

Journey through time

At the end of January, several enthusiastic members of the To-Ken Society, whose lenient bosses or understanding wives had shown gracious generosity on their respective demands of the aforementioned members' postprandial time, had the good fortune to attend an afternoon study session at the British Museum. As some of you, kind readers, might recollect, the Museum is now home to some five to six - some dare speculate, even more - hundred blades, courtesy of the generosity of benefactors such as Robert Wylie Lloyd and sagacious acquisitions by our learned former honorary president and BM curator Victor Harris. Akin to any large institution of its ilk, the Museum's Japanese collection is formidable and impressive, far outstripping the galleries afforded to it by the trustees and management. So, for those avid Nihonto aficionados who covet more exposure to those precious artefacts, we can all but persistently request the authorities to grant us some time with them, and gratefully accept the opportunities to examine and learn from them when they arise.

The session was preambled with the usual courtesies and a brief recapitulation of sword-handling etiquette, as the last thing we wished to inflict upon the ancient blades was rust from careless fingers or exuberant discourse over them. On the contrary, we pledged not to talk over the items and donned the gloves supplied by the Museum so that we could also marvel at the *koshirae* more palpably. A few of the more experienced attendees gingerly assisted with the dismantlement and rearrangement of the blades in chronological order, so that contemporaneous or school-related blades could be examined in succession and close proximity. The participants who helped with that process were impressively nimble, with virtuoso-like alacrity.

Organisationally, we had endeavoured to gratify the educational and visual yearnings of our esteemed scholarly members and newcomers interested in disparate schools and eras, and thus the Museum had prepared for us various Ko-Bizen, Ko-Aoe, Soshu and even a Shinto blade or two. A large proportion of the present blades had been donated by the pre-eminent collector, mountaineer and shrewd businessman R W Lloyd, whose biography we have included as addendum to this short essay.

Personally, the greatest visual and emotional response in your humble correspondent was elicited by the venerable Ko-Bizen and Ko-Aoe blades. Due to the degree of preservation and quality of workmanship, one sometimes forgets that these are items approximately millennium-old, cherished and carefully preserved by numerous generations of brave warriors or powerful daimyo. The opportunity to study one, and even more, hold it in one's hand, is a high honour and rare privilege which in the feudal past of Japan were afforded only to the most distinguished of daimyo guests, bravest among the *hatamoto* or accomplished of *Honami*.

It was with blended trepidation and excitement that I held the first blade, a *zaimai* Ko-Bizen Yoshikane tachi (fig.1), which once belonged to the Mori daimyo family and whose more recent previous custodian had been the renowned Dr Walter Compton. Greeted by a *shirasaya* with *sayagaki* by the NBTHK founder Dr Honma Junji, also known as Kunzan sensei, the observer could readily conjecture that the blade it houses is special, since Kunzan *sayagaki* are rare and conferred mostly to high-end items. The tachi was furthermore awarded Juyo designation by the NBTHK in its 23rd *shinsa* in 1975 and has featured in various books such as the *Tsuchiya Oshigata* and Fujishiro's *Nihon Toko Jiten: Koto Hen*.

The *ubu* blade of over 75 cm *nagasa* possesses a deep *sori* of 2cm, graceful *sugata* and the typical unconstrained flamboyance of early swords. The *koshizori*, *funbari*, straightening *monouchi* with elegant *ko-maru ko-kissaki* clearly screamed Heian to earliest Kamakura, while the darker *jigane*, prominent but not crude *itame-mokume hada* with some very faint *utsuri* above the *ko-sugumidare nie*-interspersed *hamon* clearly indicated Ko-Bizen. There are abundant fine *kinsuji* and delicate

sunagashi in the blade and the nakago bears a small nijime. Due to the overall construction and hososuguha-midare hamon with predominantly streaks of niesuji, and lack of ko-choji or ko-gunome, one could ascribe the blade to Ko-Bizen Yoshikane, even though some scholars deem a Ko-Ichimonji Yoshikane existed too.

The next tachi to behold was a Ko-Bizen Tsunemitsu (fig.2) bequeathed by R W Lloyd. Although osuriage, with 67cm nagasa, its nakago still bears the distinctive blocky mei of the Ko-Bizen mastersmith. Unlike the previously described Yoshikane, this blade actually displayed a rather different workmanship: the hamon had mostly ko-choji and some gunome, with less kinsuji or sunagashi activity, and the hada was a very fine and dense ko-itame. One could understand how this Tsunemitsu was a descendent of Ko-Bizen Masatsune, as the latter forged a more sophisticated, choji-delineated hamon with finer hada than the other famous Ko-Bizen progenitor, Tomonari, with his free-form ko-midare. Interestingly, this blade is still housed in an old shirasaya possibly once owned by a daimyo family or samurai clan. The sayagaki on it is of the daimyo inventory type, with the name of the smith, the blade length but also the monetary value of the blade, which probably had been estimated by a Honami: dai-kinsu nanajū-mai (代金子七拾枚), „value 70 kinsu“, i.e. 70 gold coins. One kinsu was equivalent to one ōban (大判), which on the other hand was worth one ryō (両, 16,5g gold).

