

Osafune Region: Sword Village Weaves the History of Japanese Swords

Japanese swords have been gaining interest not only among young people and women but also internationally, owing to the recent boom in Japanese anime and games. Here, we introduce the Osafune region in Okayama Prefecture, which is actively promoting the appeal of Japanese swords to abroad.

(Text: Kato Yukiko)

Setouchi City, adjacent to Okayama City, the central city of Okayama Prefecture, across the Yoshii River that flows east of Okayama City, is known for its gentle climate with relatively low rainfall, even among the regions of western Japan. The upper region of the Yoshii River were rich in iron sand suitable for making Japanese swords and had a thriving iron-manufacturing industry. Since the Osafune region, located in the northern part of Setouchi City, was able to easily obtain steel¹ through the water transportation of the Yoshii River, it became the largest sword production center in Japan.

Mr. Wakamatsu Takashi from the Setouchi City Hall, who is involved in cultural tourism, talks about the history of sword-making in the Osafune region and its related culture.

“Long ago, the entire southeastern part of present-day Okayama Prefecture, including Osafune, was part of Bizen Province (*Bizen no kuni*). Swords produced in the downstream area of the Yoshii River, centered around Osafune, are referred to as Bizen Swords. These swords are renowned for their exceptional quality and account for 47 of the 111² designated National Treasures of swords by the government. Moreover, it is said that there are currently approximately three million Bizen Swords remaining in Japan. We may say that it was indeed the most significant production center in Japan in terms of both quality and quantity.”

In the Osafune region, sword production has been carried out since around the 10th century, and it flourished with groups of swordsmiths known as the Fukuoka Ichimonji school³ and later the Osafune



The Japanese sword *Tachi Mumei Ichimonji*, known as *Yamatorige* (and commonly referred to as *San-cho-mo*), a National Treasure. Blade Length 79.1 cm, Curvature 3.3 cm, Weight 1.06 kg.

school⁴. The tradition of swordsmithing by the Osafune school continued until around 1920. While there are several regions known for sword production in Japan, Osafune stands out as the only one where a single school of swordsmiths continued to craft swords for over 700 years. Today, there are facilities such as the Bizen Osafune Sword Museum, forging workshops where swordsmiths work, and the Bizen Osafune Sword Village, which houses the workshops of sword artisans. These establishments continue to pass down the history and craftsmanship of Japanese swords to future generations.

The Bizen Osafune Sword Museum houses approximately 400 swords, including the National Treasure *Tachi Mumei Ichimonji*, known as *Yamatorige* (and commonly referred to as *San-cho-mo*)⁵, which has become a symbol of Japanese swords as the pinnacle of the Bizen Sword. The name *Yamatorige* originates from the intricate and beautiful *hamon* pattern that appears on the surface of the sword. It is said to resemble both the feathers of a mountain bird and burning mountains, reflecting the dynamic and fiery nature of the pattern. The craftsmen who heat and forge steel to create the blade are known as swordsmiths (*katana-kaji*). In this



The entrance to Bizen Osafune Sword Village, with the museum in the back.



From left to right:

Visitors can see the various stages of Japanese sword production in the workshop, which involves different craftsmen. The swordsmith heats and forges the steel to create the blade.

The polisher polishes the blade and refines its appearance. Through polishing, the distinctive patterns known as *hamon* and the forged skin of the sword emerge. This is a crucial process that greatly influences the value of a Japanese sword.

The craftsman known as *tsukamakishi* wraps cords and other materials around the handle (*tsuka*) to make it easier to grip, a part of the sword that the wielder holds. They often apply a base layer of rough-textured skin from a stingray to the handle.

This shows the silk cord being wrapped in a diamond pattern. There are various styles of wrapping, which serve both to make the grip comfortable and to enhance the visual beauty.

region, renowned swordsmiths include Norimune, the founder of the Fukuoka Ichimonji School, who was favored by Emperor Go-Toba⁶, and Mitsutada of the Osafune School, who crafted swords beloved by Oda Nobunaga⁷.

