A sword by Awataguchi Norikuni 粟田口則国

Recently I have had the opportunity to spend some time studying a sword attributed to the Awataguch smith Norikuni. I have previously only seen 3 Awataguchi blades in hand. Two of these were tanto and the other an O-suriage tachi attributed to Hisakuni. All three of these blades were viewd in a sale room of a well known auctioneer. Seeing them along with a Rai Kunimitsu and an Ichimonji blade had a radical impact on both my appreciation of good swords and my approach to collecting, but that is another story. Some three years after that inital exposure I am now looking again at an Awataguchi work. the 4th blade of this school I have held in a sword collecting career which now approaches 30 years.

As with previous articles I have attempted to summarise the characteristics of the school and then compared the blade under study against those features. It sounds reasonable, but in this case I am struggling to start. The subject blade is proving extremely difficult to describe and even more difficult to understand. What is not in doubt is that it is, on every measure used to determine such things, a truly beautiful work. I have looked at it now for a week. If I had the opportunity to look at it for a biblical amount of time I am confident that I would still be finding features that I had failed to recognise before. It may well be that having completed this I will in a few months time need to revisit it and update it with additional information. This is at least a start.

Historical background:

We are very fortunate as students studying the Japanese sword in that the condition and state of preservation of the works we are examining is of a very high standard. This to some extent can allow us to take for granted their longevity. To add a little perspective to the age of the blade in question I have summarised some events which were happening in other parts of the world when the subject of this article was being made (with thanks to Wikipedia as a source):

In England in the year 1220 A.D. the Plantagenet King Henry III, the son of King John was given a second coronation, the Pope believing his initial one was not legal. Although still a minor at the time of his coronation Henry survived to rule for more than 50 years. His reign was embroiled with conflict with the English Nobility following his Fathers signing of the Magna Carta which many herald as the beginnings of modern democracy. During this period re-building work was begun on York Minster, Westminster Abbey and Salisbury cathedral. Perhaps Henry's attempt to win support from the almighty as he came to grips with his Father's unsettled legacy in both England and with the old enemy France.

At the same time Genghis Khan's Mongolian warriors were invading the Middle East in an area which today sits within modern Iran. They attacked The Abbasid Caliphate, Bukhara, and Samarkand. It would be 50 or more years before the great Khan's Grandson Kublai would turn his attention to the islands of Japan.

In Japan in 1220 the Emperor Gotoba held a poetry party. The following year he led an unsuccessful attempt to replace the Kamakura Shogunate. He was subsequently exiled to Oki Island.

While not a successful politician or leader of rebellion Gotoba was an extremely sophisticated man. Alongside his involvement in Poetry and literature he had a passionate interest in sword making, not only in studying swords but also in learning manufacturing techniques from the best in the land. With this in mind he summoned the very best smiths of the day to come and work with him. These resident smiths, known as the Gobankaji, came from the Ichimonji School of Bizen (Gotoba gave the school the Ichimonji name.) the Aoe school of Bitchu province and the Yamashiro Awataguchi School. Amongst the Awataguchi smiths listed as chosen were Hisakuni, Kunitomo and his son Norikuni.

The three schools identified above, the Ichimonji, the Aoe and the Awataguchi have very different styles and features. There have been volumes written about the Ichimonji School and they were without doubt incredibly skilled sword makers. What is more they appealed to the taste of their most lucrative market of the time, the Samurai. Their hamon were flamboyant, gorgeous and full of activity, the shape exceptional. They were also quite prolific in manufacture. This enabled their work to be spread throughout the land in greater numbers and therefore be seen by a greater number of people. Their style and quality ensured that their work would be noticed.

As mentioned above it was Gotoba that gave the Ichimonji School their name with the right to carve the single horizontal stroke "Ichi" character on the nakago of their blades. There have been a number of interpretations as to the true meaning of this. The first and I think most commonly mentioned is that it refers to the school as "first under heaven" meaning pre-eminent or simply the best. Another I was told more recently was a Samurai's interpretation which describes it as meaning "one without equal" on the battlefield. Whichever meaning is most accurate the underlying point is that they were regarded as being the best around.

