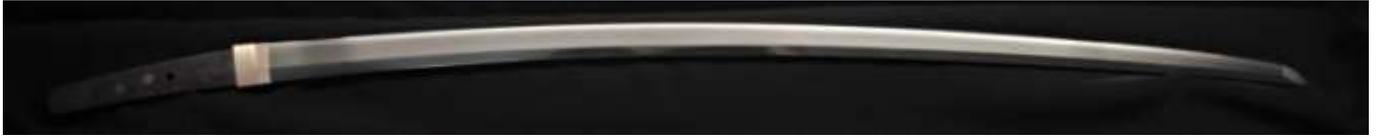


A sword By Oei Osafune Yasumitsu



Introduction:

The Region of Bizen has since earliest times been recognised as a centre of iron work. Together with its close neighbour Bitchu it enjoyed access to high quality sand iron and pine wood for making charcoal. It was also situated on a main communication route between influential provinces.

The Bizen tradition is perhaps the most popular of the Gokaden, certainly in was the most prolific. Recent calculations suggest that Bizen blades represent as much as 60% of extant koto blades. From earliest times they have been very highly regarded with such famous smiths as Masatsune and Tomonari of the Ko-Bizen School producing works that very rapidly became recognised as nationally important treasures. Following Go-Toba giving the Bizen attendant smiths who included Norimune, Nobufusa and Sukemune permission to use the character “Ichi” signifying the school was “The first under Heaven” The Bizen mantle was taken over by the Ichimonji Schools and the popularity of their work established the School as the foremost manufacturer of high quality blades for the Samurai.

As the various Ichimonji schools declined the Osafune school came to the fore. Early Osafune smiths included the great master Nagamitsu and his son Kagemitsu. These smiths were hugely talented and very innovative. From a purely personal and very subjective view I would suggest these two smiths produced some of the finest Bizen works ever made. With the dawn of the Nambokucho era significant changes occurred not only in Bizen but in sword manufacturing in general. The relatively new Soshu School in Sagami had great influence on the earlier traditions with smiths in Yamashiro, Yamato and Bizen all trying to emulate Soshu workmanship. Swords became larger, thinner and altogether more ostentatious. Demand also increased and as often happens this increase resulted in a drop in quality. As the Nambokucho progressed the many Bizen schools became absorbed in to the Osafune grouping and their work became increasingly indistinguishable from each other and from other traditions attempting to recreate Soshu workmanship.

At the beginning of the Oei period (1394-1428) a beacon of quality emerged. Following the unification of the Northern and Southern Courts under the guidance of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu this period ushered in a new era of peace with a relatively stable government. Looking back to a time prior to the excesses of the Nambokucho Warriors looked to the more conservative and subtle forms of the Kamakura period. This also brought a change in attitude and thinking towards the sword. Based in Osafune a group of smiths later known as the Oei School responded to this trend and moved away from the excesses of the previous era. They attempted to recreate the shape and workmanship of the Kamakura period. This took two forms the first an attempt to produce the flamboyant choji midare of the Fukuoka Ichimonji School, the second an altogether quieter form of the early Osafune masters Nagamitsu and Kagemitsu.

The three leading Smiths of the School were Morimitsu, Moromitsu and Yasumitsu. They were known collectively as the san-Mitsu. In the words of Nihon Koza “Morimitsu and Yasumitsu were the most outstanding smiths of the Oei Bizen School”

Workmanship of The Oei School:

As mentioned above the smiths of the Oei School appear to have consciously moved from the excesses of the preceding period, attempting to recreate the shape of the early to mid Kamakura. Both Morimitsu and Yasumitsu produced a relatively large number of blades.

Sugata: - They made tachi, tanto, katana and wakazashi in both hira-zukuri and shinogi-zukuri. Small tanto are rare and according to Nagayama there are no extant examples of Nagamaki. Tachi were approximately 70cm, katana a little shorter, Wakazashi around 50cm. Although following the sugata of earlier times Oei blades tend to be thicker than the early Kamakura work they were reproducing. In addition the tachi showed a degree of saki-zori.

Jitetsu: - Most references refer to Oei Bizen jigane as being soft (I think a description that might be applied to most Bizen steel). The hada consists of a combination of itame, mokume and nagare. Several NBTHK kantei examples say the hada “stands out” or is prominent. There are chickei like activities within the ji-hada and bo or midare utsuri is often (but not always) seen.

