

A sword By Oei Osafune Yasumitsu part II

Introduction:



Having completed the write up on a tachi by the Oei period Bizen Osafune Smith Yasumitsu, I was recently given the opportunity to look at a second blade by this smith. The second sword is a ko-wakazashi which is signed and has NBTHK Hozon papers. It was originally found in the 1980's in the north of England. It had been used for many years as a gardening tool and in the words of the person who first identified it "it looked like a blackened blade from a pair of serrated garden shears". When he was asked by the original owner about having it polished his immediate reaction was "don't waste your time". This view was confirmed by a very experienced collector who was, at the time, acting as an agent for the well respected polisher Kotoken Kajihara. However the owner insisted and the blade was duly sent to Japan. Some months later it returned both polished and papered and the resultant sword was something beautiful to behold. Between 1980 and 2001 it passed between various collectors before finally being donated to the Royal Armouries as part of the Deryck Ingham collection.

Thanks to the generous support of the Royal Armouries team I have been able to spend a couple of hours studying the blade in more detail.

The Sword:



Description: -

The blade is a ko-wakazashi. It is hira-zukuri and iori- mune. It has a slight sori.

Nagasa: 37.9cm Sori: 0.5cm

Motohaba 2.6 cm

Kasane 0.55cm.

Horimono: Futasuji-hi on both sides and bonji

character on the omote.

Jigane:-

The Jihada has a soft appearance. The jigane is a combination of itame, mokume and nagare. In some areas the nagare almost appears as masame. To use the NBTHK terminology it “stands out” in that it is very clearly visible. In comparison with the tachi previously described there are marked similarities in the shape and form of the hada. The largest difference is one of scale. While the pattern is more or less identical it is approximately two thirds of the size. This is understandable; the larger form would look totally out of place on the smaller blade. Because it is generally smaller the overall appearance is tighter and finer. The blade also exhibits a beautifully clear bo-utsuri.

Both blades exhibit what is often described by Japanese texts as a “wet” appearance. As one might anticipate there is not a great deal of ji-nie but there are the chickei-like elements previously described in the tachi, again these are generally smaller and the overall appearance tighter. I think the clarity of the utsuri in comparison to the long sword where it is certainly less obvious, is the relative fineness of the hada which offers a less distracting visual background.





Images of the jigane

Hamon: -

Suguha combined with ko- midare. It is nioi-deki with very fine ko-nie running through it. The hamon bears remarkable similarity to the tachi previously described. The type of activity, its form and location is almost identical. As with the long sword there is a huge amount of activity which generally follows the lines of the hada with a great deal of sunagashi inazuma and kinsuji present. Again the hada is clearly visible within the hamon as the various activities trace the weld lines of the steel.



Activity within the suguha hamon

Boshi:-

The boshi is very healthy. I was a little surprised that the shape might be considered as almost O-maru, rather than the small and pointed “candlewick” boshi normally associated with Yasumitsu. However in studying other examples of tanto and hira-zukuri wakazashi in Markus Sesko’s koto kantei volumes there are very similar examples.



Boshi

Horimono:

As stated the blade has Futasuji-hi on both sides and what I assume is a bonji character above the habaki on the omote (see image below). I feel the Horimono do not match the overall quality of the sword. The parallel lines are uneven and the bonji rather crude. This may be in part because of the rough life and necessary polishing to bring the sword back but I think the geometry is as carved. The sword is suriage with the machi being 1.5 to 2cm higher than the original. This being the case and looking at the position of the kanji I wonder if these are ato-bori. They do not significantly detract from the sword but I would expect a level higher carving on a blade of this standing.



Nakago:

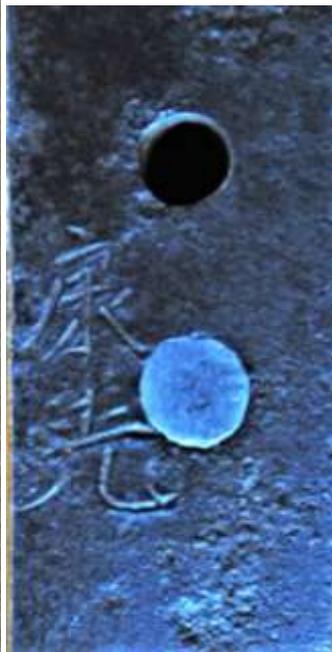
The nakago is suriage having lost approximately 2cm of the original. The jiri is kiri, there are two mekugi-ana and a niji mei which situated centrally below the lower mekugi-ana. The Yasurimei are faint and katte-sagari in form.

Mei:

The blade is signed with two characters Yasumitsu 康光 below I have copied the mei alongside that of the tachi from the earlier paper. While showing differences they both fall with examples seen in NBTHK oshigata and Sesko's kantei koto volume.



Tanto Mei



Tachi Mei

Conclusion:

I cannot remember having previously had the opportunity to study two swords by the same smith in detail. I said in the earlier article that when examining the blade I could understand why Yasumitsu enjoyed a high reputation over very many years. I mentioned that it demonstrated why he was regarded as one of the great masters of the Oei Bizen School. This blade confirms that view. Wakazashi are more common than long swords by Yasumitsu and based on this example he was very comfortable making the smaller blades in hira-zukuri. Remembering the appalling condition this sword was found in it is a great tribute to the smith (and the polisher) that what can be seen today is a stunning example of Yasumitsu craft. When comparing the two swords the similarities clearly confirm they were made by the same hand. In particular the activity within the hamon and the way it is constructed around the ji-hada is identical and very beautiful. I am assuming that as with many tanto and small wakazashi of this period and earlier that this blade is of single piece construction. Despite being polished down it shows no sign of tiredness nor is any core steel evident on the surface. It has passed through approximately 620 years, and certainly for 30 of the last 50 in terrible circumstances but has emerged as an excellent example of Yasumitsu's skill.



Reference material:

A Journey to the Gokaden **Tanobe Michihiro**

The Connoisseur's book of Japanese Swords **Kokan Nagayama**

Nihonto Koza - **Sato (Afu Watson translation)**

Koto kantei and kantei supplements 1 and 2 **Markus Sesko**

www.nihonto.com **Mr Fred Weisberg**

Special thanks to Ms. Natasha Bennet and Mr. Scot Hurst of the Royal Armouries curatorial team for giving me the opportunity to study another exceptional work by this smith.