UNDERSTANDING THE JAPANESE SWORD

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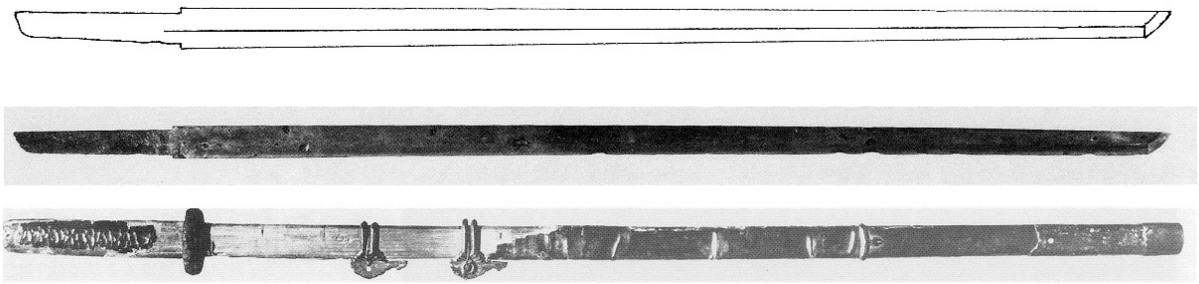
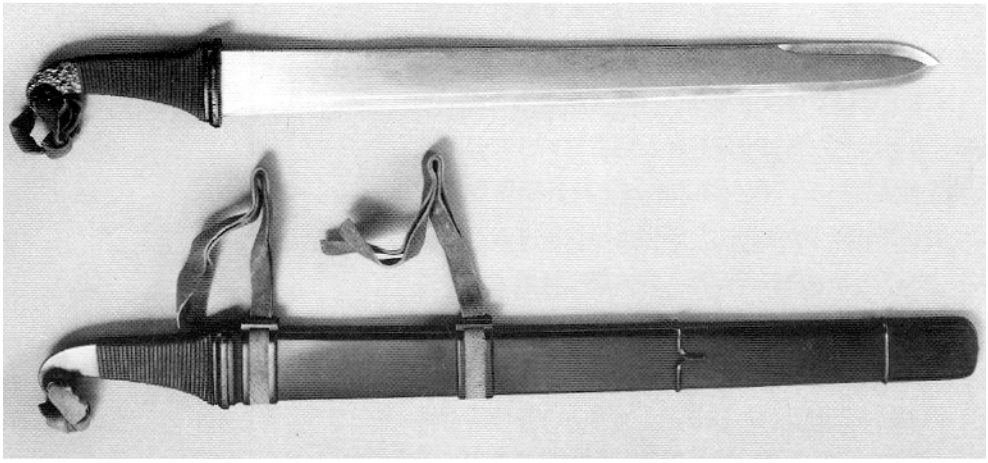
Understanding the Japanese Sword

This lecture will provide a general introduction to Japanese swords and how they are made. There are now several ways to explain Japanese swords, for example from a historical or a technical point of view but I try to do it the way that has proven to be the most easy to understand, and that is, all these aspects translated into a chronological approach.