Proceeding further, moving clockwise around the table, one would encounter the Ko-Aoe Tsunetsugu tachi (fig.3). The blade shares a common provenance with the Tsunemitsu tachi, both in the daimyo who previously owned it, as one could deduce from the similar sayagaki rendered in the same handwriting, but also being a former R W Lloyd treasured possession. While we unfortunately could not remove the tsuka to view the mei, and did not wish to force it lest we damage the nakago, it is apparently zaimai. The blade has a deep koshizori and ancient looking ko-nie-covered prominent hada with a very active midare hamon. Approximately 70cm long, it has a long graceful sugata, with an obvious tapering. The yakiba is very Ko-Bizen-like: wild, unconstrained, active in ko-nie.

The inventory sayagaki, written by a scribe for the family who owned it previously, bears the following monetary valuation: dai-kinsu gojū-mai (代金子五拾枚), „value 50 kinsu“, i.e. 50 gold coins. That is interesting, as the appraiser thought more highly of the Tsunemitsu previously discussed than this blade made by the Ko-Aoe smith! If this tachi is by the shodai Tsunetsugu, that would have been rather ironic as he was also a Gobankaji, i.e. one of the sword-forging instructors of emperor Gotoba. He created the meibutsu Juzumaru-Tsunetsugu (数珠丸恒次), which is one of the so-called tenka-goken (天下五剣, the “five finest swords under the heaven”).

The Ko-Aoe school was represented by yet another eminent blade: an ubu zaimai Sueyuki tachi (fig.4). This blade passed the 26th Juyo shinsa in 1979 under the ownership of Randolph B Caldwell, a well-known American stockbroker and sword collector. Acquired by the Museum in 2002 with funds from the Brooke Sewell Bequest and the Art Fund, this is a remarkably imposing and elegant 78cm-long tachi by an extremely rarely encountered Ko-Aoe smith. The deep koshizori, funbari and ko-kissaki point to the period of manufacture, but the hadatachi jigane, patches of large sumihada, ko-midare and hososuguha hamon with kinsuji and ashiiri are ostensible Aoe features. The 23-cm-long nakago, patinated with old age, has a thickly chiselled but smallish mei on the ura side, which is another Aoe characteristic.

The blade has seen combat, as evidenced by the two kirikomi it still proudly bears, and the fact that it has been rather polished down. Nevertheless, it has been reasonably well preserved in its grandiose shape, unaltered length, with intact mei and nakago, and today rests within a shirasaya with Dr Honma sayagaki.

Having been regaled with some ancient Bizen steel, we could next look at a couple of later, Soden and Soshu blades from the R W Lloyd bequest. One of them was an osuriage katana (fig.5), attributed to Chogi (Nagayoshi), the master Soden smith. The blade period of manufacture could indeed be narrowed down to Nanbokucho in lieu of its masculine shape with large kissaki. Unfortunately, the old polish could not reveal many activities in the hamon but the outline of the hardened edge has the clear choji-gunome mix that typifies Nagayoshi's forging style. In few places there are mimigata (ear)-like formations, which probably give reason for the attribution. Furthermore, there is an old, polished down Soshu-style horimono of a dragon with vajra on the omote and a bonji on the ura. The inventory sayagaki mentions the length, of c.72cm, and the value of 150 gold coins.

Side by side with it, there was a 70cm-long Shizu-Kaneuji attributed blade, with an active hamon, but not quite as vibrant hataraki as one would anticipate. Its state of polish was also not particularly conducive to a full assessment, but the blade had a kinpun mei attribution to Kaneuji and a chiselled tameshigiri test. It might well have been a genuine Kaneuji, but at least a shiage polish would have been necessary to adduce vibrancy to its surface.

There were also some conundra among the displayed items, which tested our kantei skills. Not having seeing the blades beforehand, when choosing the selection to view, we hoped for a Koto Yamashiro blade and thought we had found it in a tanto catalogued as Kuniyuki. We had assumed it might be a Rai blade but it turned out to be a later Yamato Kuniyuki (fig.6), perhaps attributable to the Bungo Takada school. It added variety to our selection and was accompanied by pleasant late-Edo koshirae.

