

A Journey of discovery with a Tadayoshi.



I have recently had the opportunity to look at a blade by Hizen Tadayoshi which I first acquired in 2000. After holding it in my collection for 10 years I finally wrote about it in an article entitled “But which Tadayoshi is it”. Shortly after writing that piece circumstances required that I let it go along with the rest of my Hizen collection as I pursued something which at the time represented the pinnacle of my collecting ambition.

Now some nine or ten years after letting it go I have the chance to write about it again, to describe it with I hope a greater understanding built from a further 10 years of study and research and with more accumulated information. I will try not to repeat what I have already written although some repetition is unavoidable. The initial paper focussed on trying to ascertain whether the blade was made by the first or third generation Tadayoshi. In it I came to the conclusion that it was more likely to be a work of the Shodai than the Sandai. In the following I hope to explore that in more detail and explain how that conclusion was reached.

A summary of the swords recent history From the 1960s to 2021

At some point in the mid 1960s a young Ian Bottomley was visiting a number of junk shops in Leeds. For those who may not know of Ian, after a career in education he became the curator of Asian Arms at the Royal Armouries Museum. He has spent a lifetime studying Japanese arms and is one of Europe’s leading authorities on Samurai Armour. However at this time he was an enthusiastic novice starting out on the road of study. In one shop he found hanging on a wall two Japanese blades. The first was a tanto with an ornate tsuka but no saya. The second was a wakizashi in what he describes as very tatty Satsuma Rebellion mounts. He bought the wakizashi “Because it had a scabbard”.

In 1969 this sword became one of the first swords sent from the UK to be polished in Japan by the famous polisher and author Inami Hakusui. Founder of the Japanese sword company Japan Sword. Hakusui was a highly regarded scholar and polisher. Immediately after the war he wrote one of the first reference books to be translated in to English “Nippon-To, The Japanese Sword”. He wrote this to help the occupying forces understand and appreciate the Japanese sword in the hope it would assist in the preservation of this important part of Japanese culture. Unfortunately this was not well appreciated by a number of Japanese dealers and collectors who felt it was disloyal and he was greatly criticised. As a result Hakusui’s reputation suffered and some of his attributions were questioned. This is unfortunate because there can be little doubt that his book helped non-Japanese better understand and appreciate the sword and there is equally no doubt that he was both a very capable polisher and scholar.

The sword was polished and mounted in a shirasaya. Hakusui also issued an origami attributing the blade to Sandai Tadayoshi. While in Japan it was submitted to shinsa at the NBTHK HQ in Tokyo and received a white paper confirming it to be an authentic work of Tadayoshi. Ian was informed it would not receive a green paper because it was suriage. It was returned to the UK.

Some years later the sword passed from Ian to his long time friend and fellow enthusiast Deryck Ingham. I understand it was exchanged for a Kabuto. As mentioned in the first paper I purchased the sword from Deryck in 2000. He sold it reluctantly to help fund the purchase of an important sword. I held the blade in my collection until 2012, when in the same way, I reluctantly let it go to enable me to proceed with a purchase of an important work. Nine years later I was able to buy the blade and to study it again. The following notes are aimed at describing the blade in detail. It also explores the theories relating to presentation swords and offers a possible explanation for why this blade is as it is today, the differences in workmanship visible and hopefully confirm a final attribution regarding which Tadayoshi made it.

The sword:

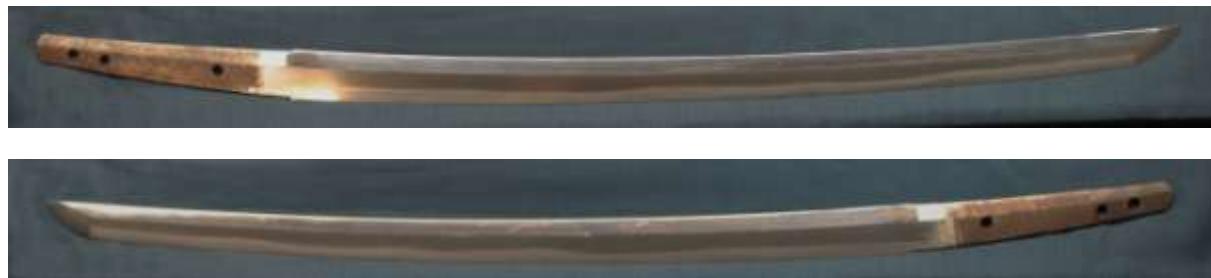
Shinogi-Zukuri, iori mune with tori-sori. Suriage with nijimei “Tadayoshi”

Nagasa 48.4cm Sori 0.9cm

Motohaba 2.8cm Sakihaba 1.9cm Kasane 0.6cm

Sugata:

The blade was originally 6-8cm longer than its current nagasa. Despite being shortened it retains elegant proportion. The blade narrows elegantly from the machi to kissaki. The shinogi is of medium height with a fairly wide shinogi-ji. There are 3 small kirikomi visible on the shinogi, one on the ura and two on the omote.



