the guerrilla tactics of the Emishi ⁴. The Yamato changed tactics to match the Emishi on horseback and archery. By the mid-9th century, most of the Emishi land in Honshū was conquered, and they ceased to be independent. The Emishi of the late 9th century were represented by different tribes, some of whom became allies of the Yamato (*fushū, ifu*) and others of whom remained hostile (*iteki*). ³ However, they continued to be influential in local politics as subjugated, though powerful, Emishi families creating semi-autonomous feudal domains in the north. In the two centuries following the conquest, a few of these domains became regional states that came into conflict with the central government again.

The semi-independent Emishi families of the 11th century were gradually brought down by the Minamoto Clan loyal to the Imperial throne based in Kyoto after many years of large fierce battles.

The Northern Fujiwara (奥州藤原氏 *Ōshū Fujiwara-shi*) or Hiraizumi were a Yamato noble family that with the support of the Imperial Court ruled the Tohoku region (subjugated part of Ōshū, the northeast of Honshū) of Japan from the late 11th through the 12th centuries as if it were their own realm. They succeeded the semi-independent Emishi families. The Ōshū Fujiwara ruled over an independent region populated by Emishi fushū that derived its wealth from gold mining, horse trading and as middlemen in the trade in luxury items from the continental Asian states and from the far northern Emishi. They were able to keep their independence vis-a-vis Kyoto by the strength of their Emishi warrior bands until they were overwhelmed by Minamoto no Yoritomo in 1189

The wars over the Ōshū district had continued for nearly 200 years as the valuable resources of the area, particularly iron ore were highly prized by both the Yamato and the Emishi. These iron resources and the local Emishi run smelters would later play an important part in supplying the needs of the Kamakura swordsmith group in its preparation for war with the Mongols.

The Ōshū (奥州) Schools

Kunzan states "Kanchi In Bon' and other swordsmith directories list many smith names from Mutsu and Dewa Provinces between the Nara and the Kamakura Periods " ⁵

According to the Nihonto Meikan, the Ōshū swordsmith group consists of the Mokusa (舞草), the Gassan (月山) and the Tamatsukuri (玉造), later to become the Hoju (寶壽) schools. The Meikan shows the earliest and by far the largest group of Ōshū smiths from the beginning of the 8th century were from the Mokusa school, listing over 100 Mokusa smiths before the beginning of the Kamakura period. Archaeological excavations of the Ōshū Tohoku region show iron ore smelting sites dating back to the early Nara period. As we can see from the Historical background above, the Tohoku region and indeed the whole Ōshū district in the 8th century was controlled and populated by the Emishi. Archaeological evidence of recovered Warabite-to (蕨手刀) show a high concentration in the burial goods of the Ōshū and Hokkaido regions ^{6 2}

Fukunaga says "Mokusa Area was famous for legendary swordsmiths in the Heian Period (AD 794-1185). They are considered as the original producers of the Japanese swords known as "Warabite-to" which can date back to the sixth to eighth centuries. "Warabite-to" gained its fame through the series of battles between Emishi people (蝦夷) and the Yamato-chotei government (大和朝廷) in the late eighth century. Using "Warabite-to," the small number of Emishi soldiers could resist against the numerous Yamato-chotei army over a Thirty-Eight Years' War (三十八年戦争) (AD 770-811). ⁷

The Meikan describes that from earlier time there was a list of forty two famous swordsmiths in the Toukou Meikan 刀工銘鑑 at Kanchiin 観智院. Eight of the swordsmiths on this list were from Ōshū schools. Five from Mokusa being Onimaru 鬼丸, Yoyasu 世安, Morifusa 森房, Hatafusa 幡房 and Gaan 瓦安, two from the Tamatsukuri Fujū 諷誦, Houji 寶次 and one from Gassan signing just Gassan 月山.

The Meikan also lists, during the time of the Kamakura Soshu swordsmith school and following the Mongol Invasions, fifteen Ōshū swordsmiths.

