

## A Katana attributed to Hojoji Yoshitsugu



### **Introduction:**

Some years ago I read in the transcription of a lecture given by a leading member of the NBTHK, his comments about the problems in making accurate appraisal. The point he made was that to judge a top tier sword was relatively easy. Once one moves away from this hallowed ground of the very best work on to the next tier down, identification becomes more challenging. In reading about various schools comments such as “Enju is almost Rai” or “Mihara is very close to Aoe” appear. When doing kantei there is advice given that “if your first bid was Yukimitsu and wrong bid Taima on the second round”, or “if it isn’t Kotetsu bid Hojoji.”

What this tells us is that appraisal is a very difficult art and those that practice it devote a great deal of time and effort in the study of their craft. It also confirms that such appraisal is an opinion, albeit a very learned one, it is not a cast iron statement of fact.

The quotations say a lot about the lesser schools referred to. To be “almost Rai” says that Enju comes very close to one of the finest Yamashiro Schools standard of work (On a purely personal note I believe that top Enju work exceeds many Rai pieces I have seen) likewise to be mistaken for Yukimitsu speaks volumes for Taima work. Kotetsu is regarded as one of the greats of the Shinto period. His work has been copied to such an extent that fake examples far exceed those thought to be original. For work by the Hojoji School to be compared to this master says a great deal about the quality of their product. I am hoping that in studying and describing the reference piece it will be possible to better understand the comparison.

Another point I would like to explore is the stated intelligence “you should never buy an unsigned Shinto or Shin-shinto sword”. The thinking behind this is that there is little or no reason that blades from this period should have been altered and lost an original signature. Therefore if it is unsigned it suggests the maker was not satisfied with the result and didn’t sign it. I hope that the study of this blade will help people reconsider this sweeping generalisation.

### **The Hojoji School:**



**A katana with NBTHK Juyo attribution to the Hojoji School**

According to Sesko's History of the Shinto era of Japanese swords the founder of the Hojoji School was Kunimitsu, a student of the famous Soshu Smith Sadamune. However when discussing the Hojoji School more typically it is the Shinto school being considered. The founder of the Shinto era Hojoji School was the Shodai Omi no Kami Masahiro. Masahiro is recorded as being active around the Kanbun era. He moved from Tajima to Edo hence the school he founded is called the Edo Hojoji School. Other smiths associated with the school include Kunimasa, Masateru (who moved to Kyoto to study under 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Kinmichi) and the smith Yoshitsugu who appears to have worked in a number of different fiefs throughout his career before settling in Edo in the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Workmanship of the Hojoji School:**

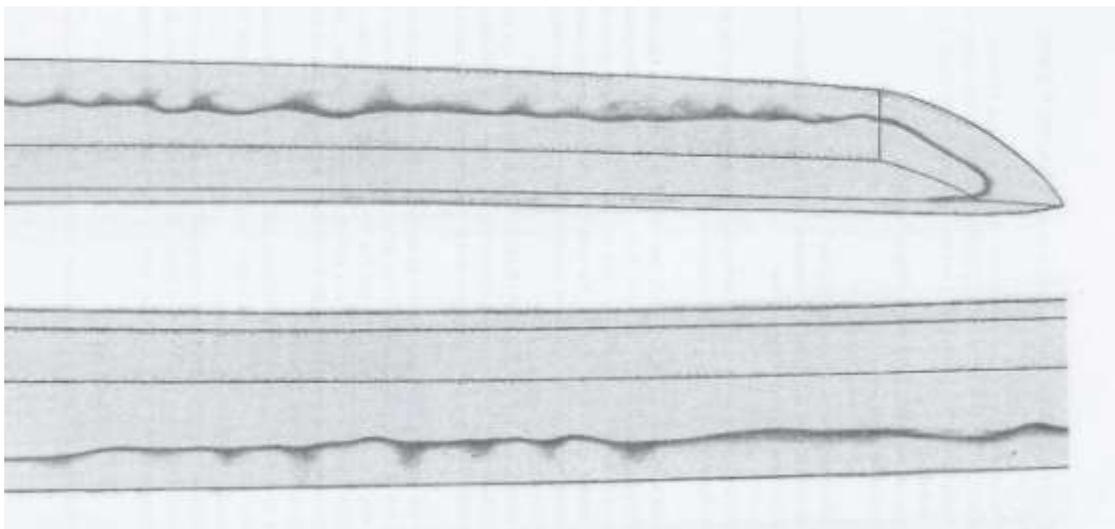
Masahiro produced both katana and wakazashi in Kanbun style. His blades had relatively little sori and tapered towards the kissaki. Some works exhibit a relatively high shinogi and broad shinogi-ji.