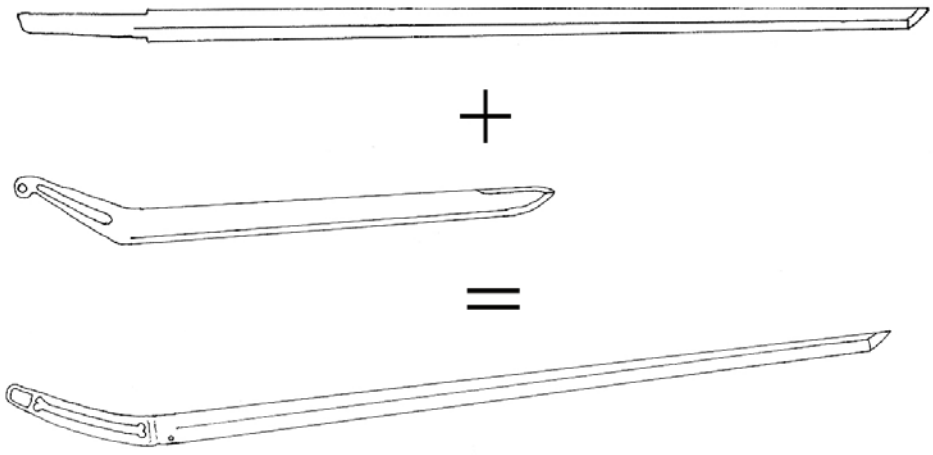
So lets start at the very beginning, and that is, that the origins of the Japanese sword are undoubtedly found in China. Now I don't want to go into too much historical detail but until the 10th century, Japan was pretty much orientating itself towards China, which was then ruled by the very advanced Tang dynasty. Accordingly, the Japanese had been importing swords and swordsmiths from China in order to equip their empire. Now in the 10th century a small break with China took place and the Japanese empire tried to get hold of the entire island and so they invaded the northern parts which were mostly inhabited by the *emishi*. So basically the imperial troops with their straight Chinese swords were battling the *emishi* who wore shorter but curved swords which were further developed from earlier influxes of immigration and what they learned was that a merger of both types of swords would actually result in a better sword. Again, there were other factors that played a role in why the Japanese sword was from then on interpreted/made the way it is still made today.



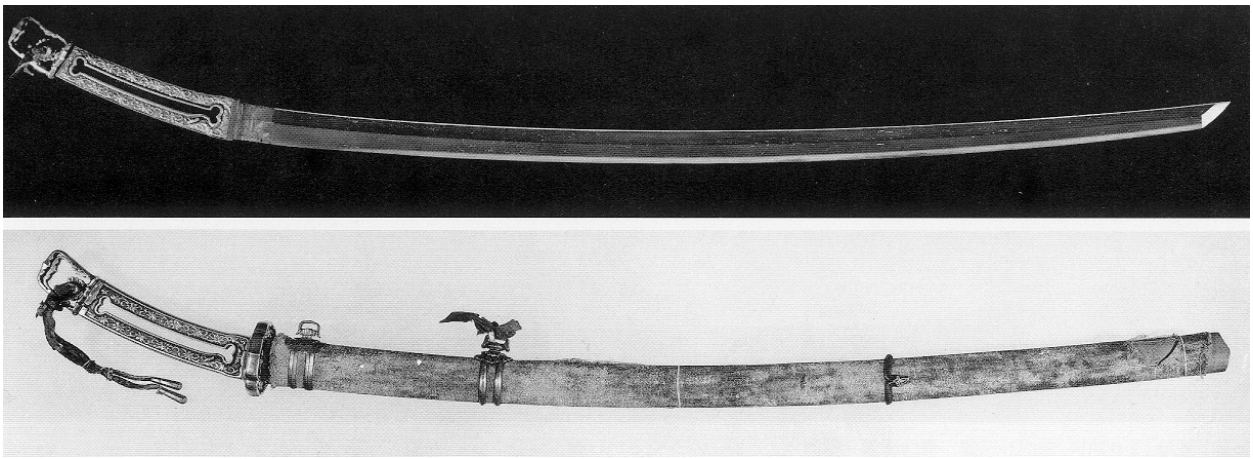
Chinese/Chinese-style sword.



Northern Japanese *warabide-tō*.

