

Real-Life *Kantei* of Swords, Part 9: The history of two *tanto*

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Introduction

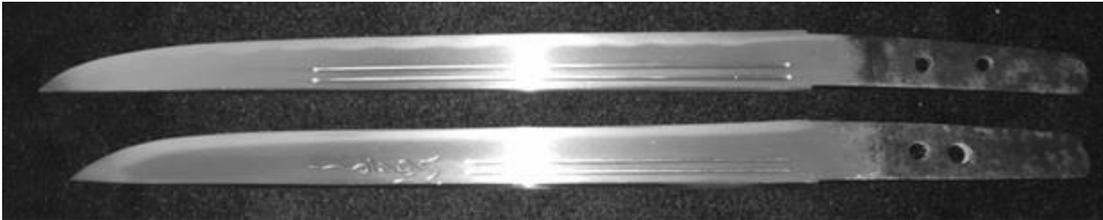
Kantei is a complicated and often imprecise activity. Despite years of study, countless documents and handling of hundreds of swords, one will inevitably be faced with a sword which does not fit “with in the box” of known characteristics. We discussed this in our article about *kantei* of *Oei Bizen* swords, “Real-Life *Kantei* of swords -Part 8” where we examined examples of swords made in the same time period in the *Bizen* school and determined that they did not all fit easily into the “*Oei Bizen* Box”. There are numerous reasons why this is so, such as incomplete data, differences of opinions among “experts” throughout the years, condition of the sword or polish and, in some cases, the smith may have just had a bad, or very good day or may have been trying to do something different. As Westerners, we have come to rely on the collective knowledge of sword experts in Japan who have studied and practiced their art for generations. Although our Western minds may never reach the “oneness of mind” that the Japanese profess, we can work towards an understanding of the practice of *kantei* and always reserve the occidental right to question what is presented to us. With this in mind we would like to present the case of two *tanto* which in many ways both fit into the “*Oei Bizen* Box”, but in fact are representative of two completely different schools. The purpose of which is to point out the often frustrating complexity of “real-life” *kantei*.

The two *tanto*

One of the *tanto* was acquired in the UK and the other in Japan. Both are *hira-zukari*, *ihori-mune*, and *ubu* with similar dimensions, condition and character. Both had their signatures removed (*Tanto 1* had a two character signature, *Tanto 2* appears to have had a two character signature as well) and have been sent for *shinsa* at least twice, with differing results. The specifics of each are as follows:

Name	Nagasa	Sori	Moto haba	Kasane	Kitae	Hamon	Horimono	Utsuri
<i>Tanto 1</i>	23cm	<i>uchi</i>	2cm	5.2mm	<i>Ko-itame & mokome mix</i>	<i>Gunome midare with Ashi</i>	<i>Goma-bashi both sides with maru-dome ends</i>	<i>Faint midare Utsuri</i>
<i>Tanto 2</i>	22.5cm	<i>uchi</i>	2cm	5.7mm	<i>Ko-itame & mokume mix</i>	<i>Nie-deki suguha with little activity</i>	<i>Kuri-kata, bonji with suji, goma-bashi one side</i>	<i>Not visible</i>

Pictures of tanto 1 and 2 presented side by side are below:



The *sugata* of each of these *tanto* is diminutive in nature. They are short with a narrow *motohaba* and of average thickness. This *sugata* would place them either in the *Kamakura* or early *Muromachi* period. However, upon closer examination it is clear they do not possess the proper shape and aged *nakago*, nor is the *hada* old enough to be considered *Kamakura*, so they are probably *Muromachi*. Therefore we are looking for a school that produces diminutive *tanto*, with a tight and fine *jihada* and *suguha* or *gunome midare hamon*.

Here are some of the other characteristics;

- *Tanto 1 jihada* is slightly more pronounced (stands out more) and less fine than *Tanto 2*. Although both have tight *ko-itame/mokume jihada*, *tanto 2* is constructed with a finer *mokume* structure in the *jihada*.
- *Tanto 1 hamon* is *gunome midare*, with some *ko-choji* mixed in and with some paired *gunome* structures. It has a bright *habuchi*, but with limited visible *nie* in the *jihada* or *habuchi* line. It also has faint *midare utsuri*.
- *Tanto 2* is *suguha* with very little activity, but has very fine *ko-nie* scattered along a muted and tight *habuchi*, possibly a result of over-polishing.

- *Tanto 1 Boshi* is a rounded *ko-maru* with a short *kaeri* and small amount of *hakikake*. *Tanto 2* is a pointed *ko-maru* with a short *kaeri*. However *Tanto 2 boshi* has fine *hakikake* and scattered *ko-nie*.
- *Tanto 2* has elaborate *horimono*, which may point us to a smith known for executing *horimono*.

