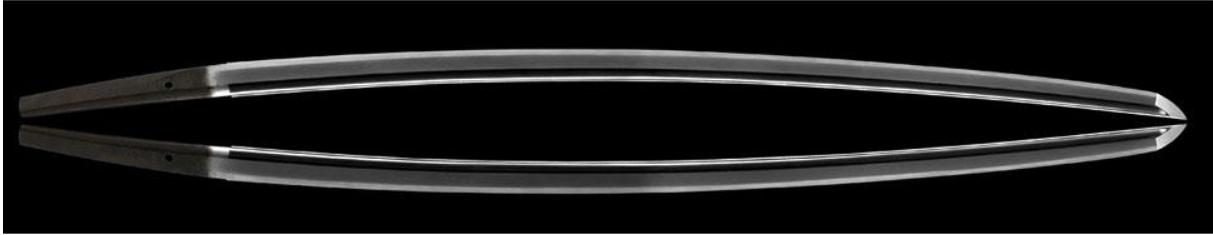


Comparison study of two swords



One of the major challenges in the study of Nihon-To is attempting to attribute an unsigned blade. The only way this can be done with any confidence is by comparing the features of the sword against standards of a time and school and then to signed known works. This is not always easy and in some cases known signed pieces are so rare it can prove almost impossible.

In this month's NBTHK journal (no 714 July 2016) the meito under study was a signed national treasure tachi by the Yamashiro master Norikuni. At the last count I believe there are fewer than 10 signed works by this smith on the Juyo register and only 3 or 4 are daito. So the one illustrated was a very rare thing. It has added provenance having been recorded and described in a number of texts including one dating back to the 16th century.

Several years ago I had the opportunity to study a sword attributed to the same smith by three separate bodies. It had the remains of a shumei from an unknown source, Hozon papers from the NBTHK and a sayagaki by Tanobe Sensei. All agreed this was an O-suriage work by the Awataguchi master Norikuni. I had written a detailed description of the sword, had numerous images and an oshigata. So I was presented with an ideal opportunity to try and compare an unsigned O-suriage work against one of the very few signed examples. The following details that comparison.

In the first instance I have reproduced an abridged version (I excluded the family information as it wasn't directly relevant to the study) of the description of the National treasure blade which belongs to the Kyoto National museum. This sword appears in a number of publications and catalogues including the recent publication "Japanese Swords Reproduced in their original size" which I believe was translated by Paul Martin and contains some excellent detailed images of famous works.

In most references Norikuni is identified as the son of Kunitomo and father of Kuniyoshi, grandfather of Yoshimitsu. He was working in the 1st quarter of the 13th century.

Meito Kansho

Examination of Important sword

Kokuho: National Treasure

Type: Tachi

Mei: Norikuni

Owner: Kyoto National Museum

Length: 2 shaku 4 sun 6 bu 4 rin (74.65 cm)

Sori: 7 bu 5 rin (2.25 cm)

Motohaba: 8 bu 8 rin (2.65 cm)

Sakihaba: 5 bu 9 rin (1.8 cm)

Motokasane: 1 bu 7 rin (0.5 cm)

Sakikasane: 1 bu 2 rin (0.35 cm)

Kissaki length: 8 bu 9 rin (2.7 cm)

Nakago length: 7 sun 3 bu 5 rin (22.25 cm)

Nakago sori: 7 rin (0.2 cm)

Commentary

This is a shinogi zukuri tachi with an ihorimune, high shinogi-ji, a standard width, and the widths at the moto and saki are different. There is large sori in the bottom half, and a short chu-kissaki. The jihada is a tight well forged ko-itame, and the entire jihada is tight. There are thick dense ji-nie, a little bit of fine chikei, and pale usuri which is straight in some places.

The hamon is based on suguha, with a small notare. There are ashi, yo, a dense nioiguchi, thick dense even ha-nie with some rough looking areas. There are kinsuji, nie-suji, and in

some places, the nioiguchi becomes wider. The entire hamon nioiguchi is bright and clear. The boshi is straight with a round tip and the omote side has kinsuji. The nakago tip is suriage and is now kuri-jiri. The yasurime are old and the original style can't be determined, but the newest yasurime are katte-sagari. There are three mekugi-ana, and on the omote on the mune side, there is a small two kanji signature made with a fine chisel.

