



Emperor Gotoba forging a sword from the poetry anthology Ogura Hyakunin Isshu, circa 1840, Utagawa Kuniyoshi; Courtesy of Library of Congress

## Emperor Gotoba

### A Swordsmith Emperor in Medieval Japan

Paul Martin, Great Britain

## Emperor Gotoba

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**Motivation** I had an interest in Japan since my childhood from practicing Japanese martial arts. I began working at the British Museum in London in 1993. It was at this time that I saw real Japanese swords on display in the Japanese Gallery. I had always thought that they were special, but seeing them in person I was incredibly moved by their beauty. The information panels explained their deep cultural and spiritual significance to Japan. Rather than a revelation, this experience was like a confirmation of something I had felt for a long time.

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In 1998, after a series of serendipitous events, I attained a position in the Department of Japanese Antiquities. There, under the guidance of the head of department, Victor Harris, I was given responsibility for the day to day care of the Japanese arms and armor collections. My appointment also involved trips to Japan to courier the department's objects back and forth. Whenever an opportunity arose, I would take some of my annual leave to extend these trips in Japan, where, with the help of my Japanese colleagues, I was able to study many fine Japanese swords in major collections and shrines, and to meet various craftsmen.

When reading sword books, it is very rare to find one that does not mention the story of Emperor Gotoba and the Gobankaji. At the same time, however, there seems to be no comprehensive study of Gotoba's swordmaking and its influence on the history of the sword. With this essay I would like to lay the foundation for my future publication on this topic.

Furthermore, as 2021 marks the 800th anniversary of Emperor Gotoba's arrival on the Oki Islands, it seems appropriate to review his legacy and influence on the Japanese sword.

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*Saki Harbor, Nakanoshima, Oki Islands ©Paul Martin*

**Objective** This essay takes a closer look at Emperor Gotoba, his life, and his sword making, as well as providing a glimpse of several locations in Shimane Prefecture that trace his journey to the Oki Islands, where he spent the last nineteen years of his life in exile. It is generally accepted that the Golden Age of Japanese sword making is the Kamakura Period (1185-1333). It would appear to be no small coincidence that early in the same era Emperor Gotoba is believed to have engaged in sword making. Although there are a number of extant swords said to have been produced by Gotoba, no official documents have yet been found so far that serve as direct proof of his sword making. Nonetheless, it seems evident that Emperor Gotoba played a major role in elevating the status of sword and the craftsmen involved in the Kamakura Period, creating a legacy that is still synonymous with sword making today. By visiting the sites associated with Emperor Gotoba on the Oki Islands, one can learn more about his life and become aware of the magnitude of the influence he had on the sword and poetry worlds.

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**Context** Although I am not qualified to speak about western swords, there are some fundamental construction and cultural differences with the Japanese sword. Moreover, it is difficult to generalize about any sword culture, as they tend to change according to the era and the prevailing methods of warfare. Having said that, outside of Japan, although swords have occasionally been used in religious rituals, they tend to be prized primarily as weapons that are sometimes externally decorated with mountings consisting of precious metals and jewels to elevate a particular sword's status. While it is possible to find Japanese swords with richly decorated mountings, on the whole they tend to be rather simple. However, the blade is considered for its intrinsic beauty as well as a vessel in which the kami (Japanese deities) can reside, or in some cases, as a manifestation of a deity itself. The condition of the surface steel and the crystalline activities of the blade are appreciated for their beauty and resemblance to natural phenomena. The harmony between the three main elements of its composition, the shape (*sugata*), the condition of the steel itself (*jigane*) and the pattern of the hardened edge (*hamon*) is of great importance to the overall appearance.

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It is thought that iron swords were manufactured in Japan at least as far back as the 3rd century CE. Many straight, double edged, and single edged swords have been discovered in various tumuli from the Kofun Period (3rd to 6th CE). These swords were based on the shapes of those from mainland Asia. However, when the Japanese curved sword was perfected around the middle of the 10th century, its uniqueness was recognized and it has been referred to as the Japanese sword (*nihonto*) ever since.

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Susano-o defeating the eight-headed, eight-tailed serpent from *Nihon Ryaku-shi*, Tsukioka Yoshitoshi; Courtesy of Shimane Museum of Ancient Izumo

#### The Japanese Sword

The Japanese spiritual connection to swords goes way back before sword and steel making were introduced to Japan. According to the origin myths of Japan in the oldest historical records *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and the *Nihon-Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720), a sword was discovered in the tail of the eight-headed, eight-tailed serpent dragon *Yamata no Orochi*, which eventually became one of the three items of the imperial regalia (*Sanshu no Jingi*): sword, mirror, and jewel. This sword is said to have been used by the heroic Prince Yamato Takeru in an episode where he was tricked into a field of long grass that was set on fire by his enemies, to cut down the grass and save his own life. According to one version of the episode, not only did the sword cut down the grass, but after relighting, the wind blew in the direction Takeru was pointing the sword, allowing him to direct the fire towards his opponents. What is important about this tale is not only the illustration that a sword can physically protect the life of its owner, but also that it is imbued with a mystical quality that spiritually protects the owner.



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Heian Period (794-1185)



Kamakura Period (1185-1333)



Nanbokucho Period (1336-1392)



Muromachi Period (1336-1573)

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*Changes in the shape of the Japanese sword ©Touken World Foundation*

#### **The Shape of the Blade (*Sugata*)**

The basic shape of Japanese sword was perfected in the middle of the 10th century. There are, however, considerable changes in shape with each of the Japanese historical periods, most notably in the curvature, and the geometry of the blade. While blades made in the Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods tend to have the deepest part of the curve in the base and handle (tang) of the blade, blades of the Nanbokucho Period (1336-1392) tend to have a fairly even arch that is centered around the middle of the blade, and blades of the Muromachi Period (1336-1573) have the deepest part of the curvature in the upper section of the blade. These variations in shape are thought to have been the result of changes in warfare methods. The most important point to remember, however, is that these curved lines, no matter what period they come from, look very natural, almost organic. They resemble the natural curvature of a drooping willow branch. Some parts are more acutely curved than others, but overall a natural shape.

