

## Ripples in a stream

### A Katana attributed to Naoe Shizu



#### **Introduction:**

I first saw this sword when it was displayed in the exhibition supporting the educational programme at Samurai Art Expo in 2018. It was displayed together with its extremely beautiful koshirae. The Koshirae was of very high quality and had been commissioned by an important (or at least very wealthy) Daimyo or senior retainer to house what even viewed through a glass case was an exceptional work from the mid Nambokucho period. The Koshirae deserves a write up in its own right and is well beyond my ability to describe in detail. Perhaps that may come later from another hand. However I have been given the opportunity to look at the blade and the following details those observations.

I should explain the title. The Nakago has a gold inscription in Soshu or “grass script” which I was at a total loss to understand. Thanks to the help of several participants on the Nihonto Message board we were able to identify that this was a form of Hiragana which reads **みをつくし** = “**Miotsukushi**” and the literal translation of this is “marks in a water channel”\* . I believe this may have been the name given to the sword and a more poetic possible interpretation might be “ripples in a stream” referring to the beautiful activity within the hamon that will be described later. This is however pure conjecture on my part.

\*See note at the end of the article

#### **The Evolution of the Naoe Shizu School:**

Mino was the Last of the 5 traditions (Gokaden) to appear. One could argue that it had far greater influence on later sword making than any other. A talented Yamato Tegai smith, Kaneuji, travelled from Yamato to Shizu in Mino Province. Either en-route or shortly after he went he spent time studying Soshu workmanship. Many references list him as one of Masamune’s 10 famous students. Whether he studied under the master directly is open to question (suggested dates don’t quite fit) but it is certain he studied the work and was greatly influenced by what he learned.

The result was the formation of the early Mino tradition. Alongside the co-founder Kaneshige (Kinju) who moved from Echizen, Kaneuji started in Shizu. His work was identified as Yamato-Shizu. There is much confusion when this attribution appears on papers and it is a subject worthy of its own paper. However as a basic guide: If a Juyo paper refers to Shodai Yamato Shizu it indicates Kaneuji. If it just says Yamato Shizu it indicates a pupil. However I have heard many alternative versions with additions of further variations.

Relatively soon after the formation of Kaneuji's school in Shizu a number of his students moved to Naoe and taking the name of the village formed the Naoe Shizu School. Unfortunately I have not found a great deal written about the school. Most references in English simply refer to them as the middle period of Mino development coming between the founder working in Shizu and the later and much more prolific school established in Seki. Nagayama lists leading smiths of Naoe Shizu as Kaneyuki, Tamestugu (a disciple of either Go or Norishige) a later Kaneuji, Kanetoshi (2) Kanetsugu Kanehisa and Kanenobu.

With regard to workmanship Nagayama states that the sugata was grander, which is something you might expect as the size of blades generally increased through the Nambokucho period. He also says the hada had more masame combined in it and is whitish. The hamon is mixed with considerable togari gunome.

There are few illustrated examples of Naoe Shizu blades but based on those I have seen in hand I think that, as you might expect, they have a great deal in common with Yamato Shizu work I have studied. Those that I have seen do not exhibit the "whiteness" Nagayama describes; in fact the colour on those examples has always struck me as relatively dark and clear blue in appearance. However colour assessment is notoriously difficult and people's perception of colour in steel can be very different. The jigane has great similarity to Yamato Shizu with a fine itame combined with a sinuous nagare and masame near the hamon and within the shinogi-ji. The hada is rich with ji-nie and as said looks clear and hard.

In trying to describe differences in the hamon between Naoe-Shizu and Yamato Shizu I think Yamato Shizu has a natural uncontrived beauty with the hamon meandering between suguha and ko-midare and with a great deal of activity. Naoe Shizu has always appeared (to me) to be more cultivated. The midare is gentler and more flowing but the variation is greater creating areas of Togari gunome as Nagayama describes. While cultivated it is still far more natural, almost gentle in appearance than the much more contrived patterns seen in later Mino work. The hamon is rich in nie which can become larger in the monouchi.

The School produced some excellent smiths and existing works are a testament to their skill. In summary they take the style created by Yamato-Shizu in combining Yamato and Soshu workmanship to the next level producing a tighter hada and grander sugata in keeping with the times. They illustrate a transition between the Mino tradition's foundation and later establishment as one of the major sword producers in Japan.

### **The Sword:**



The blade is an O-suriage katana. It is shinogi-zukuri and iori-mune. The blade has a slightly extended chu-kissaki. As one would expect from a blade of this period it is wide without a great deal of taper towards the kissaki. It is relatively thin. The overall impression is of a grand imposing blade.

Nagasa: 69.7cm      Sori: 1.3cm

Motohaba 3.1 cm    sakihaba 2.4cm

Kasane 0.6cm.