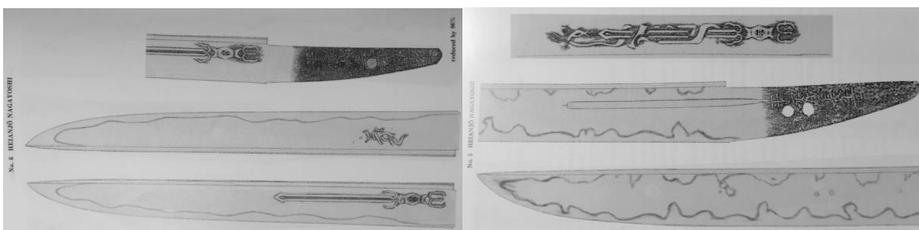
From the *hada* and *boshi* this leads us to consider two possible schools, Yamashiro and Bizen, but this is where it gets complicated. If we consider the fine *jigane* and *horimono* alone, *Tanto 2* seems like an easy candidate for attribution to a Yamashiro Sanjo Heianjo smith. However, the *motohaba* is too narrow, the *hamon* and *habuchi* too muted and conservative and the *nakago* is the wrong shape, particularly for someone like Heianjo Nagayoshi.

Tanto 1 could also be viewed as a Yamashiro Sanjo Heianjo work, but once again the *motohaba* is too narrow, the *jihada* not as fine, but the *nakago* is typical of some of the earlier Sanjo Heianjo smiths such as Yoshinori. *Tanto 2* also has a *nakago* typical of certain Sanjo Heianjo school smiths.

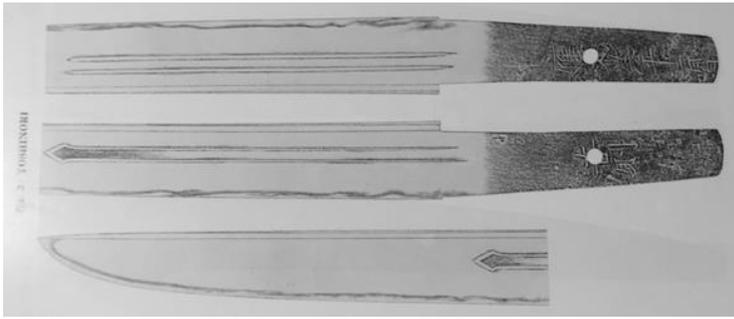
In the Token Bijutsu No.598 Nihon Koto Shi (History of Koto) Dr. Honma states: "It is said that there are a few generation of Sanjo Yoshinori and they left works with the production dates of the Oei, Hotoku, Bunmei and Eisho Eras. Swordsmith directories list the mei of 'Sanjo Yoshinori Izumi no Kuni' and Sanshu Ju Yoshinori'. They temper *sugu-ha* and *o-midare* based on *gunome*. They also made slender tanto with elaborate *horimono* of *shin-no-kurikara*. As swordsmith directories describe, Heianjo Nagayoshi and Sanjo Yoshinori belonged to the same school."

In the Connoisseur's Book of Japanese Swords by Nagayama he mentions on page 177 that the 3 Mitsu's adopted the Yamashiro tradition and the *jihada* is fine *mokume hada* and *bo-utsuri* is usually seen. He also mentions on page 137 that the *Muromachi* era Sanjo Yoshinori *jigane* is beautiful, but the *suguha hamon* lacks activity and the *habachi* is very tight.

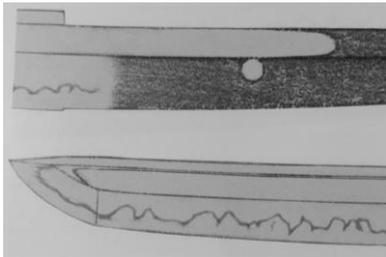
Below we present several examples of Nagayoshi, Yoshinori and *Oei Bizen* work from the Token Bijutsu monthly magazine from the NBTHK.



Picture 1 and 2 – *Tanto Nijimei* Nagayoshi (Heianjo) – notice the *horimono*, but also the *Sugata* and *nakago*.



Picture 3 – Tanto Yoshinori



Picture 4 – Katana *Oei Bizen Moromitsu* – notice the similarity of the *boshi* and paired *gunome* structures.

In comparing the two *tanto* to these works there are several unique characteristics to consider.

1. Nagayoshi *horimono* tended to be more elaborate than Yoshinori
2. Later Nagayoshi *nakago* had a unique shape and their *tanto* had wide *motohaba*.
3. Some Sanjo Heianjo *nakago* were a specific shape with slight tapering.
4. Some Sanjo Heianjo *tanto* could be slender.
5. Sanjo Yoshinori *suguha hamon* had little activity and a tight *habuchi*.
6. *Oei Bizen 3 Mitsus* used fine *mokume jigane*.
7. *Oei Bizen Moromitsu* (2nd generation) had a unique form of paired *gunome*, with typical tight and fine *Oei Bizen* hada.
8. The Sanjo Heianjo school *goma-bashi* are *maru-dome*

After comparing all of these characteristics and examples, what could we conclude?

Tanto 1 could be the work of an *Oei Bizen* smith, possibly *Moromitsu*. However, it could also be the work of an early *Muromachi* era Sanjo Heianjo smith.

Tanto 2 looks to be the work of a *Muromachi* Sanjo Heianjo School smith.

