

THE TO-KEN SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN

for the Study and Preservation of Japanese Swords and Fittings



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PROGRAMME 86

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25 Dorville Crescent
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NEXT MEETING

Monday 7th July, 7.30 p.m. at the Princess Louise, High Holborn. To get there: underground to Holborn, turn west, cross Kingsway and the P.L. is 50 yds down on the left-hand side.

The May meeting was covered by Clive Sinclair and his report reads as follows:-

The May meeting of the Society was graced with the presence of Mr. John Harding on one of his trips from Japan. He took over the sparsely attended meeting (only about 14 members showed up) and turned, what was shaping up to be the biggest non-event of all time, into an interesting and informative couple of hours. John brought with him a Katana blade in shira-saya, which he asked everyone present to study with a view to discussing it later; this we all did. The following was my assessment of the sword.

The overall length of the sword was about 30" from mune-machi to the end of the kissaki. It had a good, though modern polish and all the details of the blade were apparent. There was a single hi running up to the kissaki, past the yokote. My first impression, because of the size, feel and shape was that it was a shinto blade. Closer examination, however, revealed a lot more. The hada was mokume and there was a strong uncompromising suguha hamon with certain irregularities. Some of the grain was starting to slightly open up and this indicated more age than my first impression conveyed. Those slight marks, however, were incidental and did not detract in any way from the quality and beauty of the blade. The absolute give away as to the age of the blade and the final nail in my shinto sword theory, was the presence of utsuri. I decided then that the sword must be koto and of very good quality.

My scrutiny, having worked its way the length of the sword, arrived at the kissaki. It was a case of even John Harding cannot win them all, as there was definitely something wrong at the kissaki. The boshi was much weaker than the rest of the hamon and the entire point had a bluish tinge to it. The boshi itself was of a completely different colour to the tempering on the rest of the blade, in fact the whole of the kissaki was a bit of a worry. I decided that in all probability it had been reshaped and then requenched (i.e. a new boshi had been put on).

The nakago was the last part of the sword that I studied. As previously stated, it was mune-mei and it had a rich dark patina. It had three mekugi-ana and was o-suriage, the bottom mekugi-ana being cut in half at the time of shortening.

I was the first to look at the sword and after everyone else had had their look, I went back for another look at that kissaki. I was none the wiser, the second look did not make me any more sure of my reshaping/requenching theory.

John then asked for any comments and I said more or less as above, adding that I believed it to be 14th century Sosho-Den. Colin Nunn came up with a theory that was at considerable variance with mine, but the rest of the members appeared to have been struck dumb and did not even wish to hazard a guess at even age or school.

John then proceeded to tell us about the sword. It was indeed 14th century and of the highest quality. It was by Kanenaga of Tegai school of Yamoto. The presence of utsuri indicated that the school had to be Koto as the later shinto and shin-shinto smiths were unsuccessful in their attempts to produce it. Then followed a discussion (more of a lecture really) on utsuri and how it was produced. With the aid of a blackboard John demonstrated how the martensite in the core would come to the surface during the quenching process. He also drew diagrams of four types of utsuri.

Some discussion followed as to the possibility that this sword had been requenched as the presence of Mizukage (which I had failed to notice) would seem to indicate. John pointed out that the quality of the hamon would have been lost in the re-quenching process and that the Mizukage was simply caused by the angle that the sword had been plunged into the water, on its original quenching. Therefore the presence of Mizukage does not necessarily mean re-quenching has taken place, and other points should also be looked for.

John's explanation for the strangeness of the kissaki was as simple as it was surprising. It had, he thought, been put into a fire, probably by a samurai, ignorant of the damage he

was causing, intent on spit roasting a chicken or something. This, I suppose is possible, but I prefer to think of other explanations of how it could have found its way into fire. Apparently nothing surprises John Harding any more.

With uncharacteristic frankness, John went on in this vein to tell how a false boshi can be put onto a sword, in a painstaking process that involves punching tiny pin pricks in order to simulate Nie. In John's opinion there are no limits of skulduggery that the Japanese will not sink to in order to satisfy a hungry market. It was John's opinion, that with an unmolested kissaki this sword would have been rated Juyo.

I think all those present found this talk very informative. John undertook to provide the members with this little teach-in at very short notice and I am sure we were all very grateful to him. I was disappointed that so few people were present to pick his very knowledgeable brains, especially as it is very rare that he is so communicative, and next time he is here, he might spend the whole evening telling us all what a load of rubbish our little treasures are.

N.B. Any mistakes in here are mine, not John Harding's, as I have written this from memory several days after the meeting.