The jigane is a tight itame with ji-nie and chickei. There is masame in the shinogi-ji. His hamon were largely based on suguha with a gentle notare and with gunome ashi. The Nioi-guchi was thick and covered in ko-nie. There is a lot of activity within the hamon in the form of nijuba, sunagashi and prolific nie.

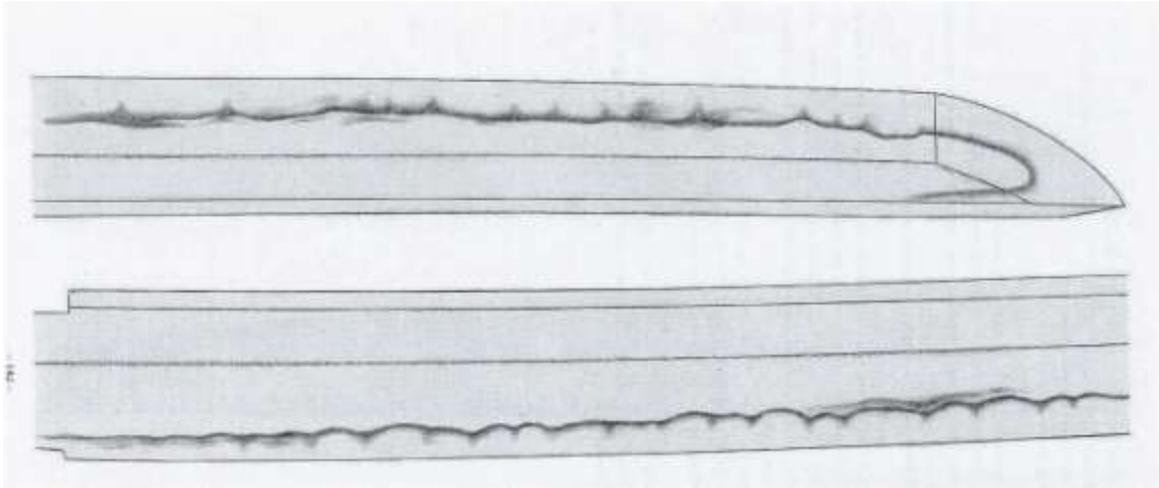
The boshi is sugu with ko-maru kaeri.

The nakago is long and tapers towards the kiri. The kiri is ha agari kurijiri and yasurimei sujikai.

I mentioned in the introduction that Hojoji workmanship was often compared to Nagasone Kotetsu. In comparison with Masahiro and other Hojoji smiths Kotetsu's work is said to have a brighter nioi-guchi and which appears as juzuba (juzuba refers to the hamon resembling a Buddhist monks rosary beads meaning that the thick ashi would produce a more rounded and gunome appearance.). Below are two Oshigata from Markus Sesko's Shinto and Shin-shinto kantei volume which shows the similarities and differences between two example blades.

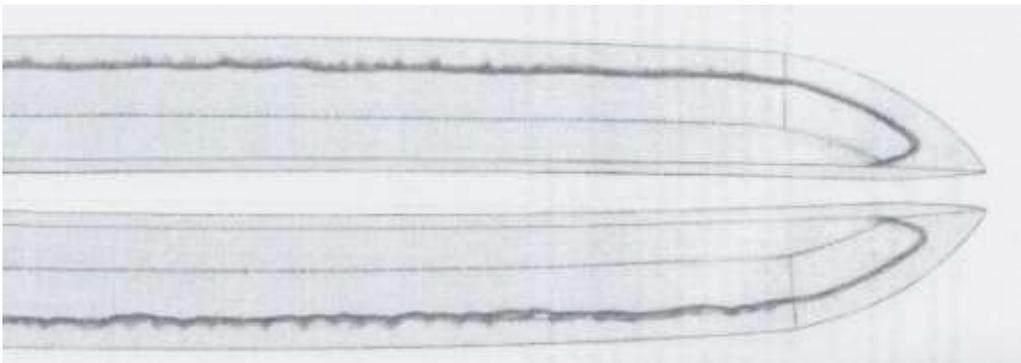


Kotetsu Oshigata



Masahiro Oshigata

Other Hojoji smiths worked in similar style. The NBTHK regard the workmanship of Masahiro and Yoshitsugu as being relatively similar although Yoshitsugu is more nie laden and the steel blackish.



Yoshitsugu Oshigata

### The Sword:



The blade is an ubu katana. It was assessed by the NBTHK and attributed to Yoshitsugu of the Hojoji School. It was awarded Hozon papers.