Hada:

The hada is a very fine and consistent ko-itame. In attempting to define it I compared it with an Awataguchi blade and Enju blade both of which have been the subject of previous papers. This blade falls somewhere between the nashiji hada seen in the Awataguchi and the ko-itame of the Enju. Overall the blade has a great deal of ji-nie which becomes brighter and larger as it progresses to the monouchi. There are also small chikei running the length of the blade. The quality of the forging and the brightness of the nie based activity are outstanding.

Unfortunately the fineness of the hada makes accurate photography extremely difficult. What is clear in the following images is the profusion of nie which runs through both hada and hamon.



Hamon:

The hamon is a very gentle midare based on a suguha foundation. The nioi-guchi is extremely clear and bright and has the typical “belt like” form associated with the early Hizen smiths. Running throughout the hamon is a great deal of activity comprising of very bright nie which cascades through the nioi-guchi and creates clouds of nie on the border with the ji. There is kinsuji in the lower half of the blade. As it progresses towards the monouchi the nie becomes larger and brighter in areas it forms nijuba and kuichigai-ba. Overall it is a very complex and beautiful hamon which despite its complexity looks uncontrived and natural in form.





Nakago:

The Nakago is suriage with 3 mekugi-ana. There is a nijimei on the lower part of the blade and the original yasurimei are clearly distinguishable. At first sight these appear to be very slightly katte-agari, which may have lead to Hakusui's appraisal to the Sandai. However the nakago has been altered when shortened. This has resulted in the mei being partially shaved and the orientation slightly changed. If one tries to reconstruct the original shape the orientation of mei and yasurimei alter moving it towards either kiri or very slightly katte-sagari thus moving it toward the Shodai.

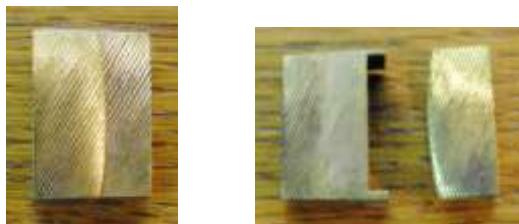


Kissaki:

The blade has a slightly small chu-kissaki with suguha boshi which is ko-maru with a short kaeri.

