

Re-visiting an old friend

Introduction:

I mentioned in another paper that in one of my meetings with Michael Hagenbusch he told me the story of him looking at a sword by a famous maker and being less than impressed. Some years later he looked again and couldn't believe how much it had changed. Of course it hadn't, what had changed was his understanding, experience and appreciation.

In 1999 a sword came in to my collection. At the time it was by far the best sword I had. It also had what was then an extremely rare asset, it had papers. These were issued by the NBTHK in 1980. So besotted was I by the blade that I ventured in to writing a paper based on my research in to the maker. This became my first ever published work written in 2000, it appeared in a Northern Token and later Token Society of GB newsletter 2001.

As one progresses through a collecting career it can happen that newer works take centre stage and as one's interests change or are modified by greater understanding. Older pieces tend to be looked at less often. This was the case with this sword. In truth I kept it more because of how it came to me rather than because it fitted in to my expanding collection. Eventually in 2012 I sold it as I sought to fund an important acquisition. I almost immediately regretted it, again not because I thought the sword had great merit but it did have significant sentimental value to me. After a few weeks the buyer called me, he decided he wasn't happy with it and asked if he could exchange it for something else. I agreed and it returned to the fold. It made a brief appearance in another article I was writing used to illustrate progression through a particular tradition, but other than that I tended to look at it only to carry out regular health checks.

A few weeks ago on a wet and miserable Sunday I decided I would follow Michael Hagenbusch's lead and look at some swords I typically spent less time with and re interpret and describe what I was seeing. I admit it was a revelation. The following is the result of that re-appraisal.



Mino katana attributed to Daido. Tensho period NBTHK Kicho ninteisho (white papers)



Original description:***The Sword:***

An O-suriage Katana blade, mumei, shinogi-zukuri iori mune toshi sori.

Nagasa 67.8cm Sori 1.2cm

Motohaba 3.0cm sakihaba 1.9cm kasane 0.6cm

Jigane: Very fine and clear ko-itame with sporadic ko-mokume. Masame in the shinogi ji. The Jihada is beautiful and sprinkled with ji-nie.

Hamon: Notare midare in nioi deki with profuse ko-nie running through it. There is a great deal of activity in the form of ko-ashi sunagashi and yo. In the monouchi the ashi forms a tight ko-gunome pattern. The hamon is clear and vibrant.

Kissaki Chu kissaki with ko maru boshi with kaeri.

Nakago O- suriage, mumei with 2.5 mekugi ana the yasurimei are indistinct. The nakago has been beautifully reshaped when the blade was shortened and it is an excellent colour.

Revised description:**General appearance:**

An O-suriage katana Shinogi-zukuri, iori-mune and slightly koshi-zori. The nakago has been beautifully reshaped when the blade was shortened. If one assumes the remains of the mekugi-ana at the nakago-jiri was the original the length of the blade has been reduced by approximately 8cm. Although the nakago measures 17cm in length it is only patinated in the lower 13cm. This makes it appear shorter than it actually is. As well as the half mekugi-ana at the jiri there are two others placed centrally in the nakago. There are no yasurimei visible but the nakago has a beautiful dark brown to black patination.

Despite being shortened the blade retains an elegant slim sugata tending towards koshi-zori. There is also an indication of fumbari. The blade has relatively shallow sori and motohaba and sakihaba show a significant difference (approximately 1/3rd reduction) the shinogi is not particularly high and is positioned slightly towards the mune. With a kasane of 6-6.5cm the sword is of standard thickness. There is not great difference in thickness between the nakago and blade suggesting it has not been polished often since it was shortened.

The kissaki is chu-kissaki and very healthy. There is no evidence of it being modified and overall the lines of the sword are crisp and harmonious in appearance. The overall appearance combines an austere elegance with an almost utilitarian practicality. In its original form and with a nagasa of 73-75cm, a deeper koshi-zori and fumbari it would have been a weapon of considerable grace. It still is.

Polish:

The blade was bought at auction in the 1970s. It was in a battered gunto koshirae and in poor state of polish. The owner sent it to Japan in 1980 where it was polished by the highly regarded polisher Kotoken Kajihara. In the intervening years subsequent custodians of the sword maintained it as recommended at the time, keeping it in oil and cleaning it with uchiko. There is evidence of the use of uchiko with slight "star bursts" showing from the application. There are also several linear scratches. Considering the polish is now 36 years old much of the original quality and detail is clearly visible. This sword was polished by a craftsman at the height of his skills.

Jigane:

My original description was extremely basic. I am not sure if this was the result of laziness, lack of knowledge or poor observation but it certainly does not do the complex structure justice.

The shinogi-ji is burnished but the masame hada can be clearly identified. There is a slight coarseness in the masame welds.