### Description:

The blade is Shinogi zukuri and iori-mune. The Shinogi is high and shinogi ji relatively wide. There is little difference between mihaba and saki haba. There is a chu-kissaki

**Nagasa:** 65.3cm      **Sori:** 1.5 cm

**Motohaba** 3.3cm      **sakihaba** 2.4cm

**Kasane** 0.75cm.

**Sugata:**

At just over 65cm the blade is slightly below standard length. This is exaggerated by the wide mihaba. There is limited taper and a chu-kissaki. There is a fairly shallow tori-sori. The shinogi is high and the shinogi-ji relatively wide. Overall the first impression is of a blade based on Yamato characteristics (High shinogi and wide shinogi-ji). However the lack of hira-niku and length suggest a later date.

The sori is a little deep and the reduction in width between motohaba and kissaki less than one might expect to see in a Kanbun shinto blade.

**Jigane:**

The hada is a dense ko-itame. The overall condition of the blade is extremely healthy suggesting that it has had very few polishes. In the current polish the hada is a little indistinct and I think it likely that the blade would benefit from a new polish. Currently there is little activity visible in the hada other than some small areas of very bright nie bordering the hamon. I think it is likely that a new polish would expose much greater levels of ji-nie and other activity and highlight what is a very attractive ko-itame hada. There is masame within the shinogi-ji which supports the Shinto attribution.

**Hamon:**

Unlike the hada the hamon is extremely bright and clear. Based on chu-suguha there is slight midare. The nioi-guchi is wide and bright and includes many short thick ashi which form a shallow gunome. There is abundant very clear and bright nie interspersed within the hamon creating an overall hotsure effect which is extremely beautiful.

There is also considerable nie based activity between hamon and ha with sunagashi and long parallel lines of nioi and nie. I am not sure if there is a specific term for this type of activity but I would describe it as nijuba within the hamon rather than above it in the jigane.

The characteristics seen within the hamon exactly copy those illustrated in various kantei examples for both Hojoji and Kotetsu school work.





**Boshi:**

Slightly midare with a short ko-maru kaeri. The boshi continues the frayed hotsure appearance with the nioi interspersed with nie and slight hakikake.



**Nakago:**

The nakago is ubu, long and slim with a single mekugi-ana. The Yasurimei are sujikai with Kesho. The kiri is Ha agari kurijiri. The blade is unsigned.

**Comment:**

I confess that the Hojoji School has not figured highly in my study of Japanese swords. As is often the case when I have the opportunity to study a blade from a school I am unfamiliar with I realise that I have missed out by not looking at them sooner. The Hojoji smiths were competent and successful. Perhaps their slightly lower profile (in my mind anyway) is that they lacked some of the individuality associated with more prominent schools of their time.

This sword has been judged by the NBTHK as being the work of one of the prominent smiths of the school, Yoshitsugu. In their own publications they state that attribution to an individual smith within the school is difficult in kantei. However they were sufficiently confident in the features identified in this blade to go further than just attributing it to Hojoji and actually naming the likely smith.

Analysing this a little more closely; the shape, length and thickness of the blade suggest a work from the Shinto period. This is confirmed by the presence of masame hada in the shinogi-ji. The tight ko-itame hada combined with a chu-suguha hamon with thick nioi-guchi and a great deal of ko-nie running through it and thick ko-ashi point towards Kotetsu School or Hojoji. Perhaps for Kotetsu one would expect more flamboyance in the hamon, for the nioi-guchi to be a degree brighter and for the jigane to contain more nie and chickei and for it to show some o-hada. So the appraisal team opted for Hojoji and took that one stage further. According to kantei examples Yoshitsugu's steel was

“blacker” than Masahiro and his blades contained more nie. What they saw in this sword was sufficient to confirm Yoshitsugu as the likely maker

This leads me to the final point. The sword under discussion is a very healthy, well made blade with sufficient merit and individuality to be attributed to a particular maker of good reputation. It is unsigned for reasons we will never know. Had it followed a different path it is quite possible that at some point in it’s history it would have had the mei of the much more famous (and expensive) smith Kotetsu added to it and it would have joined the legion of gimei Kotetsu blades which are still prevalent in the market. Based on what can be seen in this blade and the variation identified in Kotetsu’s work it would be a difficult call to deny the possibility of it being authentic based on the workmanship.

I think this blade along with many others I have seen demonstrate the weakness of such sweeping statements as “don’t buy unsigned shinto blades”. If your goal is to hold swords with higher level papers, regardless of for what, then the statement is valid. The lack of popularity in the market for mumei Shinto works mean that there are blades, such as this one, which have a great deal to offer the student at an affordable price. It confirms the often quoted but mostly ignored statement “buy the sword not the paper”. There are some very good blades on the market being largely ignored because of their papering limitations. It’s true they require greater effort to identify, to study and learn from but they can offer excellent value.



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**Reference material:**

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**

History of Sinto era Japanese swords **Markus Sesko**

Kotetsu and Kiyomaru. **The Sano Art Museum 2006 exhibition**