

A Tanto attributed to the Mihara School.



Introduction:

I must start with a confession; I have always had a secret affection for Mihara work. I have seen a number of O-Suriage katana and wakizashi attributed to this school on various auction sites over many years and have always been struck at the beauty of their shape. Even when shortened the proportions always seem just right and capture the balance between obvious robust functionality and quiet elegance. When selecting blades for the kantei exercise at Samurai Art Expo in Utrecht I was absolutely besotted by a Juyo example and immediately chose it for the kantei. I have only previously held one Mihara work in my own collection, a sue-Mihara tanto which I also enjoyed very much. Alas like so many other pieces it had to move on to make room for a later acquisition. In the following notes I am examining a sunobi tanto attributed to the Mihara School by the NBTHK. I will start with a brief summary of the Schools history and outline what one might expect to see in a Mihara work. I will then examine the blade under study to see if it's features are in line with those expectations.

The Mihara School:

The Mihara School was established in Bingo province in the Showa era at the end of the Kamakura period and was active until the end of the Muromachi period. The School was founded by the Smith Masaie. Their workmanship is said to have recognisable Yamato characteristics. The School has been divided in to three terms ko-Mihara active from the end of the Kamakura period to the mid Nambokucho period, Chu Mihara from early to mid Muromachi period and Sue Mihara active at the end of the Muromachi period. Nagayama points out that Chu-Mihara work is rarely seen and I believe in recent years two terms are used Mihara and Sue-Mihara.

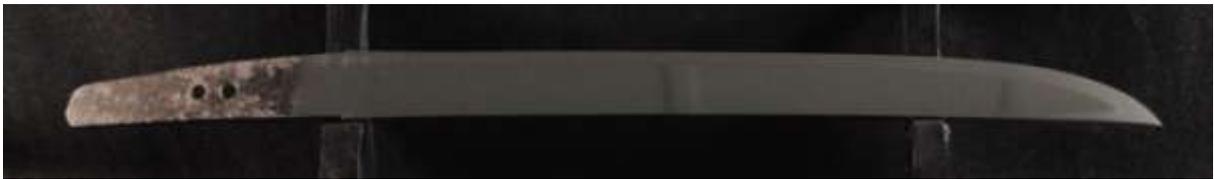
Workmanship:

As already mentioned the school's work exhibits Yamato influence. Katana have a high shinogi, there is nagare hada present in the jigane and the hamon tends to be suguha hotsure and with a ko-nie deki. In Sue Mihara pieces the Jigane appears hard and includes a coarse ko-Mokume hada. Sumegane also appears. Sue Mihara hamon has a tight nioi-guchi and can be chu suguha with small

gunome as seen in Sue Bizen or Sue seki work. As with so many schools the quality deteriorated as it progressed through the Muromachi period.

As well as Yamato features the Mihara school was said to be greatly influenced by the Aoe School from neighbouring Bitchu province. There have been a number of instances in the past where Mihara work has been attributed to Aoe and vice versa. I believe this is mainly due to the similarity in the Ji-hada. Both have a combination of Ko-Itame and Ko-Mokume. Generally Mihara jigane is less well defined. It also includes nagare hada and if there is utsuri it tends to be shirake and not the jifu or dan utsuri that one would associate with the Aoe School. Another similarity is the pointed kaeri that can be found in both school's work. When looking at the best Mihara work it is easy to see how it might be attributed to Aoe.

The Sword:



Description: Hira-zukuri iori mune. Slightly machi okuri. There is slight sori. The nakago is mumei and has two mekugi-ana.

Nagasa: 30cm

Motohaba 2.8cm

Sori: slight <05cm

Kasane 6mm

Jigane: The hada is a combination of itame, mokume and nagare. It is well forged and includes nie and a number of chickei like activities there are also some darker areas of steel.





