

OMURA SHIGEHIDE

Looking back over my research notes on a sword that I purchased in 1986, I thought that it might prove of some interest to record the details. The historical background of the Bakumatsu period when this sword was made were troubled times in Japan with the Tokugawa shogunate being put under great pressure with both internal and external forces. The research into the swordsmith also revealed something of the political thinking of the tozama or outer clans who were opposed to the shogunate and ripe for change in the government.

First, the sword itself.

Type: Shinshinto katana

Nagasa: 74.0 cm Moto-haba: 3.0 cm Saki-haba: 2.1 cm

Sugata: Shinogi-zukuri, shallow koshi-zori, iori-mune, extended chu-kissaki.
Koshi-hi on the omote and goma-bashi-hi on the ura.

Hamon: Slight midare-komi and ko-maru with kaeri

Ji-hada: Tight ko-itame, almost muji-hada.

Hamon: Suguha in ko-nie with tight habouchi, finishes in yakiotoshi past the machi.

Nakago: Ubu with one mekugi-ana, sujikai yasurime ending in kesho and tapering to a kuri-jiri. Signed on the omote SHIGEHIDE and dated on the ura KANEI GAN SHŪ (AUTUMN 1848)

(In good Hizen style han-dachi koshirae)

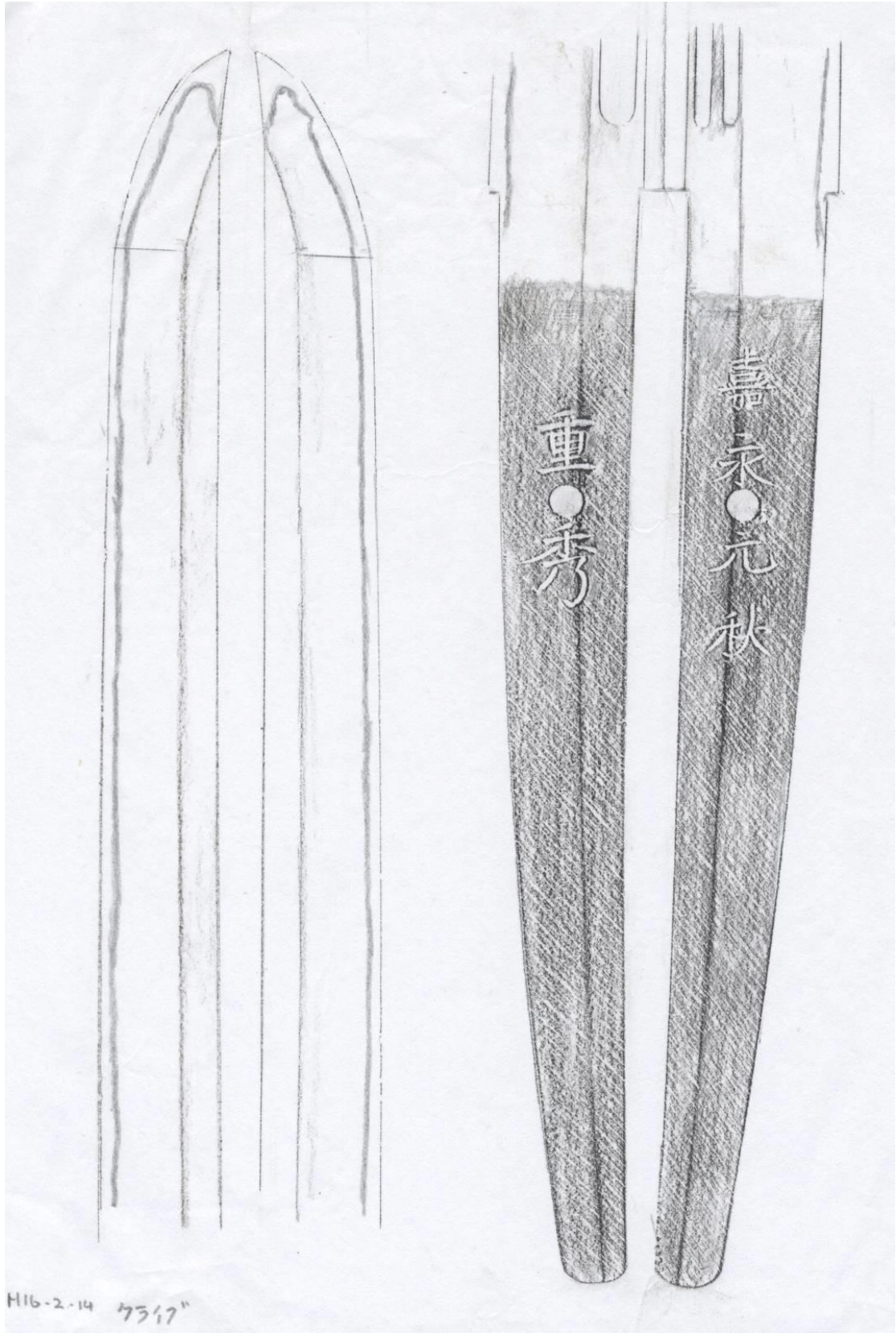
The blade is quite long and has a slender appearance although it has the weight and muji-hada associated with shinshinto work but it is currently not in a good enough state of polish to enable more detailed appraisal. The sword was made when he was 30 years of age and is quite an early example of Shigehide's work.

