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This winter, I found myself thinking about using a letter opener

Guo Xiaoxuan

Around the New Year, Yoshida Town in Unnan City lay buried beneath heavy snowfall. When we arrived, the fields were transformed into a vast, white expanse. The narrow mountain road bore no footprints, and not a single car passed by. A knife-sharp wind cut into our cheeks and the tips of our noses. In this land of silence and bitter cold, the ironworks that inspired the forge in *Princess Mononoke* still remain.

In this region, a traditional form of ironmaking known as '*tatara*' once flourished. By layering iron sand and charcoal in a furnace and carefully controlling the fire and airflow over a three-day period, artisans refined iron using a labour-intensive method that required substantial natural resources. As industrialisation progressed, the technique nearly disappeared, but it has been preserved by dedicated artisans to produce *tamahagane*, the traditional, high-quality steel used to forge Japanese swords.

During this visit, we toured the Tatara Blacksmith Workshop and took part in a hands-on session, forging a letter opener from a traditional Japanese five-sun nail (about 15 cm long). Under Mr Kobayashi's guidance, the nail glowed orange in the furnace and gradually changed shape with each strike of the hammer. Surrounded by the flickering fire and the steady rhythm of metal on metal, time itself seemed to slow. Mr Kobayashi examined each piece with meticulous care, polishing it down to the finest detail. His work clothes were marked with countless burn scars from flying sparks—a quiet testament to years spent at the forge.

この冬、ペーパーナイフを使おうと思ったのは

郭小軒

正月前後の雲南市吉田町は大雪に包まれ、私たちが到着した時も、田畑は一面の雪景色となっていた。細い山道には足跡もなく、行き交う車の姿もない。刃物のような冷たい風が頬や鼻先を刺す。映画『もののけ姫』に登場する製鉄場のモデルとなった場所が、今もこの静寂と厳寒の地に残されている。

この地域ではかつて、「謎の鉄づくり」とも呼ばれる「たたら製鉄」が行われてきた。砂鉄と木炭を炉に入れ、三日にわたって送風と火の管理を続けながら鉄を精錬する伝統技法である。膨大な労力と自然資源を要するこの工法は、時代の変化とともに一度は途絶えかけたが、日本刀の原料となる「玉鋼」を生み出すために、職人たちの手によって受け継がれてきた。

今回の訪問では、たたら鍛冶工房を見学するとともに、一本の五寸釘からペーパーナイフを作る体験を行った。小林さんの指導のもと、釘は炉の中で橙色に染まり、槌で打たれることで少しずつ形を変えていく。揺れる火と規則正しい打撃音に包まれると、時間の流れがゆるやかに感じられた。小林さんは一本一本を丁寧に確認し、細部まで磨き上げていく。その作業着には、火の粉で焼けた無数の跡が残っていた。

工房には、年間およそ100人の幅広い年齢層の体験者が訪れ、女性や外国人の姿もある。完成したペーパーナイフには防錆処理が施され、日常の中で実際に使える道具として手元に残る。

まだ余熱の残るペーパーナイフに触れながら、私は、自分が長い間、手紙を書いていないことに気づいた。社会に出てから、手紙を書くという習慣はいつの間にか生活の中から遠ざかっていた。「消費のダウングレード」が繰り返し語られる現在、生活における儀式性は、あってもなくてもよい贅沢のように受け取られがちである。しかし、効率だけを追い求め、「必要なもの」だけを選び続けた先に、私たちの生活はどこまで豊かであり続けられるのだろうか……

小林さんによれば、釘からペーパーナイフを作る工程は、鍛造技術を身につけるための基礎的な練習の一つでもあるという。広島出身の「被爆二世」であり、刀鍛冶の見習いでもある小林さんは、鉄の歴史と技の継承を語ることを通して、対立ではなく、学びと創造を選ぶことの大切さを語っていた。

『もののけ姫』の世界とは異なり、現実の製鉄や鍛造は、かつては男性が担ってきた分野であった。しかし現在では、女性が見習いとして作刀の世界に足を踏

Each year, around 100 visitors from a wide range of age groups come to the workshop, including women and international participants. The finished letter opener are treated to prevent rust, so they can be kept and used as practical tools in daily life—a tangible reminder of the experience.

