

A Daisho.

Introduction:

Recently a friend asked me if I would like to write an article describing a newly acquired daisho. While happy to have the chance to do so, the idea of describing what proved to be an intriguing and complex set of koshirae was well beyond my abilities. Keen to do justice to the set I contacted my good friend George Miller. George's level of knowledge about fittings and his understanding of, often complex themes is staggering, and I was delighted when he agreed to help me. The following article is a result of that collaboration and I am very grateful to George for his detailed assessment and input in to what follows.



Description:

A well mounted daisho in autumnal themed koshirae and with blades dating from the Momoyama period.

Dai:



The blade is slightly suriage shinogi-zukuri and iori mune. It has a moderate tori-zori and has a chu-kissaki. It has full length bo-hi and soe-hi. The nakago has two mekugi ana, it has a naga-mei and is dated.

Nagasa: 64.4cm sori: 1.7cm motohaba: 3.5cm

Sakihaba: 2.4cm kasane 0.75cm.

This is a broad and thick blade. Although not long it has an extremely imposing and powerful appearance.

Ji-Hada:

The blade is in older polish and at first sight appears rather dull and lifeless. However, on closer examination details become more apparent and one can see a very well constructed and detailed jigane. The overall hada is a combination of tight ko-itame and mokume. There is a great deal of ji-nie and activity within the jihada. In one area a short (approx. 5cm) line of very bright nie runs parallel to the hamon creating a form of nie utsuri. There are chickei and Tobiyaki formed of clouds of very fine ji-nie. Overall, the hada is what one might expect from a Bizen blade of this period. The basic form combining ko-itame and mokume is traditionally Bizen but the copious nie based activity suggests Soshu influence as seen in so many schools of this time.



Hamon:

Based on a gentle midare nioiguchi which is tight, the hamon has a great deal of ko-nie throughout. This explodes through the nioiguchi to create a mass of activity in the form of ni-juba, san-juba and kinsuji. In places this almost appears to create a form of sudare-ba which is made almost exclusively of ko-nie. The activity is bright and clear throughout.





Kissaki:

The blade has a slightly elongated chu-kissaki. Unfortunately at some point in the sword's history this appears to have been roughly sharpened/polished which has obscured detail. However, the overall shape looks healthy and the boshi appears to be intact.



Nakago:

The nakago is suriage with two mekugi ana. The yasurimeji are largely obscured but appear to be katte-sagari. The suriage nakagojiri is kiri. The mune has been modified during the shortening process which has resulted in part of the kanji of the mei being shaved. The final character in the mei has also been lost.

Mei:

The nakago is nagamei signed Bizen no Kuni Osafune Suke? (備前国長船祐)

The ura is dated Genki ni nen hatchi gatsu for August 1571.

Sho:



The blade is slightly suriage shinogi-zukuri and iori mune. It has a moderate tori-zori and a chu-kissaki. It has full length bo-hi. The nakago has two mekugi ana, it has a naga-mei and is dated.

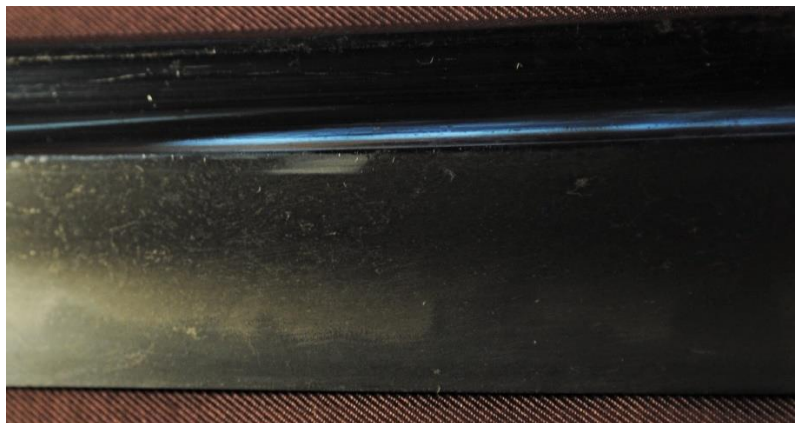
Nagasa: 51cm sori: 1.6cm motohaba: 3.1cm

Sakihaba: 2.8cm kasane 0.7cm.

As with the long blade this is a powerful and imposing sword which is both wide and relatively thick. There is a small area of corrosion near the hamachi.

Ji-Hada:

Although in older polish the jigane is slightly more prominent than the dai. It comprises of a small itame (not quite ko-itame) which is tight and well forged. There is less activity within the ji-hada than that seen on the longer blade with less profuse ji-nie.



Hamon:

Formed of a tight nioiguchi, the hamon shows greater variation than the dai. Based on a gentle midare the nioiguchi rises to form long choji and togari elements. Although less bright and frequent than in the katana there is ko-nie which is concentrated in the peaks and troughs of the hamon. There is ha-hada visible and small areas of sunagashi can be seen. Overall, the hamon appears more contrived and less spontaneous than seen in the

longer blade. It is well formed and consistent throughout the length of the blade. It is perhaps more typically what one might expect to see in a Bizen work of this period.



