

A sword signed Kotetsu.



A long time ago I read or was told a story about a competition between an armourer and swordsmith. Unfortunately I cannot find the original text so the following summary is based on memory and while correct in conclusion some of the detail may be misremembered. Early in the Edo period in Echizen a very highly regarded swordsmith and equally famous armourer plied their trade. The Daimyo of the day decided they should hold a competition to see who was the best. The date was set and on the day the armour maker set up a kabuto for the swordsmith was to try and split. The armour maker was nervous of failure and just as the smith was about to swing his sword he called out to stop as the helmet was wrongly positioned. He made some slight, fussing adjustment and then permitted the swordsmith to try again. So unnerved was the swordsmith that when he cut down his blade failed to slice the kabuto and the armourer was declared the winner. However this victory brought no joy to the armourer. He was so ashamed of his underhand act that he gave up making armour and turned instead to making swords. Whether there is any truth in the tale or there was simply little demand for armour in the second half of the 17th century but still a healthy sword market so it made sense to change career, the fact was that at the age of 50 he took up an alternative career.

That Smith was Nagasone Kotetsu. Despite his late start he became in a very short space of time one of the most popular and highly regarded swordsmiths of the early Edo period. His swords were famed for their beauty and incredible sharpness. As there were no wars in which to prove the effectiveness of blades, cutting tests carried out on criminals or corpses became a popular method of proving a blade's sharpness and many Kotetsu blades have cutting test results inscribed on the nakago. Despite his extremely high reputation the quality of his work varied considerably. In a lecture given to the Token Society of GB Mr. Kenji Mishina said that he some of the finest blades he had seen were by Kotetsu but he had also seen some he diplomatically described as "Monday morning swords". Alongside this variation in quality Kotetsu also frequently changed his mei and there are numerous variations in his signature both stylistically and in content.

We are therefore faced with an extremely popular maker, whose work style, quality and mei varied greatly. Needless to say this offered a fantastic opportunity for the more disreputable individuals to make a fast buck by faking his work. As a result there are numerous Kotetsu gimei blades in existence. As has often been quoted "for every 10 Kotetsu blades you see 11 are fakes" (probably said about other smiths as well but it holds true none the less). Thus appraisal and attribution of Kotetsu blades is to say the least extremely challenging.

With this background I have recently had the chance to look in detail at a blade signed "Kotetsu". I have followed the history of this blade for some years since it first appeared from Japan. In fairness it has never been described as other than a gimei blade. But as with any sword wishing to pass as by Kotetsu it is a good quality work. While assuming it to be gimei I thought it would be a very

interesting exercise to study it in detail and taking on board all of the points regarding variation and quality to try and determine why this is a gimei or whether could it just possibly be genuine?

In addition I had just completed a study of a Hochoji blade. Remembering the kantei wisdom “if it isn’t Kotetsu bid Hochoji” I wanted to see what similarity there was between this and the papered Hochoji blade.

Nagasone Kotetsu Workmanship

As stated above Kotetsu work varied greatly. However there were a number of features which regularly appeared in his swords and that may be regarded as detailed proof of their authenticity. Below I have listed the most common characteristics the majority of which one should expect to see in an authentic work.

Sugata: Kotetsu made katana, wakazashi and tanto. The katana were shinogi zukuri and iori-mune. He also made some wakazashi in hira zukuri. The size and shape followed the trends of the time in his early career they were typical Kanbun Shinto in shape with a shallow sori and tapering towards the kissaki. In some descriptions one reads of “Kotetsu’s magnificent straight blades”. Later in his career the blades had slightly more sori, although still shallow. Typically his katana were around 70cm in length and had a “stubby” chu-kissaki.

Hada: Very tight ko-itame throughout the majority of the blade incorporating a great deal of ji-nie and chickei. Towards the base of the blade, 6 to 9cm above the hamachi the hada becomes larger patterned and more coarse itame with nagare, this is an important kantei point and seen on the overwhelming majority of his swords.

