

# **NBTHK SWORD JOURNAL**

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#### **MEITO KANSHO: APPRECIATION OF IMPORTANT SWORDS**

**Tokubetsu Jujo token**

**Tachi**

**Mei: Tsuneto**

Length: 2 shaku 4 sun 5 bu 2 rin (74.34 cm)

Sori: 5 bu 8 rin (1.75 cm)

Motohaba: 8 bu 6 rin (2.6 cm)

Sakihaba: 5 bu 6 ri (1.7 cm)

Motokasane: 2 bu (0.6 cm)

Sakikasane: 1 bu 2 rin (0.35 cm)

Kissaki length: 8 bu 7 rin (2.65 cm)

Nakago length: 6 sun 3 bu (19.1 cm)

Nakago sori: none

#### **Commentary**

This is an ihorimune tachi. It is slightly narrow, and the widths at the moto and the saki are slightly different, there is a standard thickness, a slight funbari, it is koshizori, and the tip falls down going forward (i.e. the sori becomes shallower going towards the point), and there is a small kissaki. The hada is ko-itame hada, mixed with some itame and nagare hada. The hada is slightly visible, and there are ji-nie and pale utsuri. The entire hamon is wide, and mainly ko-choji mixed with ko-gunome, and is a komidare style hamon. The upper half has some areas with suguha. The vertical variations in the hamon's width do not stand out. There are frequent ashi and yo, a dense nioiguchi with ko-nie, and some sunagashi. The boshi is straight and there is a large round tip. The nakago is slightly suriage. The nakago tip is ha-agari kurijiri, and the yasurime are katte sagari (the newer yasurime) and a strong sujichigai (the old yasurime). There are four mekugi ana and one is closed. On the omote, above the third mekugi ana, and almost on the center, there is a large two kanji signature.

Ko-Bizen swords are recognized from the end of the Heian period to the early Kamakura period. The term Ko-Bizen refers to sword smiths and all other related

craftsmen working in that period. The most famous smiths are Tomonari and Masatsune, and two Ko-Bizen “san(3)-hira” are smiths such as Takahira, Sukehira, and Kanehira, and also Sanetsune, Nobufusa, and Yoshikane. There are more than sixty Juyo Token level smiths recognized. From this, it is easy to imagine that there are many polishers tasked with finishing and protecting swords, as well as koshirae makers, and their numbers should be at least several times larger than the number of sword smiths. We can say that in Bizen, there must have been large sword craftsman groups who formed a community of Japanese sword related craftsmen. Nationally designated works comprise about fifty pieces, and their artistic and historical values are very high, and even today this work continues to fascinate many sword lovers. Their common styles in ubu condition include a large koshisori, funbari, a sori falling down going forward towards the tip (the sori becomes shallower going towards the point), and a small kissaki. The jigane ranges from ko-itame to a large itame. There are ji-nie, chikei, midare utsuri, and sometimes jifu utsuri. The hamon are usually either ko-midare, or a suguha style. Some of the hamon are mixed with ko-choji and ko-gunome. There are nie and kinsuji, and the entire hamon has a classic appearance. One of Bizen’s representative smiths, Tomonari, has two blades signed in the Katei period (1235-38), and Yoshikane has a blade signed in the Kencho period (1249-56), and from this, it appears that Ko-Bizen’s latest works are from around the mid-Kamakura period, and naturally with the period’s transition, a breadth and diversity of styles developed. Also, Tsunemitsu who is supposed to have inherited the Ko-Bizen style, has a blade dated in Shoan 3 (1301), and some of this style was visible until the latter half of the Kamakura period.

Concerning Tsuneto, the book, “Meikan” lists as Ko-Bizen smiths, two smiths in the Genryaku (1184-5) and Ryakunin (1238-9) periods, and they are supposed to have belonged to the Masatsune group, and Tsuneto is listed as Tochika’s father. Tsuneto’s signed work consists of five swords, and his other confirmed work are a Juyo Token ko-tachi, and one blade owned by the Tokyo National Museum.