Eleven Mokusa, two Gassan and one Tamatsukuri, who were working in the area. between 1287 and 1308, after which we see no listings for any Ōshū schools for sixteen years. They were:

Gassan school: Gassan 月山 1287 , Tomoyasu 友安 1308

Mokusa school: Mitsutsune 光恒 1287 , Ietoki 家時 1288, Takamoto 高基 1288, Fushimi 伏見 1288, Yoyasu 世安 1293, Tomokiyo 友清 1293, Yorimune 頼宗 1293, Yoriyasu 頼安 1299, Tomonaga 友永 1303, Tomonaga 友長 1306, Yoshinaga 吉長 1308

Tamatsukuri school: Yukimitsu 行光 1288, said to be the 3rd generation, the second generation having moved to Kyushu

Did these Ōshū smiths of Tohoku working near Kamakura influence the development of Soshu-den?

Nagayama Kokan says “However, it seems likely that many other swordsmiths, whose work no longer exists, also visited Kamakura and local swordsmiths, and that their work had an influence on the development of the Soshu tradition”⁸

To examine this question we must first examine what we know of the work style of the Mokusa school of this period

Work Style of the Ōshū Schools from the Heian to Kamakura Jidai

Warabite-to are by far the most abundant examples left extant of the workmanship of the Ōshū swordsmiths. By correlating the known earliest time periods of Iron production in the Tohoku with the known earliest Warabite-to, it seems likely that the earliest examples were either imported or manufactured locally from imported iron. I will examine this proposal in depth in another article. For now I would like to present some evidence as to the workmanship of the Ōshū and in particular the Mokusa from known extant examples that date later than the early Nara period.

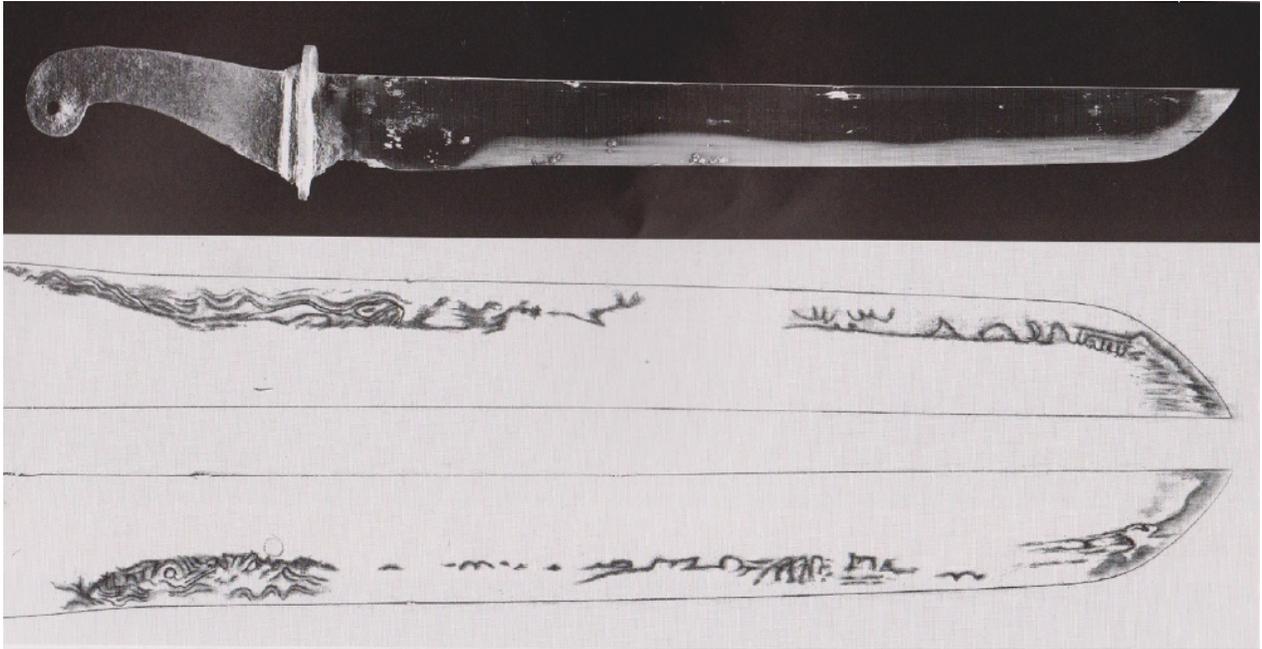


Illustration 1. Warabite-to, excavated from Kanayama site, Miyagi (Tohoku), Nara period 8th century

