

## Real-Life kantei-of swords , part 11: A small mystery revisited.

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### INTRODUCTION

In a previous article(1) we described a small mystery about a copper *tsuba* that belonged to the late Col. Caldwell (see Figure 1).

This *tsuba* was described by Col. Caldwell in his article about *tsuba* in Arts of Asia and reprinted in the Newsletter of the JSS-US [(2) and (3)].

The mysteries of this *tsuba* are;

**First**, no expert in Japan at the time (in the sixties) seemed to know when the *tsuba* was made or to what school it should be attributed. Caldwell proposed in his article that the *tsuba* was a traveling *tsuba*, which was fitted to a *yari* and used in the long procession of *Daimyo* to Edo. The purpose was to reduce the weight of the *yari* being carried. This suggests that he considered the *tsuba* to be from the Edo Era.

Caldwell stated the following in his article: (2,3) "This work is a lovely example of a contributory school of art making: i.e., that of mirror makers.....

...When this *tsuba* was purchased in London at auction no one could classify it as to origin and purpose. It remained a "copper *tsuba*" no doubt. Even when I took it to Tokyo where there was much head-shaking and blank stares. As usual no one would admit "we don't know" only *Kagemishi, Muromachi* . "But why is it so light, hollow and of Ro" "it cannot be used in battles, it's too light" , "Ah , So ". Finally, a consensus was worked out that seemed to please everybody. When on the march, a heavy Iron *tsuba* added to the weight of a heavy *Nagamaki* or *Yari* at the end of a nine or eight *shaku* pole, which became extremely tiring at the end of a long day's march. In addition to the *tsuba*, a rain resistant covering had to encase the weapon at it's more vulnerable extremity. This would be heavily waxed paper or brocade and accumulated moisture and weight as the day wore on. As a substitute to the heavy iron *tsuba* and weather proofing, this hollow copper *tsuba* was substituted during

the long march. Later in the EDO Jidai this type of *tsuba* became standard on the long trips from home base to the dreaded stay in *EDO* or *Sankin Dodai* as it was known. These "traveling *Tsuba*" became standard equipment in parades and other official displays. In Ukiyoe prints of "marches" these covers can be seen.

The next year these *tsuba* begin appearing in the *Juyo Annals*. These travelling *tsuba* did not have the strength of iron to insure a long survival life and therefore are relatively scarce."

The dimensions of the *tsuba* are given in the Caldwell article as a Diameter of 90mm, a Thickness of 6.6 mm, and Weight of 113gm. The *tsuba* is constructed with two copper plates clamped together by a *hollow dote mimi*. It is interesting that in the same Caldwell article he presents on page C13 the hypothesis that "an optimum range for size is 70 to 80 mm , 4 to 6 mm for thickness and 100 to 150 grams on weight". According to this, the subject *tsuba* is not light, but may be fragile due to the fact that it is made of layered copper plates held together by the rim.

**Second**, the *tsuba* was also included in a book of pieces from the Caldwell collection (4) and is described as made in the Fujiwara/early Kamakura period. As explained in reference (1) it is possible that the NBTHK attribution to this *tsuba* is the *tokubetsu kicho* paper 35 issued in Showa 55, and not as stated in the book, the *tokubetsu kicho* paper issued in Showa 44. The *tokubetsu kicho* paper 35 refers to a *muromachi kanagu*.

It is possible that *tsuba* like this were made in the Fujiwara period since *yamagane* and copper was used in Japan from earliest times. It came from China via Korea and was the product used by Mirror makers *Kagamishi*, who started out using bronze, but also used *yamagane*. Early *Tachi Tsuba* were also made by *Kagamishi*. These were either cast in *Yamagane* with typical patterns of mirrors or little other decoration, or they were created by layering thin plates of cast or stamped copper held together by the *Fukurin*/Rim.

**Third**, we found examples of similar *tsuba* in other references. As an example there is a similar *tsuba* in a Torigoe book (5) which he places the age of construction as late *muromachi* but does not attribute it to a school.

In this article we will present, several other examples of similar *tsuba* and try to conjecture on what they may or may not be.

### **EXAMPLES OF SIMILAR TSUBA**

**Example One** - Figure 1 presents the original Caldwell *tsuba*. According to Caldwell, as mentioned above, experts in Japan were puzzled because the *tsuba* was of copper and so too light and weak to be used in combat. We assume here that to be used in combat means to be used to deflect sword blows, that is, to protect the hand from swords cuts. We are not sure if this is convincing. Iron *Sukashi Tsuba* are also very light and supposedly used to deflect sword blows. These are also alleged to be the *Tsuba* that were preferred in the late *muromachi* and early *edo* period when combats where still being fought. This example has a hollow *dote mimi* or *chu ku dote mimi*. (See illustration below (figure 3) taken from reference (6).)