### **Sugata:**

Although O-suriage and with a fairly shallow sori the overall shape of the sword is exceptional. At just under 70cm and with a motohaba of 3.1cm one might expect it to be clumsy and heavy in appearance. It isn't. The overall impression is one of quiet, elegant power. The blade appears graceful and imposing. I think this beautiful appearance owes a great deal to the quality of the polish. The polisher has accentuated the geometry of the blade beautifully the lines of shinogi, mune and yokote are finished so crisply they appear sharp. They combine in unison to create a much harmonised finished product. The hi are beautifully cut and finished and this also adds to the overall gracefulness of the sword.

### **Jigane:**

As described in Nagayama the hada is a combination of tight itame, nagare and masame. The masame is particularly noticeable close to and running in to the hamon. It is very similar to the yamato-Shizu blades I have studied. In this case the hada appears slightly tighter and more consistent. The itame becomes tighter in the monouchi and there is bright ji-nie present throughout the length of the blade. In several places the ji-nie joins together to form bright Tobiyaki hovering above the hamon. The overall appearance is bright and clear making it look hard and sharp.



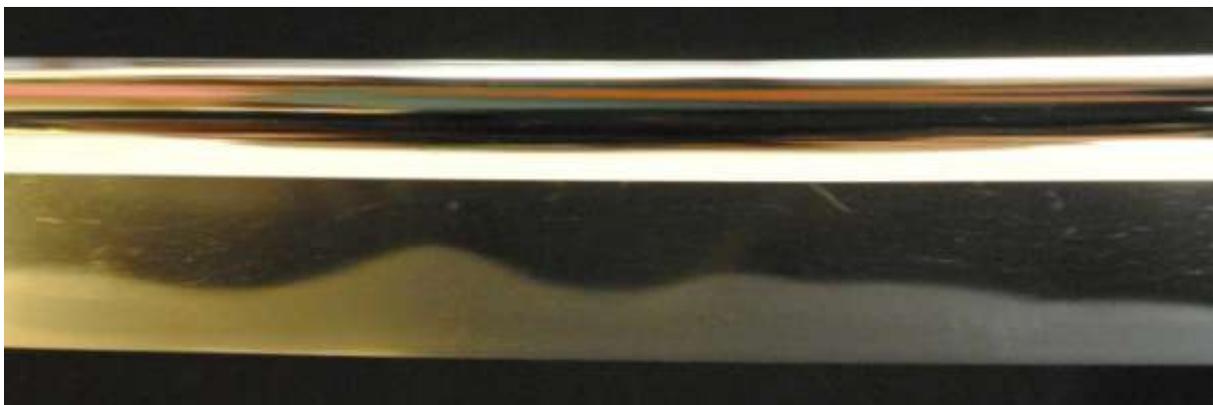
**Naoe-Shizu Jigane**

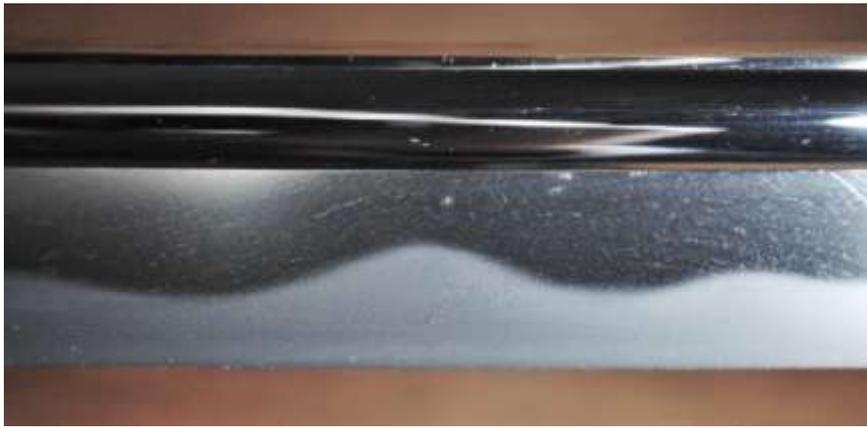


Yamato Shizu Jigane

**Hamon:**

On initial inspection the hamon appears deceptively simple. Starting at the hamachi in a thin suguha it gradually increases in width to form a broad undulating midare with rounded togari. The Nioi-guchi is relatively thick and interspersed with bright nie. The crests of the togari are populated with slightly larger nie and at some points clusters of bright ara-nie form Tobiyaki which hover just above the hamon. Following the masame hada within the hamon nie forms sinuous lines of sunagashi which cut through the nioi-guchi. Overall the hamon is extremely complex and beautiful.