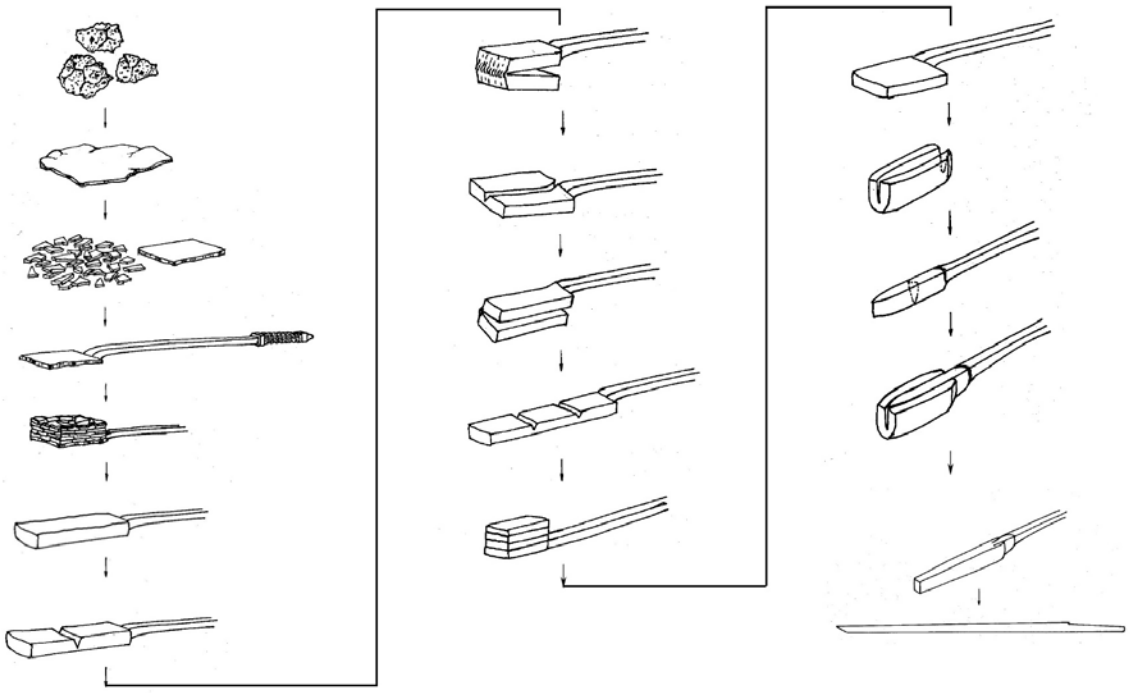


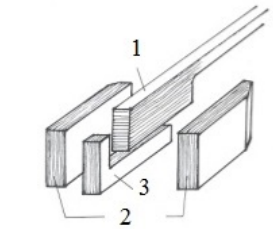
Merger of the two sword styles.

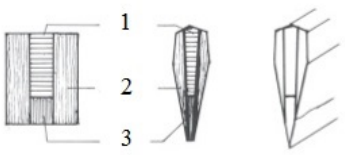


Result = *kenukigata-tachi*

And now we are coming to how Japanese swords are made. In Japan there is a famous phrase that sums up all requirements for a good sword: *orezu, magarazu, yoku kireru*; (折れず、曲がらず、よく切れる), which means “it should not break, should not bend, and should cut well”. Now these requirements are of course not limited to Japan, that means, swordsmiths from all cultures were facing the same challenge: To make a sword that is flexible enough so that it doesn’t break, that is hard enough so that it doesn’t bend, and that can mantain a sharp cutting edge so that it cuts well. All over ancient Europe, the Middle East, and India, swordsmiths basically learned that mixing steels with a different carbon content - the higher the carbon the harder but the more brittle - brings pretty good results. And by hardening that entire combination of harder and softer steels, or by just hardening the area of the cutting edge, one gets a very effective sword. I am greatly simplifying here of course but that is what basically happened all over the world. The Japanese however carried that approach to the extreme: They too combined harder and softer steels but created separate components of different hardness which they combined. That is, a super hard part that becomes the cutting edge, a hard part that becomes the outer surface, and a relatively soft part that becomes the core and the back of the sword. This bundle was then forged out to a sword blade of which on top of that basically just the cutting edge was hardened. Result was a blade which was due to the soft core and back flexible, which was due to the hard outer surface hard, and which maintained sharpness due to the extra hard and additionally hardened cutting edge.