In the early Kamakura period in Yamashiro, besides the Sanjo and Gojo sword schools, there was the Awataguchi School which elevated the Kyoto's sword smiths' reputation. Awataguchi was one of seven entrances into Kyoto, leading from the Tokaido (the great eastern Road) and other Eastern roads and was the location of an important fort for the military. Today the address is Kyoto-fu (Kyoto City), Higashiyama-ku (Higashiyama Ward), Awataguchi (the Awataguchi entrance or gate). The Awataguchi school produced many master smiths for one hundred years such as Kunitomo and his six brothers, and the latter part of that period's great smith Toshiro Yoshimitsu.

Norikuni's signed work is very rare today. His main existing tachi, besides this one, are two Juyo Bunkazai tachi, and one owned by Aichi prefecture's Atsuta shrine. Another one is owned by the Osaka-fu Konda Hachimangu Shrine, and there is one Tokubetsu Juyo Token tachi. His existing tanto are a Juyo Bijutsuhin, and one Juyo Token tanto. His signatures are all made with two kanji, and both fine and thick chisels were used. It is a commonly accepted idea that his son Kuniyoshi continued using the same "Kuni" kanji shape.

This tachi reflects its period with an elegant shape. The jihada is tight ko-itame, there are thick dense ji-nie and the school's characteristic beautiful jihada. The old sword book "Genki Gannen (1570) Token Mekiki Sho" admired this sword's jihada saying "the jihada is masame and looks very refined", and "the jihada color is dark and reflective," and there is "very clear forging". The hamon is a hoso (narrow) suguha style mixed with ko-midare and has ko-choji. Besides the large and small elements, the book lists "a lot of nie", which is a characteristic point for him. There are dense nie compared with the later smiths Kuniyoshi and Yoshimitsu.

The tachi, as the old sword books say, has a very refined jihada which is even and well forged, with the school's characteristic thick fine ji-nie, and has an elegant, but at the same time, strong jihada. Look at the beautiful jihada, the hamon with a dense nioiguchi, the even fine ha-nie, and the bright and clear hamon. Some places have kinsuji, and these hataraki create an interesting atmosphere with the gentle hamon and fascinate people. The preserved condition of this sword is very good; it is very dignified, and very rare with Norikuni's signature. At the same time, it is a rare Awataguchi school tachi, and the school's characteristic hada which the old sword book described as "reflective" is suitable.

During the Edo period, this tachi was owned by the Inshu Ikeda family.

Explanation and photo by Ishii Akira.

Original description of the mumei blade

Sugata: The blade is shinogi-zukuri and iori-mune. The shinogi is not high. Despite being shortened the blade retains an elegant shape with an even tori-zori curve. The sori is 1.8cm. The blade narrows gradually from a mihaba of 2.5cm to a sakihaba of 1.8cm. The kasane is 0.5cm. The kissaki is small and slightly ikubi in appearance. There is a beautifully carved bo-hi running the length of each side of the blade. The overall appearance of the blade is of quiet understated elegance which one immediately associates with blades of the early and mid Kamakura period.

Jigane: An extremely tight ko-itame hada of minute scale and incredible uniformity. It is covered in minute and beautiful ji-nie. As the sword is turned in the light the bright nie resembles the appearance of a frosted field. Within this surface it is also possible to pick out small and bright chickei. There are also several areas where small lines of nie run parallel to the shinogi in layers of two or three lines. There are yubishiri. The overall colour of the steel appears dark blue and has a moist appearance (I think caused by the prolific ko-nie). The hada is classic nashiji (pear skin) associated with the Awataguchi school. In more than 30 years of study I have seen nothing that compares to it in uniformity, tightness and activity.

Hamon: The hamon is narrow suguha with slight midare. It is clear and bright comprising predominantly of ko-nie. There is considerable activity within the hamon. There is a great deal of ko-nie which cascades from the Habuchi down to the cutting edge, maintaining the frosted appearance described in the jigane. Tight lines of sunagashi, inazuma and kinsuji can be seen throughout the hamon. Tanobe sensei in the sayagaki describes the blade as having a classical elegant hamon. The boshi is sugu with small turn back and has kinsuji running through it.