The other two schools are less well recorded but the quality of their work is, I believe equal to, or in some cases superior to, that of the Ichimonji School. I have written previously about the work of the Aoe School in Bitchu province. At that time I described their work as being Yamashiro in style using Bizen material. Although a crude generalisation it does convey the quieter impression produced by ko- Aoe work.

The Awataguchi School

At the end of the 12th century a group of smiths started working in the Awataguchi district of Kyoto. The two earliest known smiths were Kuniyori and Kuniiye. There is some disagreement as to the relationship between them and which was the father and which the son. However they are both recorded as active in the last decade of the 12th Century. They were followed by six brothers, Kunitomo, Hisakuni, Kuniyasu, Kunikiyo Arikuni and Kunitsuna. All of the brothers enjoyed a very high reputation and their work was extremely similar. It was and is of an exceptionally high standard. Two of them Hisakuni and Kunitomo are listed as Gobankaji. Hisakuni is recorded as having the title of administrator so I assume he was responsible for the organization of the resident smith's activity. Kunitomo had a son, Norikuni, who is also listed as Gobankaji and working in 1219-1222.

Another of the 6 brothers, Kunitsuna, was one of the three smiths summoned to work in Kamakura by the Regent Hojo Tokiyori. Kunitsuna along with Sukezane of the Ichimonji

School and Saburo Kunimuni were indentified as the founders of the Kamakura Soshu tradition. It can therefore be argued that the Sagami or Soshu School which boasted such great smiths as Shintogo Kunimitsu, Yukimitsu and of course Masamune, had its origins at least in part in the work of the Awataguchi School of Yamashiro.
The majority of extant Awataguchi works are tanto. The most famous and some would argue the greatest exponent of tanto manufacture, Yoshimitsu, was an Awataguchi smith. He was named as one of the Nippon San saku (three great makers of Japan), the other two being Go-Yoshihiro and Masamune. Yoshimitsu work is extremely beautiful and has always been treasured. In a number of references Yoshimitsu appears to be recorded as either the grandson or the student of Norikuni.
There is little written about the Awataguchi School (at least in English) this is in part because their extant work is relatively rare. There are currently fewer than 50 Awataguchi works recorded as Juyo or Tokubetsu Juyo status. There are others with designation above this but an accurate number is not available to the author. Anyone I have spoken to who has seen the work of this school speaks of it reverentially. It is simply regarded as amongst the finest work ever produced. It is quiet, conservative and subtle. Based in Kyoto I assume the Awataguchi smiths worked predominantly for the nobility. This comparatively limited market resulted in fewer works being made but also ensured they had the time to refine their art to a level which in the opinion of many has never been surpassed. This is confirmed in part in the new publication “Meibutsu treasured Japanese Swords”. It states that during the Muromachi period the specialist in ancient customs, Ise Sogo, stated that signed tachi were suitable as gifts to the Shogun when he visited the houses of Daimyo. Those of the Kyoto smiths amongst whom the Awataguchi were particularly well regarded were especially suitable.
Based on the limited descriptions appearing in Nihonto Koza and the Connoisseurs Book of Japanese Swords the features of the Awataguchi School work may be summarized as follows:

Sugata:
As previously stated tachi are less common than tanto. Tachi are slender and elegant showing a similar sugata to the Sanjo School. They are iori-mune and chu-sori. Nakago are long and slender with sori. Shinogi is of medium height. The overall appearance is of quiet elegance. Early in the Kamakura period the ko-kissaki develops more in to ikubi kissaki. Tanto are slender with mitsu-mune and uchi-zori.

Jihada:
In many works including the two references mentioned above Awataguchi is simply described as the best. There is consensus amongst available references, new and old, that the Awataguchi smiths achieved a level of perfection in their work by understanding and working their material to a level of sophistication that has never been equaled. The fact that founding and pre-eminent members of the last and perhaps most famous of the five traditions, the Soshu School have their origins in Awataguchi confirm just how good these artisans were. They understood their material and process so well that they continued to produce a product that had no equal and has been treasured since it was produced.