Description: Length 38.2cm . The description accompanying this sword is as follows. Hirazukuri with a stylised fern bracken type nakago and press fit tsuba. The jihada is blackish in mixed Oitame-mokume nagaru with profuse ji-nie and prominent chikei and chihan. The hamon has choji gunome magiri with many kinsuji, sunagashi and inazuma variations. This Warabite clearly show a jiba closely resembling that of the later Soshu-den. The weakness in the hamon can be attributed to extensive polishing to obtain to remove corrosion. Carlo Guiseppi Tachinni has another excellent example in his article on Origins of Nihonto fig. 18, which I invite the reader to examine.

Kunzan states “Considering that there were many battles in this area, such as ‘Zen-kunen-no-eki’ and ‘Go-sannen-no-eki’ when the Imperial Court sent their armies to Oshu to subjugate the Ezo (Japanese aborigines) ... It is quite natural that many swordsmiths resided there and there was remarkable progress in sword forging techniques. “⁹

I agree with Kunzan that this example shows advanced forging techniques. The Jiba of this sword is remarkable for its era and clearly shows many characteristics of Soshu-den. It should be noted that the koshi sori of the nakago on this example is one of the earliest dated and predates examples of chukoto tachi of the early Heian showing the same feature.

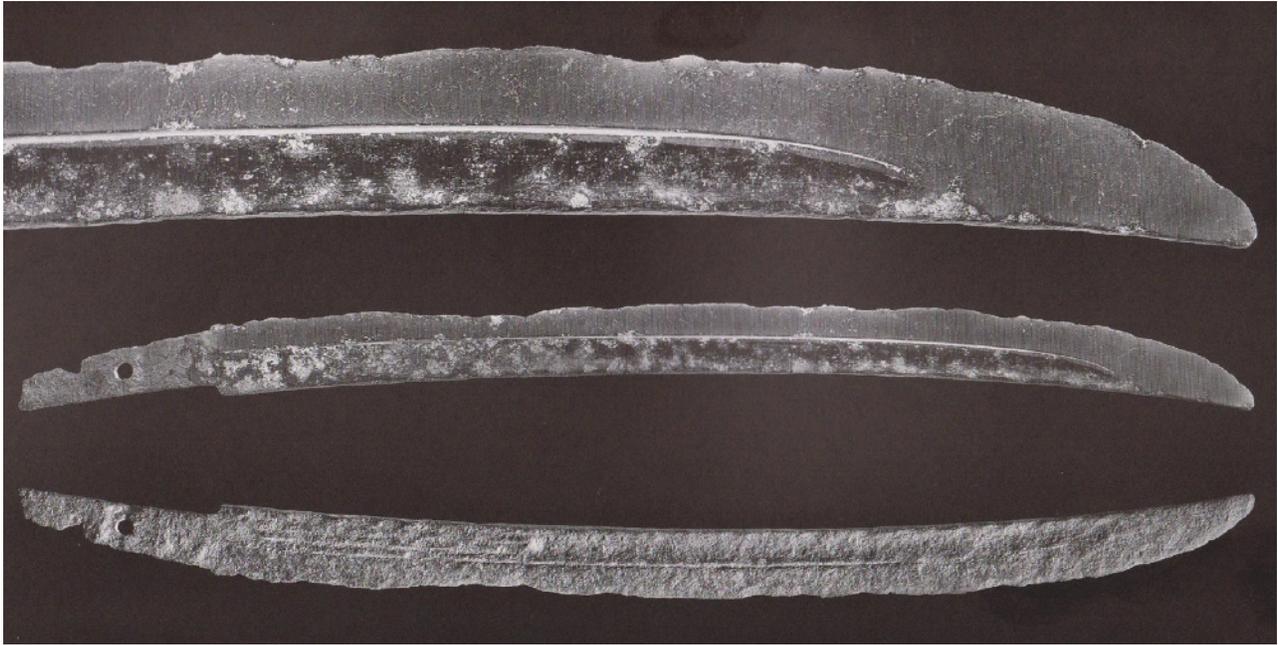
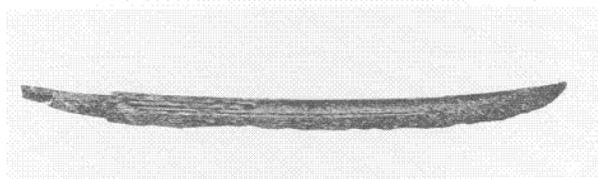
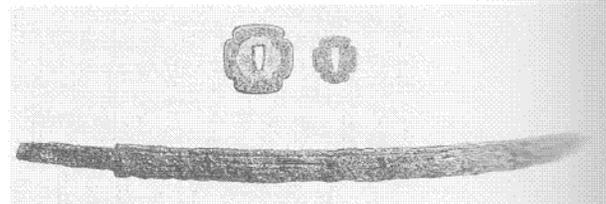