Holding the letter opener, still warm from the forge, I was struck by how long it had been since I last wrote a letter. Since entering the world of work, the practice of letter writing has quietly faded from my daily routine. At a time when the concept of 'consumption downgrading' is frequently discussed in China, the ritual aspects of everyday life are increasingly treated as dispensable luxuries. But if we continue to prioritise efficiency above all else, choosing only what is deemed 'necessary', how much richness and meaning can our lives really retain?

Mr Norio Kobayashi
小林憲生さん

According to Mr Kobayashi, making a letter opener from a nail is one of the fundamental exercises through which one learns the discipline of forging. As a second-generation atomic bomb survivor from Hiroshima and an apprentice swordsmith, he spoke not only of iron and technique, but of inheritance—how histories, skills, and values are carried forward through human hands. In his words, choosing to learn, to shape, and to create is itself an ethical stance: a quiet alternative to conflict, and a commitment to transforming what has been inherited into something new.

Unlike the world depicted in *Princess Mononoke*, ironmaking and forging in reality have long been male-dominated fields. Today, however, there are increasing examples of women entering the world of swordsmithing as apprentices. Times continue to change, yet the relationship between people, fire, and iron is quietly being carried forward in new forms.

Indeed, one could quite easily live without a letter opener. Yet, through the process of making it by hand, one can feel the weight of time in a tangible way. Such acts of craftsmanship and small rituals may be what bring culture back into everyday life, from the realm of history into lived practice, where it is used, remembered, and sustained.

み入れる例も見られる。時代は移り変わっていくが、人と火、そして鉄との関係は、新たなかたちで静かに受け継がれている。

確かに、ペーパーナイフはなくても困らない。しかし、それを自らの手で作る過程を通じて、時間の重みを確かに感じ取ることができる。こうした手仕事とささやかな儀式性こそが、文化を歴史の中に閉じ込めるのではなく、使われ、記憶される日常へそっと連れ戻してくれるのではないだろうか。

Forged Beyond Iron: Tatara Ironmaking and the Legacy of the Tanabe Family

Bianca Chan

Tatara ironmaking is a centuries-old traditional Japanese technique of producing iron from iron sand in a clay furnace, requiring exceptional skill and extensive experience passed down through generations. The iron produced through this painstaking process is of exceptional quality, supporting everyday life through the manufacture of agricultural tools and household implements, while also underpinning samurai culture through the forging of Japanese swords.

Until the adoption of modern blast furnaces in the Meiji period (1868-1912), roughly seventy per cent of Japan's iron production came from the Chugoku region in western Japan, where Shimane Prefecture is located. Within this region, the mountainous Okuizumo area was especially significant. There, three leading families—collectively known as the "Three Great Ironmaking Families": the Tanabe, Sakurai, and Itohara families—were responsible for approximately forty per cent of the country's total iron output. Foremost among them was the Tanabe family. Having been engaged in iron production since the Muromachi period (1336–1573), they are regarded as the oldest of the three and as a central pillar of the Tatara ironmaking tradition.

Earlier this year, we travelled to Yoshida Town in Unnan City, the historic base of the Tanabe family, to deepen our understanding of their legacy. Accompanied by Mr Yoshikawa, a volunteer tourism guide from the city, we learnt about a wide range of stories and historical episodes associated with the family.

One defining characteristic of the Tanabe family is the hereditary name and title passed down from one generation to the next. In the era of the ninth head of the household, the family prospered so greatly through Tatara iron production that it was reputed: "The ironworks flourish ever more; gold and

鉄を超えて地域を支える——たたら製鉄と田部家の物語

ビアンカ・チャン

たたら製鉄は、砂鉄を原料に粘土製の炉で鉄を生み出す、日本に古くから伝わる製鉄法です。高度な技と長い経験を要するこの方法によって生み出される鉄は品質が高く、農具や生活道具をはじめ、刀剣などを通じて武士文化を支えてきました。