There was another curious blade, which was catalogued as Kagemitsu. It had a long, slender sugata with a not overly Osafune-like hamon and deep koshizori. It was housed in gunto koshirae. It was nearly impossible to attribute it appropriately due to the state of preservation and mirror-like polish, which was highly inappropriate to the blade.

Finally, to round of matters, there stood a Kotetsu-signed blade with a confidently rendered dragon horimono donated by R W Lloyd. The workmanship with larger gunome-notare hamon broadly matched the Nagasone Okisato stereotype, in so far as we could elicit from the polish, and the dragon had been carved skilfully. As most of you might know, it is said that scholars of Kotetsu tend to look at the mei first and foremost and then focus on the workmanship. Some debate ensued about the blade, as Nagasone Okisato Kotetsu is an oft-forged name, with plethora of gimei around. Is the mei (fig.7) genuine or not? Well, we shall let you decide, our dear reader!

Fig.1 Ko-Bizen Yoshikane



Source: NBTHK, British Museum

Yoshikane is a (line of) Ko-Bizen smith(s), and some of the meikan describe a Bizen Ichimonji smith as well. Yoshikane left a comparatively large number of extant works. It is said that Ko-Bizen Yoshikane tempers hamon based on ko-midare, utsuri is not conspicuous, his workmanship looks more classical and his signature consists of two small characters. It is also said that Ko-Ichimonji Yoshikane tempers hamon mixed with distinct choji, midare-utsuri appears on the ji, his workmanship looks more refined and his signature consists of large characters. However, there is furthermore a theory that the former style is representative of the early years and the latter, of the late years, of workmanship of the same smith. The large style signature is sometimes rendered as *niji-me*i (two kanji signature) and sometimes also includes the kanji for *saku* ('made by'). Yoshikane's jihada is usually clearly visible, but occasionally it could show a tighter kitae (finer hada). His hamon is usually *suguha*, or ko-midare mixed with ko-gunome, and could be described as an elegant old style, with a tight or dense *sugu-nioiguchi* mixed with *ashi* and *yo*.

Old texts include references to the following smiths, according to research by Markus Sesko in *Swordsmiths of Japan*:

- Yoshikane (吉包), active in the Jōryaku era (1077-1081), was a Ko-Bizen school smith. According to written tradition, he was the grandson of Sukekane (助包), who was supposedly active around the Chōkyū era (1040-1044). Old sword documents date Yoshikane also around Jí'an (1021-1024), Chōryaku (1037-1040), Eishō (1046-1053), or Tengi (1053-1058) era.
- There was a Yoshikane active in the Genryaku era (1184-1185), who signed the same way (吉包) and had the honorary title Sakon Shōgen (左近将監). This Yoshikane's blades have a rather slender *sugata* with a *suguha*-

chō hamon mixed with some midare in nie-deki. The signature is small and the character for “kane” (包) is rather angular.

- There was a Ko-Bizen Yohikane active in Antei (安貞, 1227-1229) who, according to tradition, was the son Nagakane (永包). It is likely that it was him who was the grandson of the Genryaku-era (1184-1185) Sukekane (助包) and not the above listed Jōryaku-era Yoshikane. Confusingly, he is also listed as son of the Genryaku-era Yoshikane and as student of Koresuke (是助). Blades from the Antei to the Kenchō era (建長, 1249-1256) are attributed to this Yoshikane. His signature is noticeable bigger, his tachi have a wider mihaba and a kissaki which tends to ikubu, the hamon is a ko-midare mixed with ko-chōji and the jiba is nie-laden.

The British Museum Yoshikane has a mei which is smaller in size, and the workmanship is rendered in ko-nie. Overall, the style resembles the uncontrived approach of the Ko-Bizen founders, as the Christies catalogue of 1992 pertinently describes it: “There is a general restraint and orderliness that is rare in the works of other Ko-Bizen smiths such as Masatsune and Tomonari, even though the strong o-mokume / itame hada in this example does resemble the forging patterns of Tomonari. The elegant effect of the tempering pattern with a moderate slant is emphasized by the general feeling of lightness created by the two bo-hi extending deeply into the tang.”