Illustration 2 . Uchigatana of Nomikuchishiki type, Chuson-ji Konjiki-in, Iwate (Tohoku)

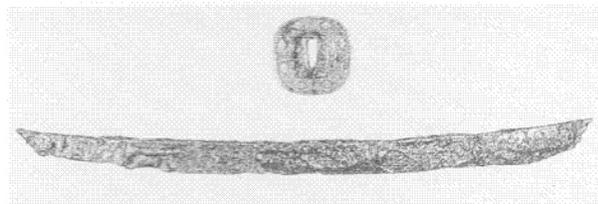
Description: Length 48cm. Hirazukuri, wide mihaba, thin kasane, torii sore. This is the Emishi-to excavated with the grave goods of Fujiwara Kiyohira (藤原 清衡) It must be clearly noted that the revolutionary features of the sugata of this sword predate the similar sugata of Soshu-den by one hundred years.



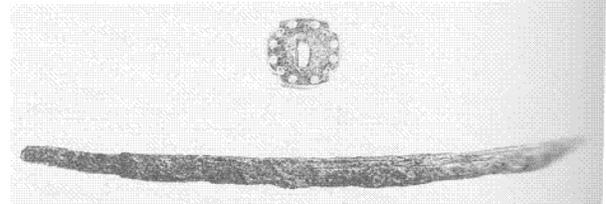
1. 奥州藤原初代清衡棺上刀。平安時代。
岩手県平泉町中尊寺蔵。



3. 同上、南北朝期。



2. 北海道深川市神居古澤出土の蝦夷刀。南北朝期。



4. 同上、南北朝期。

Illustration 3 . More excavated Emishi-to , all exhibit similar features, note the early Moko tsuba design

There can be little doubt that the Kiyohira uchigatana was produced by Emishi Ōshū swordsmiths. Similar examples of this style of Emishi-to have been excavated in the Northern regions of Honshū and Hokkaido. Fujiwara no Kiyohira (1056 – August 10, 1128) was a samurai of mixed Japanese-Emishi parentage of the late Heian period, who was the founder of the Hiraizumi or the Northern Fujiwara dynasty that ruled Northern Japan from about 1100 to 1189.¹⁰

Hiraizumi 平泉 was the name given to the capital established by Kiyohira in the Tamatsukuri county (present day Miyagi prefecture). At that time, there were two Ōshū schools, first the Mokusa , their base was around Hiraizumi and Ichinoseki 一関 city, (today's Iwate 岩手 Prefecture). They supplied for city Hiraizumi and the Anbeshi 安部氏 clan. The second smaller group was the Tamatsukuri. Their base was around Tamatsukuri county, Miyagi 宮城 prefecture.

Mamiya states “There was a saying from Heian era “Tachi is Tamatsukuri”. Since the area was the front line of Ōshū business, Tamatsukuri county must have been thriving in the Nara era and the early Heian era. In this area goods, people, troops, traders, and craftsmen were gathered and infrastructure was substantial. There is no doubting the possibility that a new culture was born in such chaos.... The Tamatsukuri area must have been an important source of sword production at that time. Still now the area has the name Meiken 名剣 (good sword). In late Heian era Hiraizumi started thriving, it was then that Sanjo Yoshitsugu 三条吉次 took some swords to Kyo 京 and sold them as Sanjo swords. After the fall of Hiraizumi, Kamakura General Hatakeyamauji 畠山氏 occupied the area and took some swordsmiths into Kamakura. “¹¹

Did General Hatakeyamauji procure the co-operation of the Tamatsukuri and Mokusa swordsmiths? This passage seems to suggest so.