明治期に近代的な高炉が導入されるまで、日本国内で生産される鉄のおよそ7割は中国地方で生産されていました。なかでも島根県奥出雲地方では、「たたら御三家」と呼ばれる田部家・桜井家・絲原家の三家が、全国の鉄生産量の約四割を担っていました。その中心的存在が田部家です。田部家は室町時代から鉄の生産に携わり、御三家の中でも最も古い歴史を持つ家として知られています。

今回は、田部家が拠点を置く雲南市吉田町を訪れ、田部家についてより深く知るため、雲南市観光ボランティアガイドの吉川さんに案内していただきながら、田部家の歴史にまつわる多くのエピソードを伺いました。

まず、田部家の特徴の一つが、代々受け継がれてきた名前と称号です。九代当主・安右衛門の時代には、「鉄山益々繁昌、金銀如山、米穀満庫」と記されるほど、たたら製鉄による大きな繁栄を遂げました。この言葉は、経済的成功のみならず、地域社会の安定と豊かさを象徴するものでもあります。こうした功績が認められ、田部家は十代当主の代に松江藩より「長右衛門」の名を賜りました。以後、歴代当主の多くが「田部長右衛門」を名乗り、この名は個人を示すものではなく、製鉄経営や土地管理、地域を支える重責を象徴する称号として、代々受け継がれてきました。

また、1874年には第21代当主が私財を投じて私立田部小学校を設立し、近代的な学校制度が十分に整う以前から、地域の子どもたちに学びの機会を提供しました。これは、産業の発展にとどまらず、人材育成と知の継承を重視していた田部

silver rise like mountains; the storehouses are filled with grain." This expression conveyed not only material wealth, but also the stability and prosperity of the wider regional community.

In recognition of these accomplishments, the family was granted the name "Chōemon" by the Matsue Domain during the tenure of the tenth head of the household. Thereafter, successive heads adopted the name "Tanabe Chōemon". Rather than functioning simply as a personal name, it served as a hereditary title—embodying the considerable responsibility of overseeing iron production, administering landholdings, and supporting the local community—passed down from one generation to the next.

In 1874, the twenty-first head of the family financed the establishment of a Primary School from his own resources. At a time when Japan's modern education system was not yet fully established, the school provided invaluable opportunities for learning to children in the surrounding community. This initiative demonstrates that the Tanabe family's commitment to the region extended beyond industrial achievement, encompassing the cultivation of talent and the preservation and transmission of knowledge.

Furthermore, when a devastating fire reduced both the family residence and the surrounding area to ashes, the Tanabe family chose to prioritise the recovery of the wider community over rebuilding their own home. As a result, compared with the grand residences of the Sakurai and Itohara families, the Tanabe house is relatively modest in both scale and design. That spirit is also evident in the surviving earthen storehouses of the Tanabe Family, which stand as a testament to the family's long-held principle of placing regional stability and recovery above personal comfort.

Although the flames of the Tatara furnaces were extinguished a hundred years ago, their spirit lives on in local custom. For approximately 350 years, the Tanabe family has upheld a distinctive New Year mochi-pounding ceremony unique to the area. During this ritual, the rice cakes (*mochi*) are never touched by hand, nor is water used at any stage; every step is carried out entirely with tools. This practice reflects the nature of Tatara ironmaking, which is highly sensitive to moisture. Accompanied by

traditional mochi-pounding songs and vigorous rhythmic calls, participants lift and bring down heavy wooden mallets in careful unison, ultimately producing a single large mochi weighing nearly one hundred kilograms. The core values associated with Tatara—purity, discipline, and meticulous respect for materials—continue to be embodied and passed down through this long-standing tradition.

Nearly a century has passed since the last tatara furnace fell silent. Determined to pass on what was once thought to be a lost cultural tradition to future generations, and to revitalise a region that had formerly flourished through iron production, the Tanabe family has made renewed efforts to bring the spirit of Tatara into the present day.