Kissaki:

The chu-kissaki is healthy. It has been cleaned at some point in its history resulting in much of the detail of the boshi being obscured. However, the boshi is present and healthy. It is sugu with a very sharp turn back.



Nakago:

The nakago is suriage with two mekugi ana. The yasurimei are not visible. The suriage nakgojiri is a very shallow inyamagata-jiri.

Mei:

The nakago is nagamei signed Bizen no Kuni Osafune Suke? (備前国長船祐)

The ura is dated Bunroku ni nen Hachi Gatsu ni for August for 1593



Comment:

The NBTHK kantei examples of Various smiths signing Sukesada define their work as having a typical sue-Bizen appearance. Features include a fine and tight jihada with a great deal of ko-nie. A very active hamon exhibiting a great deal of variation in the form of choji, gunome and pointed togari. There is generally considerable variation in pattern throughout the length. The Nioiguchi is described as tight and with copious ko-nie.

All of these features are present in this daisho. It is reasonable to assume that these blades are from the late Muromachi or Momoyama Bizen tradition. Attempting to attribute them to a specific smith is more challenging.

Markus Sesko, Revised e-Japanese Swordsmiths p1034-37 lists 10 Smiths signing Sukesada between 1573 and 1592. All using different family names. Since the mei is incomplete on both swords and both lack a family name to enable closer attribution I believe the best appraisal one (I) can make is that these are good quality Sue-Bizen blades made by one of the Sukesadas or a student. The overall quality and amount of activity demonstrate these to be better than many blades being produced by this school in this period. They are well made good quality works.

Having established that the blades are of good quality and exhibit all the features one would hope to see in work of this tradition and time we can now turn to the Koshirae. As mentioned above I am extremely grateful to George Millar for sharing his insight and knowledge in describing the koshirae.



A rare Daishō Koshirae with Mame Kairagi Saya (scabbards covered in lacquered and polished down ray-skin with bean shaped nodules) in a Late Autumn Theme with:

(i) **Tsuba:**

Two Shakudo Yotsu-Mokkō-Gata (four-lobed shaped) Tsuba signed “Otsuryuken Miboku - Gyonen Nana Ju Ichi Sai (age 71)”* from the Hamano School with Migaki-Ji (polished) grounds and Maru-Mimi (rounded edges) each with two Hitsu-Ana, depicting Chōchō (Butterflies) and Autumn Flowers/Grasses (Kiku (Chrysanthemum), Kikyo (Bell/Ballon Flower), Susuki (Pampas Grass), Fujibakama (Thoroughwort), & Hagi (Bush Clover)) by a stream, some inlayed in gold and carved in both Katakiri-bori and the rare Katakiri-hira-zōgan style;