1. soft, 2. hard, 3. Very hard

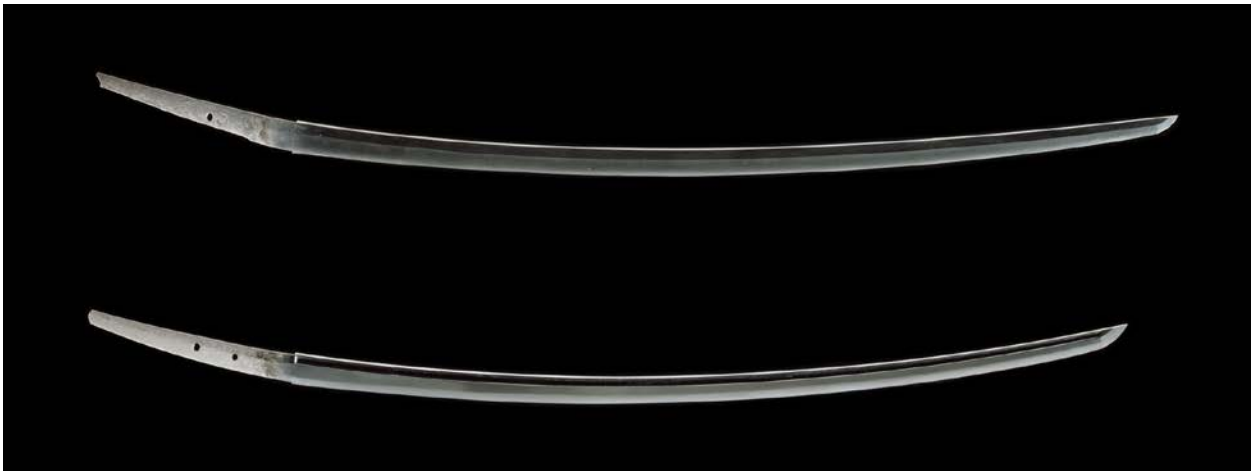
Now back to 10th century Japan. It is really fascinating to see from extant swords from that time that as soon as the Japanese empire had distanced itself from China a little bit and had conquered basically the entire island, already a quite high grade of perfection in sword making was achieved. Let me show you one of the most famous swords of Japan. It is the so-called *Mikazuki-Munechika*, a *tachi* made by Sanjō Munechika. This sword is dated to the very end of the 10th century and marks one of the very first indigenous Japanese masterswords. So basically all subsequent Japanese swords, except for special types, were following the interpretation of the *Mikazuki-Munechika*, and that is: A curved, single-edged blade with a more or less diamond cross section and a cutting edge hardened in a way that leaves a visible and very beautiful pattern.

Mikazuki-Munechika

It did not take long from there, that is, not even a century, that back in China, people were recognizing the progress little Japan had made with their swords. For example, the 11th century Chinese song "Praise for the Japanese Sword," the *Nihontō no Uta*, says, and I am paraphrasing here, that instead of seeking for mythical Chinese swords made by inaccessible, semi-legendary masters, one can get treasure swords from Japan which is close and that these swords can be bought for one hundred gold pieces and can dispel evil.