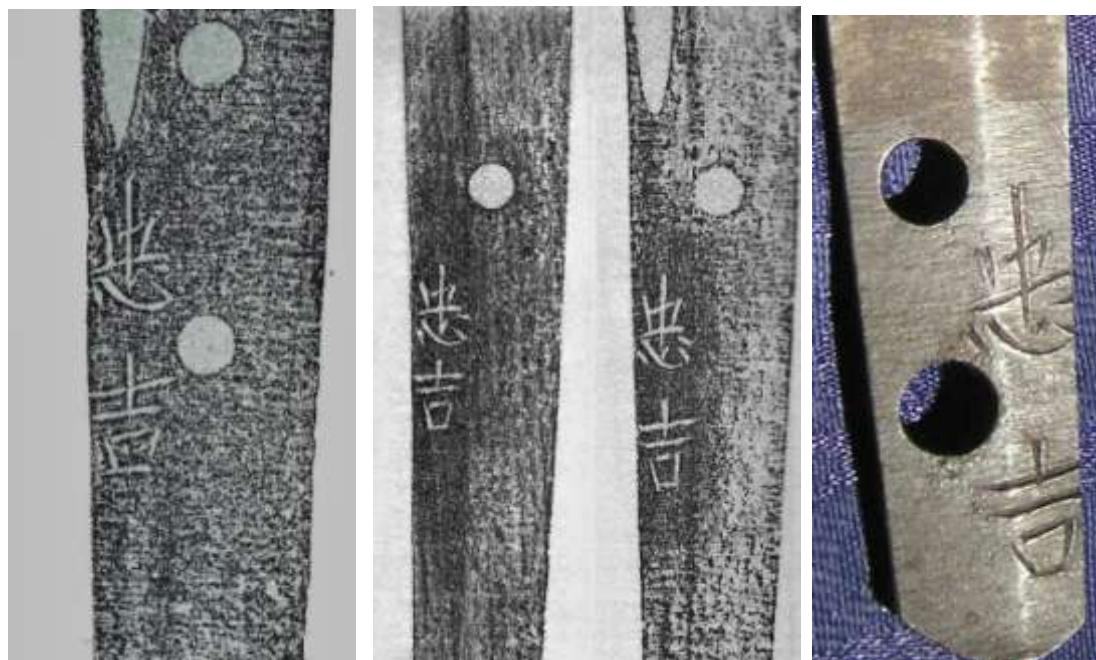


The blade is stored in Shirasaya and has a two piece gold foil covered habaki.



Niji Mei Tadayoshi.

Nijimei Tadayoshi blades are rare. Those that are published are all attributed to the Shodai. There are no examples of a nijimei sandai work, or at least none that I have found. Fujishiro lists nijimei as one of the Shodai's mei variations but does not illustrate it. To date I have only found 3 oshigata. The first illustrated in the second Juyo Zufu and two others in Markus Sesko's Shinto Miekan. All of these date from Keicho 16-17 (1612-1613).



2nd Juyo Zufu detail

Meikan Images

Study blade

At this time Tadayoshi had been back from his first trip to Kyoto after studying under Umetada Myoju, for 14 years. Eguchi Soshin in his definitive work "Hizen-To Handbook" states that he did not immediately on his return start to produce work influenced by his time in Kyoto. He continued to make copies of koto works as requested by his master. Eguchi goes on to say that by the manufacturing period of these blades he had started to move towards the creation of a very tight itame hada which in later years would develop into the iconic Konuka hada of the mainline Hizen school. He also produced an irregular suguha hamon with slight midare undulations a great deal of activity in the form of nie, kinsuji and sunagashi nijuba and kuichigaiba all flowing through a broad and clearly defined belt like nioi-guchi. After his second visit to Kyoto and subsequently receiving the Musashi Daijo title in 1624 both the konuka hada and his more regular suguha so typical of later Hizen smiths began to predominate.

The length of the study blade offers further clues as to why this is more likely to be the work of the first generation than the third. As stated in the description the blade is suriage. In its ubu form the sugata would have been between 56 and 58cm. So it was a long wakizashi. This is further confirmed by the position of the mei. Tadayoshi signed katana tachi-meи and wakizashi and tanto katana-meи. So although this was originally an o-wakizashi bordering on being a short katana the mei suggests it was always intended to be a wakizashi. In 1638 the Tokugawa Bakufu, the military government, passed laws regulating the length of swords carried by members of the Samurai class. Katana were to be no longer than 84.8 cm and wakizashi were restricted to a length of 51.5 cm. This is perhaps why the blade had been shortened. The third generation did not start signing Tadayoshi until the 1660s. If he had made a wakizashi of 56-58cm he would be breaking the law. I believe it is most likely therefore that the blade was made by the earlier smith and subsequently shortened to fall within the Tokugawa edict.

I believe that based on the above we can therefore be reasonably confident that this sword is a nijimeи wakizashi made by the Shodai Tadayoshi in or around Keicho 17.

This being the case we are left with two questions:

Why is it signed nijimeи ?

Why is the workmanship different from both his earlier style and later Tadahiro pieces?

Why Nijimeи?

Most references refer to two famous forms of signature when discussing the Hizen Tadayoshi School

The first the famous gojimeи, 5 character signature Hizen (no) Kuni Tadayoshi 肥前国忠吉

The second the "ju nin" signature Hizen (no) Kuni ju nin Tadayoshi saku. 肥前国住人忠吉作

These are by far the most common and sought after mei of the Shodai so why did he sign blades nijimeи?

Presentation Swords

When researching the original paper it was suggested by several different people that niji mei blades were swords specially commissioned by Nabeshima Naoshige as presentation gifts for visiting Daimyo. The following section explores this a little further.

Records from the earliest times mention that swords were often given as diplomatic gifts to visiting dignitaries. This is confirmed in the publication “Meibutsu treasured Japanese Swords”. It states that during the Muromachi period the specialist in ancient customs, Ise Sogo stated that “signed tachi were suitable as gifts to the Shogun when he visited the houses of Daimyo. Those of the Kyoto smiths amongst whom the Awataguchi were particularly well regarded were especially suitable”

Nabeshima Naoshige was a very successful Daimyo. He invested considerable effort in developing and exporting the crafts and products of his domain. He also wanted to establish a leading and successful school of swordsmiths within the capital town Saga which, according Euguchi in “Hizen Handbook”, was the reason he sent Tadayoshi to Kyoto and then relocated him from Nagase to Saga.