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*Ayasugi hada*

*Mokume hada*

*Itame hada*

*Masame hada*

*Grain patterns in the steel ©Hyogo Prefectural Museum of History*

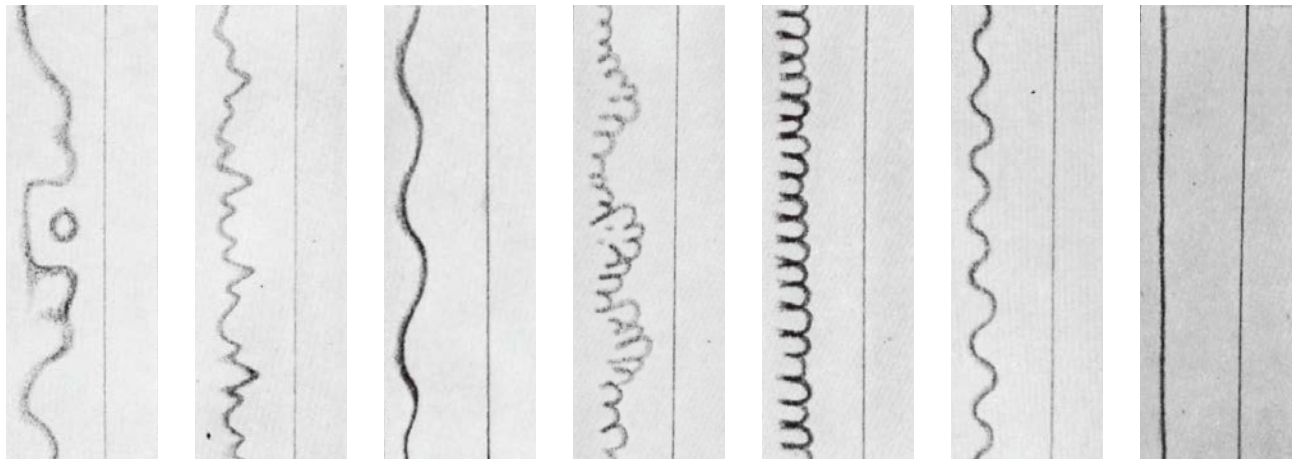
#### **The Condition of the Surface Steel (*Jigane*)**

The grain pattern in the steel appears like the wood grain in planks of wood. It is a result of the fold-forging process. Japan was rather poor in rock iron ore, but it was discovered that certain regions were abundant in sand-iron. A method of smelting unique to Japan evolved called *Tatara-buki*, in which iron-sand and charcoal are smelted in a clay furnace to produce a kind of bloom steel. As the iron and steel of the bloom are inconsistent in their composition, the most suitable pieces are selected and then fold-forged in order to more evenly distribute the carbon and other elements in the steel.

Contrary to the myth that *the steel for Japanese swords is folded a thousand times*, the outer steel of a Japanese sword is only folded around twelve to fifteen times. With some of the older blades, it is estimated that they may have been folded only eight times. Even though the steel is folded a number of times, it still does not become homogenized. It is this aspect of Japanese archaic steel (*wa-tetsu/tamahagane*) that allows natural crystalline structures to be induced into the blade of a Japanese sword that reflect elements of natural phenomena. If one were to try to achieve the same results with Western homogenized steel, one could not because the consistency of the steel is such that it does not allow for the variability of Japanese steel.

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Touran-ba

Sanbon-sugi

Notare

Juka-choji

Choji

Gunome

Sugu-ha

Varied hamon patterns on the edge of swords ©Hyogo Prefectural Museum of History

Sometimes *Damascus* or *Wootz* steel with its unique surface pattern is compared to that of Japanese swords. However, Damascus steel is very distinct and fairly uniform, possibly a laminate of two steels of differing carbon content.

Later in the history of the Japanese sword, a similar technique called *mazegane* was used to produce a vivid grain pattern. In general, most grain patterns in Japanese swords are very subtle in their hues and textures.

#### The Pattern of the Hardened Edge (*Hamon*)

The last main element of the Japanese sword is the pattern of the hardened edge called the *hamon*. The hamon is created by a clay application, which is then allowed to dry before the blade is heated, *to the color of the moon in the second or eighth month*, before being rapidly cooled by quenching in a trough of tepid water. There are two methods in which to apply the clay. One, is to cover the whole blade in a layer of clay and then scrape it off along the cutting edge. The other is to apply a thicker layer of clay along the back and body of the blade, with a thinner layer along the cutting edge. In either case, this process, in combination with the quench, is important in capturing some of the maker's idiosyncrasies.



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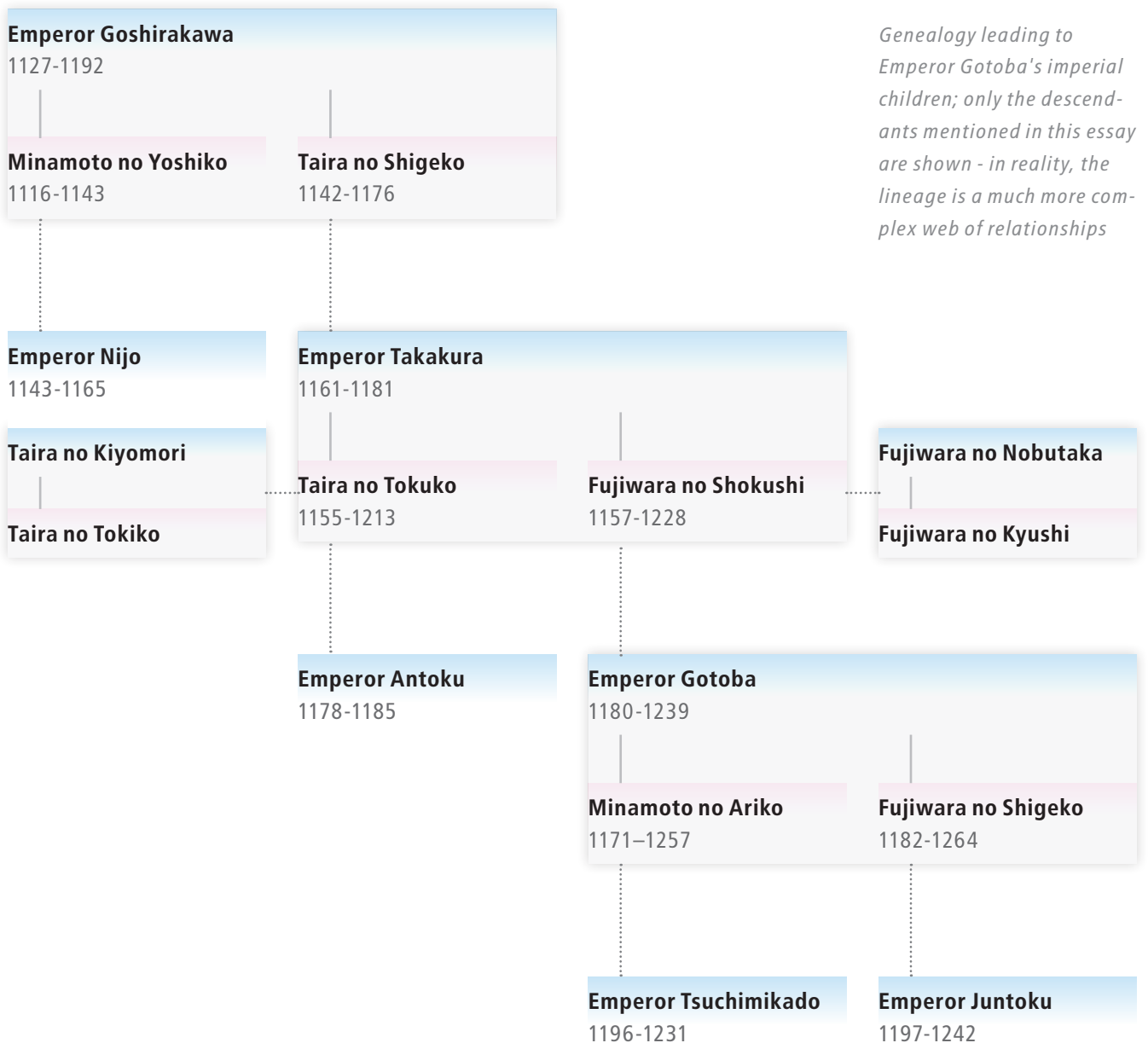
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The way the clay is applied is somewhat like handwriting, the habits and mannerisms of the maker are reflected in the characteristics of the resulting hamon. Since the swordsmith gauge the temperature of the heated blade by its color, he will quench it as soon as it turns the same color each time. The temperature of the blade at the time of quenching, together with the reactions of the materials and forging methods, affects the size and brightness of the crystals formed during heating as they are frozen by the rapid cooling of the quench. Although there are no two swords exactly the same, the combination of the above factors produces similarities and characteristic activities in the steel and hamon that can be an indicator to the workmanship of a particular maker.