The Awataguchi smiths produced a hada whose characteristics are unique and extremely beautiful. The basic pattern is an extremely tight ko-itame. Described as Nashiji hada, it is thought to resemble the texture of the flesh of the Japanese pear. As can be gathered by this it is very, very tight. The hada is described as being covered in ji-nie with small chickei and yubashiri. The overall appearance of the steel gives an impression of moistness or "oiliness". The colour is a deep blue black. To achieve this unique appearance is due in no small part to the forging skill of the smith. However I think it is also a reasonable view that the quality of their material also played a significant role in the formation of the ultimate product. It is this combination of extremely high quality steel and exceptional skill which produces the supreme quality realized in Awataguchi work.
An additional feature illustrated in "The connoisseurs guide to Japanese swords" makes deliberate reference to lines of nie within the jihada running parallel to the hamon for 2 or 3cms.

Hamon:
A narrow suguha, which in early work becomes increasingly narrow towards the yokote. The hamon is hotsure or suguha with ko-choji midare. It is covered in thick, bright ko-nie which is extremely reflective and known as Awataguchi nie. There is a great deal of activity including nioi kogori, inazuma and kinsuji all of which are tight, narrow and very clear.

Boshi:
Ko maru with nie which is slightly courser than that in the hamon.

Horimono:
Bo-hi are relatively common and very well executed. The top of the hi near the ko-shinogi is cut straight rather than curved. The bottom of the hi ends in kaku dome below the machi. In tanto simple horimono are common such as suken and gomabashi are seen. The grooves are carved close to the mune and the gap between grooves narrow.

Nakago:
In tachi, the nakago are long and slender. They have sori and hira niku. In tanto nakago are either without sori or furisode. Yasurimei are either kiri or a gentle kattesagari. Signatures usually comprise of two characters.

Norikuni:
As mentioned above Norikuni is listed as the son of Kunitomo working between 1219 and 1222. He was one of the Gobankaji working in the months of January and February. There are only 7 of his swords listed in the Juyo register, 1 signed tachi which is a national treasure blade, a mumei tachi, 1 signed tanto and 3 mumei tanto. Nihonto Koza states that the Sugata of both his tachi and tanto were the same as his father's. It describes his kitae as "the finest". I am not sure whether this means the tightest or the best. The illustration below (fig.1) is taken from the Tokyo Museum exhibition catalogue of 122

National Treasures. The sword belongs to the Kyoto National Museum. There are two blades illustrated in Nihonto Koza, this one and a mumei o-suriage piece. Unfortunately the image of the mumei blade is not of sufficiently good quality to show any great detail.