A number of references, The NBTHK, the previously mentioned Mr. Eguchi, Mr. Roger Robertshaw, Mr. Markus Sesko and Mr. Darcy Brockbank all refer to a number of blades which were of superior quality and made by Tadayoshi in the latter part of his career (after he received an honorary title and changed his name to Tadahiro). These were signed omitting his Musashi Daijo title. The blades, known as kenjo mei (献上銘), were made as presentation pieces for the Daimyo to give as gifts to visiting dignitaries. The omission of the honorary title was regarded as an act of respect toward the recipient. The translation of the Juyo paper on Mr. Brockbank’s website www.Yuhindo.com describes the blade as follows:

Keijo: shinogi-zukuri, iori-mune, wide mihaba, shinogi-ji is wide in relation to the mihaba, shallow sori, ō-kissaki

Kitae: very dense ko-itame with plentiful of fine ji-nie and chikei, the steel is clear

Hamon: chū-suguha with a wide, very ko-nie-laden, bright and clear nioiguchi with fine kinsuji and sunagashi

Boshi: sugu with a ko-maru-kaeri

Explanation: This katana shows a very densely forged ko-itame and a chū-suguha with a quite ko-nie-laden and wide nioi-guchi. There are fine kinsuji and sunagashi and the bōshi is sugu with a ko-maru-kaeri, this means we have here the typical characteristics of the smith and of his school. The jiba is bright and clear and the deki is excellent and the blade is also an important reference as its date signature from the second month of Kan’ei nine shows that it is from the 1 generation Tadahiro’s very late active period. (Copyright © Markus Sesko 2018.)

From the sources mentioned above it is clear that after his return from his second stay in Kyoto and before his death in 1632 Tadayoshi was involved in making kenjo mei swords as presentation pieces. These were of superior quality exhibiting finer workmanship in terms of jigane and hamon.

In looking at the description of such a blade above it is interesting to draw a comparison with the juyo description of the nijimei katana published in the second volume of the NBTHK Juyo Zufu. (With thanks to Mr. Markus Sesko for the translation)

The entry states ‘The jigane is more zanguri than usual and shows beautiful chickei, and the hamon is interpreted in a classical manner.

In Nihonto Koza Zanguri is defined as coarse pear skin, i.e. a more pronounced form of nashiji. As mentioned in the original description of the study blade the jihada is extremely tight ko-itame with ji-nie and chickei it is closer to Yamashiro Nashiji in appearance than Konuka hada. The description of the hamon being interpreted in the classical manner may also suggest it harks back to an earlier form seen in the golden age of the mid Kamakura period.

To summarise some of the points regarding presentation works:

It is recorded that Tadayoshi made a number of superior blades in the latter part of his career.

These works were signed differently and the workmanship also differed from what might be regarded as the norm. In particular descriptions refer to a very tight and clear hada, a great deal of bright nie and a lot of activity within a broad nioi-guchi.

The same style of workmanship incorporating the same characteristics are also described in his nijimei works.

To date I have not found any written evidence that nijimei blades were given as gifts by the Nabeshima Daimyo. However the descriptions given of such blades and the workmanship seen in the study blade have a great deal in common with the kenjo mei blades of Tadayoshi's later career.

Why is the workmanship different?

Throughout his early career Tadayoshi produced blades in a number of styles. He made copies of Bizen, Soshu and Shizu work. However the overall style of the school settled on a form that emulated the work of the Yamashiro Rai School. His Niji mei works seem to have the same characteristics as his later career Tadahiro Kenjo- mei blades, a very tight, nie laded jigane and a classic hamon with a great deal of activity. It is stated they were superior works, but what does this mean? They appear to be still copying Yamashiro workmanship but perhaps going a level higher than Rai and attempting to reproduce Awataguchi characteristics. Remembering the quotation from Iso Sogo Awataguchi blades were particularly suitable as diplomatic gifts, would it not be reasonable to make a copy of what was and is regarded as the best quality of Yamashiro blade for presentation to a visiting Daimyo?