Hamon: Suguha with a tight nioi-guchi and abundant ko-nie. There is a great deal of activity within the hamon including inazuma, kinsuji and sunagashi. The hada is also visible within the hamon showing sinuous lines throughout.

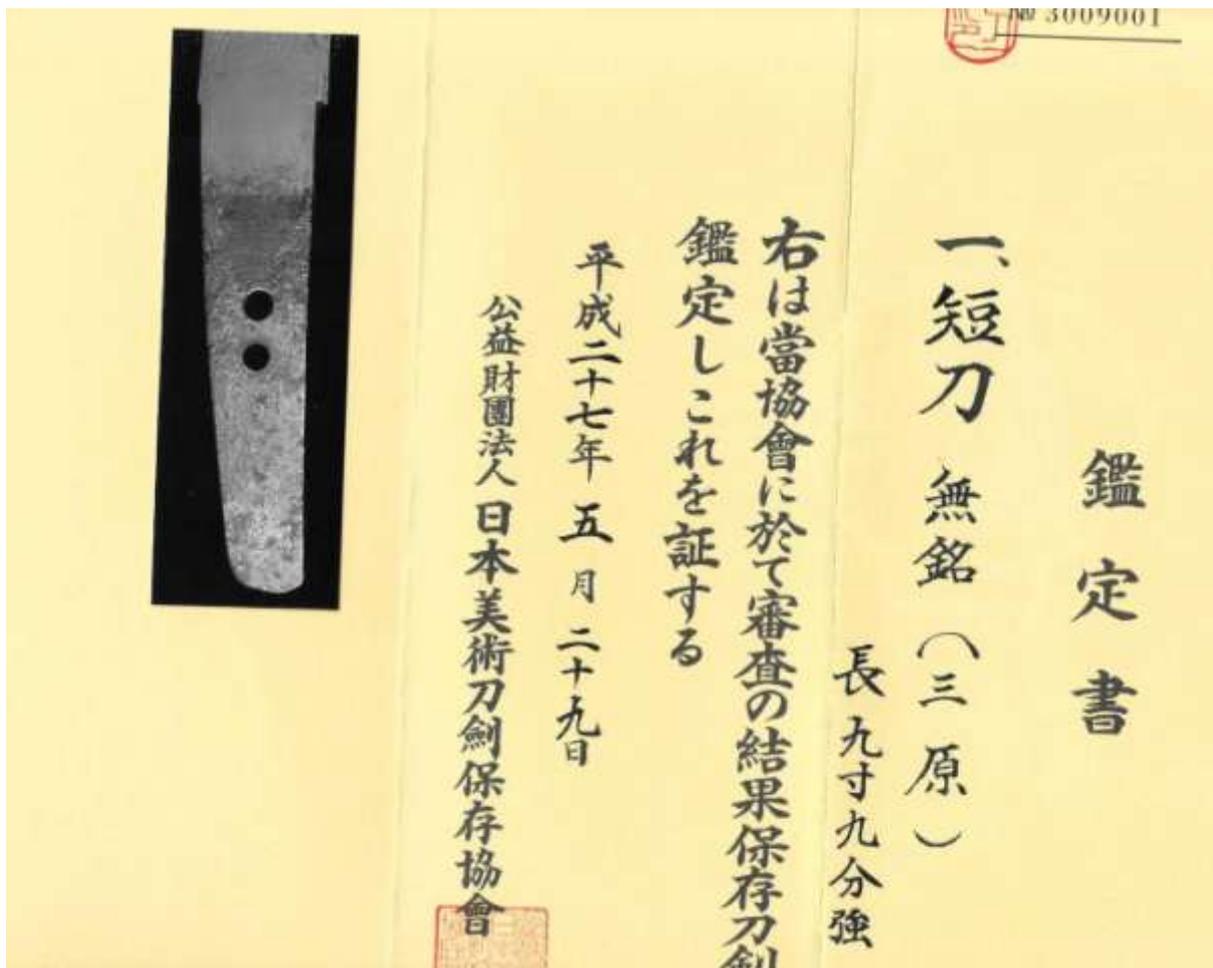


Boshi: a pointed Ko-Maru with a medium turn-back. The boshi has ko-nie and resembles the "candlewick" boshi of the Aoe School.