Dai

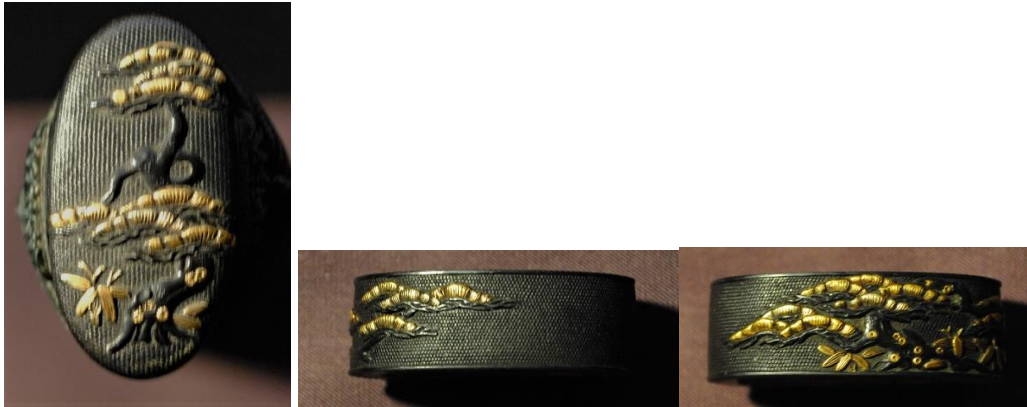


Sho

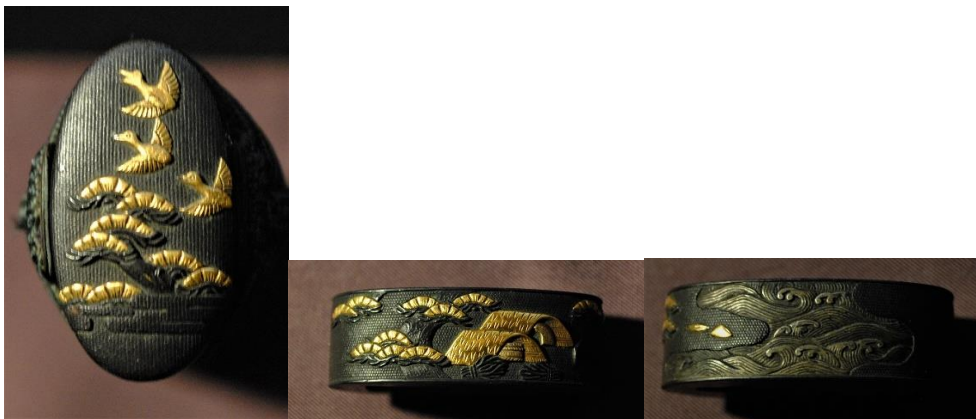
(ii) **Fuchigashira**

Two Mumei (unsigned) Shakudo Fuchigashira each with a Nanako (dotted fish row) ground with Suemon-Zogan (separately carved and inlayed); the designs done in gold, shakudo, and silver depicting, on the Dai (Katana): Matsu (Pine - symbolizing longevity) and Take (Bamboo - symbolizing flexibility) which are two of the Three Friends of Winter and without the third “friend” Ume (Plum which

blooms in late Winter) symbolizes an end of Autumn or early Winter, and on the Sho (Wakizashi): Migrating Kari (Geese) symbolizing Kanaraigetsu - the 8th Lunar Month when the Geese migrate and the rice harvest is over and when another important harvest ends - salt harvesting symbolized by Agehama-style salt making huts on the beach next to the ocean waves and two bundles of fire wood stacked to boil the sea water into salt.**



Dai Fuchi Kashira



Sho Fuchi Kashira

(iii) Menuki

two Shakudo [and Gold] Menuki sets carved in Katachi-Bori (Shaped Carving) depicting Kiku (Chrysanthemum - another Autumn Flower);



(iv) Kozuka

a single Mumei (unsigned) Shakudo Kozuka (with the Sho - Wakazashi) of Bō-Kozuka (unframed) construction depicting rice stalks (symbolizing a good, late Autumn harvest) with gold rice grains and inlaid silver dew drops with a Kogatana signed “Seki Kanemoto” a Mino smith;



(v) Tsuka

two Tsuka with white Same wrapped in black Ito; and

(vi) Saya

two Togidashi-Samezaya (Polished Ray-Skin Scabbards) with a Mame Kairagi (bean shaped nodules) design

* Otsuryuken and Miboku are art names used by the five generations of mainline Hamano Masters. Only the 1st Generation (named Shozui) and 4th Generation (named Masanobu) are known to have lived to 71 years of age or older and both often included their age on their work in their later years.

** Salt was a very valuable resource in ancient Japan used for religious purification (e.g., throwing salt before a Sumo match) and even used a money or to pay taxes. The salt making season ended in late Autumn and was almost as important as a good rice harvest.

Conclusion:

One of the many benefits of looking at works that fall out of your main line of interest it causes you to re-examine some long-held views and prejudices and hopefully learn something. Prior to looking at these blades my immediate reaction when being told this daisho was made using blades made and signed by Sukesada (probably) in the second half of the 16th century was that they would be low quality. As a basic rule I have always thought that unless the mei included a family name such as Yosōzaemon or Genbei the blades would most likely be some of the many kazu-uchimono (mass produced blades) being created by the Osafune school to meet the demands of the warring states.

This is definitely not the case with this daisho. The blades are very well forged and hardened. Made some twenty years apart there are considerable differences in both ji-hada and hamon between them. However, they both show many of the features identified as

defining kantei characteristics by the NBTHK in their kantei exercises. There is no sign of the lifeless hamon or coarseness of hada that is associated with bundle swords of the time.

At some point in the late Edo period these blades were brought together in a daisho. The quality of the fittings and saya mean that at the time they were assembled this would not have been an inexpensive exercise. While not absolutely top tier the various components are well above the average in terms of workmanship and material. The custodian must have been someone of reasonable means and standing. The Tsuba were made as a daisho. The fuchi kashira are unsigned and although they do not match as one might expect in a daisho they appear to come from the same school and period. Both also follow the same theme. Each representing different aspects and symbols of Autumn, a very important season that was much revered and celebrated by the Japanese of the time. This also suggests (at least to me) that the person who commissioned the daisho was a man of learning who understood the subtlety of such representation.

By any measure this is a good Daisho. The symbolism, as so eloquently described by George, is subtle and I believe offers at least a slight insight into the level of thought that went into their creation and assembly. The blades are well made and functional pieces which exhibit many of the finer traits associated with good late Bizen workmanship. I am very glad that I have had the opportunity to study these pieces in detail.

Bibliography and references:

As always when compiling a work of this nature I attempt to cross refer several references and follow what appears to be the majority view. I have listed these works below. However, any errors appear in the above text are purely my own.

Reference material:

A Journey to the Gokaden Tanobe Michihiro

The Connoisseur's book of Japanese Swords Kokan Nagayama

Nihonto Koza (various volumes) Drs. Homma and Sato (Harry Afu Watson translation)

NBTHK Juyo zufu (various) NBTHK Token Bijutsu (various)

The Koto and Shinto kantei volumes by Markus Sesko

I would like to thank my friends and colleagues, The Reverend Timothy Kay, Dr. Graham Curtis, Mr. Michael Spasov and Mr. Charles Bowman for sharing their thoughts and ideas when discussing the above swords.

Paul Bowman