Hamon: - broadly placed in to two groups, the first a large choji midare following the Fukuoka Ichimonji style, the second a much quieter suguha with ko-midare. The hamon has a nioi-guchi with ha-hada visible and activity in the form of kinsuji inazuma sunagashi and ko-nie running through it. Generally Morimitsu produced larger hamon patterns, Yasumitsu somewhat smaller. Yasumitsu in particular specialised in suguha.

Boshi: - The Oei smiths produced a distinctive ko-maru boshi with small kaeri. It was known as rosukunoshin or “candlewick” boshi as the very narrow point of the return resembled this. It is regarded as being similar to the very pointed boshi seen in Chu-Aoe work.

Nakago:- The nakago was relatively short with kurijiri and less tapered than earlier work.

Mei:- Blades were signed both using nijimei and nagamei. Nijimei was more common for Shodai Yasumitsu, later generations generally producing a longer signature.

The Sword:



Description: -

The blade is an ubu (slightly machi-okuri) tachi. It is shinogi-zukuri and iori- mune. It exhibits fumbari. It has a strong koshi-zori and slight saki zori.

Nagasa: 71.0cm Sori: 2.1cm

Motohaba 2.9 cm sakihaba 1.0cm

Kasane 0.7cm.

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. Although prominent it is not coarse or rough the overall appearance being tight. Activity in the form of chickei is present although somewhat masked by the dominant hada pattern. Overall the hada has a soft natural, almost organic look which is extremely beautiful. The quality of the forging is outstanding; over the 71cm length there is neither sign of kizu or other fault nor any sign of tiredness which for a blade of this age is exceptional. There is a faint bo- utsuri although once again the prominence of the jihada makes this less obvious than it might be in a less distinctive work. It is most clearly observed when looking at the hamon in a single light source when the utsuri shows as a faint pale shadow running between and parallel to the hamon and shinogi.





Hamon: -

Based on Suguha combined with ko- midare. It is nioi-deki with very fine ko-nie running through it. What I cannot see are any traces of ko-choji, ko-gunome or small ashi that one might expect from this smith. There is a huge amount of activity generally follows the lines of the hada with a great deal of sunagashi inazuma and kinsuji present.

Boshi:-

The boshi is very healthy with a small sharp angled turn back and short Kaeri, the classic "candlewick" boshi indicative of the Oei School. It is sugu and nioi based



Nakago:-

The Nakago is ubu, short without a great deal of taper . it has sori. The Yasurimeai are indistinct but I think kate-sagari . The blade is slightly machi-okuri (perhaps 2cm). It has three mekugi-ana two of which are filled. It is signed tachi-mei with a two character signature.

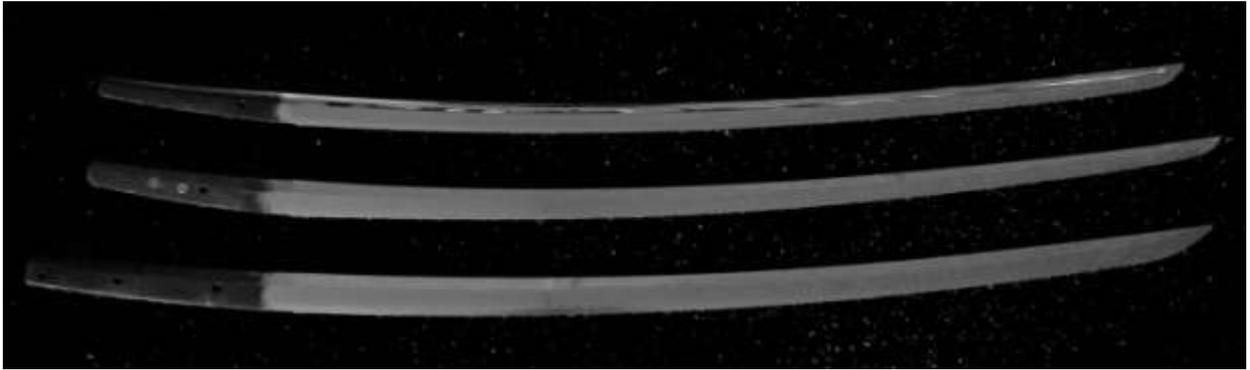


Comment and attribution:-

This is an exceptional sword. A very brief examination confirms why Yasumitsu enjoys such a high reputation and in the words of Nihonto-Koza he was a “famous and excellent smith”. However to understand it fully (or at least in more detail) requires very careful study. The NBTHK states that the Oei School’s work can prove extremely difficult to kantei. They were deliberately trying to emulate work of a much earlier period and doing so very successfully. Therefore to identify a piece as being Oei and not 100-150 years older requires careful study.