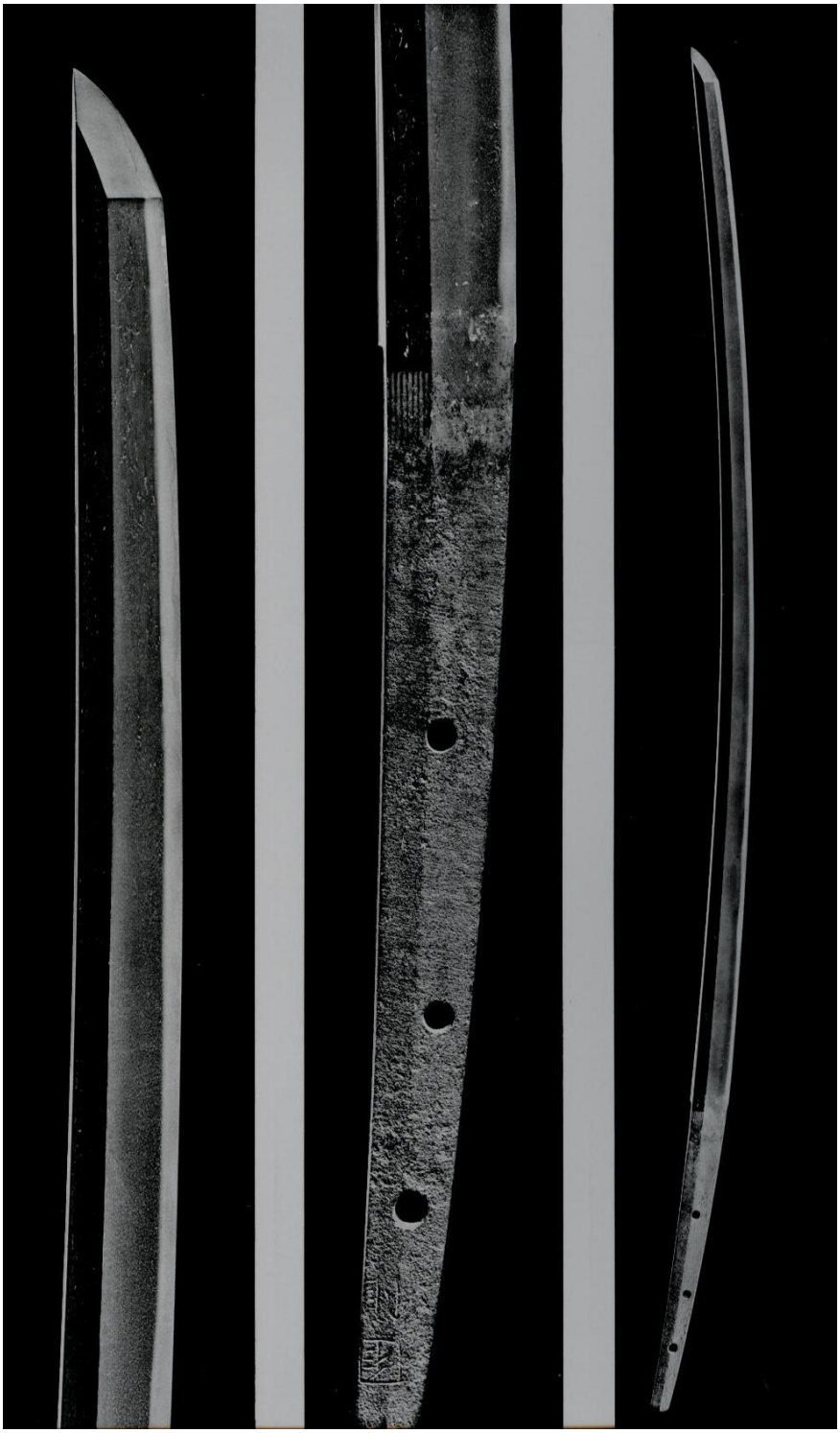

Fig1 Norikuni national treasure Kyoto National Museum

The Sword.

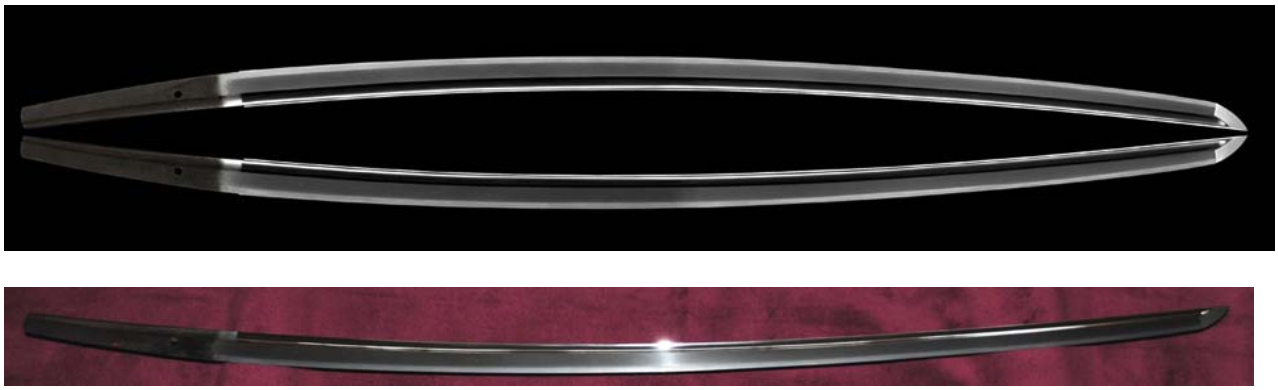

Fig2 O-suriage Norikuni.