In 2021, the Tanabe Group launched the "Tanabe Tatara no Sato" Project in Unnan City. Seeking to revive Tatara ironmaking traditions dating back to the Muromachi period and to restore the surrounding satoyama landscape—a traditional rural environment in which farmland, villages, and managed woodland coexist in careful balance—the initiative promotes a range of integrated activities rooted in this ironmaking heritage, including agriculture, tourism, food services, and accommodation. Through these efforts, it aims not only to support regional revitalisation but also to cultivate a self-reliant community striving towards food self-sufficiency.

Across the centuries, the responsibilities and ethos embodied in the name "Tanabe Chōemon" have been faithfully handed down from one generation to the next. The story of the Tanabe family is therefore not merely that of a former ironmaking enterprise, but of a living heritage—deeply rooted in Yoshida Town, Unnan City—that continues to be carried forward into the future.

Much of the Tanabe family's long and remarkable history cannot be fully captured here. To truly appreciate its depth and richness, I would strongly recommend visiting in person. Exploring the area with a local volunteer guide offers a unique opportunity to encounter the Tanabe family's lasting legacy and layered history in a way that can only be appreciated through personal experience.

家の地域への姿勢を示しています。

さらに、火災によって自邸と周辺地域が焼失した際には、自らの住まいの再建を後回しにし、地域全体の復興を優先しました。そのため、桜井家や絲原家の邸宅と比較すると、田部家住宅は比較的質素に見えます。こうした姿勢は、現在も残る田部家土蔵群の建築に表れており、地域の安定と再生を第一に考えてきた田部家の価値観を今に伝えています。

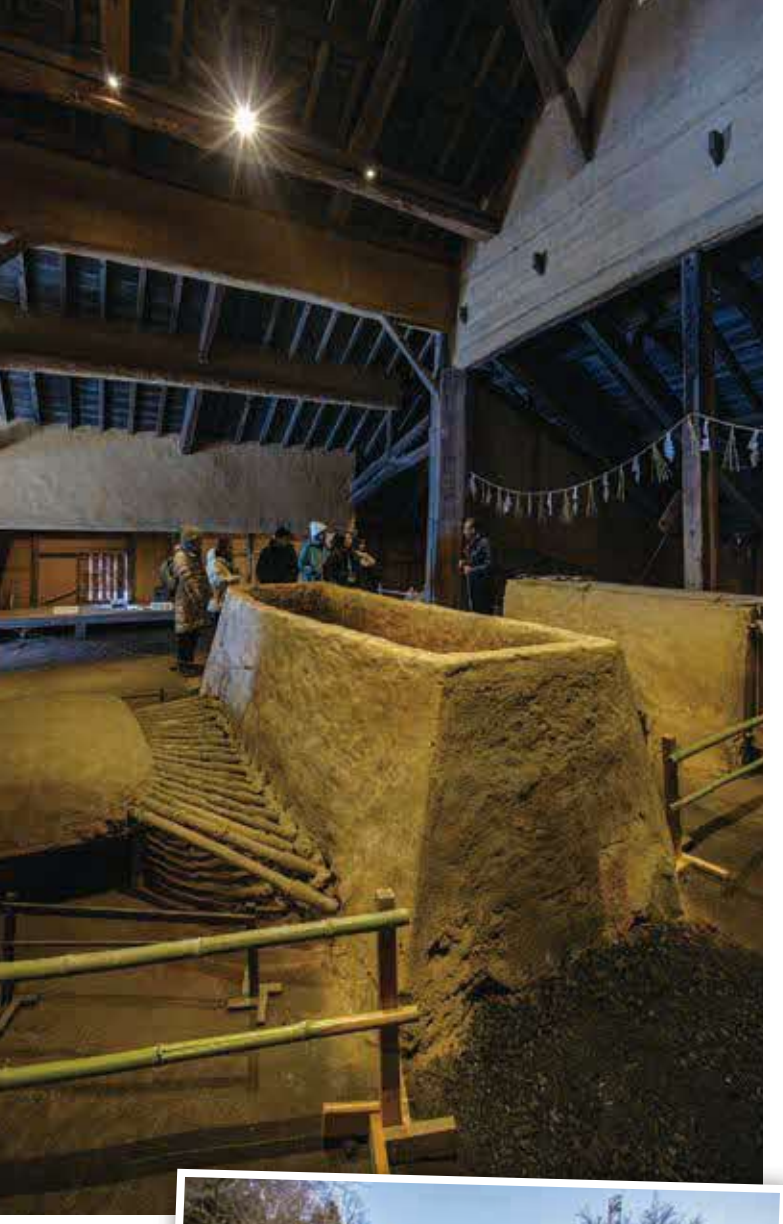
たたらの精神は、今でも地域の風習の中に息づいています。田部家では、約350年にわたり、毎年正月にこの地域独自の餅つきが行われてきました。この餅つきでは、餅に直接手を触れず、手水も用いず、すべて道具を使って作業を行います。これは、湿気や水分を嫌うたたら製鉄の性質に由来するものです。古くから伝わる餅つき唄と威勢の良い掛け声のもと、大勢で杵を上下に振り下ろす独特の方法で、五斗五升の餅がつき上げられます。清浄さや素材を丁寧に扱う姿勢といった、たたら製鉄に通じる価値観が、この風習の中に受け継がれています。