Moreover, at the workshops in Bizen Osafune Sword Village, visitors can observe the process of Japanese sword production and, by reservation, participate in a workshop for crafting small knives, where craftsmen guide directly. "It's not just about appreciating the swords, but also the opportunity for visitors to watch the craftsmen working up close. This event has been well-received by visitors from abroad," says Wakamatsu.

The same museum is actively engaged in promoting information to foreign tourists, aiming to have them think of Osafune when they hear the term "Japanese sword." It provides guided tours in English by British support staff and offer information in English. Additionally, as nearly half of its overseas visitors are from France, they are also available in French.

The radiance of Japanese swords, which do not seem to be crafted from steel, each have their own beauty. In Japan, throughout its history, swords have been regarded as vessels of divine presence⁸, believed to harbor the essence of a soul in exceptional blades," says Wakamatsu. "We invite visitors to experience the

spirituality and cultural allure of the Japanese people who have cherished and preserved this divinity and beauty over the centuries."

Near Bizen Osafune Sword Museum, visitors will find the Jigen-in Temple, which serves as the memorial temple for generations of swordsmiths, and the Yuki-e Shrine, revered by swordsmiths as a place of worship.

"Both places feature wooden votive plaques⁹ and temple or shrine stamps¹⁰ with depictions of swords, making them popular spots among sword enthusiasts," explains Wakamatsu. "I hope visitors thoroughly enjoy the surrounding attractions in this hub of Japanese sword culture."

For those interested in Japanese swords, a visit to the Osafune area of Setouchi City is highly recommended. ■



Above: Jigen-in is the ancestral temple of swordsmiths.

Below: Wooden votive plaques shaped like swords at Jigen-in are rare in Japan.



Above: A work by Yoshifusa, a representative swordsmith of the Fukuoka Ichimonji school, who was active in the 14th century.

Below: A sword created through the collaboration of swordsmiths and other artisans associated with the Bizen Osafune Sword Village. These is a contemporary work by modern swordsmiths.



Bizen Osafune Sword Museum, known for attracting many tourists from France.

1. Steel is made of iron and carbon and has a carbon content of 0.02% to 2% while iron has a carbon content of less than 0.02%. Although iron is easily oxidized and therefore less durable, steel has superior strength and sturdiness.
2. There are several ways to count swords, including "hon," "furi," and "koshi or yo." When written as "1口," it may be read as "ikkou," "hitofuri," or "hitokuchi."
3. A school of swordsmiths that thrived around the 12th century. The name originates from the region of Bizen-Fukuoka where they were active. They are known for their splendid blade patterns, with the National Treasure *Yamatorige* also being a creation of the Fukuoka Ichimonji school. Prominent swordsmiths from this school include Norimune, Muneyoshi, and Yoshifusa.
4. The largest school of Japanese swords founded in the 13th century. The oldest known sword with a clear date is from 1274, made by Nagamitsu, Mitsutada's son. Their distinctive features include a grand appearance and elaborate blade patterns. Notable swords from this school include the National Treasure *Daihannya Nagamitsu*.
5. The Japanese sword *Tachi Mumei Ichimonji*, known as *Yamatorige* (and commonly referred to

as *San-cho-mo*) is attributed to the Fukuoka Ichimonji school of swordsmiths who were active in the late 12th century to the middle of the Kamakura period, around 1333, in the Fukuoka region (present-day Osafune Town, Setouchi City). The swordsmith's name is unknown. It was designated as a National Treasure in 1953.

6. Emperor Go-Toba reigned during the 12th century. He was known for his appreciation of culture, the arts, and his interest in Japanese swords.
7. Oda Nobunaga was a prominent military commander who thrived in the 15th century. Known for his remarkable leadership and efforts to unify Japan, he played a significant role in the country's history.
8. An object believed to house deities or spirits is referred to as a "vessel of divine presence."
9. A wooden tablet offered at shrines or temples for making wishes.
10. A stamp or seal that visitors can receive as proof of a visit to a shrine or temple. Since the design of the stamps vary from one shrine or temple to another, collecting them is a popular activity among visitors.