

Outside the comfort zone

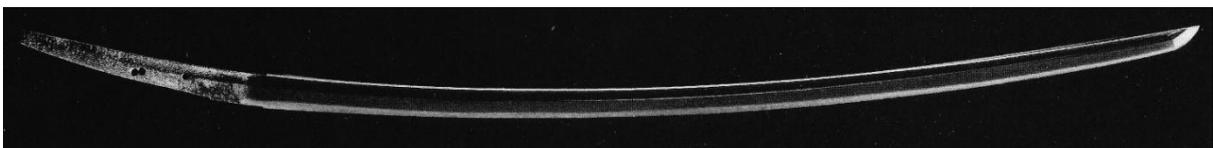
(study of an Osaka Ishido Wakazashi)

For the past 7 years virtually everything I have written has focussed on Koto blades. More specifically the majority of them have looked at swords produced in the Kamakura period and predominantly those made in or around Kyoto and Nara (Yamashiro and Yamato). This reflects my own preferences in terms of blade characteristics and features. More recently I have mentioned on various sites the problem of becoming too single minded and focussed. To do so creates the possibility of missing out on a whole range of excellent work. I mentioned some of the great Shinshinto blades I have had the chance to study of late which were a great revelation after many years of believing Shinshinto work to be unbelievably dull.

Earlier this year I was given the opportunity to study a piece that is well outside my comfort zone; a Kanbun Shinto wakazashi by the Osaka Ishido smith Yasuhiro. This was about as far removed from the place my mind usually dwells as it is possible to get. Sometimes however it does us all good to be given a wake-up call and to have to look at something we are far less familiar with, to have the chance to research a piece with no preconceived ideas or no history of study behind you. The following notes are the result of that study.

The Demise of Bizen:

The Bizen tradition was the most prolific and successful in sword making history. There has been a long metal working history in both Bizen and Bitchu dating back to the 8th century, possibly earlier. By the late Heian and early Kamakura period the reputation of Bizen smiths was well established with smiths such as Tomonari and Masatsune gaining considerable reputations as master craftsmen.



Tachi by Ko-Bizen Tomonari

The success of Bizen reached its zenith with the Ichimonji schools of the Kamakura period with smiths producing magnificent works with flamboyant hamon and vivid utsuri. The style of blade appealed greatly to the Samurai of the day and the output was prestigious. Overlapping and following the Ichimonji Schools the Osafune groups continued manufacture and produced outstanding works throughout the later Kamakura period and Nambokucho.

High quality workmanship continued into the Oei period and beyond. However high demand for weapons and possibly in response to competition from the mass output from Seki in Mino, Bizen Smiths started to produce Kazu-uchi blades sold in bundles, hence the alternative description of "Bundle sword". During the Muromachi period, with some notable exceptions, few good quality blades were produced.

By the beginning of the Tensho period Bizen production as it had been known during the earlier koto period was virtually, if not completely, nonexistent. Prior to its demise, the combination of Kazu-uchi production and the attempts to follow the market and emulate Soshu workmanship (as did many other schools) meant that much that had made Bizen unique and very successful had been lost.

Bizen manufacturing was brought to a dramatic halt in 1590 when a catastrophic flood of the Yoshii River is said to have virtually destroyed the sword making area of Osafune.

As stated above the Bizen tradition through the koto period was incredibly successful and productive. In a survey carried out in the latter part of the 20th. Century the renowned sword scholar Han Bing Siong identified that of 10,000 swords on the Juyo register more than 40% were Bizen. There are approximately 3 times as many Kanemitsu blades designated Juyo as there are all of the Awataguchi smiths combined.

The Ishido School

First evidence of the Ishido School can be found in Omi province. Omi was a sword producing area in the late Kamakura and Nambokucho periods but went in to decline and few of the works of these early smiths survive. In the Meio era (late 15th century) a number of Osafune smiths moved to Omi province. One of these smiths, Sukenaga, is said to have founded the Ishido School.

In the early Edo period various groups that made up the Ishido School left Omi and established 3 schools working in Edo, Wakayama (Kii) and Fukuoka. At some point in the second quarter of the 17th century the Kii group relocated to Osaka. This group is known as both the Kii Ishido and Osaka Ishido School. Its founder was Tosa Shogen Tachibana Tameyasu. His eldest son, also Tameyasu used the title Mutsu no kami. Tameyasu's younger brother was Bitchu no Kami Yasuhiro. Yasuhiro's line continued for 3 generations. Another smith of importance was Yasunaga (Yasuhiro's son or student) who taught perhaps one of the finest Shinto exponents of Bizen style Tatara Nagayuki.