Clive Sinclair.

The June meeting consisted mainly of a very informative talk by Clive Sinclair on the subject of Seppuku or ritual suicide. This was amusing as well as informative and a precis of the talk based on Clive's notes appears here:-

The Oxford Dictionary definition of Seppuku is: "suicide by disembowment as practised by high classes of Japanese when in disgrace etc. - 'happy dispatch'."

The two written characters signifying the idea if read backwards become "Hara Kiri" (cutting the stomach) and is a more common word.

Shintoism, as opposed to Buddhism, did not hold with a fatalistic acceptance of death. However Shintoism plus Buddhism made men positive and aggressive and helped to formulate the code of "Bushido". Seppuku came to be known as the flower of Bushido and the ultimate expression of discipline and self-control, in fact an integral part of Bushido.

Development of Executions/Suicide

In ancient Japan (Pre Gem-Pei (1180)) most swords were straight and not so well fitted for decapitation. Strangulation

or burning were the more probable forms of suicide or execution. The first proper recorded Seppuku was that of Minamoto No Tametomo, who, after furious fighting in a lost cause cut his stomach and then stabbed himself in the neck thus severing his spinal cord. He set a fashion for this type of death. Ten years later Minamoto No Yorimasa, wounded and defeated in battle, went into a temple and fell on his long sword. This then became the acceptable method. Towards the end of the Ashikaga period Seppuku began to be included as one of the forms of execution.

When later the Tokugawa regime was established everything became formalised. Bushido hardened into a strict code of conduct, Cha-No-Ryu, Ikebana Dress, the wearing of swords, class structure etc. became subject to strict rules.

Punishment was also included and in fact we find five grades of punishment for samurai, viz:

1. Hissoku - Contrite seclusion.
2. Heimon - House arrest 50-100 days
3. Chikkyo - Solitary confinement - up to life
4. Kai-Eki - Removal from the roll of Samurai
5. Seppuku

It is seen that as regards the Seppuku itself there were many different forms based on motive, method and degree of severity.

Thus we find Chugi-Bara which is a form of Seppuku committed through loyalty to ones feudal lord. This is again sub-divided into "Junshi" or self-destruction on the death of ones Lord and "Kanshi" for remonstrance. Many retainers considered it better to die by their own hand to improve their childrens standing rather than to die of old age.

Junshi

This was inspired by affection and loyalty to the lord. Abolished in A.D. 3 but re-emphasised in the wars between the Taira and Minamoto. When a vassal lost his master, the vassal's Raison d'etre had gone and Junshi became the accepted and common course of action.

There were not many examples of Junshi during the Muromachi period (1392-1573) but when peace came after Sengoku-Ji and the beginning of the Tokugawa period many battle tested warriors found life dull, with little or no opportunity to prove their loyalty and therefore there are many examples at this period. However the first Tokugawa Shogun Ieyasu was very much against this practice and wrote:-

"Although it is undesirably the ancient custom for a vassal to follow his master to death, there is not the slightest reason for this practice. Confucious himself ridiculed the practice of making Yo (effigies buried with the dead). These practices are strictly forbidden to secondary as well as primary retainers. He who disregards this is the reverse of a faithful servant".

This had little effect although some lords already had the practice banned in their fiefs, e.g. Hota Masamor decided to commit seppuku for the 3rd Tokugawa Shogun. He told his vassals that he would follow his own master, the Shogun, in death but that his vassals should live. This motivated the edict finally banning Junshi in Kambun 3rd (1663). The edict stated that any offender would have his family punished if he offended the law. Although there were sporadic violations Junshi was effectively finished.

When however General Nogi followed his master Emperor Meiji to his death great outbursts of emotion was had from the Japanese people who took this act to be in true Samurai spirit and in strict conformity with the ethics of Bushido. In fact there is some evidence to suggest the General's act to have been political. This took place in 1912.

Kanshi

This was a form of Seppuku but not as common as Junshi. The purpose of the act was to point out to the lord the error of his ways after all other methods of persuasion had failed.

The most famous case was of the close retainer of Oda Nobunaga. Oda Nobunaga was a wild youth and the particular retainer committed seppuku as an example to his lord. Apparently it worked for Nobunaga became one of Japan's greatest heroes.

Sokotsu-Shi

This means "death for imprudence or heedlessness". This often occurred in the Tokugawa period due to the very strict regulations in force. If a man broke any such regulation or acted contrary to accepted etiquette, even if unintentionally, he quite often found that Seppuku was the only honourable way out.

