

SWORD GENEALOGY



A distinction has to be drawn between the sword as a symbol and its use as a weapon. In the study of iaido we are concerned predominantly with the practical use as a weapon but Iaido itself is an art form full of symbolism. The Japanese sword is synonymous with the culture of that country and as such is unique. The sword forms part of the national regalia of Japan along with the mirror and fan. Its association with the military class in Japan known as the Samurai is strong; the sword being referred to as the "soul of the Samurai". In no small part the functionality of the sword and its special manufacture has added to the regard it has as an art object to be greatly prized and indeed valued. However, it is a weapon designed to be used and inevitable damaged or broken in the hurly burly of battle. As part of our Iai training we need to afford sincere respect to the sword (no matter if it be bokken, Iaito, Shinken or a valuable antique). Bearing in mind the practical nature of the sword to be overly sentimental toward it is inappropriate. There are many books about that can give you a better understanding of the history of the sword itself, and the following are recommended as basic texts:

- Kangan Sato, "The Japanese Sword", Kodansha, ISBN 0-87011-5b2-6
- B W Robinson, "The Arts of the Japanese Sword", Faber & Faber, ISBN 0-571-04723-8
- John M Yumoto, "The Samurai Sword - A Handbook", Tuttle, ISBN 0-8048-0509-1.

Below is a brief chronology to the history of the Japanese sword.

Yayoi Period (7500-300BC)

Prior to this period stone swords existed but it is doubtful they were used as real weapons and were more likely to be decorative. During this period bronze metal blades appeared of the straight double edged variety.

Kofun Period (400-600AD)

Iron swords have been found from this period in tombs that characterised the burials in this era. The swords themselves are considered unlikely to be indigenous and more likely to have been imported from China.

Nara Period (645-794)

During this and the preceding Asuka era the thrusting weapon known as the *ken* style was very common. China was a great influence on the Japanese and this was reflected in both sword design and in military training.

Amakuni (c 700)

It is not clear if this name belonged to an actual person, but the design of what we would recognise as a Japanese sword is attributed to Amakuni. It is suggested that he responded to the soldier's use of the sword in a slashing manner rather than in a thrusting motion, by devising the single edged curved blade more suited to the action of slashing. The existence, or otherwise, of Amakuni as a historical character is not relevant but his name is used here to signify the transition from straight to curved blade design.

Heian Period (794-1185)

During this long period the old *ken* style sword was relegated to mostly ceremonial use. The single edged curved blade became well established as the weapon of choice of the Samurai warrior. Sword smiths proliferated in this period to supply the growing demand of swords. Terms to describe the formalised study of sword arts came into use during this period.

Late Heian-Early Kamakura (12th Century)

The curved and rigid blade familiar to us in the form of *shinogi zukuri tachi* (hung edge down from the obi) came into existence. As well as the introduction of the ridges the blades were characterised by differences in the width (fumburi) between the base and *kissaki*. Also the curvature was marked with *koshizori* (centre of the curve) near to the tang end. Many great smiths were working during this time such as Munechika, Kanenaga, Yasutsuna, Tomonari, Masatsune etc.

Middle Kamakura (mid 13th Century)

This period coincides with the pinnacle of Samurai power based around the Eastern Capital of Kamakura. It gave birth to the stately tachi of ample thickness (*kusane*), little tapering in blade width towards the point and ample convex curvature. The *shinogi* was placed closer to the *mune*. A marked flamboyance in the *hamon* can also be seen with choji (cherry blossom design) being very popular. Tanto were also produced in large numbers, some of these were of very good quality. Many excellent smiths such as Kuniyoshi, Yoshimitsu, Kuni-yuki etc. were working in this period.

Late Kamakura (Early 14th Century)

During this period the blade became even sturdier with almost a uniform width over the length of the blade. The point became longer and new types of tempering patterns became popular such as guome (zig-zag), notare (wavy) for example. The different form of sword making resulted in a change to base crystalline structure due mainly to the hardening and tempering process. Famous smiths of this era are Rai Kunimitsu, Kaneyuki, and Sadayoshi etc.

Nambokucho (mid to late 14th Century)

The feature of this period was the production of extraordinary long tachi measuring over 91 cms. Ridge less tanto *hira-zukurei* became popular. At a later date many of these long tachi were shortened to make katana. Naginata were also very popular at this time and became longer. It was during this time that they were referred to as nagamaki.

Early Muromachi (Late 14th Early 15th Century)

The early Kamakura style of sword making was revived and many kinds of *tanto* and *wakizashi* were manufactured.

Late Muromachi (Mid 16th Century)

As the change took place from cavalry to foot soldiers so the sword changed markedly. We see the development of uchigata, a shorter sword than the tachi worn cutting edge up and thrust through the obi. The swords over 60 cms were called *katana*, the name we use today. There was also a tendency for the centre of the curve of the sword being nearer the point (*sakiyori*) not the hilt (*koshiyori*). By the end of this period swords were being made in there thousands, and the fame of the Japanese sword was spreading.

Momoyama Period (1573-1603)

The development of large-scale armies came about in these years sponsored by the three most powerful warlords Nobunaga, Hideyori and Hideyoshi. The sword came face to face with the gun in set piece battles that caused slaughter on WWI scale but predating it by 300 years!

Shinto Sword Period (c 1590-1865)

Literally meaning “new sword”, these weapons unlike the preceding *koto* blades were made much shorter, thicker, and straighter and much heavier. These are true *katana* rather than tachi blades. Many fine swords made during this period.

Tokugawa (Edo) Period (1603-1868)

This was an era of sustained peace and isolation from the rest of the world. The Samurai dominated the country and were the only class permitted to wear swords. The use of the firearm diminished leaving the *sword* as the supreme weapon again. During this time Iai was developed and the training with the sword became a path to spiritual enlightenment.

Meiji (Shin-shinto) Period (1868-1912)

This was the beginning of the modern Japan. The country opened up with the arrival of Commodore Perry's black ships. Along with the opening of the country came the opening of the Ryu to common people. Without this happening we would not have an opportunity today to study the sword arts. The first army swords called gunto appeared in this period.

Taisho & Showa Periods (1912-1989)

These two periods saw the birth and death of militarism in Japan. The sword became a symbol yet again. It defined what militarism stood for and even to this day the sword is regarded this way both inside and outside of Japan. The code of the *bushi* was subverted for political ends and thus was tarnished. A few great men kept the true spirit of *bushido* alive and through their students and *deshi* (followers) we are able to experience the essence of true *bushido* through the training in the use of the Nihonto (Japanese sword).

CHOKUTO (KEN): Ancient - Period to AD900

KOTO: Old sword - Period AD900 - 1530

SHINTO: New sword - Period 1530 – 1867

SHINSHINTO: Modern sword – Period 1868 – 1912

SHOWA-TO: to present day.



Iaido