This tachi has a shallow sori with funbari, it has an elegant classic shape and has a koshizori. The jigane is mainly ko-itame with pale jifu utsuri, and is well forged. Also, the mainly ko-choji hamon bunches or groups have large and small variations, but the vertical variations are not noticeable, but reminds one of the next generation’s Ichimonji school’s work. There are frequent ashi and yo, and ko-nie, and it resembles Masatsune’s work, and the comments in the Meikan are confirmed, and this looks like work from around the Ryakunin period. I could say that this a masterpiece which has a classic elegant feeling and is highly dignified. The hamon width from the moto to the tip is wide. There is a healthy boshi, and the state of preservation is very good, and it supposed to be one of a few of Tsuneto’s representative works. Also, this is listed in the “Kozan Oshigata”, and in the Edo period it belonged to the Ueno Koku Tatebayashi clan’s Akimoto family.

The top Ko-Bizen smiths were not as organized or as business-like as the later generation Osafune school smiths. But every time we see a smith’s work like this one from Tsuneto who has few works and was not famous, we can’t help but feel sympathy for the sword smith group, with their high level of skill and the quality of their work, and this is a very useful work to remember as a reference.

Explanation and photo by Ishii Akira.

## Shijo Kantei To No. 824

### Information:

Katana

Length: 2 shaku 4 sun 2.5 bu (73.5 cm)

Sori: 4.5 bu (1.35 cm)

Motohaba: 1 sun (3.0 cm)

Sakihaba: slightly over 6 bu (1.9 cm)

Motokasane: slightly less than 2 bu (0.55 cm)

Sakikasane: slightly over 1 bu (0.4 cm)

Kissaki length: slightly over 1 sun 2 bu (3.7 cm)

Nakago length: slightly over 7 sun 4 bu (22.5 cm)

Nakago sori: slight

This is a shinogi tsukuri katana with an ihorimune. There is a standard width, the widths at the moto and saki are different, there is a standard thickness, a rich hiraniku, a prominent ha-niku, a shallow sori and a long chu-kissaki. The jigane has a ko-itame hada mixed with some nagare hada. There are abundant pronounced ji-nie, and chikei. The hamon and boshi are as shown as the picture. There is a dense nioiguchi, and some areas in the hamon have slightly tight mura nie. There are prominent nie mixed in places with rough nie. The upper part of the hamon has yubashiri and tobiyaki, niesuji, thick frequent kinsuji, and a bright and clear nioiguchi. The nakago is ubu. The tip is a narrow kengyo style (the smith has many iriyama-gata nakago jiri). The yasurime are a shallow katte-sagari. There is one mekugi ana. On the omote along the mune side there is a mon and a long kanji signature with a title.

## Tokubetsu Jujo Tosogu

Reiju zu (sacred beast design) mitokoromono

Kozuka and ko-gai mei: Tobari Tomohisa with kao  
Menuki: mumei Tobari Tomohisa

Tobari Tomohisa's common name was Kisoji, and he was born in Toshima Gun's Zoshigaya village. He became a student of the Goto family's 13th generation. After he learned his craft and established his carving techniques, he became independent and cultivated his own students such as Saito Tomozui. His own son Yoshihisa inherited the family's engraving business. Many of their styles are based on a shakudo nanako ground with takabori or gold mon which is a typical oie-bori style (oie-bori is the Goto family gold smith's style of work for the shogun in the Edo period).

This mitokoromono work consists of a kogai and kozuka with a shakudo nanako ground, with a gold mon and reiju (beast) design, and the menuki have a solid gold ground with yo-bori. The mon and back use a luxurious gold ground, and with the carving style used in the construction of the kozuka and kogai, he showed that he inherited and assumed his Goto teacher's style of carving, and this is Mitsutaka's (his teacher) best disciple, and Tomohisa's high level of skill is fully demonstrated in this work. Each beast (reiju) is made using a traditional oie-bori design, but their locations and angles reflect special efforts, and it almost looks like the beasts are alive and jumping up and down.