Even at the time of the Meiji restoration a late running train could cause such a "loss of face" that the railway official concerned would feel that the only thing to do was to commit Seppuku. Once successful full honour was restored both to him and to his family because this showed that he accepted the responsibility. The idea of accepting responsibility

became, from Meiji onwards, one of the most common reasons for Seppuku. The famous eye witness account of the ceremony by "Mitford" in his "Tales of Old Japan" was of Taki-Zenzaburo, who was a Bizen Samurai who accepted the responsibility for firing on the foreign settlement at Kobe.

During World War II beaten Japanese Generals apologised for losing and took the responsibility for defeat upon themselves by committing Seppuku. This meant to the Japanese people that it was the General's fault and not the Emperor's e.g. General Cho at Okinawa.

Munen-Bara

This was Seppuku due to mortification. Thus a means of displaying extreme resentment, hatred or enmity. An example of this was a certain Tea Ceremony Master Sen-No-Rikyu who made the mistake of offending the great Hideyoshi to such an extent that he was ordered to commit Seppuku. Angered at the unjustness of the charge he cut his stomach and drew out his intestines, placed them on a tray, cut them free and made a present of them to Hideyoshi, thus expressing his dissatisfaction. This type of Seppuku is called "Funshi" or Seppuku caused by indignation.

Convenient Seppuku

There is another type of Seppuku for which there is no precise name but can be referred to as "convenient Seppuku". This occurred when one life was sacrificed in order that many others might be saved. When, for instance, Hideyoshi laid siege to one of the castles of Mori Motonari commanded by Shimizu Muneharu, Hideyoshi offered to spare the garrison if Mori Motonari would have Shimizu Muneharu commit Seppuku. This was done.

The ceremony itself was performed with great care and formality. The venue was generally a Buddhist temple (never a Shinto one) but there are examples of Seppuku being performed in many places other than a temple. By the time that Seppuku had become formalised during the Tokugawa period the common place for the event was the garden or mansion of the lord into whose care the victim had been placed.

Two white Tatami were arranged in a 'T' and a cushion called a "Futon" placed thereon. There were two gates at North and South of the Tatami called the "Shugyo-Mon" and the "Nemam-Mon" which meant loosely the aesthetic gate and the nirvana gate respectively. The person performing the Seppuku entered through the "Shugyo Mon" and the "Kaishaku" or assistant entered through the "Nemam-Mon".

The Kaishaku's job was to decapitate the performer, after

he had committed the act of Seppuku. This was to shorten the agony after honour had been satisfied. His job was not of executioner but more of a second, and therefore the Kaishaku was usually a friend or retainer of the performer.

The Kaishaku would be a good swordsman and would have arranged with the performer the signal for the decapitation. It was also his job to make sure that all the formalities and ritual were complied with, and that the whole ceremony was carried out speedily and efficiently.

Present at the ceremony were two representatives from the Shogun, called "Kenshi" and also five or six constables and lesser officials. It was their task to witness the Seppuku and see that the Shogunate order had been carried out correctly.

When the time is near for the Seppuku the performer would purify himself and dress himself in a kimono bearing his family Mon and a Kamishimo. When dressed he would be escorted by a high retainer who would wear only a Wakizashi.

As he enters the room set aside for the ceremony he bows to the Senior Kenshi who pronounces sentence. The performer again changes his clothes. This time he wears a white Kimono signifying purity and his decision to end his life.

He makes his way to the Tatami where the Kaishaku is waiting. He bows to those present and is presented with a cup of plain water called "Matsugo-no-Mizu" (water for the last moment). He then receives the dirk from the wooden tray or "Sanbo". The sword was always a short blade to avoid a possible change of mind on the part of the performer. There was a case of one man, however, who grabbed the long sword from the Kaishaku, killed him and escaped (very bad style!!).

Before taking the sword from the Sanbo the performer would bare himself to the waist. He would then tuck the sleeves of his Kimono under his knees to prevent himself falling backwards then, showing no hesitation, he should pick up the sword plunge it low into the left side of his stomach and draw it across to the right giving it a twist upwards. His last act was then to stretch his neck out and as previously arranged the Kaishaku would decapitate him. An expert Kaishaku should leave the loose skin at the front of the neck uncut, thus preventing the head rolling onto the floor in an undignified manner.

This is a very brief description of the ceremony for in fact every part of the ceremony was formalised right down to the last detail. This included dress, seating and so on, both of the performer and of the witnesses.

All wrongs could be put right as long as the Seppuku was correctly performed. If the end was good and honourable no honour was lost but much was gained for the performer and for his descendants.

