

UK Sword Reg No: 96

Type: Shinshinto katana

Nagasa: 67.8 cm

Moto-haba: 2.9 cm **Saki-haba:** 2.3 cm

Sugata: Shinogi-zukuri with extended chu-kissaki, iori-mune and a shallow tori-zori.

Ji-hada: A reasonably tight ko-itame-mokume-hada with some ji-nie.

Hamon: Slightly undulating suguha in ko-nie deki with wide nioi-guchi, suguha boshi with ko-maru and a short kaeri.

Nakago: Suriage and possibly machi-okuri, 2 mekugi-ana, kesho yasurime, signed on the omote: GEISHU YAMAGATA IHARA MASAMITSU and SHINSEI KOTETSU OMOTE KORE O TSUKURU and on the ura it is dated: KEIO GANNEN JUNI.....

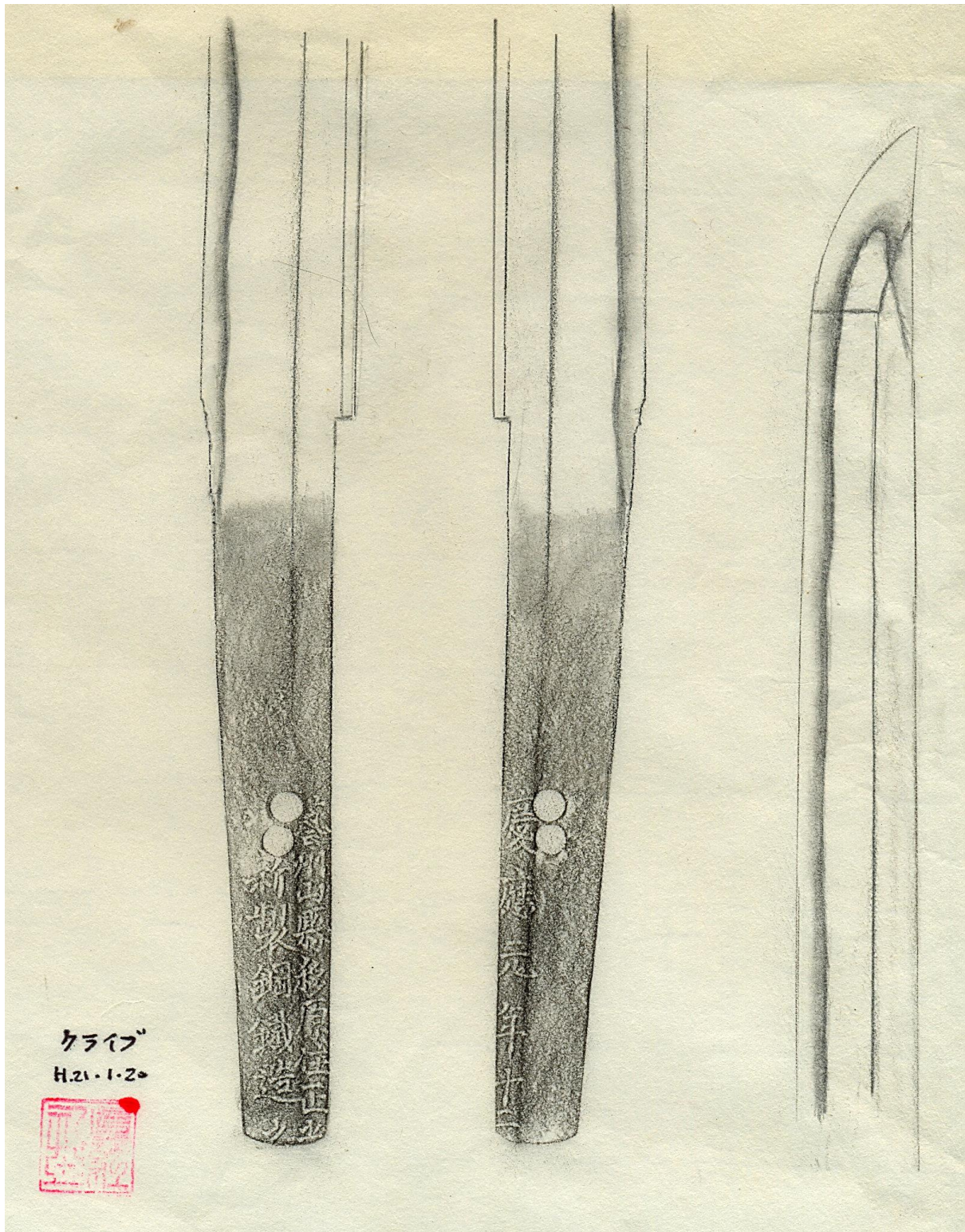
This sword is signed with the name of provincial swordsmith called Masamitsu and it is dated the first year of the Keio period (1855) in the 12th month (it is unusual to see the 12th month included in a date). Masamitsu was from Geishu or Aki province, which is in the present day district around Hiroshima in the west of Japan. In the early shinto period, the province of Aki boasted several good swordsmiths, including Teruhiro, Hirotaka and Fuyuhiko. However, by the shinshinto period, when these families were into the 14th, 6th, and 9th generations respectively, the workmanship had declined greatly. Coming from the town of Takuno in the Yamagata-gun area of the province (all or part of which is often included in his mei), Masamitsu is also said to have been a popular smith and that he was a pupil of Owari Motonaga.