Some of Tomihosa's work has mei which include Goto's name and say "Tsujo's copy", or "Mitsumasa-in design", and we can recognize his attitude to learn a lot from his teacher's work. This is a one example of this type of work. Also, this is a work reminding us that the Goto family trained these students, and they in turn supported the family.

Explanation by Takeda Kotaro

## **TEIREI KANSHO KAI**

**The answer for the Teirei Kansho Kai 822 in the July, 2025 issue is a wakizashi by Osafune Norimitsu**

The jigane is itame with bo-utsuri, the hamon is midare with a strong nioiguchi, and these are clearly characteristics of Bizen Den work. From the low hamon width for the width of the blade, and the prominent slightly angular hamon features, in voting, besides votes for Eikyo Bizen smiths such as Norimitsu, some people voted for Kosori work in which the upper half is similar to this, and also for Bizen smiths from the end of the Oei period.

However, although the Kosori smiths were active until around the latter half of the Nanbokucho period, we do not see many works which are this long. Most of their

wakizashi are hirazukuri wakizashi and 1 shaku 5 sun is a comparatively long length for hirazukuri work, and there are few works. Also, from the statement that there is a short ubu nakago, the omote has the smith's name, and confirmation that this is a wakizashi means that this cannot be a suriage ko-tachi, and it was appropriate to judge it as being other than Kosori work.

Around the Oei (1394-1427) period, there were relatively many blades with lengths 1 shaku 5-7 sun long, also there were relatively many shinogi zukuri blades. Their use was supposedly growing among higher ranking samurai, as supplemental blades for tachi, and lower ranking samurai used these instead of hirazukuri uchigatana. However, before, during, and after the Kansho period (1460-65) higher ranking samurai's use of tachi as their main blade became less popular, and shinogi zukuri katana with lengths of about 2 shaku were produced in greater numbers, and tachi were no longer the leading blade style. Some experts call this trend or period the Gekokujo (the rising up of lower ranks to higher ranks).

This style of 1 shaku 5-7 sun shinogi zukuri style blades was seen in Oei Bizen, and before and after the Meiroku period (1390-93), compared with the period around the Eikyo to Kansei (1429-65) eras in active Osafune smith's work. Many of them are slightly narrow, the widths at the moto and saki are different, there is a small kissaki or a small chu-kissaki, the entire shape appears gentle, and these are supposed to be the period's characteristic points.

This wakizashi's jiba (jigane and hamon) has an itame hada with bo-utsuri, a midare hamon with a strong nioiguchi, a narrow hamon width for the blade's width, and a prominently slightly angular hamon. In addition, above the machi there is a small yakimodoshi (often seen around the Oei period, and more on midare hamon than on suguha hamon). There is a slightly small midare pattern, and between the shallow notare and angular shaped hamon features, some of the valleys connecting the gunome or waves are a suguha style. There are not many prominent ashi and yo. The boshi matches the hamon, and is a gentle midare with a return. This is a Norimitsu's best style.

The nakago tip is a slightly square narrow kurijiri, the yasurime are katte-sagari, the small signature made with a fine chisel almost fits into the shinogi ji. In addition, comparing the mei with the style seen on a tachi, there is a short space between the hamachi and the mekugi ana, and on the omote, the space under the mekugi ana has more kanji present than above the mekugi ana (many of the smith's signatures are all below the mekugi ana along the mune side). The ura has a date composed in almost the same style as on the omote side, and the nakago style matches with Norimitsu's characteristic points in this period.

In the hints, it mentioned that a tachi over 2 shaku 2 sun long was forged in the neighboring province for an order and was classified as Juyo Bunkazai. It was recently given to the Tokyo National Museum and signed "Bizen koku Osafune ju Saemonjo Fujiwara Ason Norimitsu, oite Saku-shu Takatori-ju Kurosaka tsukuru Takatori Kageyusaemon-jo Sugawara Ason Taisauta-su kore Choroku San-nen

Tsuchinoto-u 12 gatsu 13nichi (length 2 shaku 2 sun 4 bu). Also, another hint about Eikyo Bizen work was a guide to a Norimitsu answer. There were different Norimitsu generations, and there are many unconfirmed theories about this, so at this time, any Norimitsu is treated as a correct answer.