One more difference of the Japanese sword to the swords of other cultures is the refined polishing process. A professional traditional sword polish of today is much more refined than that of 800 years ago. Even back then, a Japanese sword polish allowed connoisseurs to appreciate the hada and hamon, and make records of the patterns and crystalline activities. Swords of other cultures may have undergone a similar hardening process, and yet there is no comparable cultural setting for the refined polishing process and artistic appreciation of the appearance of the various crystalline activities in the hardened edge. This custom is unique to Japan.

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### A Brief History of Emperor Gotoba

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The 82nd emperor, Gotoba, was born in 1180 at the beginning of one of the most brutal civil wars in Japanese history, the Genpei War, which led to the decimation of a clan, the Taira. It was also a major turning point as it marked the transition of power from the imperial court to the military government in Kamakura; a situation that would not change until the start of the Meiji Period in 1868.

Gotoba was the fourth son of Emperor Takakura, and the grandson of Goshirakawa. His mother, Fujiwara no Shokushi, was the daughter of Fujiwara no Nobutaka (1126-1179). He ascended the throne during the Genpei War, and reigned as emperor from Juei 2 (1183) through Kenkyu 9 (1198). While he is known by several names - at birth he was called Takahira, after tonsure Ryouzen, then Kentoku - he is most often referred to by his posthumous name Gotoba.

The Genpei War was the culmination of decades of rivalry between two powerful warrior court families: the Minamoto and the Taira. It began in 1180, around the same time that the Knights Templar and Crusaders of the Western Middle Ages were active. The Taira attempted to control the court, and thus Japan, by marrying members of its family into the imperial family and placing their subsequent heirs on the throne.

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Antoku Tenno Engi zu depicting the Battle of Dan-no-ura  
Courtesy of Akama Jingu

Kiyomori, the head of the Taira clan, eventually manipulated himself into the position of *Daijo Daijin*, chief minister of the government. He went on to arrange for his daughter Tokuko to marry the Emperor Takakura. They had a son, Tokihito, Gotoba's half-brother. After taking control of the government, Kiyomori imprisoned the cloistered emperor Goshirakawa and forced Takakura to abdicate. He then enthroned his grandson Tokihito as the child Emperor, Antoku in 1180.

However, after a series of defeats to the Minamoto, the Taira absconded from Kyoto in 1183, taking the child Emperor Antoku, and the sacred imperial regalia of the sword, the mirror, and the jewels with them. Goshirakawa made several demands for the return of the emperor and the imperial regalia, but these were simply ignored by the Taira. Following advice of the top court official Kujo Kanezane (1149-1207), he enthroned Gotoba in place of the absconded Antoku, thus creating two opposing child emperors.

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Stone monument engraved with a poem by Emperor Gotoba at Oki Shrine  
©Oki Shrine

The Genpei war ended with the decimation of the Taira at the Battle of Dan-no-ura. The 7-year-old Emperor Antoku sank beneath the waves in the arms of his grandmother, Taira no Tokiko, wife of Taira no Kiyomori, never to be seen again, leaving Gotoba the sole reigning emperor. By the time of the death of his grandfather, Goshirakawa, the power of the emperor and even that of the cloistered emperor had been greatly reduced from what the court had been used to. The Bakufu (lit. *Tent Government*, the military government of the shogunate), had installed itself in Kamakura to the east, far from the influence of the court.

#### Child of Genius

According to various written accounts, Gotoba was an especially intelligent child, with unusually acute learning abilities. Fujiwara no Kanezane wrote in his diary, *Gyokuyo*, of his wonder at Gotoba's natural aptitude, *The young master is like an adult; those who have seen him remark on how uncanny it is*. Gotoba's intellect is also reflected in a record in the historical tale *Masu-kagami*, *Since he was enlightened in all the arts his reign embraced many men of brilliance and was in no way a source of shame*.

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Karuta card game  
©Emperor Gotoba Museum

*Hito mo oshi  
Hito mo urameshi  
Ajiki naku  
Yo o omou yue ni  
Mono omou mi wa*

Gotoba abdicated in 1198, at the age of 19, and placed his son, Tsuchimikado, on the throne. This allowed Gotoba to freely pursue his outside interests. He is known to have excelled in many things, among them martial arts, equestrianism, archery, kemari (a kind of football game), as well as sword making; his greatest love though was poetry. One of his first actions as cloistered emperor was to sponsor and participate in poetry contests. Not long after, he made it known that he wished to commission a new anthology of poetry (the eighth) called the Shin Kokin Wakashu (The New Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern, 1205). The title was specifically chosen to echo that of the first and most revered of the imperial collections, the Kokinshu. The Shin Kokin Wakashu is one of the most famous anthologies of Japanese court poetry.