The ji combines itame with small areas of mokume. As it approaches and passes through the ha the hada becomes masame. There are patches of shirake utsuri. In the monuchi there are small areas of nie-utsuri forming an impression of sporadic nijuba. Within the ji there are profuse ko-nie. In areas this forms chickei and Yubashiri. Again in the monuchi thin lines of nie hang just below the shinogi. Overall the nie is bright and clear.

Within the jihada there are several small openings the worst of which is close to the hamachi. These together with the few scratches mentioned earlier are the only issues I can see.



The jigane combines itame, mokume and masame

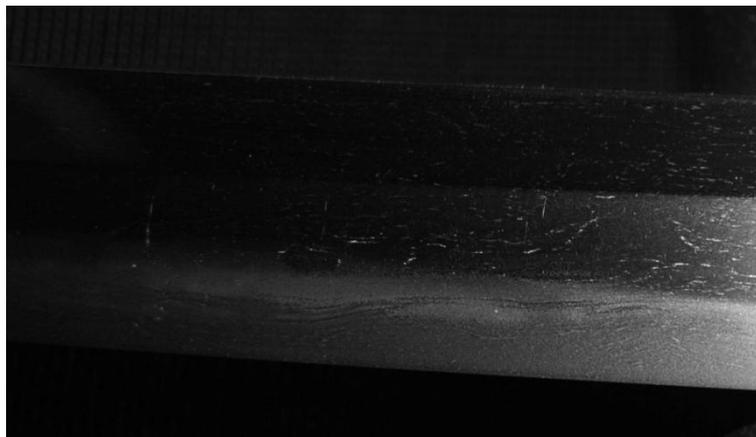
Hamon:

The hamon is extremely complex, so much so that I have singularly failed to capture much of the activity in photographs. As a result I resorted to attempting to draw an oshigata to try and illustrate some of the complex interaction between the various elements. I hope this combined with the included images will give an impression of what is there to see.

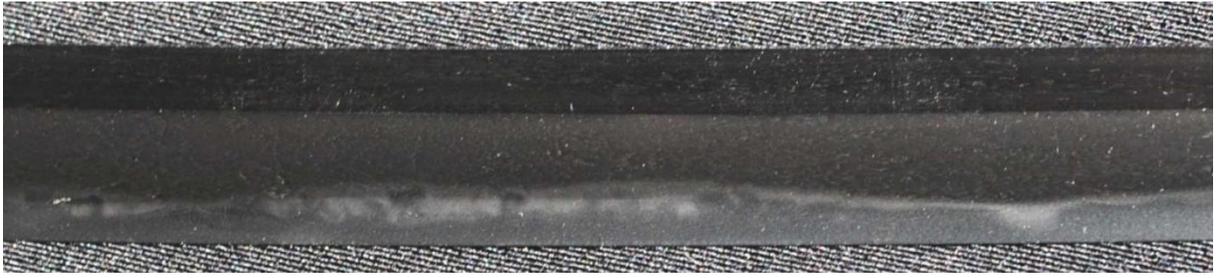
The foundation of the hamon is a sinuous and gently undulating midare which in places runs close to the edge of the blade. It consists of a tight and clear nioi-guchi interspersed with profuse ko-nie. The hamon is full of activity, the majority of which is nie based. In places there are small lines of nie running parallel to the hamon and forming small areas of nijuba. Within the hamon sunagashi form dark undulating lines which follow the masame of the underlying hada. There are yo and kinsuji. In three areas, the first near the hamachi the others in the monuchi the hamon has small ashi which form a very small and tight ko- gunome pattern.

While the overall structure of the hamon is extremely busy it looks natural and uncontrived. It has many elements one would associate with both Soshu work and the early examples of Yamato-shizu. In addition the masame running through the hamon is very similar to that seen within Shikkake examples.