In old literatures and tales of war

Ōshū swords appear in various old books of this time, for example Heiji Monogatari 平治物語 (Tale of Heiji), Konjaku Monogatari 今昔物語 (Anthology of tales from the past), Kojidan 古事談 (Japanese collection of Setsuwa 説話), and Gikeiki 義経記 (War tale that focuses on the legends of Minamoto no Yoshitsune 源義経 and his followers). Ōshū swordsmiths appeared in books in quite early times compared to others. Tales in these books tell of the Emishi-to in the capital city and these swords seem to have been quite popular with the Bushi. Maybe a badge of honour being captured weapons. For example

In “Nihongiryaku” 日本紀略 983AD :” the number of people wearing a funny looking Tachi 太刀 is increasing.”

In “Kauyagokau” 高野御幸 1124AD :“ when emperor Shirakawa 白河法皇 visited Kouyasan 高野山, Fujiwara Zaemon Michisue 藤原左衛門通季 was wearing a Fushū sword “

In “Heihanki” 兵範記 1158AD there was a line that mentioned the Emperor himself had Fushū Tachi.”

It seems that during the late Heian the Emishi-to was gaining some popularity in Kyoto. A very handy weapon for Bushi making their way around Japan's largest city at the time. Also it is clear that increasing trade with the Yamato of Kyoto was having an influence of the style of swords being made by the Ōshū swordsmiths. It seems that the local Tohoku Bushi were creating a demand for the "Yamato style" Tachi. It is probable that both styles were being produced into the Early Kamakura jidai. This demand for two styles of swords in the area created in my opinion a cross pollination of ideas and technology evident in the next sword.