Work Style of Osaka Ishido

Sugata: The swords were very much of their period. Katana are relatively short and narrowing towards the kissaki. The Osaka Ishido School made a large number of shinogi-zukuri wakazashi but tanto are rare.

Jitetsu: Ko-itame mixed with O-hada, nagare and masame. Utsuri is often seen (but not always).

Hamon: As one might expect from a group following the Bizen tradition the hamon is extremely complex. They produced a choji-midare and koshi-no-hiraita midare in nioi which is wide bright and clear. A point of difference from koto work is that Osaka Ishido smiths usually applied a yakidashi which widened as it progressed up the blade to the hamon proper. Also the hamon occasionally included sporadic nie. There is often activity within the hamon in the form of inazuma kinsuji and sunagashi.

Boshi: Sugu and ko-maru with a short kaeri there is some hakikake. The kissaki is chu-kissaki. On some blades, particularly those of Yasuhiro muneyaki can be seen.

Nakago: Either Katayamagata or ha-agiri kurijiri . The yasurime are katte-sagari or sujikai. With the first generation Yasuhiro a kiku mon is often inscribed above the mei.

When reading kantei examples of Ishido workmanship it quickly becomes apparent that it is difficult to identify the different branches or individual smiths. The texts identify what is typical of a branch or smith but also acknowledge that there is considerable variation. Often when doing kantei identifying the blade as Ishido is considered sufficient.

In addition when examining illustrated examples it also becomes clear how capable these smiths were. They worked tirelessly in attempting to recreate the form and characteristics of their illustrious predecessors. In doing so some produced some very fine work and there have been examples of swords originally being papered to Ichimonji having on re-submission been attributed to Ishido. The reverse has also happened on occasion. Of all the schools that followed the original koto Bizen tradition the Ishido schools were the most consistent and came closest. One of the key elements that distinguish their work is that they were one of the very few Shinto schools capable of consistently producing utsuri.

What is perhaps a little surprising (at least to me) is that while attempting to reproduce koto hada and hamon they very much followed the trends of their time with regard to size and shape. On more than one Kantei answer the most important differentiating factor listed is that the kantei blade had a Kanbun shape.



Bitchu (no) kami Tachibana Yasuhiro

The Sword:

Description: Kanbun Shinto wakazashi of the Osaka Ishido School. NBTHK Hozon papers

Configuration:

Sugata: Shinogi-zukuri, iori-mune. Ubu with naga mei

Nagasa: 39.3cm. **Sori:** 0.6cm.

Motohaba: 2.9 cm. **Sakihaba:** 2cm. **Kasane:** 0.6cm

Hada: fine Itame with Nagare and O-hada with ji-nie and chikei. There is a patchy midare utsuri and masame in the shinogi-ji. There are areas of plain bright steel within the jihada.

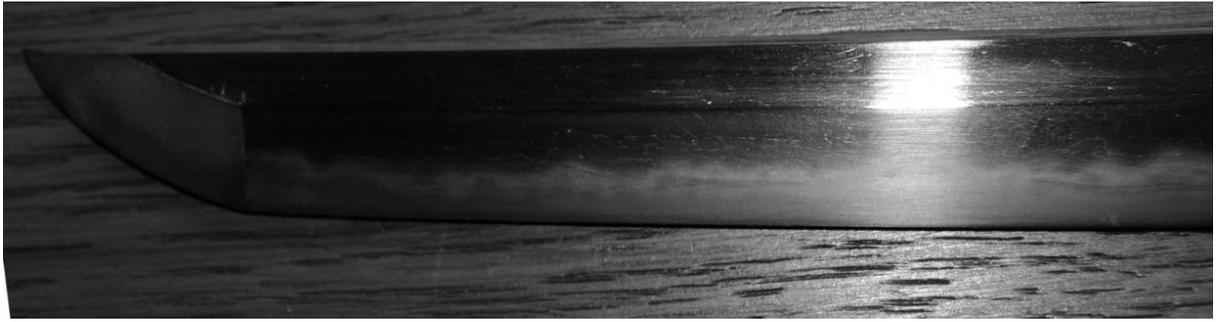
Hamon: Midare with billowing but compact choji (koshi-no-hiraita midare?) and isolated areas of togari. The hamon is nioi-guchi interspersed with ko-nie. The valleys of the choji broaden in to small pockets of ko-nie. There is a great deal of activity within the hamon in the form of sunagashi and nie. Also strong inazuma and kinsuji appear in the monouchi