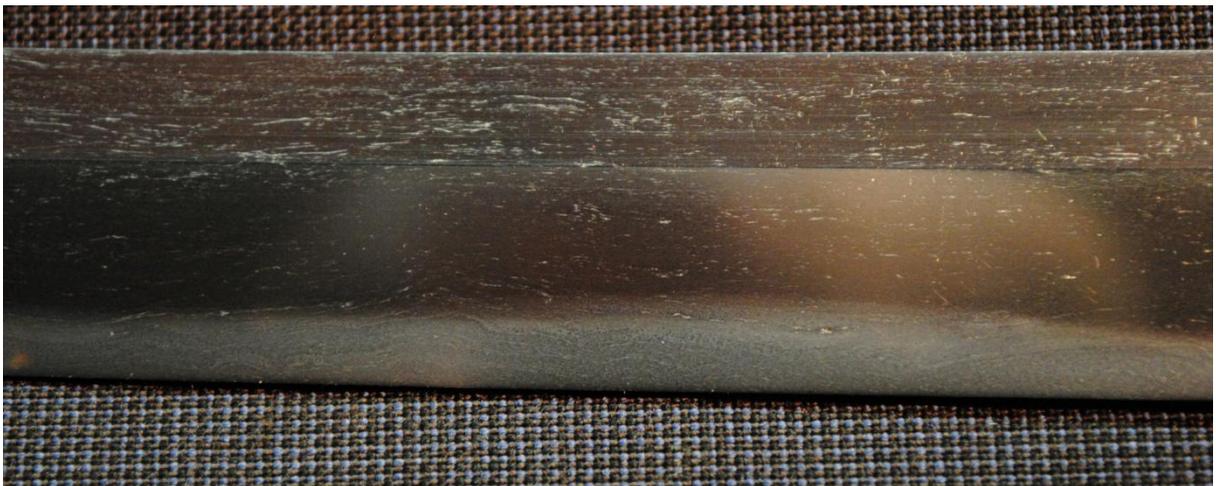
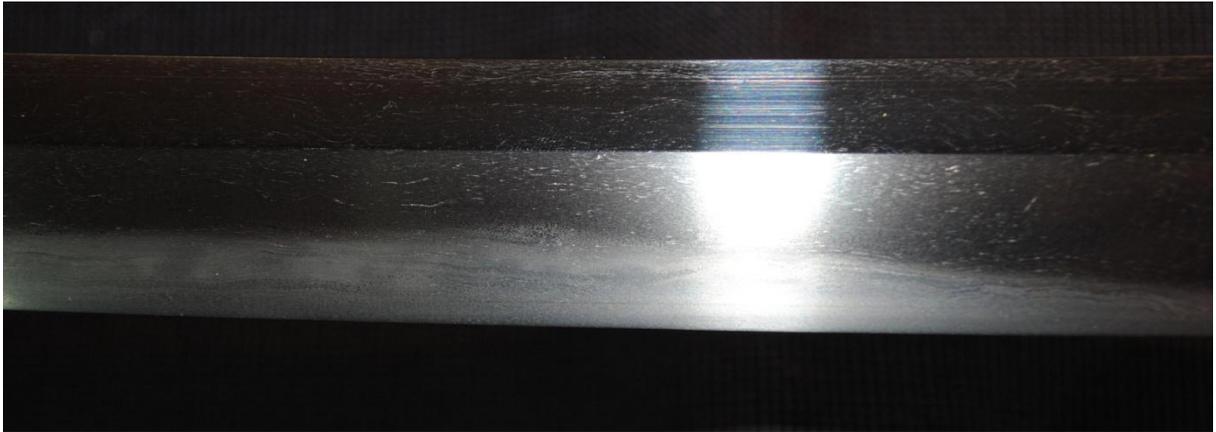
One of the standard texts, I forget which one, described Masamune's hada and hamon as creating a natural landscape where all the elements are clear and in balance. I think much of this natural uncontrived beauty tended to be lost in later Soshu work where smiths seemed to try almost too hard to recreate that natural and spontaneous look. Early Shizu work also creates this raw natural look and in many ways this hamon combined with the nie rich hada demonstrates similar elements.