An identical (or perhaps the same *tsuba*) is illustrated in the Bushido magazine (1980) volume 2 page 14 as part of an exhibition promoted by the NBTHK. The caption on the figure reads that the *tsuba* is *muromachi kagamishi* (mirror-maker).

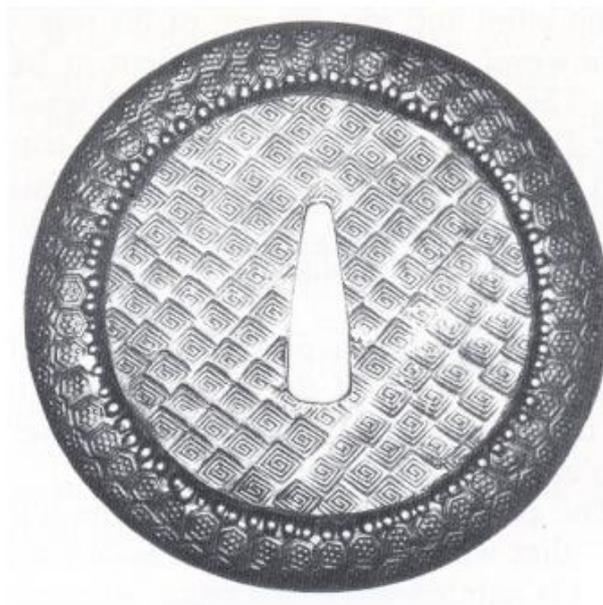


Figure 1- Caldwell tsuba (References 1, 2 and 3)

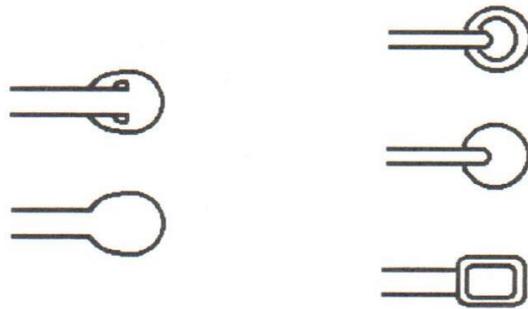


Figure 2-Types of Fukurin

**In the above illustration the three figures at the right illustrates different types of Dote mimi. The top figure on the right is the hollow dote mimi. (chu ku dote mimi)**

**Example Two** - Figure 3 is a similar *tsuba* found in a book by Torigoe, reference (5), page 376. This *tsuba* is described as late *muromachi* , made of *yamagane* , but it is not attributed to any author. The *tsuba* is described as *michinoku* , that is from *Mutsu* province. It's decoration is described as different kinds of crests (*mon*). It's *fukurin* is described as *tomofukurin* which means that the *fukurin* is made of the same material as that main plate, in this case *yamagane* (non refined copper). The construction of this *tsuba*, that is, if this *tsuba* is cast or layered plates is not described, but it looks to be the same construction as the previous one.



Figure 2- Torigoe book *tsuba* (Reference 5)

**Example Three** - This example appeared in a sale in Paris (8) and is lot 200 of that sale. This *tsuba* was attributed tentatively to the *momoyama* period. This *tsuba*, has a slot for the *kodzuka*, that in our opinion was added later and suggests that the *tsuba* was used, if not in fights but mounted to a *wakizashi* or *katana*. Therefore it is not merely a traveling *tsuba*. The gold figures shown in figures 3b are earlier additions since the slot for the *kozuka* perforate them partially. The diameter of this *tsuba* is 7.5cm

Once again, the construction appears to be plates held together by rim. However, as with the other *tsuba*, it is not light, so there was little advantage, as suggested by Caldwell, in swapping it out from one made of Iron. It may have been decorative.



Figure 4a and 4b (See reference 8)

**Example Four** - Figure 5 shows a *tsuba* almost identical to the one found in the article by Caldwell (2, 3). It was extracted from an article (8) that was part of a series published by the NBTHK and written by Fukushi Shigeo.