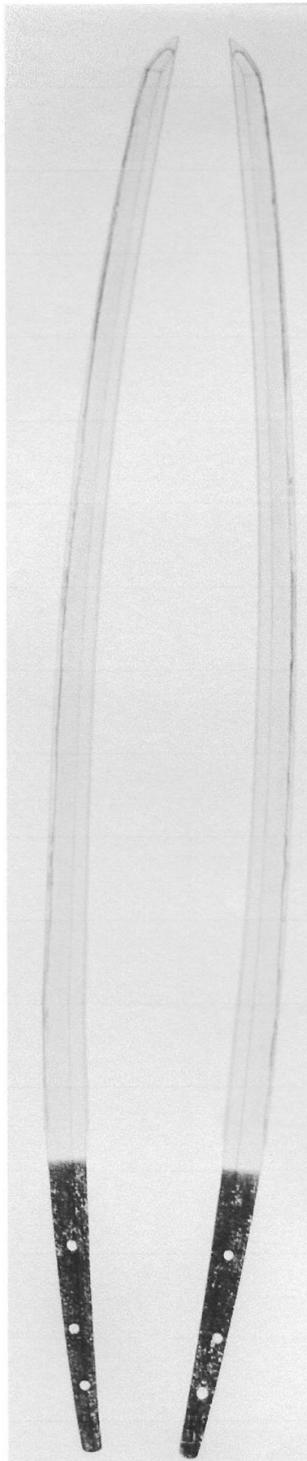
Comparison:

Following this summary there are illustrations and direct comparison of dimensions.

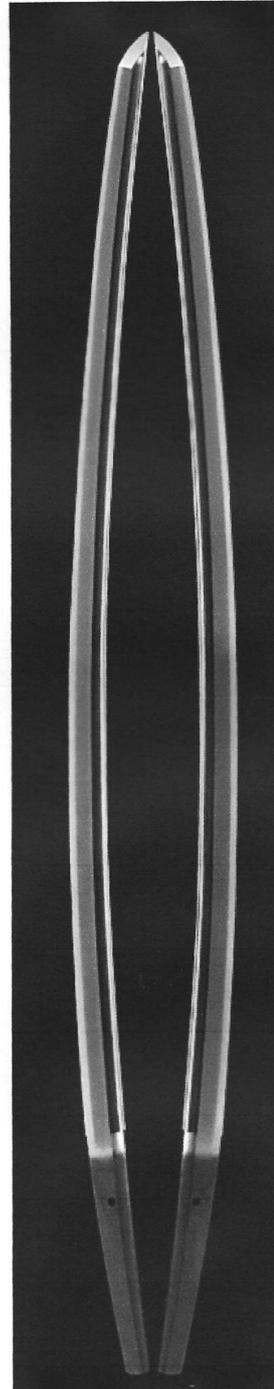
Looking at both descriptions there are many common features. Some are less obvious mainly because of the use of terminology, for example Akira san uses the term "Nie-Suji" which was, until now, unknown to me but I think it is another way of describing the parallel lines of nie running through the jihada in to the hamon. The kinsuji in the Boshi is also significant

I think the differences in characteristics may be explained. For example the sori on the study blade is less, but the blade is O-suriage. The ubu blade, if it followed the norm would be koshi-sori with the deepest part of the curve near or even in the nakago. By shortening it some of the depth of curve was lost. I think if the study blade were the same length as the national treasure the sori would be very similar. The signed work is described as having a high shinogi. In my original note I didn't think the study blade was high. However there is a deep and beautiful bo-hi running the length of the blade and this may well have distorted my view of the shinogi. Other than that I think the blades are remarkably similar. Something that did surprise me is that both are relatively thin at 0.5cm, When I first saw the study blade I thought this was the result of numerous polishes, I guess it still could be but my

feeling is that these swords were always slim. Remembering the target market slim refined blades would be much more acceptable than something thicker.