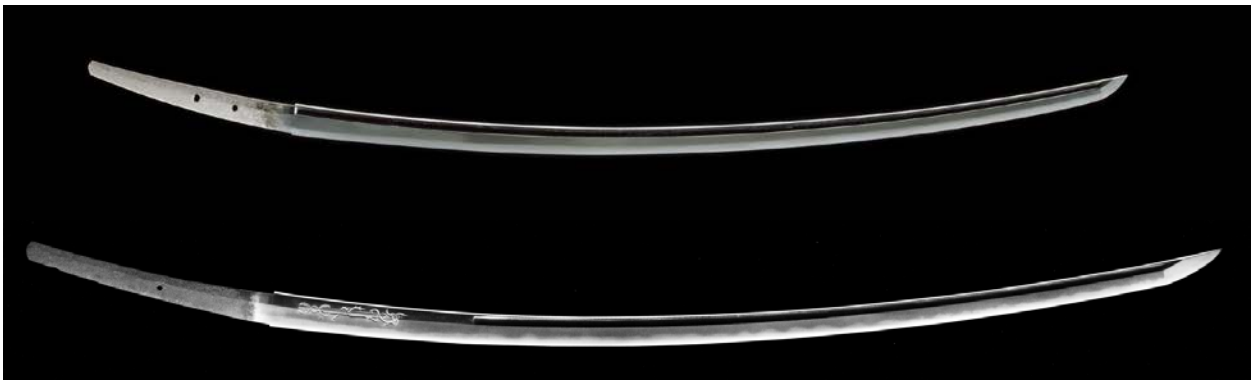
Now the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries were relatively peaceful in Japan and gave rise to a very sophisticated high culture, the Heian culture. Accordingly, swords remained very elegant, that is, relatively slender and deeply curved. There were exceptions of course but I want to focus on the general trends in sword making. Things changed when the warrior class, the *buke* or *bushi*, or better known as *samurai*, seized power at the end of the 12th century. They made Kamakura in the east their capital and left the courtiers in Kyōto. Well, there was one attempt by a retired emperor, Gotoba, to overthrow the Kamakura

Shogunate and to restore imperial power, but he was not successful. However, prior to his coup détat he had invited the best master swordsmiths of the country to work in his palace in Kyōto on the perfect sword. The Kamakura Shogunate did the same about sixty years later and this so to speak momentum in sword making resulted in the fact that swords from the Kamakura period, that is from the latter half of the 13th to the early 14th century, mark the pinnacle of Japanese sword making, both from a technical and artistical point of view.



Heian-period *tachi* (top), Kamakura-period *tachi* (bottom)

But also something else happened in the 13th century, namely two invasions by the Mongols. The Mongols were not successful but as they tried twice, the Shogunate became kind of paranoid for a while and assumed that a third invasion must be imminent. So a lot of precautions were taken and also swords changed. In the mid-14th century, extremely large swords were made which look noticeably different than their 13th century predecessors. They were extra long, some of them measuring four feet for example, very wide, did not curve much, and ended in a very large tip. But these oversized swords were relatively short-lived and by the end of the 14th century swordsmiths had returned to more "normal" sword shapes again. The time these oversized swords were made also corresponds to the time when the Kamakura Shogunate was overthrown and a new Shogunate was reinstalled in Kyōto. Well, peace didn't last very long, only about seventy years, as now towards the end of the 15th century a struggle for land and power ensued among the *samurai* which lasted a century, a century of not continuous but nationwide wars which went down in history as Sengoku period, the Warring States period.



Kamakura-period *tachi* (top), Nanbokuchō-period *tachi* (bottom)

That period also meant some changes for the Japanese sword of course. Unlike earlier periods like Heian and Kamakura where smaller *samurai* units fought on horseback, the Sengoku period so to speak introduced large infantry-based armies who were battling each other. So now swords had to be procuded fast and in masses and large production sites emerged: One in Osafune in Bizen province, which had been a famous sword production site since earliest times by the way, and a new one in Seki in Mino province. Apart from that, the fragmentation of the country and the development of domains urged *samurai* warlords to have swords locally made rather than depending on unstable trade connections with distant provinces. As a result, also sword making fragmented and what used to be basically five major more or less locally bound traditions of sword making became in the latter half of the 16th century a nationwide system of local schools and lineages.

But back to how swords have changed since “normal” shapes had returned at the end of the 14th century. Well, these “normal” shapes were kept for some time but the mentioned changes in warfare and the focus on infantry rather than cavalry made more and more *samurai* wearing somewhat shorter and straighter swords and not the long and deeply curved *tachi* that were designed to fight with from horseback. These shorter and not so curved swords were the *katana* and they had the advantage that one can draw them easier and faster than *tachi*. Again, I am oversimplifying here because there was more than one factor that played a role in the increasing use of *katana* at that time. Also, *samurai* have always been wearing a smaller companion sword or dagger to the main sword, the *tachi*. This side sword had several possible uses and was called *wakizashi* when its blade was over one foot long and *tantō* when its blade length was one foot or less.