The results from the *shinsa*, were in agreement with these conclusions, which show the difficulty of doing *kantei* on two similar blades with subtle differences. The *shinsa* results were;

- **Tanto 1** was attributed to **Sanjo (Heianjo) Yoshinori** Bunmei era (1469) and **Oei Bizen Moromitsu**. It is important to note the *Heianjo* and middle *Muromachi* era attribution.

- **Tanto 2** was attributed to **Heianjo Nagayoshi** in the **Sanjo Heianjo School**.

We think that given the close similarities between the two *tanto*, the results were not surprising, however we believe the results are not conclusive and worthy of further analysis. Although we are only amateurs at *Kantei* and not professionals in this field, we are lovers of Japanese swords and the mysteries they often present.

As explained in our previous article (reference 1), papers (certificates) more often than not attribute a sword to a smith or school, but fail to point out exactly which smith they are referring too. It is therefore an enhanced *kantei* to try to identify who is the actual smith. In our previous article (reference 1), this was easier because the swords were originally signed when *Kantei* took place. Here the swords are *mumei* and received different attributions. As explained recently by Miyano Sensei at the Tampa (2015) show this is to be expected in the case of *mumei* swords.

First consider **Tanto 1** and the attribution to Yoshinori. The original signature was a two *kanji* signature that can be easily determined. On page 317 of the *Tosho Zenshu* (bottom row) there are only three smiths named Yoshinori who signed with a two character signature. One of them was from the Unjo school and worked in Izumo and Bizen during Oei era, but was originally from the Bizen Yoshii school. Because he worked in Bizen and Izumo this smith appears twice in the book, but is the same person. The last one (in the bottom row) is his son and worked around Eikyo (1429). To attribute this *tanto* to Yoshinori who worked both in Bizen and Izumo or to *Oei Bizen Moromitsu* are reasonable and compatible attributions. However, the Yoshinori to whom it was originally attributed to was a *Sanjo Yoshinori*. This is perhaps incompatible with the faint *utsuri*, and is not entirely compatible with the second attribution to Moromitsu.

It seems to us that a better attribution would be to **Bizen Yoshinori**, rather than to a **Sanjo Yoshinori**. However in comparing the other characteristics of *jihada*, *sugata* and *hamon*, it could be either. The fact that it has faint *utsuri*, would suggest a *Bizen* origin rather than a *Yamashiro*, but the *utsuri* is very faint compared to most *Bizen* smiths and could easily be missed. All things considered, an attribution to *Moromitsu* and either *Yoshinori* seems reasonable.

If we consider **Tanto 2**, the situation becomes more complicated. First consider the attribution to Heianjo Nagayoshi. This *tanto* is typical *Yamashiro hada* and *hamon*. The *ko-nie* and *boshi* are also very typical *Yamashiro*. Therefore an attribution to the *Heianjo Nagayoshi* school is understandable. There are various *Nagayoshi* that are listed on page 199 of the *Tosho Zenshu*, five of them are from *Yamashiro*. The first one listed is from Ryakuō, (1338) the other four are from the *Muromachi* era. The second, the third and the fourth signed Heianjo. They worked around Oei (1394), Bumei (1469) and Meio (1492) respectively. The last one was also working around Eisho (1504) and belonged to the school of Muramasa, but he apparently didn't signed *Heianjo*. (It is believed that Bunmei era Heianjo Nagayoshi was the teacher of Muramasa) Any

of these three could be the one to whom the sword was attributed to. Where it gets complicated is in the shape of the *nakago*, width of the *mihaba* and style of *horimono*. In looking at several Heianjo Nagayoshi *tanto oshigata*, only one had a *nakago* similar to this *tanto*, all have wider *mihaba* and the *horimono*, although similar in type, is more elaborate with detailed features. In the book of Fujishiro there are three *Yamashiro Nagayoshi*. The first one worked again in the Ryakuo era, didn't sign with two kanji and should be disregarded. The second one worked (according to Fujishiro) in Entoku (1489) and is likely the same as the one working in the Meio or Bumei eras in the Tosho Zenshu. Any of these smiths could be the Heianjo Nagayoshi that the *Shinsa* team attributed this *tanto* to, but none of them completely fit the description in the books. The fourth one working in Oei era is the most likely. (See page 199 of the Tosho Zenshu)

Consider now the attribution to *Sanjo Yoshinori*. Slightly earlier works by *Sanjo Yoshinori* have similar *nakago*, width and *horimono* as *Tanto 2*. In fact one of smiths we described above, when dealing with *Tanto 1*, is listed as **Sanjo** Yoshinori and signed with two characters and worked around the Oei era. (See the top row of page 377 of the Tosho Zenshu) There is also another smith from the **Sanjo Heianjo** School who worked in the Bunmei era and signed Yoshinori Saku. Considering all these facts we believe an attribution to the Sanjo Heianjo School is correct, but we believe an attribution to one of the Sanjo Yoshinori smiths could also be a possibility. The most reasonable attribution to us would be the Sanjo Yoshinori that worked in the Oei era. (see page 317 of the Tosho Zenshu). However we also can't disregard the Heianjo Nagayoshi working in Oei era.(see page 199 of the Tosho Zenshu).

References

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