Nakago: The nakago appears ubu the Yasurime are katte sagari and there are two mekugi ana:

Attribution: The blade has NBTHK papers attributing it to Mihara



Koshirae:

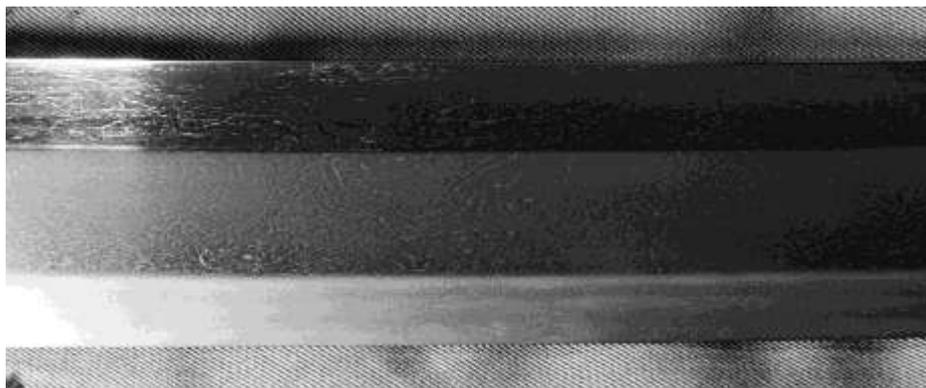
The blade is mounted as an aikuchi . The Tsuka is wrapped in very fine noded sharkskin. The sakura Menuki form the mekugi. The striped saya is of good quality. Unusually the kojiri has what appears to be a drain hole which runs through the wood of the saya. This is not something I have seen previously and warrants further investigation.



Comment:

The NBTHK Hozon paper attributes this blade simply to Mihara. The fact they opted for Mihara rather than Sue Mihara suggests they believed it to be made before the later part of the Muromachi period or they couldn't tie it down more precisely. In an attempt to try and date it more precisely I reviewed such literature as I have. The Sugata suggests (at least to me) that this is a Nambokucho work. The nearest example I was able to find was in the NBTHK journal no.663 which illustrates a signed and dated work by the Masakiyo which is dated Oan one (1368). The overall shape is almost identical. The Masakiyo is 1.6cm shorter. The description of the blade matches the study piece very closely. Based on this I believe this work dates from the second half of the Nambokucho period.

Looking at the jigane in detail it is possible to see how on initial viewing Mihara work might be mistaken for Aoe. However on closer examination (albeit from a very limited sample base) differences are apparent. Aoe Chirimen hada looks clearer and a degree finer. It is more clearly visible and has more ji-nie and chickei. The Mihara example is less clearly defined, lacks the finer definition. Most telling of all is the presence of nagare in the Mihara piece which isn't seen in the Aoe example. The other telling point is the lack of either jifu or Dan Utsuri which one would expect to see in Aoe work.



Aoe Chirimen hada



Mihara Itame/mokume/ nagare hada

As stated in Nagayama and the NBTHK literature Mihara combines characteristics of its Yamato origins with those of its neighbouring Bitchu Aoe School. The result is very attractive. I believe that the best Mihara work can stand alongside that of the Aoe School. When comparing the sword under review with the descriptions published for Mihara examples in the NBTHK journals it is easy to understand how this mumei work was attributed to the Mihara group of smiths. I think it will also ensure that my now not so secret infatuation with Mihara work will continue.

References:

The connoisseurs book of Japanese Swords by Kokan Nagayama

Koto Kantei by Markus Sesko

The NBTHK monthly Journal no. 663.