Boshi: Hakikake with profuse Nie. Ko-maru with narrow return. There is muneyaki in patches on the mune

Nakago: Ubu with 2 mekugi-ana. Kengo nakago jiri and sujikai yasurime

Mei: Naga Mei **Bitchu no kami tachibana Yasuhiro.**





備中守橘康廣

Bitchu (no) Kami Tachibana Yasuhiro

I mentioned earlier that it was difficult to differentiate between the different branches of the Ishido School and the different smiths within it. I am very fortunate here because the blade is signed and it has been authenticated by the NBTHK. Were it not signed and based on the various descriptions seen in kantei examples of Yasuhiro and other Ishido smiths I think I would not have necessarily opted for Yasuhiro.

The hamon while typically Ishido has much more in common with the illustrations of Tameyasu (Token Bijutsu English version vol. 31) and the work of Tataru Nagayuki. The sugu boshi takes it away from Nagayuki who produced a midare boshi. Also the mune-yaki is very much a Yasuhiro characteristic. However there is no yakidashi, regarded as a key identifier of his work. I was also surprised to see very strong and clear lines of inazuma running into the hamon together with sunagashi. The troughs of the choji were rich in ko-nie.

The hada was a combination of ko-itame O-hada and masame. There were also areas of dark clear steel. As always when seeing this I am left unsure whether this is the first signs of core steel showing (I don't think it is on this occasion) or harder steel in the jigane. There is also a patchy midare utsuri.

As one who is obsessed with Jigane I admit to being a little disappointed in the hada. Although competent it lacked some of the detail one might expect to see in earlier work. I think this has more to do with the raw material available to the smith than any lack of skill on his part. Put bluntly it just isn't koto steel! Allowing for the limitations of centralised steel production I think the smith did what he set out to do and produced something showing many features of the koto Bizen tradition.

Conclusion:

If I am brutally honest had I seen this sword at a fair I would not have spent a great deal of time looking at it. My prejudice little demons would be telling me a) it's a Shinto wakazashi and b) It is Bizen. Both would be sufficient for me puff out my cheeks sigh heavily and move on. That would have been a big mistake. I mentioned previously about being focussed on koto swords and largely ignoring later work. Apart from my first loves which as for so many others were Hizen work closely followed by Osaka smiths such as Shinkai I admit to having been largely dismissive of Shinto workmanship. That was a mistake, as this blade clearly demonstrates.

The Ishido smiths were extremely competent. They were making swords to meet the requirements of their time whilst at the same time being true to their professed ancestry The Bizen Masters of the Ichimonji and Osafune Schools. They were very good at what they did. At its best I would suggest their work compares favourably with any other Shinto School and is far better than some of the later examples one sees of Koto Bizen workmanship. The other advantages in studying Shinto and later work are that they are often signed, as in this case, which makes attribution much more straightforward; also they have had several hundred less years to have been used, abused and polished down, so they are much closer to the Smith's original concept.

I have no doubt that in the coming years I will continue to focus on blades of the Kamakura period. I will continue to believe that the sword making art reached its peak in the second half of that time. However I hope that this exercise has reminded me that such focus should not prevent me from studying and enjoying swords from other times. Are they as good? In my opinion no, but that doesn't mean they are not worthy of attention. Certainly there is a great deal to learn and enjoy

from looking at them in detail. I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to look at this blade in detail.

Acknowledgements:

In writing this short piece I have relied on the following reference material and people who have kindly given me permission to use their images:

Nihonto Koza Harry Watson Translation

Connoisseurs Book of Japanese Swords Nagayama

NBTHK English Journals

Japanese Swords reflections of a Nation Rayhan Perera

Fred Weisberg of www.nihonto.com for reference material and images (the better ones).

Finally I mentioned this being far outside my comfort zone. I have relied heavily on the above sources to fill in gaps in my understanding. However I confirm that any errors in the above, which I am sure there are, are all my own work.