This *tsuba* is said to be made of *Yamagane* (non-refined cooper) and is attributed to *Ko-Kaneiyae* school. It is decorated with *Uzumaki Mon* all over and it has a (*chu ku dote mimi*) that is, a hollow *dote mimi* (see illustration above Figure 2). It is finished with lacquer (*urushi*) and the *tsuba* appears to be of plate construction similar to the other ones. The attribution to *Ko-Kaneiyae*

school is not explained by the author in this part of the article series. Fukushi says that this example was introduced just to show to the readers what is *yamagane* .

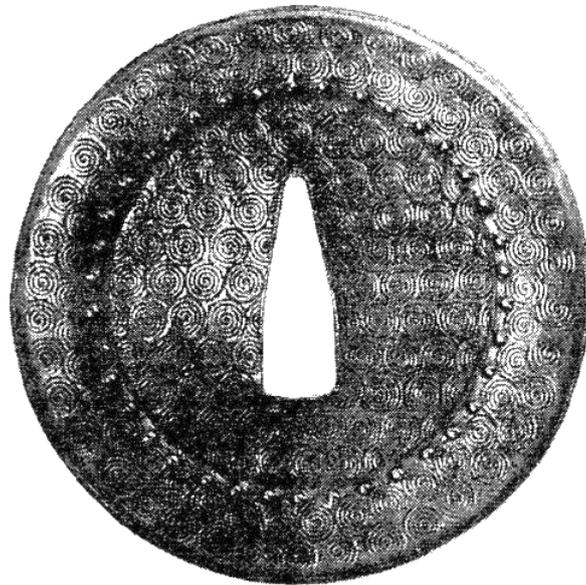


Figure 5 - *Yamagane tsuba* (reference 9)

We have now presented four similar examples of copper tsuba, however, all have different attributions. Caldwell (2,3) attributes our subject *tsuba* to the Edo period. Patrick Sys (4), apparently based on a NBTHK *shinsa* result, attributes it to *Fujwara/early Kamakura* period. Torigoe(5) to *muromachi* period. Fukushi(9) to Ko-Kaneie school and *muromachi* period and Tessier Sarrou & Associé (8) to the *Momoyama* period. It is no wonder that we are curious about if something more definitive can be said.

We searched auction catalogues, many books and on-line sites for similar *tsuba*. Unfortunately, after examining more than a thousand examples we found only two other *tsuba* that are similar to the four types described above. They are similar only in the use of elaborate repeated patterns and are included here for completeness and as an example of other rare types of *tsuba*. These two *tsuba* are not constructed of copper or *yamagane*, but have similar designs made up of repeated patterns on the front and back of the *tsuba* and lack *seppa dai*. Repeated patterns are also seen in the previous four examples.

**Example Five** - The *tsuba* illustrated in reference (figure 6 – reference 10) is lacquered, and has a repeated pattern on both sides inlaid into the lacquer. The pattern appears to be a design of an *awabi* (A kind of shell fish). The catalogue attributes this *tsuba* to *Somada*. But this is not very helpful because the so called *Somada* School is not very well known. We reproduce Below are some comments about *tsuba* published by F. Karel Wiest in the magazine *Bushido* volume 2 number 4 page 33. The comments, according to F. Karrel Wiest are "from the book *Toso Kodogu Koza* by Sato and Wakayama in their discussion of lacquered fittings."

"Also, though there are very few existing examples, there are some sword guards that are similar to *maki-e tsuba* ..... Almost all of them are unsigned. In fact, none with signature have ever been found. It is thought that the artist is Somada Mitsumasa." This is similar to our previous examples, since none of them are signed either.

The attribution to the 19<sup>th</sup> century follows from the attribution to Somada. This is because the *tsuba* illustrated by Karel Wiest has a decoration that appeared only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as attested to by other signed and dated examples.



Figure 6 - An early 19<sup>th</sup> century *tsuba* - reference (10)

### Example Six – Another patterned *tsuba*.

The *tsuba* in figure 7 is made of iron without a hollow *mimi*. The design on both sides is identical and the respective pattern makes it similar to the one we examined in example five. The design is of *awabi* (a kind of shell fish) inlaid into black lacquer. It is not clear when this *tsuba* was made and to what school it belongs.