Gotoba's most well-known poem is often associated with his frustration of being exiled on the Oki Islands, though it was penned well before his banishment. The poem was eventually included as No. 99 in the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* (One hundred people, one poem each), one of the most highly regarded collections of medieval poetry in Japan today. The collection even serves as the basis for the popular *Karuta* card game.

*I value some  
And I resent others  
The world goes not  
As I would wish  
And I am filled with grief*

#### The Jokyu Disturbance

Gotoba's demise came with the Jokyu Disturbance of 1221, considered one of the critical turning points in medieval Japanese history. Following the deaths of cloistered emperor Goshirakawa in 1192 and the shogun Minamoto no Yoritomo in 1199, the court enjoyed a freedom that it had not experienced since before the Genpei war. In 1198, Gotoba had abdicated and placed his son, Tsuchimikado, on the throne. Eager to expand and regain imperial rule, he was for a time rather successful in maintaining power through the succession of his sons Emperor Tsuchimikado (1198-1210) and Emperor Juntoku (1210-1221).



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*Gotoba-tei Goei, Portrait of Emperor Gotoba from Shuko jyusshu: Ko-ga shozo, Matsudaira Sadonobu (ed), 20 century, Courtesy of National Diet Library*

With the death of Yoritomo, he saw his opportunity to restore the power of authority back to the imperial court in Kyoto. Gotoba considered Hojo Yoshitoki, who was acting as regent on behalf of Yoritomo's son, the child shogun Sanetomo, to be a lowly baishin (a vassal of a vassal). There was already enmity between Gotoba and Yoshitoki, and Gotoba's contempt for Yoshitoki did not go unnoticed by the Bakufu. Gotoba had made appointments to positions in the court and even enthroned his third son, Juntoku, without consulting the Bakufu. The illusion of power Gotoba gained by acting without challenge led him to believe that he could do as he pleased. This included attacking and defeating the Bakufu.

Gotoba began rallying his forces, and issued a command to his captains and their men to kill Hojo Yoshitoki. The Bakufu heard of Gotoba's intentions to attack, and immediately sent a three-headed pre-emptive strike down from Kamakura. The Bakufu met with little resistance. Gotoba tried to escape to Mount Hiei and enlist the help of the warrior monks there. However, knowing that they were no match for the Kamakura forces, they refused. The ex-emperor returned to Kyoto and surrendered.

On the eighth day of the seventh month, 1221, Gotoba underwent tonsure and took the name Ryozen at Minase shrine as a symbol of his submission and repentance. Before cutting his hair, he summoned Fujiwara no Nobuzane to paint his portrait, which, along with a lock of his hair, he sent to his mother. This portrait is in the collection of Minase Jingu Shrine, and is a designated National Treasure, stored at Kyoto National Museum.

A week later he began his exile, setting out from Kyoto to the Oki Islands (Okinoshima).

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Miho Shrine, Ama cho ©Paul Martin



View of Oki Islands ©Ota Akihiko

#### An Emperor in Exile

The weather on the Oki Islands can be rather extreme. Even today, there are a few weeks of the year when the island is inaccessible from the mainland by ferry.

Gotoba and his retinue departed from Miho-no-seki early in the morning. However, due to the inclement weather, it took all day to reach the Oki Islands. On his arrival, it is said that he recited the poem:

*Ware koso ha  
Nii-jima mori yo  
Oki no umi no arakinamakaze  
Kokoro shite fuke*

*For it is I, who am  
The new lord of these islands  
May the winds and sea of Oki  
Pay heed*

The ship was forced to dock at Saki bay just south of Ama village. Close to the harbor is the *Okoshikake-no-Ishi* (the imperial stone seat), a rock that is known as the place where Gotoba sat while his servants tried to find him lodgings. However, the occupants, scared of the Bakufu, all refused, and the servants could not find suitable lodgings. Gotoba and his party crossed the harbor and ended up spending his first night on the island at Miho Shrine, which sits on top of a hill overlooking the bay.

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*Katsuta pond where Gotoba wrote a verse on the sound of frogs and pine trees, ©JIN*



*A stone monument to mark the location where Gotoba resided, the former Genpuku-ji temple site ©Paul Martin*

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The next day, Gotoba and his servants set off from Miho shrine and walked along the mountain peaks to descend near Amacho. They then followed the main path to Genpuku-ji Temple, where Gotoba found his dwelling, a modest house situated between the temple and a small well.

In front of the dwelling is Katsuta pond. There is a famous story that one evening the sound of the frogs and the wind in the pines bothered Gotoba, so he composed and recited this poem:

*Kawazu naku  
Katsuta no ike no  
Yudatami kikamashi mono ha  
Matsukaze no oto*

*The chirping frogs  
On the banks of Katsuta Pond  
Make me long for  
The sound of the wind in the pine trees*

Legend has it that the frogs have remained silent ever since. Many see the poem as representing his loneliness and being so far away from his beloved Kyoto. Gotoba, discontent with his life on the Oki Islands, was frustrated and remorseful. Hojo Yoshitoki reportedly looked kindly on Gotoba and even sent him swordsmiths to the Island so that he could continue his pursuits.

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*Cremation mound of Emperor Gotoba ©JIN*

Gotoba was exiled to the Oki Islands for the remainder of his life. He pleaded for his return to the capital, but died before he could fulfill this wish. After nineteen years in exile, he suffered a brief but grave illness. At around this time, he wrote his last testament and marked it with his own handprints in red ink.

Gotoba died aged 58 on the 28th of March, 1239. He was cremated close to Genpuku-ji temple in a civil ceremony. Very few people attended, and it is said to have been a sorrowful sight.

According to the Masu-kagami, Gotoba's remains were put in a small box that was hung around the neck of Fujiwara Yoshimochi, one of Gotoba's warrior guards at the Imperial Palace, to be taken back to the capital. After the emperor's defeat in the Jōkyū Disturbance (1221), Yoshimochi had also taken tonsure and followed the emperor to serve him on Oki Island. Emperor Gotoba's funeral pyre mound has since been turned into a walled off Mausoleum that is further fenced off from the front. Many people still pay their respects to him today.