Source: British Museum

Fig.2 Ko-Bizen Tsunemitsu



Source: British Museum

Old texts include references to the following smiths, according to research by Markus Sesko in *Swordsmiths of Japan*:

- TSUNEMITSU (恒光), Jōtoku (承德, 1097-1099), Bizen – “Tsunemitsu” (恒光), Ko-Bizen school, according to tradition the son of Tsuneyasu (常保) who in turn was supposedly the son of the 2nd gen. Masatsune (正恒). This approach assumes that the 1st gen- Masatsune was active around Ei'en (永延, 987-989)
- TSUNEMITSU (恒光), Kōwa (康和, 1099-1104), Bizen – “Tsunemitsu” (恒光), Ko-Bizen school, according to tradition the grandson of Masatsune (正恒). This bases on the traditions which state that the 1st gen. Masatsune was active around Ei'en (永延, 987-989) but it is very likely that Tsunemitsu was active in the early Kamakura period, maybe around Kangi (寛喜, 1229-1232), from this point of view it is possible that he was the grandson of Masatsune, following the approach that Masatsune was actually active around Genryaku (元暦, 1184-1185), his jigane is a somewhat standing-out ko-itame mixed with mokume and ji-nie, the hamon is a suguha-chō with ko-midare and ko-chōji whereas the yakihaba shows ups and downs, some blades show a conspicuous amount of chōji, the more nie-laden blades are attributed to his earlier active period, jōjō-saku ©
- TSUNEMITSU (恒光), Hōgen (保元, 1156-1159), Bizen – “Tsunemitsu” (恒光), Ko-Bizen school
- TSUNEMITSU (恒光), Shōō (正応, 1288-1293), Bizen – “Tsunemitsu” (恒光), there exists a date signature of the third year of Shōō (正応, 1290), jōjō-saku

Fig.3 Ko-Aoe Tsunetsugu



Source: British Museum

Old texts include references to the following smiths, according to research by Markus Sesko in *Swordsmiths of Japan*:

- TSUNETSUGU (恒次), Jōgen (承元, 1207-1211), Bitchū – “Tsunetsugu” (恒次), Ko-Aoe school, he was goban-kaji of the fifth month and bore the honorary title Bitchū no Kami (備中守), slender mihaba, deep koshizori, ko-kissaki, funbari, i.e. a tachi-sugata of the early Kamakura period, the jigane is a dense itame with ji-nie all over the blade which appears as chirimen-hada, also sumigane appears, the hamon is a ko-midare mixed with ko-chōji in nie-deki, the bōshi is midare-komi and ends as yakitsume or has a very short kaeri, he signed the character for “tsugu” somewhat smaller than that for “Tsune,” he is considered as maker of the meibutsu Juzumaru-Tsunetsugu (数珠丸恒次)
- TSUNETSUGU (恒次), Tenpuku (天福, 1233-1234), Bitchū – “Tsunetsugu” (恒清), Ko-Aoe school, according to tradition the son of Yasutsugu (康次), ko-itame with ji-nie and jifu, the hamon is a quite nie-laden suguha mixed with ko- midare and/or ko-chōji in ko-nie-deki, the bōshi is sugu and has a very short kaeri, the signature is chiselled on the haki-omote side which is atypical for Ko-Aoe
- TSUNETSUGU (恒次), Kōchō (弘長, 1261-1264), Bitchū – “Tsunetsugu” (恒次), Ko-Aoe school, some say it was him who made the meibutsu Juzumaru-Tsunetsugu (数珠丸恒次)
- TSUNETSUGU (恒次), Bunpō (文保, 1317-1319), Bitchū – “Bitchū no Kuni Aoe-jū Tsunetsugu” (備中国青江住恒次), “Bitchū no Kuni Masu no Shō-jū Sahyōe no Jō Tsunetsugu” (備中国万壽庄住左兵衛尉恒次), “Bitchū-shū Sahyōe no Jō Tsunetsugu saku” (備中州左兵衛尉恒次作), Aoe school, honorary title Sahyōe no Jō (左兵衛尉), according to tradition the son of Yukitsugu (行次), we know blades from the Shōwa (正和, 1312-1317) to the Gentoku era (元徳, 1329-1331), dense itame mixed with ō-hada, fine ji-nie and jifu, the hamon is a suguha-chō to slightly undulating notare in ko-nie-deki with some chōji, ashi and yō, the nioiguchi is rather tight, the bōshi is sugu or some notare-komi and has a ko-maru-kaeri, the signature is executed on the haki-omote side, ō-wazamono, jōjō-saku

Fig.4 Ko-Aoe Sueyuki



Source: NBTHK, British Museum

Old texts include references to the following smiths, according to research by Markus Sesko in *Swordsmiths of Japan*:

- Sueyuki (末行) who worked primarily in the Jōō era (貞応, 1222-1224), in the Aoe Bitchū area. He signed “Sueyuki” (末行) and belonged to the Ko-Aoe school. According to tradition, he is deemed to be the son of the Genryaku-era (元暦, 1184-1185) or the Kenryaku-era (建暦, 1211-1213) smith Yasutsugu (康次)
- Sueyuki (末行), another Bitchū smith who also signed “Sueyuki” (末行) but worked in Bun’ei (文永, 1264-1275) era.