Masamitsu seems often to have experimented with different types of steel and it is difficult to know what this entailed or whether it was simply a “marketing tool” designed to sell his wares.

References on this swordsmith are reasonably scarce, but according to Fujishiro in *Shinto Jiten*, Masamitsu was 43 years old in Kokka Gannen (1844) making 1801 his birth year. In the same book there is an illustration of a nakago, the inscription reading “*Geishu Yamagata Ihara Masamitsu*” but Fujishiro does not transcribe the *Ju-roku-go sai* which follows the name, the meaning of which is “at the age of 65”. As this sword is also dated the equivalent of 1866, it confirms Masamitsu’s birth date as 1801 and shows that he had a long working life as he was 64 when he made the Fujishiro sword, just one year after the sword being examined here. It appears that the size of the characters in his mei grew smaller in his later years but remained strong and the style of calligraphy remains basically the same. Fujishiro rates Masamitsu as *Chu-saku* or average in skill.

Another example of his work is advertised on www.ejapaneseswords.com. This sword was made for a local samurai in Tempo 5th year (1834) and was taken to the Senju execution ground in Edo on the following year. Here it was successfully tested by Yamada Asaemon Yoshimasa employing the Ryo-guruma cut (through the hips) which was the most severe test possible. The Senju execution ground was the scene for many sword tests during the Tempo

period as a number of swordsmiths were interested in the effectiveness of their swords at this time. This sword was given Tokubetsu Hozon by the NBTHK and according to the



description on the website: "it looks like top quality Hizen-to at first blush," which is a most interesting comment.

The present sword was entered into the 2008 NTHK shinsa held in the UK. According to the rejection slip, which stated that the sword was gimei, the panel assessed that the sword was the work of the Tadayoshi school of Hizen province and circa 1860. This is an interesting assessment and quite understandable if the hamon and construction of the blade are the sole considerations, as the sword, in the same manner as that quoted above, certainly looks like good Hizen work at the first glance. However, it is possible that this judgement is something of an oversimplification and has not fully considered the idiosyncrasies and characteristics of this provincial swordsmith. It is also difficult to see why, if it were actually made by a member of the Tadayoshi school, it has been effectively downgraded and signed by a smith that is less highly rated, the opposite of what might be expected.