Hamon: Kotetsu produced a considerable range of hamon throughout his career. However regardless of pattern they always had a thick and bright nioi-guchi and incorporated ko-nie throughout. Most commonly his hamon began with a long rising sugu yakidashi before evolving in to a series of rounded joined gunome known as juzuba (Buddhist prayer beads). They hamon included very thick ashi.

Boshi: The boshi narrows as it falls away from the yokote turning centrally within the kissaki to create characteristic balloon or “priests head” type pattern.

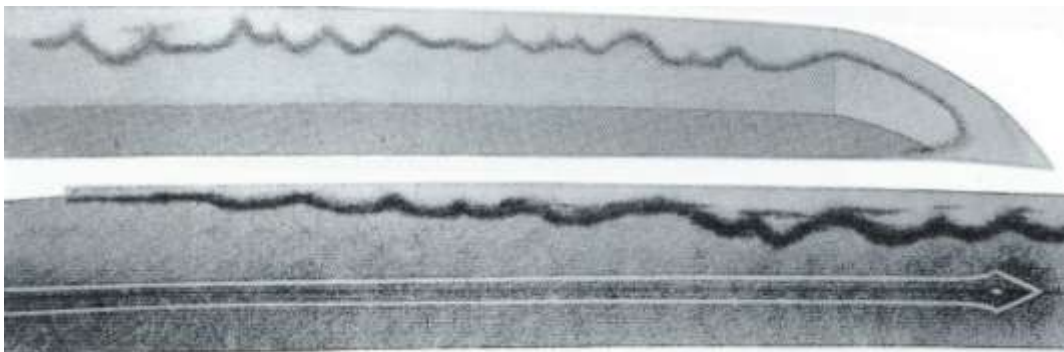


Illustration from Nihonto Koza showing typical hamon and boshi

Horimono: Kotetsu was a very skilled horimono carver and his very varied work is much appreciated. Subjects included ken, bonji and figures of Buddhist deities.

Nakago: In his early career he his nakago ended in a form described as ha-agari kengata and resembled the work of Kazusa no Suke Kaneshige. Later they become a more shallow kurijiri. The shinogi runs clearly through the nakago and the sides are slightly rounded. The yasurimeai are very skilfully cut katte-sagari (also alternatively described as ko-sujikai).

Mei: As previously mentioned Kotetsu used many variations of his signature, changing them frequently throughout his short career. Nihonto Koza lists at least nine variants some of which were also used in combination. Many of his works are dated and also have saidan kinzogan mei of the Yamano family of cutting testers.

From the above key factors to help identify an authentic Kotetsu include:

- A bright clear and thick nioi-guchi with a great deal of nie.
- A tight ko-itame hada with ji-nie and chickei that becomes larger and coarser in pattern 6-9cm above the hamachi.
- The hamon usually contains uniform and rounded and joined gunome in the juzuba pattern and with thick ashi.

The Sword:



The blade is shinogi-zukuri and ioi-mune. It is ubu with a shallow sori and tapers towards the kissaki. It has well cut bo-hi which are marudome. It is signed Ju Toeizan Shino Hotori Tora Nyudo it is dated Enpo second year and has a saidan mei by Yamano kanjuro Hisahide with a kaeo stating it cut through a body at the shoulders (more litterally the armpits).

Sugata: 70.9cm

Sori: 1.5cm

Motohaba 3.2cm

sakihaba: 2cm

Kasane: 0.8cm.

Description:

The blade is of a typical sugata dating from the later part of Kotetsu's career. It tapers towards the kissaki but has rather more sori than one would anticipate in his earlier, Kanbun style works. It is wide and thick. Even with the bo-hi it feels a heavy and a substantial piece. The overall condition is healthy although in older polish. There are one or two superficial blemishes which would be easily removed with a fresh polish.

Jigane: Overall the hada is a very tight ko-itame it is consistent and well forged. There is not a great deal of activity visible within the hada but again this may become more apparent with a new polish. More significantly other than a very slight indication of some nagare hada near the hamachi there is none of the coarser o-itame one would expect to see in a Kotetsu blade.