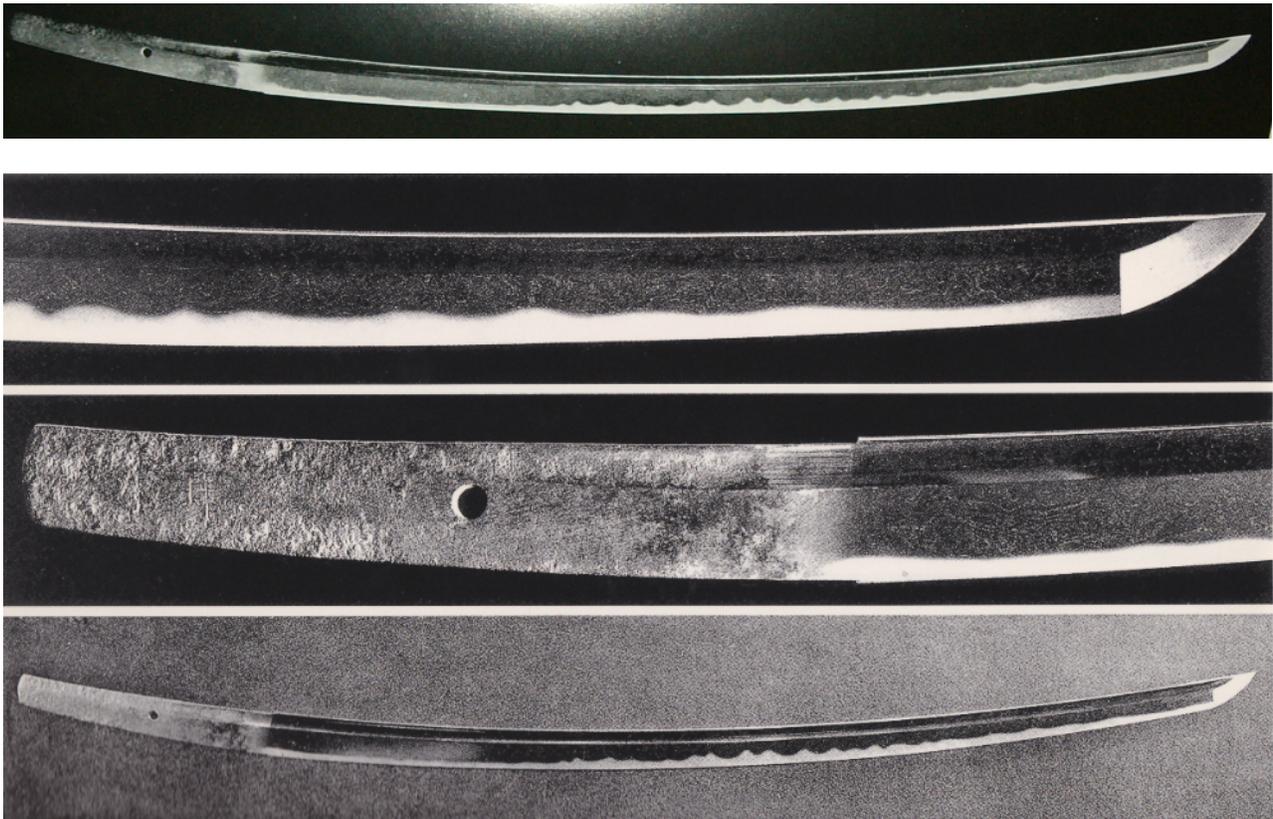
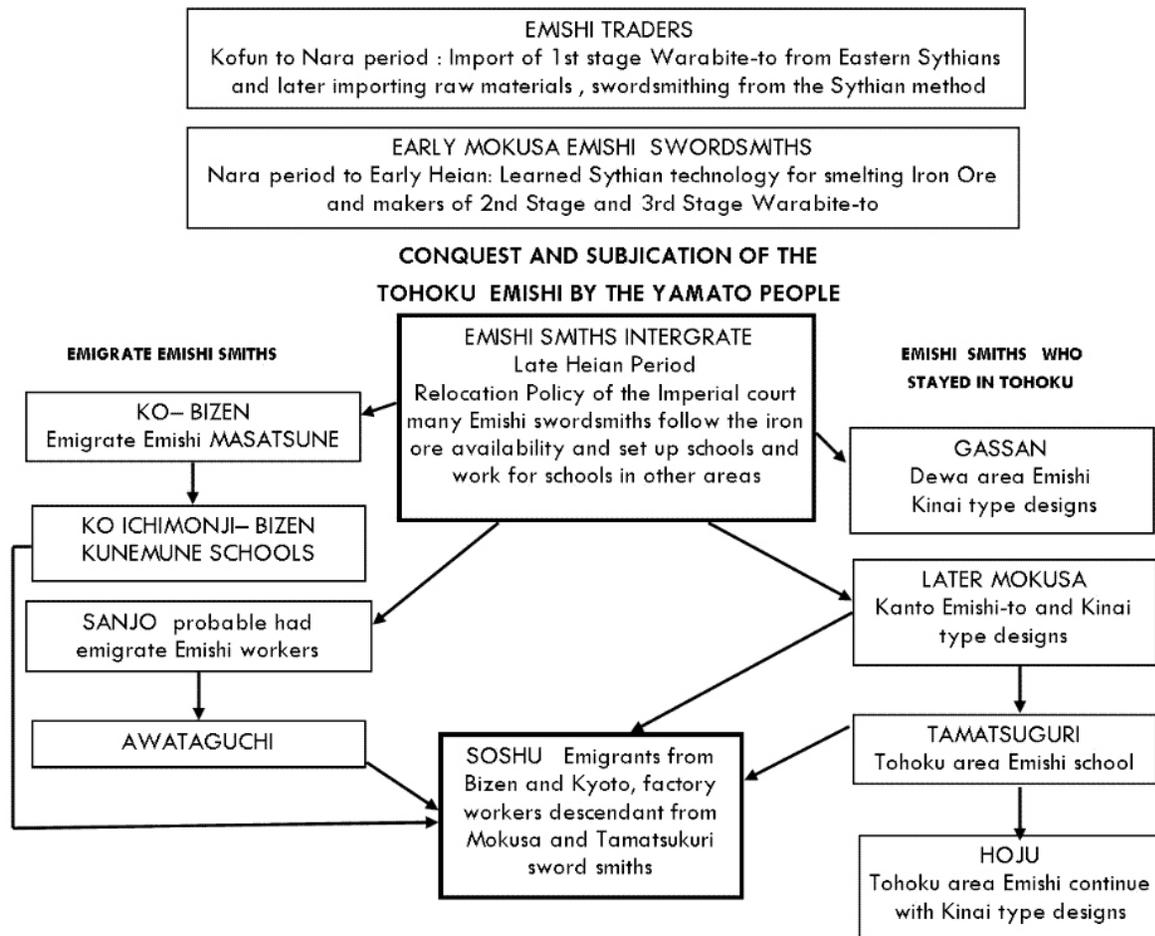