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:

The blade is shinogi-zukuri and iori-mune. The shinogi is not high. Despite being shortened the blade maintains an elegant shape with an even tori-sori curve. The sori is 1.8cm. The blade narrows gradually from a mihaba of 2.5cm to a sakihaba of 1.8cm. The kasane is 0.5cm. 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:

When I first looked at this blade I confess I was underwhelmed. The shape was beautiful but I could not see very much, if anything, happening in the body of the blade. Based on what others, far more knowledgeable than I, had said about it I did not doubt it was a high quality sword. What I doubted was my own ability to identify and interpret what I was looking at. It took me several trips back and forth to the blade, viewing under varying light sources and over a number of hours for me to focus on what was in front of me. To use another biblical expression “The scales finally fell from his eyes”. Once I focused in to the blade all manner of activity appeared before me. I realised that up until now all the illustrations I had seen of Awataguchi work had been magnified, including pictures of this piece. In reality the real hada was even finer and tighter than I had assumed it would

be. Having now started to see what is there I believe I can say without any exaggeration that I have never seen a more beautiful hada.
I am usually wary of using poetic terms or superlatives in attempting to describe a metallurgical feature. In some ways it is too easy to allow florid descriptions to enhance an object. In this case there are a number of very specific features that come together to generate an effect that is unlike anything I have seen in swords of other schools. The first striking feature is the incredible tightness and uniformity of the hada. I am struggling to understand how a smith nearly 800 years ago had such a command of both technique and material to enable him to fold and weld iron a sufficient number of times to create such an effect without losing all the carbon content in the process.
This leads to the second feature, the whole surface is covered in the most minute and beautiful ko-nie. Falling into the poetic trap I mentioned earlier, as you re-orientate the blade in a single light source the nie creates an effect not unlike a frosted field. It sparkles in prismatic colour across the whole surface. Within this frosted field it then becomes possible to pick out numerous small and bright chickei. In two or three areas collections of nie form two or three parallel wave type lines running between the hamon and shinogi, in exactly the way illustrated in Mr. Nagayama's book. I am reluctant to describe this as nie utsuri as they run for short sections of 4 to 5cm rather than in a continuous line above the hamon as one sees in bo or midare utsuri in Bizen work, but I can think of no better term to define them. There are Yubashiri present. I normally avoid trying to define colour in steel but in this case the overall colour of the jigane is a clear dark blue. This is most noticeable when sitting the blade alongside another piece from a different school and time.