This swordsmith is known as Omura Shigehide and was a samurai retainer of the Omura han, a relatively small clan whose fief was at the edge of Hizen province which, of course was mostly ruled by the much larger and more important Nabeshima han. It also seems that the Omura clan were long time Christians from as early as 1562 and it is recorded that, small though they may have been, they supplied 1,000 troops for the first assault of Hideyoshi's Korean campaign at the end of the 16th century, when they were led by Omura Yoshiaki.

There is no record of swordsmiths working for the Omura clan in the shinto period and Tamon or Hayashi Shigehide was not really known about to the sword world until a lecture by Ikushima Rintaro in 1929 when he introduced Shigehide's biography to the To-ken Kenyukai (sword study group).

SHODAI

The Shodai's personal name was Tamon and he was born in 1808 into a samurai family retained by the Omura daimyo. As Omura was close to Nagasaki, the young Shigehide was aware of the Namban-sen or foreign ships, which were constantly docking there and this caused him to realise the importance that swords would shortly become to his clan. He could foresee trouble in the near future and it was of great concern to him that there were no swordsmiths in the Omura clan. The insecurity that he felt decided him to become a swordsmith.



Katana: Signed SHIGEHIDE and dated KANEI GAN SHŪ (Autumn 1848)

According to *Shinshinto Taikan*, Shigehide became a pupil of Suishinshi Masahide but this does not seem likely as Shigehide's working dates seem too late for an association with the Shodai. *Hizen-to no Tsuba* confirms that Masahide was already "gone" by the time Shigehide started making swords, however, Masahide was followed by Taikei Naotane who was very famous in Edo at this time.

Shigehide applied to go to Edo on the clan's Sakin Kotai (alternate year's attendance on the shogunate court) and whilst there he studied under Naotane while his lord and fellow retainers discharged their duty at the shogun's court. He accompanied the clan on Sakin Kotai six times in all which means he studied under Naotane for about 1500 days in total. He seemed to have been a good pupil and learned swordmaking very quickly, also making swords whilst he was back home in Omura. (There are others that say that he went to Bizen Osafune (in present day Okayama prefecture) to learn swordmaking but this is doubtful although I have seen swords in a choji – midare and he did become skilled in the Bizen style).

The lord of the Omura clan, Matsudaira Tadakazu patronised and supported Shigehide in his sword making endeavours and Shigehide soon became well known in Omura as a good swordsmith. He is known to have made swords for Matsubayashi Iizan and Watanabe Noburo, both well known as Kin-no or Emperor supporters in this Bakumatsu period. (Matsubayashi was a very well educated man and became head master of the Omura han's school at the age of 21. Watanabe was an eccentric with a peculiar sense of humour. He used to walk the streets at night with a lantern suspended on the tsukagashira of his sword – "to bring light into the dark world"! A diminutive man he had a small wheel attached to the kojiri of his saya so that it could drag along the ground as he walked, apparently an idea that had been introduced early in the Edo period!)

The Meiji Ishin in 1868 changed many things in Japan, not least of which was "Taito no Jiyu" (free of sword wearing for everyone, including samurai). This was a great shock to Shigehide but, of course, he was powerless to do anything about it. On 5th December 1873 he died and was cremated. His ashes were interred in the Omura family temple, the Hongyo-ji, and his name was registered as Hayashi Tamon Fujiwara Shigehide.

Other examples of Shigehide's mei are:

Omura Han Shigehide

Omura hanshi Shigehide

Omura Han Hayashi Shigehide

Toto ni oite Hayashi Shigehide kore o Tsukuru (made whilst in Edo)

He often seems to have include Haru (spring) or Shu (autumn) in his date inscriptions.

Shigehide's residence was in the centre of the town of Omura where the Shima Iron Manufacturing company stands today and not very far from his grave. Here you used to be able to find two stone Yabune (troughs used for yaki-ire), one for katana and the other for wakizashi but they were used for flower beds today. Behind the factory there is a well still fed by a spring with the same water that Shigehide used for sword making. (I am not sure if these features are still there).