Illustration 4 . Tachi signed Yoyasu (alt. Sei-an) , Juyo Bunkuzai, Tokyo National Museum

Description: Mei "Yoyasu", Mokusa school. This sword is shinogi zukuri and is ubu nakago. The jihada show a remarkable similarity to the previous illustrated Warabite-to being blackish in mixed Oitame nagaru and mokume with profuse ji-nie and prominent chikei and chihan. The Hamon is sugha from in from the hamachi for a third of the blade changing to gunome midair in thick nie with many kinsuji, sunagashi and inazuma is abundant. The boshi is notarekomi ending in yakitsume. This sword is claimed by Mamiya to be late Heian. In referring to the Nihonto Meikan it clearly lists this exact sword as the work of the 6th generation Yoyasu working in 1293. How is it possible with the traditional genealogy of the Soshu school swordsmiths that this sword pre-dates similar works from that school?

As I have stated earlier, at the time of the establishment of the Kamakura swordsmith school, of the three Ōshū schools, the Mokusa school was dominant. (the Gassan developed later, and the Tamatsukuri were in decline to be replaced by Hoju) As can be seen by the Yoyasu example, and comparisons to all other known swords, it can be said that the Mokusa were closest stylistically to Soshu-den.

Let me stop here and make a summary of what we know to this point. The Mokusa school of swordsmiths, with a five hundred year heritage have existed in the Tohoku region right up to the time of the establishment of the Kamakura Soshu school. The Mokusa were regarded as highly skilled swordsmiths. The Mokusa were the swordsmiths of the Emishi. Stylistically they have a striking resemblance to Soshu-den which can clearly be seen as an ongoing evolution from at least the early Heian period. The Mokusa used as their raw materials the iron ore smelted from vast local deposits. When the Kamakura school was established , the local swordsmiths were put to work in some capacity in the Kamakura workshops. From the standard historical texts we also know that the Hojo Bakufu spent a lot of money preparing for a potential third Mogul Invasion. We know the Hojo valued the resources of the Tohoku area in particular the iron ore reserves with a view of self sustainability.



The imported iron resources from the mainland were controlled by the Mongol Yuan government at this time. The Soshu School was forced to fully utilise all the local resources at hand to meet the increased demand for arms. This flow diagram correlates the information I have presented along with what we know from the accepted texts.

At the very least I would speculate that the Mokusa smiths, who smelted their own steel, became a supplier of raw materials to the Soshu school. Chemical analysis will bear that statement out as it seems that both schools utilized the same local resources of iron ore. It may well be that the Mokusa school was employed as a substitute supplier of semi refined steel when mainline supplies were cut. At the same time a technical exchange of knowledge was required to adapt to the new source material, which requires different forging methodology.

Stylistic Influence of the Mokusa School on Soshu-den.

The history of the establishment of the Kamakura Soshu school of swordsmiths by the Hojo Bakufu is well documented in many references. Here I would like to present to you from the historical, archaeological and stylistic evidence presented a new theory of the beginnings of the Soshu-den.

Commonly the features of Kamakura Soshu-den have been considered a hybrid of Awataguchi and Bizen kaji styles. For the purposes of this article I will defer the stylistic characteristics of these two schools to the research of the reader from the common texts. However it is becoming more evident that the Mokusa school could be the true root of the Kamakura Soshu-den. Mr. Mitsuharu Mamiya (the chairman of Mokusa Sword Research Group) said “Mokusa swordsmiths and Kamakura swordsmiths were like parent and child.” Mr. Nakabachi also from the Mokusa Sword Research Group said that Kamakura swordsmiths’ Nie 沸 is more like the Oshu sword, and it must have been a strongly influence”⁷