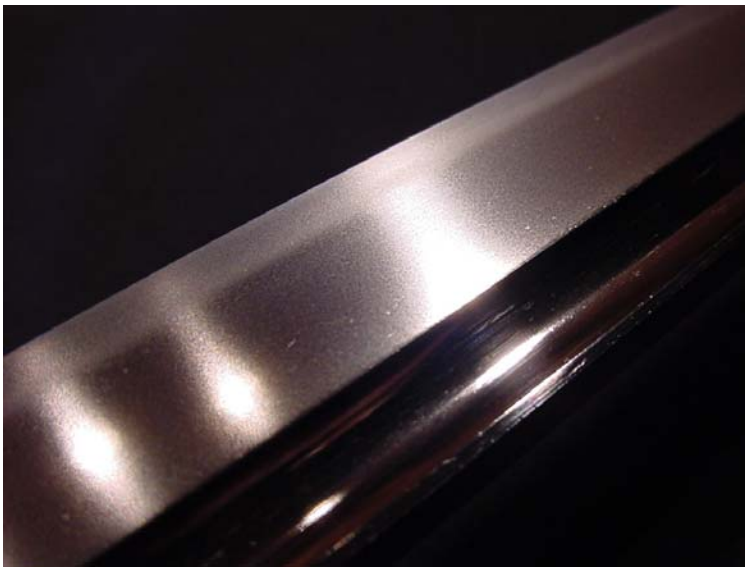

Fig3. hada with ji-nie and chickei

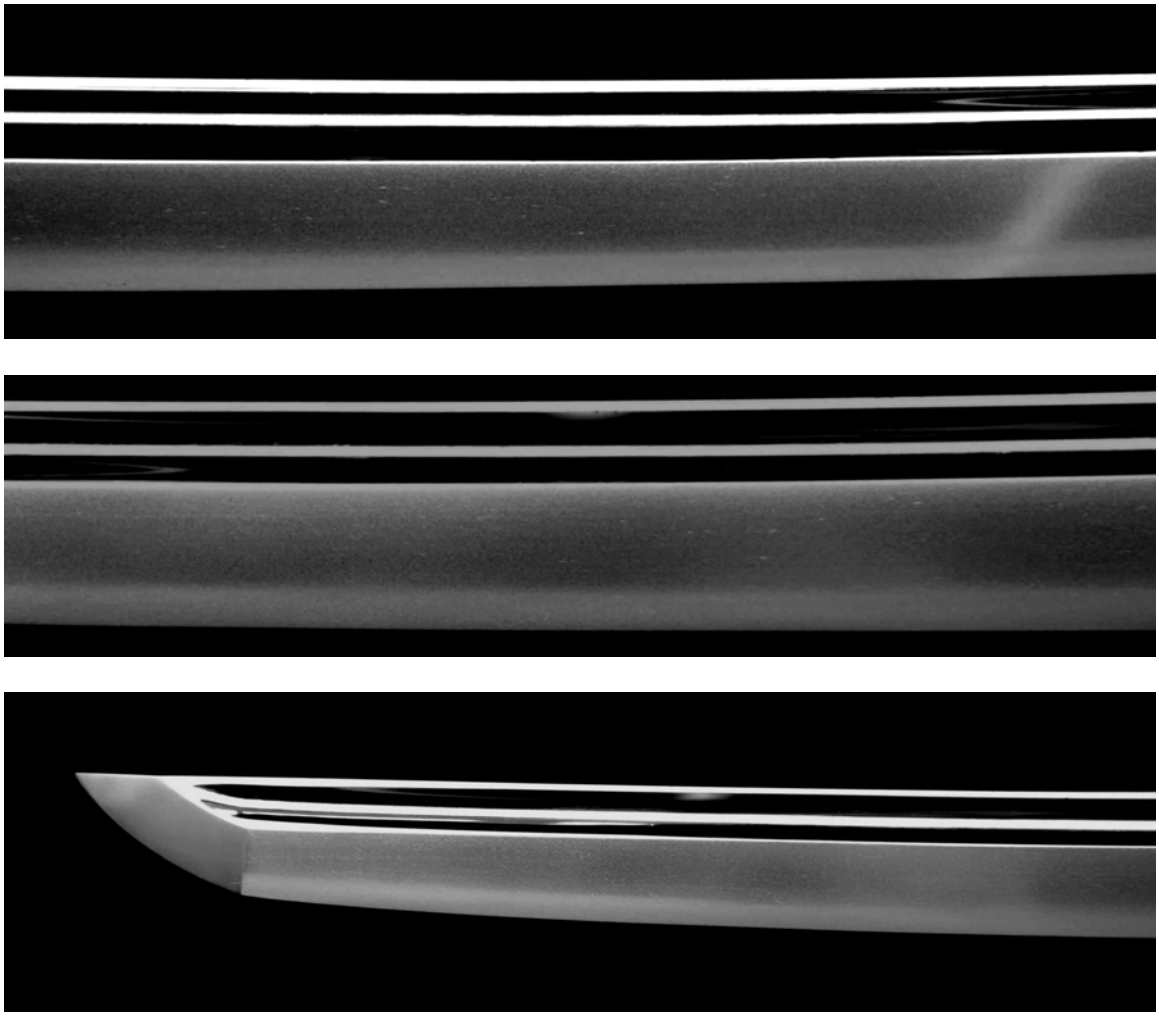

Fig3a Hada with ji-nie and chickei

The images above will I hope give some indication of the fineness of the hada, the quality of the jigane and the profuse nie throughout the ji. The first image gives an impression of the luster of the blade. The remaining images have been converted to grayscale and the brightness and contrast adjusted marginally. I hope this will allow the reader to see the hada and the ko-nie within the jigane more clearly.

Hamon:

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. Tanobe-san in the sayagaki describes the blade as having a classical elegant hamon. It is an opinion that it would be difficult to disagree with.