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It is said that in the run-up to the Jokyu Disturbance, Gotoba had a swordsmithing workshop set up in the imperial palace, to which he invited some of the country's best swordsmiths from various schools on a monthly rotating basis, so that he could engage in sword making himself. To what extent he participated is not known, but it is reported that he actually forged blades himself. Swords believed to have been made by Gotoba bear a finely engraved sixteen- or twenty-four-petalled chrysanthemum on the surface of the blade below the collar (*habaki*). This crest was later adopted as the official imperial crest. He is known for having gifted these swords to his favorite acolytes.

Gotoba's work is respectfully referred to using the honorific prefix *Go*. His works are commonly referred to as *Gyo-saku* (made by imperial hand), *Gosho-yaki* (quenched by imperial hand), or *Kiku-go-saku* (Kiku means chrysanthemum, thereby implying, made by imperial hand).

The earliest records of Gotoba's hand in sword making exist in the *Jokyu-ki* (The Chronicle of the Jokyu Disturbance). Likewise, the *Kanchi'in Bon Mei Zukushi*, a designated Important Cultural Property and also known as the first sword compendium (*meikan*), contains details of Gotoba's sword making, the smiths he invited, the commissioner (*bugyo*) charged with organizing the forging, and details of the swords; although it is dated Oei 30 (1423) of the Muromachi Period (1336-1573) it contains a note that declaring it to be a reproduction of an earlier version from Showa 5 (1316).

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### Swordsmiths invited in rotation over 12 months during the reign of Gotoba

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First and second months

*Norimune* from the Ichimonji school in Bizen Province, today's southeastern Okayama Prefecture, and *Sadatsugu* from the Aoe school in Bitchu Province, today's western Okayama Prefecture

Third and fourth months

*Nobufusa* from the Ichimonji school, and *Kuniyasu* from the Awataguchi school in Yamashiro Province, today's southern part of Kyoto Prefecture

Fifth and sixth months

*Tsunetsugu* from the Aoe school, and *Kunitomo* from the Awataguchi school

Seventh and eighth months

*Muneyoshi* from the Ichimonji school, and *Tsuguie* from the Aoe school

Ninth and tenth months

*Sukemune* and *Yukikuni*, both from the Ichimonji school

Eleventh and twelfth months

*Sukenari* and *Sukechika*, both from the Ichimonji school

Other sword compendiums contain variations of this list as well as further records of other smiths, including a separate group of smiths, known as the *Okii Gobankaji*, who were sent to work with Gotoba on the Oki Islands during his time in exile.

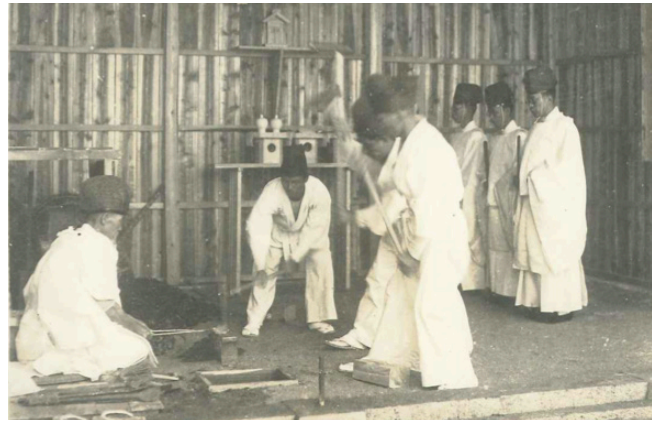


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Oki Shrine, Ama cho ©Paul Martin



Okimitsu (Hara Hiroshi) performing a sword making demonstration at the opening of Oki Shrine in 1939  
Courtesy of Oki Shrine

#### The Showa (1926-1989) Gobankaji

In 1939, to mark the 700th anniversary of Gotoba's death, there was a celebration that coincided with the completion of the Oki Shrine, which is close to Gotoba's grave. To honor Gotoba and his sword making, twenty-five swords were forged by contemporary *Gobankaji*, a group of twenty-five representative swordsmiths of the period that is also known as the *Gotoba Tenno 700 Nen Hosan Shinsakuto Hono Kai*. Drawings of the twenty-five swords were made and compiled in the catalogue *Showa no Gobankaji Sakuto: Swords Made by the Showa Gobankaji*, which accompanied an exhibition of the swords at the Osaka branch of the Takashimaya department store in 1941.

Ten of the swords were gifted to Oki Shrine, while the other fifteen were presented to Minase Shrine in Osaka, originally an imperial villa where Emperor Gotoba had enjoyed staying. On his death, he left the villa to the Minase clan. One year after Gotoba's death the leaders of the Minase clan converted the villa into a shrine in his memory.

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*Assembly at the occasion of the sword forging demonstration in 1975 at Oki Shrine; Courtesy of Gassan Sadatoshi*

In 1975, the Living National Treasure swordsmith, Gassan Sadaichi (1907-1995), visited Oki Shrine to perform a ritual sword forging demonstration along with his son, Sadatoshi, and other students, in honor of Emperor Gotoba. Sadaichi had also been one of the Showa Gobankaji who devoted swords in 1939; at that time he used the swordsmith name Sadamitsu. Sadatoshi is now a world-renowned master swordsmith in his own right.

Although, there has not been another sword forging demonstration on the island since 1975, occasionally swordsmiths and members of the public have donated swords to the shrine, which houses its collection in the nearby Gotoba Museum. The museum displays the swords from the Showa Gobankaji and other donated swords, including a blade by Rai Kunimitsu that has been designated a cultural property of Shimane prefecture. On display are also other objects related to Gotoba's life as well as archaeological artifacts detailing the history of the island. The nearby Murakami-Ke Museum, the homestead of the ancient Murakami family, displays items said to have been given to them by Emperor Gotoba.

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**Closing** Although there exist a number of sword blades said to have been made by Emperor Gotoba, all documentary evidence was recorded in later eras. Just as with many of the ancient holy relics of the west, there are technical reasons for doubting the authenticity of some of the swords reputed to be made by Gotoba. However, several cannot be disproven as works made by the hand of the Emperor. In fact, the strongest evidence is rather circumstantial, but is in the form of an inventory note, produced just 60 years after his death. This is a list of gifts given from one official to another and mentions a *kiku-gyosaku sword*. As this term cannot be read in any other way and in the absence of additional explanations, all parties must have been aware of the meaning of this entry. In the opinion of the author of the essay, this very much strengthens the case for the authenticity of the story.