I have often quoted and then disputed the generally stated advice that “Shape tells you the age of a sword”. Here is a classic example of why it doesn’t, or at least not easily. This blade has a stunningly beautiful sugata. The combination of koshi-zori, fumbari followed by the gentle taper to what must be the smallest ko-kissaki I have ever seen, especially on a blade of 71cm, creates something which is extremely elegant, but at the same time could be regarded as severely beautiful. Despite its lack of bulk it is an imposing blade which sits very comfortably alongside the more excessive pieces of the

Nambokucho. In the image below it is placed below a Yamashiro work dating from the early Kamakura and above a late Kamakura piece made some 60 to 80 years earlier.



Initial inspection would suggest this was blade produced in the early to mid Kamakura and in kantei there would be a danger of following that route only to become totally confused by the other elements of the blade. However when you look more closely there are some small details which take one away from that initial view. Firstly the blade is relatively thick at 0.7cm. By comparison an Awataguchi blade of the early Kamakura I have studied in detail had a kasane of slightly less than 0.5cm. Generally the earlier blades were thinner. More telling is the presence of very subtle saki-zori. One of the most distinctive features of an early Kamakura blade is the straightness or even slight dip (Uchi-zori) within the monuchi. There wasn't saki-zori and if this is present it is indicative of a later copy of the older form. In this blade the saki-zori is extremely subtle and it offers a good lesson in the level of assessment needed to accurately date a particular work. Therefore the thickness of the blade and the presence of saki-zori is telling us this is not an earlier Bizen piece but possibly a work from the Oei Bizen school.

The Jigane is outstanding, beautifully forged and in excellent condition. The welding forms a sinuous combination of itame and mokume linked by flowing nagare. There is activity within the jigane which might be described as chickei. The NBTHK often refer to "chikei like elements" and I think this is what is visible here. Normally I would expect to see chickei in combination with ji-nie. As with most Bizen work there is not a great deal of ji-nie in this sword and perhaps what is being seen are slightly underdeveloped chickei formed predominantly from nioi, hence they are less bright and visible and this may explain the "like elements" description. The bo- utsuri is faint and subtle. Again I think the dominance of the jihada is masking this to some extent but seen in the right lighting it becomes clearly visible.

Perhaps the greatest surprise (at least to me) is the hamon. Yasumitsu was regarded as an expert in suguha and this can be clearly seen in this sword. Lacking some of the normal features identified with this smith such as ko-choji small ashi etc., the overall activity more than compensates for what might be considered missing features. Ha-hada is clearly visible and much of the activity traces the lines of this.

The ko-kissaki is exceptional and a great testament to the forging and tempering skills of the smith. The fact it survived hardening and has remained so healthy is remarkable.

When you pull all of these elements, thickness, saki-zori, jigane and bo-utsuri, together you are led to the Oei School and Yasumitsu in particular. This is confirmed by the mei. The Tokubetsu Hozon papers state that this is a Daito by Yasumitsu (Osafune). The fact it is nijimei and following the convention that the papers do not indicate a generation it is reasonable to assume this to be the work of the Shodai. Shodai Yasumitsu was working in the early part of the Oei period.

Conclusion: -

Both Morimitsu and Yasumitsu are listed as prolific smiths with many extant works. However in the case of Yasumitsu relatively few tachi are seen in references. Although it has been quoted that he was a specialist in suguha I have been unable to find another example of an ubu, signed tachi of this form by Yasumitsu. I therefore believe it to be a rare example. It has been suggested that it was custom made for a senior retainer or courtier looking for a Kyoto style blade of the Kamakura period. I think this is a credible explanation but of course there is no way to confirm or disprove it. Regardless of motivation Yasumitsu produced a very fine sword.

I have said for many years I am not a fan of Bizen swords. But as has been the case with some swords from other traditions and periods I have seen recently, this blade has come along and clearly exposed my prejudices as unjustified. This is, on any scale, an exceptional blade. From a purely personal point of view it fulfils every aspect of design and manufacture that I value in a Japanese sword. It clearly illustrates those features that made me start collecting so many years ago and those that are recognised features of this smith. The shape is staggeringly beautiful. The jigane in combination with a controlled suguha hamon and exceptional ko-kissaki lifts this blade well above the standard of the times. It does, I think, clearly demonstrate why Yasumitsu was and continues to be regarded as one of the masters of the Bizen tradition from the Oei period.

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

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