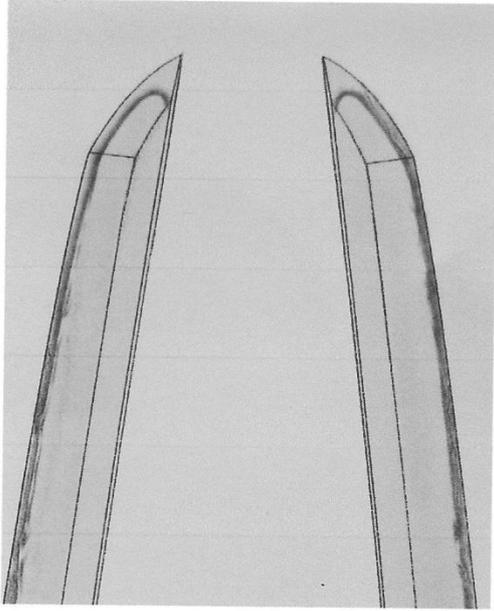


National treasure Oshigata

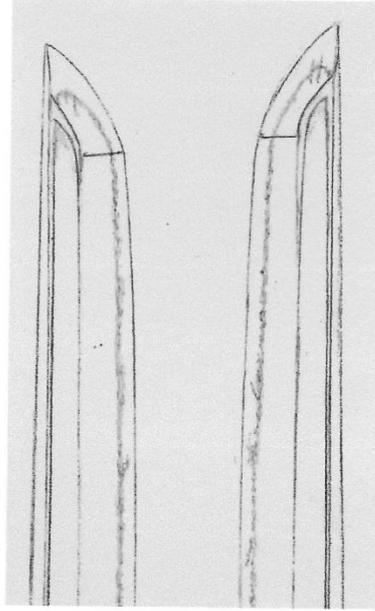


Study blade oshigata

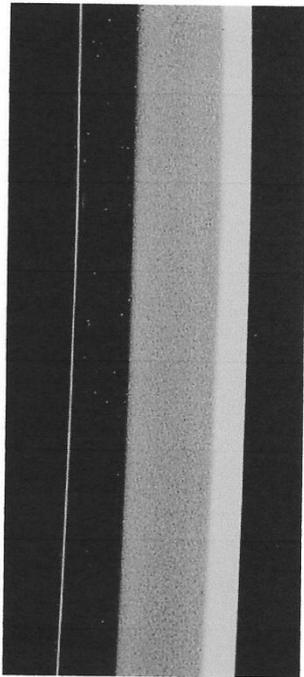
Fig 1. Sugata comparison



National treasure kissaki and boshi



Study blade kissaki and boshi



National treasure jigane



Study blade jigane

National Treasure Description:

Sugata:	74.65cm
Sori:	2.25cm
Motohaba	2.65cm
Sakihaba	1.8cm
Motokasane	0.5cm

Study blade Description:

Sugata:	68.5cm
Sori:	1.8cm
Motohaba	2.5cm
Sakihaba	1.8cm
Motokasane	0.5cm

Conclusion:

The first question to be answered is “was the comparison useful? From a personal point of view the answer is an unreserved yes; not least because it forced me to look in great detail to images and descriptions of two fine swords. The next question is did it help to understand the attribution given? Again I think the answer is yes but to explain this in more detail:

It is often said that shape indicates age. I have said before, all the shape can really tell you, and then when it is ubu, is not how old but how young a blade is. For example a Kanbun shaped blade can be no earlier than the Kanbun period when it first appeared. A Kamakura shape can be and was copied throughout history. However the shape of the two blades being discussed is very similar. Allowing for the shortening that has occurred to both I would go further and say they were originally close to identical. The shape of both is what you would expect to see from a sword made in the mid Kamakura period so at least the sugata does not eliminate the study blade from being of period.

If the shape tells the age the Hada indicates the tradition or even the school. In this case life is made a little easier. I believe the nashiji ji-hada of the Awataguchi School is unique. There is simply nothing else like it. Both of the blades illustrated show this distinctive hada very clearly.

Likewise the hamon of both have similar activity and what I have once seen described as a wonderful “crumbly” look as the nioi-guchi interacts with the ko-nie and other activity to produce an effect which Tanobe Sensei describes as classical elegant hamon of the Kamakura period.

So the shape and hamon are telling us the blade is early to mid Kamakura in period. The jigane tells us it is an Awataguchi sword. However now comes the problem. Most references claim that the work of the 6 original brothers were difficult to tell apart. It is also stated that Norikuni’s work was identical to that of his father Kunitomo. So why have three separate

appraisals identified this specifically as the work of Norikuni. I believe the answer lies in two characteristics. I have heard it said that “The Boshi tells you the smith”. Until doing this study I wasn’t sure I agreed, however when looking at these swords together the similarity is exceptional. I mentioned earlier the kinsuji running through the boshi which I think is unusual but in both swords here. The second point is that if you compare the study blade with other Awataguchi smiths such as Kunitomo, Hisakuni or Kuniyasu none offer such close correlation as is seen with the National Treasure blade from the Kyoto museum.

Does this constitute definitive proof? No it doesn’t. However based on all the evidence seen here I can understand why the mumei sword has been attributed to the same smith on three separate occasions. I am also confident that those attributions are correct.

References and thanks:

In compiling this short paper I have used the following sources:

1. The NBTHK monthly journal no 714
2. The Kyoto museum illustrated catalogue
3. Japanese swords reproduced in their original size
4. Koto kantei by Markus Sesko.

I would also like to thank those that have reviewed this article to make sure that it appears to make sense!

Paul Bowman

July 2016