Tachi (top), *katana* (bottom)

Now it took three strong successive leaders to end the wars of the Sengoku period and to unify the country. These three men were Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu, in that order. It was Ieyasu who won in 1600 the decisive Battle of Sekigahara, and became the new Shogun. He made Edo, the present-day Tōkyō the headquarters of the Shogunate. He and his advisers then took measures to secure peace and that the Tokugawa were able to maintain their power. So a rigid feudal hierarchy and a large bureaucracy was introduced that controlled everyone and everything and that kept all local lords, the *daimyō*, in check. Of course also swords were regulated and a so to speak "*samurai* uniform" was introduced which made it mandatory to wear a pair of swords, the so-called *daishō*, which consisted of a *katana* and a *wakizashi*. The reason for wearing *wakizashi* was primarily that the *katana* was not allowed in certain areas, for example when visiting the residence of another *samurai*. So with the *wakizashi* one was at least not completely defenseless in such situations.

So the Edo period, named after the new capital, brought 250 years of peace and stability to Japan and the *samurai* became basically "bureaucrats with swords." Accordingly, the demand for newly made swords decreased significantly and except for master swordsmiths who focused on the output of artistically orientated blades for a wealthy clientele, the craft started to decline from about the beginning of the 18th century onwards. I mean, there were still decent and sometimes even excellent swords made in the 18th and early 19th century but on average the output was no comparison to the quality and artistry

we have seen in the Kamakura period about 600 years earlier. Now one man tried to change this, master swordsmith Suishinshi Masahide, who did a lot of experimenting and who tried to revive some of the old techniques and secrets that had been lost. And he was successful. So his studies were carried on by his best students and we can see a certain boom in swordmaking at that time, that is the time from around 1820 to 1860. A contributing factor to that was on the one hand, that virtually all *daimyō* of the 19th century were facing economic difficulties and many fiefs were on the edge of going bankrupt. There were of course many reasons for this situations but much was blamed on the too strict, too ineffective, and bloated Shogunate. On the other hand, more and more Western ships were appearing at Japan's coast. You have to know, Japan had closed its borders or rather harbors in the mid-17th century and was secluded for more than 200 years. So everyone now felt that something was going to happen soon and that this something will most likely come with fghtings. Accordingly, more and higher quality swords were made again.

And people were right. The Shogunate was ended and the emperor took over again to rule the country and the forces of the Shogunate and the forces of the emperor were clashing in several battes. Well, we know how it ended. There are no more *samurai* in Japan. The modernization won, new weapon laws were issued and an Imperial Japanese Army was created. In this course, the wearing of swords in public was prohibited and there was of course now hardly any more need to have new swords made. So many many swordsmiths had to end their career and turn to the production of farming implements or kitchen cutlery for example.

But then a series of new wars, that is with China, with Russia, and eventually with the US kind of revived sword making again. Not that swords were seen as actual weapons decisive for the outcome of the war but because of the return to old values so to speak. So officers were again proudly wearing their swords with the old *samurai* ideals in mind. Well, everyone knows the outcome of World War II, Japan lost and was occupied by allied powers. This occupation also meant a total disarmament which also included swords. Sword making was prohibited, many swords were destroyed, but quite many were taken home by US soldiers as souveniers. And that is why there is still a very large number of Japanese swords of all period and by all makers going round in the US. But a sword lobby was forming during the occupation which was worried about the preservation of the more

than thousand years old craft. So they developed a plan to lift the sword ban by declaring them pieces of art. And it worked because also some official US guys were in that camp who realized that Japanese swords are really precious objects and that they don't pose any real danger for domestic and international security. However, since then, every edged weapon that is longer than a knife has to be registered by the police in Japan.