たたらの火が消えてから約100年。一度は途絶えた「たたら文化」を未来へ継承し、かつてたたらで栄えたこの地に再び光を当てるため、田部家は、たたら製鉄の精神を現代に蘇らせる取り組みを始めました。

2021年、田部グループは「たなべたたらの里」を設立しました。室町時代から続くたたら製鉄の復興と里山再生を目的に、製鉄を軸としながら、農業・観光・飲食・宿泊など多角的な事業を展開しています。地域の活性化と、食料自給率100％を目指す自立したコミュニティの構築に取り組んでいます。

過去から現在へと、「田部長右衛門」の名のもとで受け継がれてきた責任と精神。田部家の歩みは、たたら製鉄を単なる歴史産業ではなく、雲南市吉田町に根ざした生きた遺産として未来へとつないでいく物語そのものです。

田部家の歴史には、ここでは紹介しきれない数多くのエピソードがあります。ぜひ現地を訪れ、観光ボランティアガイドとともに歩きながら、その魅力と物語を体感してみてください。



Listening to the Echoes of History at Sugaya Tatara Takadono

Yuan Shuai

As you drive up the winding mountain road in Yoshida Town, Unnan City, the distinctive form of Sugaya Tatara Takadono gradually comes into view. This *takadono* is the only surviving Tatara ironmaking hall in Japan.

Tatara ironmaking is a traditional Japanese method of producing iron by smelting iron sand with charcoal. The structure that shelters the clay furnace at the heart of the process is known as the *takadono*. Centred around the *takadono*, craftsmen lived and worked on site, and over time their activities gave rise to a settlement known as a *sannai*—a community formed specifically to support iron production. Sugaya Tatara Sannai was one of the most important ironmaking centres in Unnan City during the peak of Tatara production and was owned by the distinguished Tanabe family, renowned ironmasters of the region.

Upon our arrival at Sugaya Tatara Sannai, we were greeted in front of the *takadono* by Mr Mitsuo Asahi, director of the Sugaya Tatara Sannai Lifestyle Museum, who was already waiting to guide us on a journey through history. Standing tall in front of the entrance to the Takadono is a single katsura tree. According to legend, *Kanayago-kami*, the goddess who presides over ironmaking, descended upon a white heron and alighted in a katsura tree. For this reason, katsura trees are often planted around Tatara sites. In April, the tree begins to bud, and in the glow of the setting sun its young leaves turn a vivid red, resembling flames flickering within the furnace. Surrounding the *takadono* are administrative buildings, production facilities, and living quarters, all carefully arranged. Even today, the landscape of the Edo period (1603 - 1868) has been thoughtfully preserved.