### **Boshi:**

The boshi is ko-maru with a short kaeri. Centrally above the hamon within the kissaki there is a Tobiyaki comprised of a cluster of ko-nie. It's positioning (on both sides) looks to be very deliberate and demonstrates incredible skill and control of the hardening process.



### **Nakago:**

The nakago is O-suriage with 3 mekugi ana. Although O-suriage it is well shaped and of good colour. The full length hi end in kaki-nagashi part way in to the nakago. The Yasurimei are a fine kate-sagari.

On the Omote there is a gold inlaid inscription in Soshu script which has been translated as: みをつ  
くし = "Miotsukushi".

The Nakago has been very well reshaped and finished.



### **Comment and Conclusion:**

When I first saw this sword alongside its spectacular koshirae my initial thought was that the previous owner who commissioned the koshirae must have truly valued this blade. Having spent some time looking at it in detail it is a feeling I can fully appreciate. It is a very good sword. I have now had the opportunity to study three Naoe-Shizu blades in some detail and each of them has proven to be of very good quality. I think it is a great shame that the English references I have read limit them to a few sentences sandwiched between Kaneuji and the Seki smiths Kanesada and Kanemoto. They are worthy of much more.

This blade demonstrates many of the qualities that make Naoe-Shizu stand out above the norms of the time. The sugata is grand without being excessive, the hada tight and clear with a lot of activity and the hamon is gently cultivated and complex. It skilfully avoids the excesses of the period while at the same time it resisted falling in to the contrived patterns so familiar in Mino work. Whoever made it used incredible skill to create something that looks simple but is extremely complex in detail and execution. It is, to use the correct term, "Just right".

The "Marks in a water channel" remain a mystery and I am sure there are many alternative possibilities. But I would like to think someone in times past looked at the blade as I have and saw within the hamon images of ripples sparkling through a fast flowing stream.



Paul Bowman

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**Reference material:**

The Connoisseur's book of Japanese Swords **Kokan Nagayama**

Nihonto Koza - **Sato (Afu Watson translation)**

Japanese sword encyclopaedia **Markus Sesko**

NBTHK English version magazines

Special thanks to Ray Singer and K. Morita of the Nihonto Message board for their help in translating the nakago.

Note\*

Following the initial writing and publication of this piece a member of the Token Society Ms. Mieko Grey was kind enough to do further research on inscription. She found a number of alternative meanings. I have copied her note to me below which explains her findings far better than I could.

Re: Inscription on the Nakago

[www.to-ken.uk/onewebmedia/35.%20naoe%20shizu.pdf](http://www.to-ken.uk/onewebmedia/35.%20naoe%20shizu.pdf)

Inscribed: みを徒くし (in a mixture of hiragana and Manyo-gana) "Miotsukushi"

Deciphered: みをつくし "Miotsukushi"

Translated: 身を尽くし (to dedicate oneself whole heartedly), also 濤標 (Channel Buoys) --- Both read "Miotsukushi". The word is literary, poetic and has a romantic tone, pledging utmost dedication.

Miotsukushi: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E6%BE%AA%E6%A8%99>

<http://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/m/miotsukushi.htm>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/45366>

Chapter 14 (Miotsukushi 濤標) in the Tale of Genji (Genji Monogatari 源氏物語).

Channel Buoys, Channel Markers.

My tentative interpretations:

1 The swordsmith made the sword with his all might, heart and soul.

2 The person who commissioned this sword would dedicate his life to the art of Samurai – the Bunbu Ryodo 文武兩道. “This term can be found to be as old as the famous literary Heike Story of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. We do not know exactly when this term was invented but the combination of two kanjis 文 and 武 was popular in ancient Japan. We find the combination of 文武 was used for the 42<sup>nd</sup> emperor 文武天皇 in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Though the pronunciation of those kanjis was “Monmu” the meaning remained the same and it represented the meaning that this emperor was to excel in both higher education and military affairs.” QUOTE: <http://asaikarate.com/what-is-bunbu-ryodo-%E6%96%87%E6%AD%A6%E4%B8%A1%E9%81%93%E3%81%A8%E3%81%AF%E4%BD%95%E3%81%9E%E3%82%84%EF%BC%9F/>

<https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%96%87%E6%AD%A6%E4%B8%A1%E9%81%93>

3 The person (e.g. vassal) might have commissioned this sword in order to dedicate the sword to a Daimyo or a high ranking courtier, in pledge of his feudal devotion, diplomatic gifts and courtly services, doing so with his whole heart and soul.

4 The wearer would pledge his service to the Shogun or the Emperor, with his heart and soul.

PB Comment:

This seems to be an altogether more likely interpretation of the inscription (although I still like the reference to the activity in the hamon) and I think confirms that this blade was very highly valued through its long life.

I would like to thank Ms. Grey for supplying this fascinating insight.