Typical characteristics are the graceful sugata, the hada and also chiselling the mei on the opposite side of Heian / Kamakura smiths.

Fig.5 Soden Bizen Nagayoshi (Chogi)



Source: NBTHK, British Museum

Fig.6 Yamato no kami Kuniyuki



Source: NBTHK, British Museum

Fig.7 Kotetsu omote and ura



Source: NBTHK, British Museum
ROBERT WYLIE LLOYD (1868-1958)

Accomplished mountaineer, entomologist, Japanese sword collector and former chairman of Christie's, he was born in relative poverty in Lancashire and grew up in Clapham. R W Lloyd had little formal education but he built a successful business career through the publishing subsidiary of Nathaniel Lloyd & Co. According to the British Museum, he "bequeathed his collection of mountaineering books to the National Library of Scotland and his collection of Swiss prints and pre-1885 English watercolours to the British Museum, along with his Japanese swords and sword furniture. His drawings by Joseph Mallord William Turner are superlative."

"Lloyd was born on 17 March 1868, at Oswaldtwistle, Lancs., the grandson of Nathaniel Lloyd, a calico printer and bleacher. His family life was unhappy; his parents separated, and Lloyd and his brother were brought up in somewhat reduced circumstances by his mother, to whom he was deeply attached. In a revealing moment, he once remarked that it had given him, as a boy, a shock to see his mother having to economise and he early determined to retrieve her fortunes and set her up in comfort. He had just succeeded in establishing himself satisfactorily, in his early twenties, when his mother died, and the blow was one he never forgot. From then on, instead of being able to work for another's welfare, he simply concentrated on extending his business activities and it was from this concentration that there arose that dour strain and vein of ruthlessness in his character that struck many who encountered him. That he tended to drive a hard bargain, that he liked his money's worth, will not be denied; but there were other facets to his character not always seen by the world. He had helped one or two young men financially at the universities; he assisted with funds several mountaineering expeditions of note ; and, provided his terms were acceded to, a number of institutions benefited from him, particularly the Royal Entomological Society of London, of which he had been a Fellow for over seventy years and of which he was Vice-President on several occasions. For many years he was Treasurer of the old Mount Everest Committee and its later transformations, and he was energetic in raising money for the Everest expedition of 1953. As Treasurer he could be difficult to manage and it was said (and it rather pleased him) that his assiduity in raising funds for Everest was only matched by his extreme reluctance to part with them. Lloyd visited the Alps first in 1896 and he was elected to the Alpine Club in December 1901, after being refused in 1900 on the grounds of insufficient climbing qualification. In the service of the Club he acted as Auditor from 1909-12; member of Committee from 1913-15. "



Excerpted from the obituary in the Alpine Journal vol63, 1958 and supplemented

WALTER AMES COMPTON (1911-1990)

Walter Compton, a medical doctor, prominent pharmaceutical researcher and head of healthcare-product manufacturer Miles Laboratories, was a high-profile collector of Japanese swords and related artefacts. His interest in Japanese swords began when he read about them in a boy's magazine when he was 14 years old. While a student at Princeton University in the early 1930's he bought his first samurai blade for \$6 in a Chinatown laundry in New York. He collected Japanese swords for 50 years and continued to buy swords until shortly before his death in 1990. Dr Compton famously acquired a kokuho (national treasure) Saburo Kunimune tachi which once belonged to a Kagoshima-prefecture shrine (Terukini Jinja) and returned it to Japan in 1953, cementing his reputation as a life-long friend of the nation.

In a research career that spanned nearly half a century, Dr Compton was noted for his roles in a number of pharmaceutical and health-care advances, among them the development of the first multivitamin and tests for the effects of diabetes. Dr Compton was educated at Princeton University and Harvard Medical School, and he interned at Billings Hospital in Chicago. While in medical school he was a summer intern with Miles Laboratories in Elkhart, his hometown in Indiana, and he longed to return to the world of invention after some discouraging experiences with some medical equipment. So he soon returned to Miles Laboratories, overseeing the company's research and development efforts in the 1940's and 1950's. In 1964 he became president and chief executive, and he was appointed chairman in 1973. On his retirement in 1981, he was made honorary chairman.



Source: NY times (Oct 1990), Christie's (May 1992)