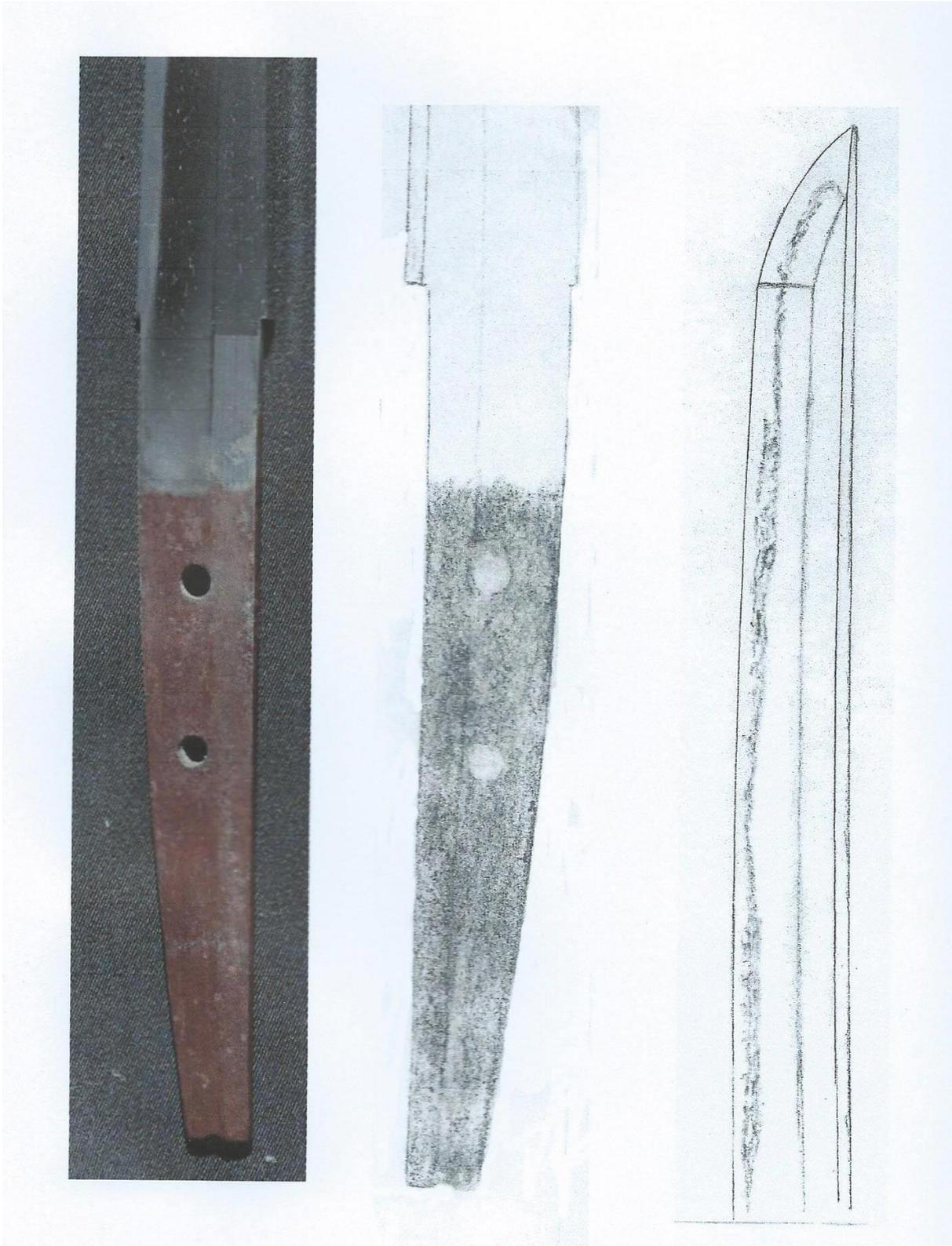
Sunagashi composed of ko-nie running through the nioi-guchi



Activity within the hamon with ko-ashi and yo.



Images showing some of the elements mentioned in the description.



Oshigata showing activity in the monuchi and the reshaped nakago.

Conclusion:

I thought I knew the swords within my collection. I am glad that a chance conversation some time ago caused me to take the time to relook at this sword. The first thing I should say is that though I valued it highly based on its association with old friends I had not taken the time to look at it properly. In a recent post on the NMB Kunitaro-san states that on receiving a sword back from polish one should sit in silence and study one area of it for 5 minute. Only after this should you move on to the next area. Walter Compton in his paper regarding the importance of shape tells us to study the sugata until you can describe it with your eyes closed. Had I taken this advice many years ago I would have realised that this sword has far greater quality and merit than I had previously realised.

Regarding the attribution to Daido I confess I am struggling. There were many recorded smiths signing Daido (O-Michi) at the time of the original there was him and his brother both using the name and working in different places. The fact the paper just says Daido is not over helpful but I assume they mean the original. He is perhaps best known as the father of Kin-michi founder of the Mishina School. He also collaborated with Kunihiro and claimed to be a direct descendant of Kaneuji. So the man was no mean smith. However looking at such other examples as I can find and reading as much as I can I don't really see where that attribution originates. It could be argued that there are strong shizu elements in the blade. In addition the nijuba mentioned could be the first examples of the development of sudare-ba, a Mishina trademark; in reality those links are a little tenuous.

My biggest problem is the sugata. The blade looks earlier than Tensho and certainly at its original length this would be even less common for that period.

There is a lot of nie within the hamon and ji showing a very strong Soshu influence. As mentioned above the interaction of the activity is more reminiscent of early Yamato Shizu Workmanship than it is of other Daido blades. I think if I was asked to kantei this sword I would be inclined to date it to mid-muromachi and place it as shizu.

It may be that at some point I will send it to be papered again. However this is not a priority. Taking the decision to look again at this blade has been a sharp lesson for me. I will certainly be looking more closely at other swords that generally are given less time than those I regard as core to my collection. I hope that in the future I will not assume that just because I have had a sword for a long time it no longer has anything to teach me.

Paul Bowman

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