Another striking clue from analysing the Meikan. is it only co-incidental that the third generation Tamatsukuri smith is named Yukimitsu 行光, his working period exactly coincides with the late Kamakura period. He is the last of his school with his only predecessor being listed 37 years before him, the Tamatsukuri school morphing into the Hoju after his time. It could be that this swordsmith became Soshu Yukimitu 相州行光. The work style of Yukimitsu could be considered a fusion of the Tamatsukuri Ōshū style and that of Shintogo Kunimitsu. If that was so, then the story of Masamune being the adopted son of Yukimitsu may also be a direct reference to Masamune coming from a brother school, the Mokusa. Of interest, we know that the kanji characters that make the name Masamune 正宗 do not appear in the genealogy of the Soshu School prior to him. Alternatively in the record of the Mokusa smiths we do see one kanji appear in the name of, Yorimune 頼宗 1293, it being common practice for junior smiths to change their name when studying with a new master. Quite an interesting and plausible hypothetical.

Around the mid Muromachi era the Bushi started to appreciate the beauty of swords and studied Meito. Did all the information about the genealogy of the Mokusa swordsmiths disappear at that

time? I don't think so, but I do think that the connection of the Emishi Mokusa swordsmiths with the birth of Soshu-den was written out of the sword texts for political reasons and for the ethnic pride of the Yamato people. The implications of the evidence is obvious. But there may be more to it than just deleting the Mokusa from the sword books to cater to the egos of the Yamato Bushi. It may well have also suited the purposes of Hideyoshi and subsequently the Tokugawa Shogun to create the myth of the origins of Soshu-den.

Historically, good Ōshū swords may well have been passed off as Soshu-den in their own right. Ōshū swords have O-itame hada. Kamakura swords are also hadamono. It seems likely that to fill the demand for good Soshu-den for gift giving, good Ōshū swords were altered to become Kamakura Soshu den, and the not so good swords were left as they were. This may account for the scarcity and the generally lower quality of extant Ōshū swords.

Some more points to consider. Kunzan describes Hoju , “Hoju forges whitish jigane and itame-hada that combines nagare-hada and stands out, and tempers ko-midare and sugu-ha mixed with ko-midare in accompanied by a hazy nioi-guchi in nie-deki.”⁵ Generally Hoju hamon characteristics are described as watery and weak nioiguchi, but the Hoju example at Tokyo National Museum has a strong Yakiba and is refined.

Many swords made by Soshu Yukimitu 相州行光, Masamune 正宗 and Sadamune 貞宗 are suriage and mumei, especially Sadamune. There is no Sadamune long sword that is not suriage. Most suriage swords are better quality than swords with Mei 銘. In the opinion of Mamiya, one of Masamune's superb swords Jo Izumino Kami Shoji Masamune 城和泉守所持正宗 is mumei and suriage, but from its shape you can tell it could be an ubu Tachi 太刀 from early Kamakura era, and the Mei was removed “¹³

Conclusion

Stylistically the biggest change in Soshu-den came just after the Mongol invasions and is attributed to Masamune. Before the time of Shintogo Kunimitsu, the relocated Kamakura swordsmiths seem to have been content to work in the style of their forbearers with little deviation. After the invasions, the country was on a war footing and all Japanese, Yamato and Emishi alike were facing a potentially devastating third invasion. It may well be that the Kamakura school gladly and openly co-operated in joint efforts with the Mokusa school for the common good of the country. Combining resources and trading technical innovation, this union was the birth of Soshu-den. Then how is it that the origin of the Kamakura swordsmiths is passes down with such myths. Accepting that later it may well have served the purposes of the Honami or the Tokugawa, the mythology seems to stem from an earlier time. The reason is possibly in the Emishi Kamakura swordsmiths themselves.

Tales in the old books refer to the Ōshū Swordsmiths by the derogatory term Fushū swordsmiths. I assume that in those times they were ashamed of their ancestry. If their ancestors were Emishi and to be called Fushū (also translated as war prisoner or slave labourer) was socially detrimental. It sounded better to claim they were descendants of Awataguchi 粟田口 or Bizen 備前 swordsmiths who were their peers, and it certainly became a popular misconception.

So was Masamune an Emishi? We will never know for sure, but I would like to think so. It is quite probable from his outlandish and rugged style that he may have been one of the locally conscripted swordsmiths as could have been Yukimitsu. From the beginning of the Nambokucho jidai the Mokusa school declined and so ended the history of one of the most innovative swordsmith school in Japanese history.

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