Hamon: This is very much in line with what one would expect in a Kotetsu blade of this period. It begins with a longish sloping sugu yakidashi before developing in to a gentle midare with rounded and joined gunome elements (juzuba). The nioi-guchi is thick and bright and the ashi falling from the gunome thick. The base of the ashi have ko-nie which is also present, although relatively sparsely within the nioi-guchi.



Boshi: The boshi is sugu ko-maru with a short Kaeri. It is healthy but does not exhibit the drop and narrowing after the yokote nor the central return which creates the characteristic "Kotetsu Boshi"



Nakago: The nakago is ubu the shape is exactly what one expect for a Kotetsu of this period. The colour is dark brown and the Yasurimeai are kate-sagari and clearly visible. The mei is very attractively cut and the kanji well spaced. This is equally true of the nengo on the ura. The saidan mei appears competent although perhaps not quite of the quality seen on other examples of this smiths work.

Mei: as said above the blade is signed Ju Toeizan Shino Hotori Tora Nyudo. This is a very rare form of signature. In fact we have only been able to find a single example of this form in the Kotetsu Meikan. It is carved on a wakazashi which dates from the same later period of Kotetsu's work. The Yamano family are noted testers and various members of the family appear on Kotetsu blades. Normally the inscription carries a little more detail regarding time of testing.



Comment and Conclusion

Perhaps not surprisingly I find it impossible to come to a confident and definitive conclusion about this sword. It is a good sword, well made of good shape and in good condition. In fairness no one in the recent supply chain has suggested this was an authentic Kotetsu. What was said and I think borne out by this blade is that if you were hoping to fake a Kotetsu you had to start with a very good sword. So what are the possibilities?

1. It is gimei with the mei being added to an existing blade that approximated Kotetsu workmanship
2. It is a copy made to order for someone who aspired to but couldn't afford a Kotetsu blade.
3. It is an authentic Kotetsu.

The problem in trying to draw a conclusion is the huge variation in so many aspects of the smiths work in both style and quality. All one can do is look at the various elements and try to determine whether they offer a convincing argument as to the works authenticity. As said above the form of mei is unusual and rare. One would therefore have to ask whether it would be known to someone attempting to fake a smith's work. Conversely if you were trying to forge a signature it would be better to fake a form where there were fewer known examples for comparison. The Mei is beautifully cut and to my very untrained eye seems to fall within the range variation seen on authentic works. The colour of the nakago is good, perhaps a little too consistent. The yasurimei are well cut but again a little too fresh for a blade that is trying to be 350 years old.

Moving on to the body of the sword, the hamon falls very much in line with the standard identified for Kotetsu. The nioi-guchi is thick and clear as are the ashi but there is a distinct lack of nie present. This is also true of the hada. It is very well forged ko-itame but shows little evidence of activity in the form of ji-nie or chickei. More significant is the lack of o-itame and nagare near the hamachi. The boshi does not conform to what is described for Kotetsu. Finally the blade is 8 mm thick and a substantial piece of steel.

Based on the above I am inclined to believe that this might be shin-shinto copy. At one of the NTHK shinsas held in the UK it was suggested it was by Aizu Nagamichi (known as the Aizu Kotetsu) and this certainly would be a plausible attribution.

Of course there is the final possibility that it is by the man himself and falls within the range of and between masterwork and "Monday morning sword".

I think this is a sword that will remain an enigma. Were it to be submitted for papers I think simply because so many good forgeries of this smith exist it would be unlikely that any panel would be sufficiently confident to pass it as authentic. There are simply too many variations in the workmanship from what one would expect from this smith. None the less this is a good sword it is substantial and in good condition. I would like to believe that it was made for an aspiring samurai who was desperate for a Kotetsu blade with all the bells and whistles but simply didn't have the resources to own one. What he ended up with is a very good copy by a very competent smith.

Paul Bowman

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Reference material:

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