Horimono:
The blade is comparatively thin at a shade under 5mm. However it has deep bo-hi running its full length and through the nakago. When looking at blades with deep hi it is not unusual to see ware and other longitudinal openings as the polishing on what is an already reduced section of the blade reveals coarser core steel. In this case, looking at a sword that is nearly 800 years old, the very deep hi are almost perfect. The burnished surface is clear and bright and without fault. The carving of the hi is exceptional. It was written some time ago (sorry I cannot remember where I read it) That Sanjo Munechika made swords out of a solid piece (i.e. without a soft core). I wonder whether the quality of the steel seen in the hi on this blade is because early Awataguchi work was made in the same manner.

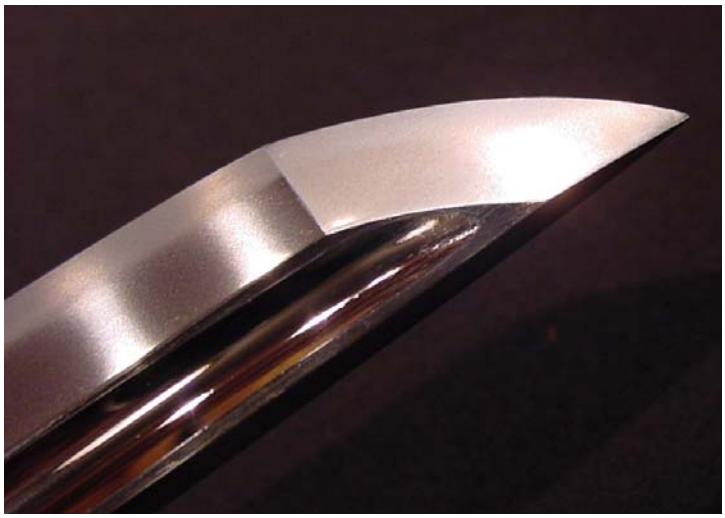

Fig4. horimono and kissaki

Comments:
As all good art should, ongoing examination of the blade results in many more questions than answers. In the text above I have already touched on some of these; how did the smith control choose and refine his material? How did he know exactly the time to stop folding to achieve the tightness he did without damaging the composition? What quenching method did he use to achieve the beautiful effects with nie, chickei and the activity in the hamon? And so I can go on. Regrettably the only way some of these questions might be answered is through destructive analysis and I think few custodians of Awataguchi work would be willing to have their treasure sectioned to determine the physical structure and chemical composition. Perhaps these are subjects for a more general work in future on the school rather than the specific blade described here.

Whether one likes the blade is ultimately a matter of subjective preference. For lovers of Ichimonji or later Soshu work the style of the Awataguchi may be altogether too restrained and quiet. What I don't think can be disputed is that on any measure, the work produced by this school between 750 and 830 years ago is art of the highest order. It

demands attention and as I think I have demonstrated above it is very difficult to describe in terms used for any other work. It is unique and of a quality which I believe remains unsurpassed in any subsequent period or tradition. In fact I think it is arguable it has been the foundation of much of the finest subsequent work of the Rai, Soshu and Aoe traditions.
I am sure that I could continue to look at this blade regularly over the coming years and still be confident of finding something new and wonderful on each visit. It is certainly one of the finest examples of the koto swordsmith's art I have ever seen.

References and Thanks:
In attempting to glean information from such scant material as is available in English I have drawn heavily on the following:
Nihonto Koza Koto edition vol. 1
The Connoisseurs Book of Japanese Swords by K. Nagayama
The Albert Yamanaka Newsletters
The Catalogue of 122 national treasure swords and fittings, published by Tokyo National Museum.
Meibutsu- Treasured Japanese Swords.

As I mentioned I found identifying aspects of the sword and then describing what I was seeing challenging. While doing this I was very fortunate to be able to discuss ideas as they developed with a number of people who have had greater experience and exposure to this school than I have. In addition some read through the initial drafts of the above and I am very grateful for the suggestions and guidance offered. I would like to thank the following for their time, suggestions and ideas.
:
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Paul Bowman February 2012.