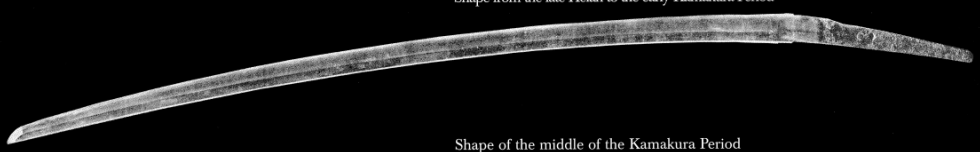
So in the early 1950s, a new society was formed, the NBTHK, the Society for the Preservation of Japanese Art Swords. This society was now and still is appraising and certifying swords. I am the translator of the European and American Branch and the secretary of the European Branch of the NBTHK. Now at the same time, that is in the 1950s, swords became legal again and also the ban on sword making was lifted and the NBTHK started to hold annual sword forging contests to stimulate the craft. First it was still difficult as again much handed down information had been lost since when many swordsmiths lost their job in the 1870s but for some decades now we have a real solid sword world in Japan that is very capable of preserving the craft for future generations.

And that was the history of the Japanese Sword in a nutshell so to speak. Thank you very much for your attention.

Picture next page: Changes in sword shape.

Shape of ancient sword (Before the middle of the Heian Period or before 980)

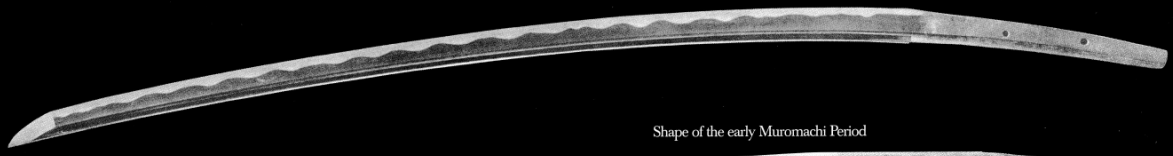
Shape from the late Heian to the early Kamakura Period



Shape of the middle of the Kamakura Period

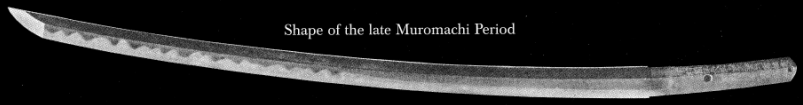
Shape of the late Kamakura Period

Shape of the Nambokucho Period (Enbun and Joji Eras/1356-1367)

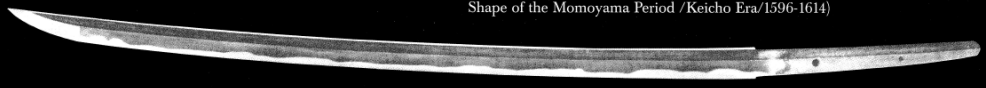


Shape of the early Muromachi Period

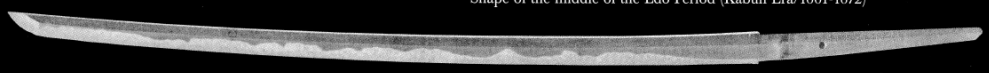
Shape of the late Muromachi Period



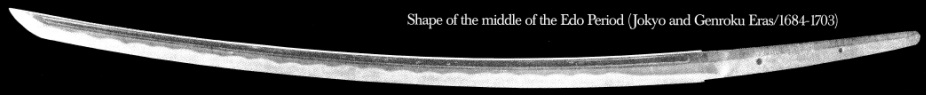
Shape of the Momoyama Period /Keicho Era/1596-1614)



Shape of the middle of the Edo Period (Kabun Era/1661-1672)



Shape of the middle of the Edo Period (Jokyo and Genroku Eras/1684-1703)



Shape of the late Edo Period

Shape of Modern Times