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There are many locations introduced in the references section of this essay. Visiting them, the Emperor Gotoba's route to the Oki Islands can be traced. The Oki Islands are of exceptional natural beauty and have been designated a Unesco Global Geopark. Moreover, separated from the mainland, they are away from mass tourism and preserve the 800-year-old secrets of the exiled emperor and many unique customs, some of which were introduced by Gotoba himself. Tourism wise, it really is an undiscovered treasure of epic proportions. It is strongly recommended that everyone should visit the islands at least once, and feel the power of Emperor Gotoba resonating from his mausoleum even 800 years after his passing.

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Paul Martin is one of the leading Japanese sword experts based in Japan. He is a former curator in the Japanese section at the British Museum in London.

He holds an M.A. in Asian Studies (Japan) from the University of California, Berkeley, and is a trustee for the Nihonto Bunka Shinko Kyokai Public Foundation (NBSK). He is also a designated Bunka Meister (Master of Culture) for Honganji Temple's (Kyoto) cultural organization, the Japonisme Shinko Kai, and a recognized specialist by the Japanese Government's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT). He dedicates himself to preserve and promote Japanese swords.

[www.thejapanesesword.com](http://www.thejapanesesword.com)

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### Places

#### **Bukkoku-ji Temple**

Emperor Gotoba is thought to have spent the night at Bukkoku-ji in Mihonoseki, before boarding his ship to the Oki Islands. Later, his descendant, Emperor Godaigo, would also stay here before his own exile to the Oki Islands. The temple has a small museum, Dainichi Do, with statues of Buddha that date back to the Heian period (794-1185), designated as Important Cultural Properties.

690-1501, Shimane, Matsue shi, Mihonoseki cho, Mihonoseki 530

[web-site](#)

#### **Cremation Mound of Emperor Gotoba**

After living in exile on the Oki Islands for nineteen years, Emperor Gotoba passed away on the 28th of March, 1239, at 58 years old. He was cremated in a civil ceremony apparently attended by very few people, remembered as a rather sad affair for a former emperor. Today, Emperor Gotoba's cremation mound is a walled-off Mausoleum that is further fenced off from the front. According to the Masu-kagami, his remains were returned to Kyoto. However, local lore has it that his remains are still there.

684-0403, Shimane, Oki gun, Ama cho, Ama

[web-site](#)

#### **Emperor Gotoba Museum**

Located near Oki Shrine, the museum displays artefacts related to Emperor Gotoba's exile on Nakanoshima and archaeological objects detailing the Oki Islands' long history. It also has a large permanent display of Japanese swords that have been gifted to the shrine in honor of the emperor.

Open from March 21st through November 20, 9:00-17:00.

684-0403, Shimane, Oki gun, Ama cho, Ama 1521-1

[web-site](#)

#### **Miho Shrine**

Shrine where Emperor Gotoba spent his first night on the Oki Islands

684-0413, Shimane, Oki gun, Ama cho, Saki 1755

# Emperor Gotoba

## A Swordsmith Emperor in Medieval Japan

### Places **Minase Shrine**

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Originally an imperial villa where Emperor Gotoba enjoyed staying. On his death, he left the villa to the Minase clan. One year after Gotoba's death the leaders of the Minase clan converted the villa into a shrine in his memory.

The shrine is open to the public and holds many annual festivals and ceremonies.

618-0011, Osaka, Mishima gun, Shimamoto cho, Hirose 3-10-24

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

### **Oki Shrine**

The shrine was built in 1939 to mark the 700th anniversary of Emperor Gotoba's death on the site of the former Genpuku-ji Temple, which also served as Gotoba's humble residence. Nearby is Katsuta Pond, where the emperor composed a poem.

684-0403, Shimane, Oki gun, Ama cho, Ama

[web-site](#)

### **Okoshikake-no-Ishi**

Literally, the imperial stone seat. Legend has it that Emperor Gotoba rested upon this stone while his servants searched lodgings for the night in the nearby village on the Nakanoshima island. As he was refused by the locals, Emperor Gotoba and his party went across the harbor to Miho Jinja and spent their first night there.

684-0413, Shimane, Oki gun, Ama cho, Saki 1708



# Emperor Gotoba

## A Swordsmith Emperor in Medieval Japan

### Glossary

#### **Bakufu**

Literally *Tent Government*, the collective name for the military officials of the Shogunate

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#### **Daijo Daijin**

The head of the three ministers of the *Dajokan* the central administrative body in the late 7th and early 8th centuries, and also briefly during the Meiji Period (1868-1912)

#### **Dan-no-Ura**

Stretch of coast on the Shimonoseki straights in the southern part of Japan's main island, Honshu. The site of the major, sea Battle of Dan-no-ura between the Minamoto and the Taira clans on April 25, 1185.

- ▶ Emperor Antoku (1178-1185)
- ▶ Genpei War
- ▶ Taira no Tokiko (1126-1185)

#### **Emperor Antoku (1178-1185)**

The 81st emperor, enthroned at the age of 3, he reigned from 1180 to 1185. Son of Emperor Takakura (1161-1181) and grandson of Emperor Goshirakawa (1127-1192). Also known by his personal name, Tokihito. He died in the arms of his grandmother, Taira no Tokiko, who drowned in the sea during the major sea Battle of Dan-no-ura in 1185.

- ▶ Dan-No-Ura
- ▶ Genpei War
- ▶ Taira no Kiyomori (1118-1181)
- ▶ Taira no Tokiko (1126-1185)

#### **Emperor Goshirakawa (1127-1192)**

The 77th emperor of Japan, he reigned from 1155 to 1158. Father of Emperor Takakura (1161-1181). He effectively maintained power and influence in court politics for over thirty years, even after his abdication.

- ▶ Emperor Antoku (1178-1185)
- ▶ Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239)
- ▶ Emperor Takakura (1161-1181)
- ▶ Fujiwara no Kanezane (1149-1207)

# Emperor Gotoba

## A Swordsmith Emperor in Medieval Japan

### Glossary

#### **Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239)**

The 82nd emperor of Japan, he reigned from 1183 to 1198. The fourth son of Emperor Takakura (1161-1181) and grandson of Emperor Goshirakawa (1127-1192). He was a great patron of the arts and was known to excel in many activities, including martial arts, horseback riding, archery, kemari (a type of football game), and sword making; his greatest love, however, was poetry.