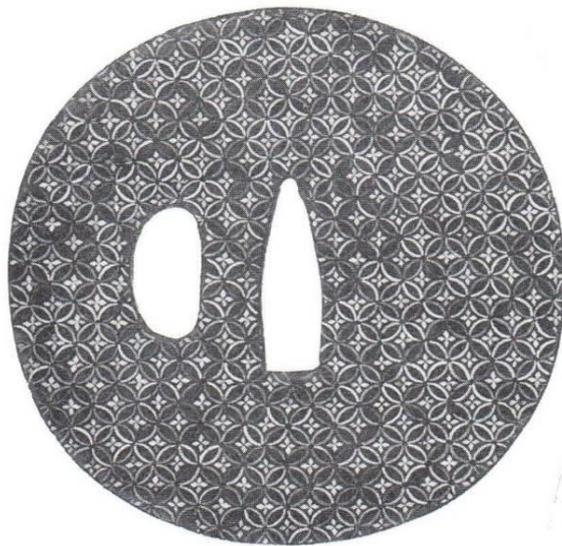


Figure 7-Tsuba from reference (11) page 82.

### CONCLUSION

In this article we described four *tsuba* that are difficult to date and attribute to a school. What we observe is that these *tsuba* have the following things in common.

- a) Both sides of the *tsuba* have similar patterns, which are elaborately engraved. Originally they had no *hitsuana*, which if present was a later addition.
- b) The *tsuba* have no *seppa dai*. The following comment about the lack of *seppa dai* can be found in the article by Caldwell: "A great master said, 'If it doesn't have a *seppa dai* it isn't a *tsuba*.' It is a hunk of decorated metal to extract money from a tourist in Yokohama. ". We think this is an interesting yet extreme comment valid perhaps to *Edo jidai tsuba*.

- c) All the *tsuba* have repeated motifs related to shell fish, simple water patterns or Family *Mon*.
- d) The first four examples are made of copper, and appear to be of plate construction held together by a hollow rim.

We also believe these *tsuba* cannot be attributed to *kagamishi* (mirror-makers) because they have two sides which are identical and do not use typical mirror-maker patterns. Also, the hypothesis that these *tsuba* were used to lighten the weight of a Yari or heavy *Nagamaki*, raised by Caldwell is weak and not well justified in his article. The *tsuba* are neither light, nor commonly found, as you would expect based on his hypothesis.

The attribution to *ko-kaneiye* (9) is also not explained and seems doubtful. In fact an attribution to the Nobuiye school would be more acceptable considering that many *tsuba* from that school have a repeated decoration on both sides, such as the repetitive *Nikko* pattern, and have no *seppa dai*.

We also question the comment that these *tsuba* are too fragile for use in battle or sword fighting and would not adequately protect the hand. In an article by Terutaka Kawabata (7) he mentions that the use of *tsuba* was not designed to protect the hand or fend off blows. So the weakness of them is irrelevant. Also if you look at the body of evidence on what types of *tsuba* were used during the *senjoku Jidai* (warring period), and examine the pictures of the warriors swords turned over to temples, you will see that many of the swords did not use *tsuba*, but had *aikuchi* mounts and many also used leather *tsuba*. Also, the *sukashi tsuba* apparently started appearing in the late *muromachi* or early momoyama period and it is questionable if they were used in Battle at all. If you look at early *tosho* and *katchushi tsuba*, which appear in old paintings of warriors, you find most of them are thin solid plate iron (hammered) construction and may have small *sukashi* carve-outs (*ko-sukashi*). This would be typical of the iron *tsuba* used during the warring era of early *muromachi* and *senjoku jidai*. (Also, they could be mass produced, which is important feature for weaponry). We think being concerned about the fragility of the *tsuba* means it was either for decoration or purposes other than defending the hand.

We acknowledge that the purpose and use of *tsuba* is a controversial topic with several hypotheses raised over the years. Conventionally it is accepted that *tsuba* have the following purposes:

- 1) To protect the hand from blows of other swords. This is considered the purpose of the *tsuba*, for example as stated by Caldwell (2). He says on page C-6 of (2): 'Is this a *tsuba*? Silly as it sounds it is a legitimate query. Would I be comfortable going into battle with this to protect my right hand? A great master said, "If it doesn't have a *seppa dai* it isn't a *tsuba*." (It is a hunk of decorated metal to extract money from a tourist in Yokohama.)
- 2) To assist the *Bushi* to take the sword out of the *saya* with his left thumb.
- 3) To stop the hand from slipping from the *tsuka* to the blade, thus avoiding a severe cut.
- 4) As a decorative piece to balance the sword.

As we explained in this article many of the conclusions about these four *tsuba*, in our opinion, should be taken with care. However, the conclusion we reached, we are sad to say, is that we don't know what these unusual and rare *tsuba* were used for nor when they were made.

**Acknowledgment:** We would like to thank Fred Weisberg for assisting us in the edition of this comment. Any errors in the comment should however be attributed to us.

## REFERENCES

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