A trace of the heavy snowfall from a few days earlier still remained on the roof of Sugaya Tatara Takadono. Meltwater dripped down drop by drop, as if a curtain of rain had been drawn around the building. Passing through this gentle veil, we stepped inside the takadono. The interior was dim and filled with a cool, still air. As our eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness, the furnace—the

菅谷たたら高殿で、歴史の響きに耳を澄ます

袁　帥

雲南市吉田町の山道を車でくねくねと登っていくと、やがて菅谷たたら高殿の姿が現れます。この高殿は、日本に現存する唯一のたたら製鉄高殿です。たたら製鉄とは、砂鉄と木炭を燃焼させて鉄を作り出す日本古来の製鉄法のことです。たたらの中心をなす土炉の覆屋を「高殿」と呼ばれます。高殿を中心に職人たちが生活し、作業を行うことで、「山内」と呼ばれる集落が形成されていきました。菅谷たたら山内は、雲南市におけるたたら製鉄最盛期、鉄師の名門・田部家が所有していた重要な拠点の一つです。

到着すると、菅谷たたら山内生活伝承館の館長である朝日光男さんが、すでに高殿前で私たちを待っており、歴史の旅へと案内してくださる準備をしていました。高殿の入口前には、一本の桂の木がそびえ立っています。鉄を司る女神・金屋子神は、白鷺に乗って桂の木に降り立ったと伝えられており、そのため、たたら場の周囲には桂が植えられることが多いとされています。四月になると、この桂は芽吹き、夕日を浴びて赤く染まり、まるで炉の中で揺らめく炎のように見えます。高殿の周囲には、管理施設、生産施設、生活施設が配置され、江戸時代の景観が今も大切に保たれています。

数日前に降った大雪の名残が、高殿の屋根にまだ残っていました。溶け出した雪解け水が一滴一滴と落ち、まるで高殿に雨の帳を垂らしているかのようです。その雨をくぐり抜け、私たちは高殿の内部へと足を踏み入れました。中は薄暗く、ひんやりとした空気に包まれています。目が次第に慣れてくると、たたら製鉄の核心である炉が姿を現しました。朝日館長は、たたら製鉄の工程を一つひとつ丁寧に説明してくださいました。

たたら製鉄に欠かせない原料は、砂鉄と木炭です。奥出雲地方には良質な砂鉄を含む花崗岩の山々が広く分布しており、木炭の原料となる森林資源にも恵まれています。菅谷たたら山内は、まさにそのような自然環境の中に位置しています。さらに、菅谷川と吉田川が合流することで生まれる風の通り道が、高殿内の送風に重要な役割を果たしていました。立地条件の面から見ても、菅谷たたら高殿は非常に恵まれた場所にあったと言えます。

職人たちは砂鉄を採るために山肌を切り崩した土砂を流水で洗い流し、川に沿って流しました。砂鉄は通常の土よりも重いため、次第に川底に沈殿していきます。こうして集められた砂鉄は乾燥させた後、高殿へと運ばれました。あらかじめ焼いておいた木炭を炉に入れて火をつけ、十分に炉を温めたのち、砂鉄を投入します。木炭と砂鉄を交互に、何層にも重ねていくことで、最終的に「鉧（けら）」と呼ばれる大きな鉄の塊が生み出されます。

この一連の工程において、技術責任者である「村下」は極めて重要な存在であ

very heart of Tatara ironmaking—slowly came into view. The director, Mr Mitsuo Asahi, carefully guided us through the process, explaining each stage of Tatara iron production in turn.

The essential raw materials for Tatara ironmaking are iron sand and charcoal. The Okuizumo region is home to mountains rich in granite that contain high-quality iron sand, and it is also blessed with abundant forest resources that provide the wood needed to produce charcoal. Sugaya Tatara Sannai is situated precisely within such a favourable natural environment. The airflow created where the Sugaya River and the Yoshida River meet played an important role in ventilating the interior of Sugaya Tatara Takadono. From the perspective of location and natural conditions, the Sugaya Tatara Takadono was exceptionally well situated.

To obtain iron sand, the craftsmen cut away sections of the mountainside and washed the loosened soil with running water, allowing it to flow downstream along the river. Because iron sand is heavier than ordinary soil, it gradually settled on the riverbed. Once collected, the iron sand was dried and then transported to Sugaya Tatara Takadono. Charcoal that had been prepared in advance was first placed in the furnace and ignited. After the furnace had been sufficiently heated, the iron sand was added. By alternately layering charcoal and iron sand, building up many layers over time, the process eventually produced a large bloom of steel known as a *kera*.