- ▶Fujiwara no Kanezane (1149-1207)
- ▶Genpei War
- ▶Gobankaji
- ▶Gyokuyo
- ▶Kanchi'in Bon Mei Zukushi
- ▶Kiku-Go-Saku
- ▶Masu-kagami

#### **Emperor Takakura (1161-1181)**

The 80th emperor of Japan, he reigned from 1168 to 1180. The fourth son of Emperor Goshirakawa (1127-1192) and Taira no Shigeo, the younger sister of Taira no Tokiko (1126-1185).

- ▶Emperor Goshirakawa (1127-1192)

#### **Emperor Tsuchimikado (1195-1231)**

The 83rd emperor of Japan, he reigned from 1198-1210. The first son of Emperor Gotoba. Court politics were controlled by his father during his reign.

- ▶Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239)

#### **Fujiwara no Kanezane (1149-1207)**

Also known as Kujo Kanezane, the son of Fujiwara no Tadamichi, Kanezane founded the Kujo family, one of the five families that were eligible to serve the post of imperial regent

- ▶Emperor Goshirakawa
- ▶Emperor Gotoba
- ▶Gyokuyo

#### **Fujiwara no Nobutaka (1126-1179)**

A courtier of the Heian Period (794-1185), grandfather of Emperor Gotoba.

- ▶Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239)

# Emperor Gotoba

## A Swordsmith Emperor in Medieval Japan

### Glossary

#### **Fujiwara no Shokushi (1157-1228)**

Noblewoman in the late Heian (794-1185) and early Kamakura (1185-1333) periods; the mother of Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239); popularly known by her title Shichijo-in

- ▶ Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239)
- ▶ Heian Period (794-1185)
- ▶ Kamakura Period (1185-1333)

#### **Genpei War**

The series of battles between the Heike, or Taira clan and the Genji, or Minamoto clan from 1180 to 1185. The end of the war serves as the marker between the Heian (794-1185) and the Kamakura (1185-1332) periods.

- ▶ Dan-No-Ura
- ▶ Heian Period (794-1185)
- ▶ Kamakura Period (1185-1333)
- ▶ Taira no Tokiko (1126-1185)

[web-site](#)

#### **Gobankaji**

Honorific collective title given to the swordsmiths who worked in monthly rotation with and at the invitation of Emperor Gotoba

#### **Gyokuyo**

Diary of Fujiwara no Kanezane that records in detail his life at the court

- ▶ Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239)
- ▶ Fujiwara no Kanezane (1149-1207)

#### **Habaki**

Retaining collar that sits at the base of a blade. It acts as a buffer for a swordguard and as a stopper to retain the blade in the scabbard

#### **Hada**

Wood-grain-like patterns that appear on the surface of the steel of a Japanese sword blade as a result of the folding process during forging.

# Emperor Gotoba

## A Swordsmith Emperor in Medieval Japan

### Glossary

#### **Hamon**

Pattern of the hardened edge of a Japanese sword blade; interacting with the grain pattern it displays groupings of crystals in various shapes, referred to as *activities*

►Hada

#### **Heian Period (794-1185)**

The period of Japanese history that ran from the establishment of the imperial capital Heiankyo, present-day Kyoto, by emperor Kanmu in 794 to the end of the Genpei War in 1185.

►Genpei War

#### **Jigane**

Surface steel of a Japanese sword blade; its condition, such as hues, textures, and grain patterns, is not only a point of appreciation, but can also be an indicator of where in Japan, or which period it was made in.

►Habaki

►Hada

►Hamon

#### **Jokyu**

Japanese era from 1219 and 1222, also referred to as Shokyu

#### **Jokyu Disturbance**

Named after the period between 1219 and 1221, the battle in which the troops of the resigned Emperor Gotoba attempted to overthrow the ruling Kamakura shogunate in 1221. Gotoba's forces were defeated and he was banished to the Oki Islands for the rest of his life.

►Bakufu

►Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239)

►Jokyu

►Jokyu-Ki

►Kamakura Period (1185-1333)

[web-site](#)

#### **Jokyu-Ki**

The Chronicle of the Jokyu Disturbance, 1221

# Emperor Gotoba

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### Glossary

#### Juei

Japanese era from 1182 to 1184

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#### Kamakura Period (1185-1333)

Named after the city where the seat of the government was located, this period started when the Minamoto clan defeated the Taira clan in the Genpei war in 1185, leading to the establishment of the first warrior government in 1192 by Minamoto no Yoritomo. It ended with the shogunate's collapse in 1333.

► Genpei War

#### Kanchi'in Bon Mei Zukushi

A sword compendium (*meikan*) with details of Gotoba's sword making, the smiths he invited to work with, and details of the swords he forged. An Important Cultural Property.

► Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239)

► Gobankaji

► Meikan

#### Karuta

Card game based on the Ogura Hyakunin Isshu anthology of medieval poetry in which each card represents a different poem; the cards are evenly distributed between the two participants and placed face up on the floor; while a third person reads the poems in random order, the two participants must try to grab the corresponding card as quickly as possible; whoever has the most cards at the end wins.

► Ogura Hyakunin Isshu

[web-site](#)

#### Kenkyu

Japanese era from 1190 to 1199

#### Kiku-Go-Saku

Long sword (*tachi*) with a hairline engraving of a chrysanthemum that is said to be made, or at least quenched by Emperor Gotoba

► Tachi

# Emperor Gotoba

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### Glossary

#### Kojiki

Records of Ancient Matters, one of the earliest chronicles of Japan, compiled by the nobleman, bureaucrat, and chronicler O no Yasumaro on the order of Empress Genmei (660-721) based on recollections of Hieda no Are in the 8th century. It starts with Japan's creation myth and continues into the early 7th century. Along with the Nihon Shoki, the legends and practices recorded in the Kojiki became the basis for Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion.

#### Masu-kagami

Historical tale set between 1183 and 1333. It is believed to have been written during the 14th century, and told through the eyes of a fictional nun of the Buddhist Seiryō-ji Temple. The actual author is unknown but is possibly the court noble and poet Nijo Yoshimoto (1320-1388).

#### Mazegane

Literally *mixed metals*, mazegane is a process whereby two types of steel are mixed to produce a Japanese sword blade with vivid grain pattern in the surface steel.

- ▶ Habaki
- ▶ Hada
- ▶ Hamon
- ▶ Jigane

#### Meikan

Sword compendium

- ▶ Kanchi'in Bon Mei Zukushi

#### Minamoto

Also known as *Genji*. One of the warrior families that dominated Japanese politics during the Heian Period (794-1185).