It was not necessary to actually cut deeply into the stomach to correctly fulfil the ritual, merely to scratch the skin was enough for the intention was therefore obvious.

Cases of Seppuku of whichever type are well documented from earliest days right up to recent times. However in one case a nobleman was ordered to perform Seppuku. Unfortunately he found this a rather frightening idea and hesitated to commit the act. A high retainer concerned that such hesitation would cause dishonour on the clan went to his lord and opening his Kimono showed his own cut stomach, thus hoping to show his lord that there was nothing to be afraid of.

One amusing story concerns one Kakei Juzo who was a Ninja or assassin. He was sent on a mission against Tokugawa Ieyasu but was caught by one of Ieyasu's own Ninja. The two Ninja, by chance, were old training partners and Juzo persuaded his old friend to take him before Ieyasu and then pleaded to be allowed to commit Seppuku. This amused Ieyasu who had never seen a Ninja commit Seppuku and the request was granted.

Juzo took the dirk and plunged it into his stomach. The bloody corpse was then thrown into the moat of the castle. The corpse then came to life and swam ashore and disappeared.

In fact what had occurred was the Ninja had concealed a newly slain fox under his clothing and it was this that had bled when he appeared to stab himself.

Probably the most recent act of Seppuku was that of Yukio Mishima, the famous Japanese poet and playwright. He made an attempt to instill into the Japanese people the ethics of the Samurai which in his opinion had been lost in recent years. His last attempt took place in the form of a Speech from a balcony in Tokyo. He called on members of the Japanese army to return to the standards and martial ways of the Samurai.

Members of the army living in a very modern and materialistic world were not convinced and laughed at him. He felt that the only way to show his sincerity and to set an example to them was to commit Seppuku, which is what he did.

Apparently his Kaishaku, who was one of his followers, took three strokes before severing his leader's head and then proceeded to commit Seppuku himself. The assembled crowd at last believed the sincerity of the man and were moved to tears. The blade that Yukio Mishima used for his Seppuku was a Kanemoto II.

Following the last Programme with its comments I have received a letter from Mr. Richard D. Wilson of Kettering which is reproduced here:-

I thank you for the recent Programme and News Letters received. However on reading both you seem to be telling the members that it is up to us as to how the To-Ken Society keeps upon its feet. You mention the feeling of gloom in the Society, bad attendance, little to talk about and where have all the collectors gone.

I am a collector, a collector for eight years. I have involved myself hour after hour searching the Japanese history following tales, myths and legends regarding the sword people and works of art that they have produced and so I for one, count myself among others as being not only a collector but a dedicated one. I came one night to a To - Ken meeting - a distance of 85 miles. I surveyed the scene, little groups in the corners, people looking at quickly unwrapped items on the stairs and quickly wrapped up again, the glancing eye in all directions to see if they are missing anything, without having a thought of getting up and going over to one other group and saying how nice something is without seeing pounds, shillings and pence. It was a general discussion it turned out as I had no idea what the meeting would be about. I always get my Programme telling me what's on after it has happened (with the exception of the recent News Letter). I wished that I had gone with someone so that I could have a conversation, as the dealers present appeared only interested in what to sell and what's for sale. I had the feeling that if I had put one of my swords on the table and shouted for sale I would have had to fight them off.

You asked what was wrong. I hope that as one example may be of help to you, you print it in your next Programme if only to fill its pages a bit more.

I agree with the remarks contained therein. It is encouraging that at least one person has found the time and energy to reply. I am sorry that Mr. Wilson had such a bad time at the meeting in question. I hope however that this will provide a good reason for Mr. Wilson and other members to come along to meetings and do something about the situation. After all any club is only as good as its members and it is up to them to make or break the Society.

OSHIGATA

A reminder to members who may have difficulties in reading tang inscriptions due to inadequate references; if they care to send a rubbing (oshigata) of the tang addressed to Alan Bale, 46 West Close, Woodthorpe Road, Ashford, Middlesex, he will check it for them and send them all available information he has on the smith or inscription. Please remember to make a careful rubbing of the whole tang, both sides, not just the inscription.

NEW MEMBERS

R.C. Smith, 915 Cargill Bldg., Minn. 55402, U.S.A.
 T. Morita, 2030 East Maple, Troy, Michigan 48084, U.S.A.
 M.J. Taylor, 84 Poplar St., South Moor, Stanley, Co. Durham
 C.H. Slade, 83 Crescent Road, Ramsgate, Kent
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 B. Moffatt, 10 Westfield Ave., West Monkseaton, Whitley Bay,
 Tyne & Wear.