Within this entire process, *murage*—the master craftsman who served as the technical director—was an indispensable figure and the very cornerstone of Tatara ironmaking. Generations of *murage* relied on intuition and years of experience to read the colour, height, and heat of the furnace flames, deciding precisely when and how much iron sand and charcoal should be added. Their techniques were closely guarded secrets, traditionally passed down only to the eldest son of the family.

Operating the foot-powered *Tenbin* (literally "scales") *Fuigo* (bellows) was another essential yet extremely demanding task. Positioned on either side of the furnace, these large bellows were operated by workers stepping rhythmically on them to force air into the fire and maintain the intense heat required for smelting. In Movie Princess Mononoke, directed by Hayao Miyazaki, women are depicted operating the bellows. In reality, however, this physically demanding work in Tatara ironmaking was carried out exclusively by men. A single smelting operation was an arduous undertaking: from the moment the first charcoal was placed into the furnace until the *kera*—the large bloom of steel—was produced, the work continued without interruption for three days and three nights.

As we listened to the explanation, a vivid scene naturally began to take shape in my mind. At the centre stood the clay-built furnace, its flames roaring fiercely. On either side of the furnace, two *murage* stood watching the fire with sharp, unwavering gazes, carefully reading its behaviour. Beside

them, workers operated the bellows, sweat covering their bodies as they stepped tirelessly, driving air into the furnace with all their strength.

Mountains, forests, wind, water, and the wisdom and toil of the craftsmen—these elements came together to create a chapter deeply engraved in the history of human industry. With the passage of time, Tatara ironmaking was gradually replaced by Western-style steelmaking technologies. Yet *tamahagane*, the high-quality steel essential for crafting Japanese swords, is still produced only through the Tatara method. In that sense, the flame of Tatara continues to burn even today.

Standing before Sugaya Tatara Takadono today, it feels less like a mere historical site or exhibition facility and more like a symbol of the deep connection between nature and human ingenuity. The furnace that once burned continuously for three days and three nights seems to speak quietly even now.

Here in this mountain valley, the memory of people confronting nature and working in harmony with it, patiently shaping iron through skill, endurance, and time, still resonates.

り、たたら製鉄の要とも言える人物です。歴代の村下は、炉の炎の色や高さ、温度を勘と経験だけで読み取り、砂鉄や木炭を加えるタイミングと量を判断してきました。その技は門外不出とされ、家族の長男のみに受け継がれてきたといいます。また、天秤ふいごの操作も欠かせない重労働でした。宮崎駿監督の『もののけ姫』では、女性たちがふいごを踏む場面が描かれていますが、実際のたたら製鉄では、ふいご作業を担当できるのは男性に限られていました。一回の操業は、最初の木炭を投入してから鋼が完成するまで、三日三晩休みなく続く、非常に過酷な作業だったそうです。

説明を聞くうちに、自然と一つの光景が思い浮かびました。土で築かれた炉の中央で炎が激しく燃え上がり、炉の両端には二人の村下が立ち、鋭い眼差しで炎の様子を見つめています。両脇のふいごには作業者が立ち、全身に汗をにじませながら、懸命に踏み続けています。

山、森、風、水、そして職人たちの知恵と苦労。それらが重なり合い、人類の産業史に深く刻まれる一章が生み出されました。時代の流れとともに、たたら製鉄は西洋式製鉄技術に取って代わられていきましたが、日本刀の製作に欠かせない玉鋼は、今なおたたら製鉄によってのみ生み出されています。その意味で、たたらの炎は今でも燃え続いています。

今日、この高殿を前にすると、そこは単なる史跡や展示施設ではなく、自然と人間の知恵が結びついた象徴のように感じられます。かつて三日三晩燃え続けた炉の炎は、今もなお静かに語りかけてきます。人が自然と向き合い、時間と対話してきたその記憶は、この山あいで確かに響き続けているのです。

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