- ▶ Genpei War
- ▶ Heian Period (794-1185)

#### Muromachi Period (1336-1573)

Period of Japanese history that ran from the establishment of the Ashikaga Shogunate in Kyoto by Ashikaga Takauji until the last shogun in this line, the 15th Ashikaga Yoshiaki, was expelled from the capital by Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), one of the first great unifiers of Japan.



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#### **Nanbokucho Period (1336-1392)**

Literally 'Northern and Southern Courts', it refers to the period that saw the formation of the Muromachi Shogunate (1336-1573), a time of conflict between rival imperial courts, with each claiming the legitimate right to rule. In the north was the Jimyoin line, descending from the 89th Emperor Gofukakusa, and in the south was the Daikakuji line, descending from Gofukakusa's younger brother the 90th Emperor Kameyama.

#### **Nihon Shoki**

It was completed in 720 and, together with the Kojiki, is considered the oldest surviving chronicle in Japan; beginning with the creation myth of Japan and continuing into the early 8th century, it had a great influence on the shaping of Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan. Although many of the early sections are legendary rather than historical, the Nihon Shoki is considered by scholars as the most complete and detailed of Japan's ancient historical manuscripts.

►Kojiki

#### **Nihonto**

One of several types of traditional Japanese swords made after the Heian period (794-1185), recognizable by the curved blades

►Sugata

[web-site](#)

#### **Oei**

Japanese era from 1394 to 1428

#### **Ogura Hyakunin Isshu**

Hyakunin Isshu is the collective term for a particular format of anthologies of Japanese medieval waka poetry, literally 'One hundred people, one poem each.' Each poem consists of five lines of 5, 7, 5, 7, 7 syllables respectively. The most popular version was compiled by Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241) for the father-in-law of his son, who moved to a new residence near Mount Ogura, near Kyoto.

►Karuta

# Emperor Gotoba

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#### Oki Islands

Archipelago in the Sea of Japan consisting of four inhabited and 180 uninhabited islands. Known as a place of exile, where everyone from the court elite to petty criminals were sent when their misdemeanours merited banishment to the periphery. Their geological heritage has earned them recognition as a UNESCO Global Geopark.

[web-site](#)

#### Saki Harbor

Landing site of Emperor Gotoba when exiled to the Oki Islands.

Early in the morning of August 23, 1221, Emperor Gotoba's ship set sail from Miho-no-Seki in present-day Shimane Prefecture toward the village of Karita in the Oki Islands. However, the weather was bad that day and visibility was poor. When a distant light was sighted, the ship headed for it and eventually reached Saki harbor on Nakanoshima Island. The Emperor disembarked and paused on the nearby Okoshikake-no-Ishi (Imperial Stone Seat) for a brief respite. As the sun was already setting, the Emperor spent his first night on the Oki Islands at the nearby Miho Shrine.

► Oki Islands

#### Sanshu no Jingi

Collective name for the three sacred items of the Imperial Regalia, consisting of the jewel (*Yasakani no magatama*), the mirror (*Yata no kagami*), and the sword (*Kusanagi no tsurugi*). Together they symbolize the legitimacy and authority of the emperor.

#### Shin Kokin Wakashu

*The new Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* is one of Japan's most important anthologies of imperial poetry, commissioned by the retired Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239) in 1201, and compiled by a group of poets that included the scholar, poet, novelist, and calligrapher Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241).

► Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239)

# Emperor Gotoba

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### Glossary

#### Showa Gobankaji

Twenty-five representative swordsmiths from the Showa Period (1926-1989) coming together in 1939 to forge twenty-five swords to commemorate the 700th anniversary of Gotoba's death, and to honor his sword making.

- ▶ Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239)
- ▶ Gobankaji
- ▶ Showa Period (1926-1989)

#### Showa Period (1926-1989)

Since Japan adopted the *one rule, one era* system during the Meiji Period (1868-1912), this period coincides with the reign of Emperor Hirohito, who is posthumously referred to as Emperor Showa.

#### Sugata

The shape of the blade, the most important point for its evaluation, underwent many changes in the course of the history of the Japanese sword, nihonto; mainly the curvature is considered, but also the cross-section

- ▶ Habaki
- ▶ Hada
- ▶ Hamon, Jigane, Mazegane

#### Tachi

Long swords designed for use on horseback, worn suspended from the waist with the cutting edge facing downwards

- ▶ Habaki
- ▶ Hada
- ▶ Hamon, Jigane
- ▶ Kiku-Go-Saku
- ▶ Mazegane, Sugata

#### Taira

Also known as *Heishi*, one of the warrior families that dominated Japanese politics during the Heian Period (794-1185)

- ▶ Daijo Daijin
- ▶ Dan-No-Ura
- ▶ Genpei War
- ▶ Heian Period (794-1185)
- ▶ Taira no Kiyomori (1118-1181)
- ▶ Taira no Tokiko (1126-1185)

# Emperor Gotoba

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#### **Taira no Kiyomori (1118-1181)**

A prominent military leader of the Taira clan who rose to dominate the court and became the first 'Daijo Daijin,' the head of the central administrative body.

- ▶ Daijo Daijin
- ▶ Genpei War
- ▶ Heian Period (794-1185)
- ▶ Taira no Tokiko (1126-1185)

#### **Taira no Tokiko (1126-1185)**

Wife of Taira no Kiyomori (1118-1181) and grandmother of Emperor Antoku (1178-1185), the 81st emperor.

- ▶ Dan-No-Ura
- ▶ Genpei War
- ▶ Taira no Kiyomori (1118-1181)

#### **Tamahagane**

Literally *jewel-steel*, a kind of bloom steel that is produced by using charcoal to smelt sand iron in a clay furnace called *tatara*.

- ▶ Jigane
- ▶ Tachi
- ▶ Tatara

#### **Tatara**

Clay furnace in which sand-iron is smelted in charcoal to produce a kind of bloom steel indigenous to Japan (wa-tetsu: Japanese steel). The core of the bloom containing the best quality steel is often referred to as tamahagane. The tatara process is called tatara-buki. Tatara can also refer to the site, or complex where tatara-buki is performed.

- ▶ Tamahagane

#### **Yamato Takeru**

Heroic prince, also known as Yamato Takeru no Mikoto, Ousu no Mikoto, or Prince Ousu, who appears in the earliest chronicle of Japan, the Kojiki. The son of the 12th Emperor Keiko.

- ▶ Kojiki

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