Several other details of the present blade require consideration. I have never seen a nakago on a mainline Hizen-to with kesho yasurime, as shown on this sword, even in shinshinto times. Also the suguha hamon on Tadayoshi school blades always ends directly above the ha-machi rather than running past it (this could be changed by the machi-okuri of course) and the jihada is not fine enough to be termed Hizen konuka-hada. Lastly, and most convincingly, it seems that Masamitsu was known to make blades in the suguha style of Tadayoshi in at least this current sword and the one mentioned above from the Tempo period, which gained Tokubetsu Hozon. The relatively wide mihaba and the extended chu-kissaki are reminiscent of the sugata of the Keicho-shinto period and may indicate a conservative taste in sword-making. The reason for the similarity to Hizen-to may lie in the sword-making history of the province.

It seems that certainly in the early Shinto period at least, there was considerable movement of swordsmiths, between Hizen and Aki no Kuni. This included the mainline smith, shodai Yukihiro (grandson of shodai Tadayoshi) as well as other talented sideline smiths, more than one being retained by the ruling Asano clan in Aki no Kuni. In all I could find seven swordsmiths recorded who all went to Aki province from Hizen, mostly in the Kanbun era, circa 1661 (see Appendix for details). I think it perfectly possible that there were later unrecorded generations who maintained Hizen's influence over swords made in Aki and if not it may be that these seven laid the foundation of sword making in the province during the Shinto period, that was maintained into the Bakamatsu era. Certainly, to reject this sword at shinsa for appearing like a Hizen Tadayoshi school blade seems inconsistent with both the workmanship of Masamitsu and the historical circumstances.

Hawley's shows altogether three others named Masamitsu from Geishu, as follows:

MAS 480 Whose signature *Oite Settsu Geishu Masamitsu* indicates he was working in Osaka with a working date of 1716, earlier than the smith under discussion.

MAS 481 Who had the title of Izumo Daijo and is given a working date of 1830-44

MAS 482 Whose signature is the same as the sword being discussed here and whose active dates are given as 1859-71.

As we have seen that a Masamitsu was still productive at the age of 65, it would seem quite possible that the last two listed are the same man and the first is too early for consideration. It would also seem possible that, in accordance with the prevailing custom of the time, Masamitsu may have resigned his title as it does not seem to appear in the mei of these later works. However, there is no firm evidence, except the similarity of the calligraphy, to support this theory and so it must remain conjecture.

Clive Sinclaire
Bexley, Kent
January 2009

References: Chris Bowen: e-japanesewords.com
Fujishiro, Shinto Jiten
Imura: Shinshinto Taikan
Tokono: Toku Taikan
Eguichi: Hizento Hikkei (see below)
Hawley's Japanese Swordsmiths

APPENDIX

Extracts from Hizento Hikkei (Hizento Handbook) by Eguchi Shoshin, translated by G Robson

TSUNAYOSHI:

"Geishu ju Minamoto Tsunayoshi saku", later made swords in the castle town of Nakajima, Hiroshima. Circa (1661).

NORITSUNA:

"Geishu ju Minamoto Noritsuna", Itahara Zensuke. Later moved to Hiroshima, Geishu. Circa Kanbun (1661)

NORIFUSA:

"Geishu ju Norifusa", Sakahara Sozaemon. Was born in Saga but later moved to Hiroshima with Noritsuna. Was smith to the Asano family. Circa Kanbun (1661)

NORIFUSA:

Minamoto Norifusa, *"Geishu ju Minamoto Norifusa"*, Sakahara Sasaemon, moved from Saga, Hizen. Second generation. Circa Genroku (1688)

HIROKATSU:

Hizen no Kuni Hirokatsu, Miyoshi Hirokatsu. Student of first generation Tadayoshi. Myoshi Rokuzaemon. Rokuzaemon. Circa Kanei (1624). (It is said that he moved to both Awa and Aki).

YUKIHIRO

(shodai and grandson of first generation Tadayoshi) even forged swords whilst residing in Hiroshima, Geishu. I believe this was due to a relationship with Norifusa who was originally from Saga and who was the fief smith in the castle town of Hiroshima.

YOSHIMUNE:

"Geishu ju Yoshimune". Student of the first generation Tadayoshi. Moved to Hiroshima. Circa Kanei (1624).