NIDAI

Shodai Shigetsugu had two sons and both were trained by their father in sword

making. Shigehide decided that his second son, Sukesaku, would benefit from learning better techniques if he were able to study under the Naminohira school of nearby Satsuma province. However, there were problems associated with this. The Naminohira, a very conservative group of sword makers, had a rule known as Isshi-soden. This rule meant that they would pass on their trade secrets to only one son or student and the only time they would break this rule was under a direct order from their feudal lord. In this instance, the Lord of the Omura clan asked the Lord of Satsuma to order the Naminohira to accept Sukesaku, an order that they could not refuse.

One might wonder why Shodai Shigehide favoured the Naminohira over the closer and still quite prolific Hizen swordsmiths of the Nabeshima han. As with many things the answer was political. Recently, the Satsuma clan had defeated the Tokugawa bakufu at the battle of Toba Fushimi in 1868. The influence of Satsuma was becoming stronger and Shigehide thought that eventually they might even remove the Tokugawa and determine the future of Japan. If this were so, his son might benefit from the association and become a famous swordsmith and so have a better life in the future.

Eventually Sukesaku was accepted as a student of Yukiyasau, the 63rd generation of the Naminohira and he visited Taniyama in Satsuma on 16th June 1868. The Naminohira workshop was situated near Kagoshima bay on the far side of the Sakura Jima volcano.

Sukesaku was greatly impressed by the atmosphere of the Naminohira workshop and he found lodgings with a certain Shobee who had a house in Kamifuko Motomura, a village that was quite close to the workshop. Sukesaku was very surprised at the dialect spoken in Satsuma and he was hardly able to believe it was Japanese. In the beginning he was unable to understand it at all but he gradually became accustomed to it and was very pleased at the hospitality and kindness, which he enjoyed from the local folk. He stayed with Shobee over a year and then moved to Nakashioya, which was not far from Kamifuko Motomura. He stayed there for some 6 months then again moved to the next village called Komatsubara on 19th May 1870. Here he stayed with a certain Fujimoto Masasuke, his wife and baby child.

A few days later, on the morning of 23rd May 1870 he rose early as usual and took a morning walk. On his return, he asked Masasuke's wife for breakfast and after eating it, he went back to his bedroom. About 2 o'clock that afternoon, Masasuke's wife heard a strange snoring sound coming from Sukesaku's bedroom and she had a quick look through the gap in the door. Seeing blood on the blanket she jumped into the room and found the dead body of Sukesaku who had committed suicide with a tanto.

It was so sudden and unexpected that nobody could believe it and nobody could find the real reason for his death. The teacher Yukiyasu was very shocked about the unbelievable suicide of such a promising and diligent student. The funeral, lead by Yukiyasu and including Sukesaku's Omura han colleagues, Haraguchi Setsunosuke and Nagata Goichi, was held on the following day, 24th March 1870.

The question of why Sukesaku had taken such drastic action was still a mystery as he had left no will. However, from a letter written by Yukiyasu, his brother Yasuyuki

and his cousin Kuniyuki to Shigehide, there appears there may have been financial problems as Sukesaku owed the Satsuma han armourer 20 Ryo.

This is not such a large sum but it seemed to have become an unbearable burden to Sukesaku. It was compounded by the fact that he was the Omura han's representative in Satsuma and he had borrowed money from the other han and was unable to repay it as quickly as he had thought he could. His living expenses were sent from the Omura han as he was their student, but unluckily, out of the 108 Ryo sent as his annual expenses, 34 Ryo turned out to be forgeries.

The father, Shigehide was greatly shocked by the unexpected death of his son. This was more so as, had he known of the problem in advance, he could have helped. His great expectations for his son were now destroyed.

Details of Sukesaku's age cannot be found and it is, therefore, difficult to establish whether he ever made swords on his own. There is, however, a sword in existence that has the mei; *Hizen (maybe Hishu) Ju Takahide*. As there is only one Omura in Hizen and the character for *Hide* is the same as that of Shigehide, there is a distinct possibility that this is Sukesaku's art name. The only other possibility is if Shigehide had any students but there are no records of any. Although his ability as a swordsmith was quite respectable, his character was not strong enough for him to become the brilliant swordsmith his father wanted him to be.

Sukesaku's elder brother, Shigemasa, was making swords alongside his father but had to stop working as a swordsmith when the Haitorei was enacted by the new government, banning the wearing of swords in 1872. It is not known where Shigemasa and his family went after this time as his grave is not with Shigehide and Sukesaku at the Hongyoji.

The above interesting and detailed account of a relatively unknown family of swordsmiths casts interesting light over the trials and tribulations of the time. The strains put on swordsmiths was immense and the banning of sword wearing caused problems that were to last for decades right into the 20th century.

Reference:

Hizen-to to Tsuba by Fukinaga Suiken

Shinshinto Taikan

Hizen-to: Philadelphia To-ken Kai

Hizen Hikkei: Egughi (translated Robson)

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