The transition in styles from Oei Bizen to Sue Bizen which peaked before and after the Bunmei (1469-86) period, is seen, not only in Norimitsu's work, but also in other Eikyo Bizen (1429-40) smiths' style. Also, Oei Bizen smiths such as Iesuke and Tsuneie were active after the Eikyo period, and they have some work which is not very different from this wakizashi. From this, at this time all Eikyo Bizen smiths such as Sukemitsu, Yoshimitsu, and in addition, Iesuke, Tsuneie and Yasumitsu with the Eikyo period acknowledgement are treated as correct answers.

For a reference, I will list smiths with work similar to this wakizashi. Sukemitsu has many examples of tightly forged jigane, and his notare hamon tops are split in half. All of Tsunemitsu's work appear rough when compared with Norimitsu and Sukemitsu, and his average blades often show slightly less skill in their workmanship.

Iesuke is supposed to have many hamon with shapes similar to this one, but his jigane are mixed with frequent mokume and nagare hada, the hada is visible and uneven, and there are prominent sunagashi. Many of his works have a slightly rustic look.

Many of Tsuneie's hamon are mixed with frequent notare, based on notare and angular shaped hamon features, mixed with small ko-gunome and ko-choji, and some of his midare hamon are a slightly small size.

Eikyo Yasumitsu has some Oei Bizen work on a smaller scale, but he has a relatively large number of suguha hamon.

Besides the correct answer, if it were Kosori work, for the width, the blade is thick. Many of his jigane are mixed with dark chikei and jifu, the hamon include many kinds of features or elements, and are an uneven midare. However, in the hamon size and composition, there is not much variation, and the midare valley's straight floors or bottoms do not stand out. Looking at their signatures, they are the same and inside of the shinogi-ji, but they are signed either above a mekugi ana, or mostly above a mekugi ana and there are few kanji below the mekugi ana, and this is a difference.

On many of Oei Bizen Morimitsu's works, the entire hamon is high or wide, the midare hamon valleys almost reach the edge of the hamon, and there are prominent high and low variations. His boshi tips are sharp and there is a short return. Often the tips are narrow, and there are ashi, and this produces an effect which appears like a candle wick. His tachi signatures are same as on Kosori work, but many of them are signed in the center of the nakago or on the flat area. His shinogi tsukuri wakizashi are not shortened tachi, but appear more like a hirazukuri shape was changed into a

shinogi tsukuri shape. This used to be a supplemental weapon, and we can catch a glimpse of lower ranking samurai.

From the Juyo Bunkazai Bitchu's Kusakabe (geographic area) uchi (forging), some people voted for Ukyo Katsumitsu, but because this is a wakizashi, it does not match the hint. He has mid-Muromachi to mid-Bunmei period work, but in this period, many Osafune blades were over 2 shaku long. Many of hamon are large and gorgeous, like a regression to Oei Bizen work, there were prominent double gunome and choji, and there are frequent ashi and yo. The boshi yakiba are wide, and we do not often see bo-utsuri.

Around the Eikyo period, shinogi tsukuri blade signatures were are along the mune side, and most of them are under the mekugi ana. The smiths who started to be active around this time, such as Katsumitsu and Tadamitsu are same way, but many of their kanji are slightly larger, and are often expanded over the shinogi ji. Also, we see fewer inscriptions with 6 kanji signatures such as "Bishu Osafune ---" and more have titles or long kanji signature such as "Bizen Koku Osafune ---". Following this, many of the ura side dates are lower than the omote signatures.

Also, long inscribed signatures were influenced on hirazukuri work too. Sometimes they expand to more than two lines, and they are not located on a particular location on the nakago. Before and after the Eisho (1504-20) period, even some hirazukuri blades with one line signatures were signed along the mune side, and eventually around Tenmon (1532-54) it became an established custom.

Explanation by Ooi Gaku