Even after Tadayoshi received his honorary title and the true Hizen characteristics of konuka hada with a regular suguba hamon became established his kenjo mei works were more in line with the niji mei examples than his Musashi Daijo Tadahiro pieces. One should also remember that Awataguchi smiths invariably signed Nijimei. Would it not therefore be reasonable when making a copy to do the same? So could it be that the superior pieces made for presentation were attempting to recreate the finest of Yamashiro workmanship?

I must confess that the above hypothesis contains a great deal of speculation. However based on such information as is available and more importantly the features seen in the blade under discussion I believe such speculation to be the result of a logical assessment and progression of the facts available. I am therefore led to the conclusion that this is a nijimei wakizashi made by Shodai Tadayoshi in the Keicho period and made as a special order presentation blade for Nabeshima Naoshige.

The Hakusui attribution

One of the early problems when I first started studying the blade was the Hakusui attribution to the Sandai. It is true that the signatures of Shodai and Sandai are very similar. This combined with the fact The Shodai's Mei had a great deal of variation makes appraisal challenging. However to date I have found no recorded examples of a Sandai blade signed Nijimei. This combined with the factors pointed out above make the attribution to the Shodai by far the most logical conclusion. So why did Mr. Hakusui attribute it to the Sandai? The NBTHK paper is dated to January 26th 1969 and attributes the blade to Tadayoshi. As said in the previous paper the conventional thought at the time was that if a generation wasn't stated it referred to the Shodai. Mr. Hakusui's letter accompanying his paper is dated Feb 20th 1969 which was after the NBTHK attribution. Having discussed the blade with recognised western experts and long term collectors of Hizen work, they agreed that this was most likely the work of the Shodai. I have mentioned previously that the mei of the Shodai and Sandai was very similar. One telling difference was that the Shodai's Yasurimei tended to be Katte-sagari the Sandal's katte-agari. When initially looking at this blade the first thing to strike you is the incredible tightness of the hada and how richly it is populated with ji-nie. Both of these characteristics are described in the work of the Sandai. However they are also described in the Shodai's kenjo work. The nakago is also misleading. When I first examined it I convinced myself the original yasurimei visible were katte-agari, thus suggesting the Sandai. However when studying more closely I believe that in the original form their orientation was more katte-sagari therefore more likely the Shodai.

Unfortunately we will never know Mr. Hakusui's reasons for attributing the blade to the Sandai.

However based on the above I believe that the most likely conclusion remains that this is a work by the Shodai made in the Keicho period as a presentation blade. I believe this is confirmed by the construction the quality of the workmanship and the two character signature all of which support this attribution.

Conclusion:

I must repeat something said in the earlier paper. This is a high class problem. The first and third generation Tadayoshi are regarded as the greatest of the Hizen smiths. Unfortunately the NBTHK papers are the older Kicho white papers which have been superseded by the current system. However the problems which occurred at the NBTHK and necessitated the change of system were some 11 years after these papers were issued. In addition the incorrect papers originated in regional offices and were green papers rather than the basic white seen here. Also this blade was sent from Europe and could therefore only have been assessed in the Tokyo HQ. Based on these points it is not unreasonable to believe the NBTHK papers to be accurate. At some point the blade should be re-appraised under the revised structure. However that is for another day.

There do of course remain many questions regarding this blades journey from being made in the second decade of the 17th century to arriving in a junk shop in the north of England. If this was, as I believe, a presentation blade made for a high ranking visitor to Nabeshima Naoshige how did it gain its kirikomi and how did it end up in poor quality Satsuma rebellion mounts? I am assuming it was brought to Europe at the turn of the 20th century when tourists to the newly opened Japan enthusiastically gathered souvenirs from this mysterious land. Whatever the blades path from Saga to the North England I for one am very glad it made that journey.

In writing the above I have studied a number of reference works and sought the opinion of people far more knowledgeable in this subject than I am. I would like to thank the following for their help and sharing their material and thoughts on the subject:

Mr. Roger Robertshaw Author of The School of Hizen Tadayoshi www.hizento.com

Mr. Darcy Brockbank [Nihonto · Antique Japanese Swords – Yuhindo.com](http://Nihonto.com)

Mr. Markus Sesko [Markus Sesko | Japanese Arms and Armor](http://MarkusSesko.com)

Mr. Fred Weissberg www.nihonto.com

Mr. Clive Sinclair Honorary President of the Token Society of Great Britain.

Reference Material:

Hizento handbook Eguchi Soshin G. Robson translation

Shinto Meikan Markus Sesko

Hizen-To Taikan Dr. Homma (NBTHK)

Juyo Zufu vol.2 NBTHK

Token Magazine NBTHK