

Before Hizen Tadayoshi.

Introduction

Those of you who have had the dubious pleasure of hearing or reading my ramblings at meetings or in the newsletter will know that I have become an obsessive Hizen enthusiast. This addiction has been fuelled over recent years by occasional very pleasant (though doubtless damaging to my liver) evenings in discussion the Roger Robertshaw in Hong Kong. I owe Roger a great debt, his enthusiasm was sufficiently contagious to take me from “I have something which I like and think is Hizen” to “I regard Hizen swords to be amongst the finest Shinto blades ever produced”

For those who are interested in Hizen swords, and the mainline Tadayoshi school in particular I thoroughly recommend Rogers book, which I believe is still available on CD.

I have now been studying Hizen swords for a number of years I have had the good fortune to look at a lot of very fine Hizen blades and many others which at first glance appeared to be but were not.

Continued research in any field always generates more questions than answers and because of this I wanted to look at some different aspects of the Hizen School. The characteristics and techniques of the school have been well documented, the background to the development of the school less so. The early years of Tadayoshi are still the cause of much study, controversy and debate within Japan.

In an attempt to better understand how the school of Hizen Tadayoshi reached such a pinnacle in Shinto sword production I started to look at pre-Tadayoshi sword making in Hizen and the political environment which existed before and during the growth of the school.

The object of the following is to challenge some of the more populist statements about the development of the Hizen Tadayoshi School and suggest some alternative theories. Reaching a point whereby one can advance even the most speculative theory can only be achieved by the study of existing reference works. In my own case I have relied heavily on Eguchi Shosins definitive work “Hizento Handbook” which has been superbly translated by Dr. Gordon Robson, Robertshaws Hizen Tadayoshi, the Nihonto Koza and references in “Art and the sword”. I am also grateful to Mr. Cary Condell for his advice and input.

Although using these reference works, ultimately in any such article the conclusions are the authors’ opinion, and as such can be accepted or disregarded as the reader feels inclined. Likewise Errors, of which I am sure there are many, are all my own work.

Hopefully however it may give some cause to re-look at their favourite school or smith and try to re-evaluate the accepted intelligence.

The Populist history.

The following is a brief summary of the most widely described development and history of the Tadayoshi School.

Hashishimoto Shinsaemonjo was born in 1572. His Father and Grandfather served the ruling Hizen family led by Ryuzoji Takanobu. Tadayoshis' grandfather died at the battle of Shimabara in 1584 (not to be confused with the Shimabara revolt of 1637) both his parents died later the same year.

At the age of 13 and an orphan he was taken in by a relative who was a sword smith manufacturing mass produced blades for the Nabeshima clan. In 1596 Nabeshima Naoshige was establishing an industrial empire in Hizen and recognising the talent of the young Tadayoshi sent him to study under the renowned "father of Shinto" Umetada Myoju where he refined his skill in producing Yamashiro style swords. After three years he returned home was given a stipend and established the Hizen Tadayoshi School in the service of Naoshige. The fame of the school grew rapidly (partly as a result of the entrepreneurial skills of Naoshige) and Tadayoshi blades much sort after. The Tadayoshi reputation was further enhanced following a second (or according to some texts third) visit to Kyoto and Umetada Myoju in 1624. At this time he was granted the title Musashi Daijo and the clan name Fujiwara by the Imperial court. He changed his name from Tadayoshi to Tadahiro and returned to Hizen.

By this time the Hizen style was well established and the school, together with the branch line schools prospered for a further 8 generations up to the Meiji sword ban.

Superficially this looks reasonably logical and neat and an acceptable précis of the sequence of events. However there are some anomalies and contradictions which warrant further consideration. A number of o texts offer alternative views as to the early working life of Tadayoshi which could also explain his meteoric rise to fame. To understand these we need to examine the following:

1. Early Sword making in Hizen and the surrounding provinces
2. The prevalent political situation during the formative years of the Hizen School
3. Having obtained title and fame why did Tadayoshi change his name.
4. Who was Tosa no Kami Tadayoshi?
5. How much technical influence did Umetada Myoju have on Tadayoshi?

The general texts suggest that there was not a great deal of sword making going on in Hizen in during the Koto period and consequently few high quality sword-smiths. However looking at a slightly larger area within Kyushu this was not strictly true. In neighbouring Chikuzen province the Chikuzen School founded by Ryosai was active producing blades in the Yamato tradition. Sa, one of Masamunes jitetsu founded the Chikuzen Sa School in the early Nambokucho and produced blades strongly influenced by the Soshu School. Also active from the early 14th.century the Kongobyoe School was founded by Moritaka in the mountain area surrounding Saga. This school continued producing powerful, conservative blades heavily influenced by the Yamato School, until the end of the Koto period. Although the majority of later works were tanto there are a number of illustrated works (100 masterpieces from the Compton collection no.32 is an example) which show Tachi with a powerful sugata, combined with a reserved, almost understated Suguha hamon and clear Itame hada. Both Chikuzen Sa and Kongobyoe smiths were known to have visited and worked in Hizen

In addition to these neighbouring Schools Eguchi states that Smiths from Enju (Suefusa and Norisue) Bungo (Ieshige) and the Munesaka group all travelled and worked within Hizen at various times in the Koto period. There was, therefore, a considerable amount of movement within Kyushu in the Koto period, with master smiths exchanging ideas and interacting on a fairly high level.

Munetsugu

At the very end of the Koto period and at the beginning of the Shinto period a sword smith named Munetsugu was a retainer of the ruling family the Ryuzoji. The Munetsugu family were priests responsible for the Ryuzoji temple in Nagase. Munetsugu (also known as Masatsugu in some texts) succeeded to the head of the family in 1584.

As with many sword smiths of this period it appears that Munetsugu carried out a lot of experimentation, producing blades in Bizen, Soshu and Yamashiro styles. He was a very accomplished swords-smith His work was ranked as Jo Saku (good) and a number of his Bizen and Soshu style blades are extant. Eguchi believes that the lack of Yamashiro copies by Munetsugu is due in part to Sword dealers of the time shortening his Yamashiro style blades and selling them as Koto Rai and Enju work to the ultra-conservative Kyoto nobility. If this is the case then Munetsugus work must have been of a very high standard indeed.

Munetsugu was the relative that the young Tadayoshi stayed with from the time he was orphaned until he went to Kyoto in 1596.

There is an immediate contradiction here with the original theory. Contrary to that view Tadayoshi did not spend his formative years in a workshop making kazu-uchimono (mass produced blades). He was, in fact working with a highly skilled group of smiths the leader of which had considerable talent and was producing Koto copies of Yamashiro, Bizen and Soshu workmanship. This is further borne out by examining the early work of Tadayoshi pre Kiecho 10 (1605) which show little influence of Umetada Myoju. They exhibit traits of Yamato and Soshu (shizu style) with a relatively coarse hada and hotsure and kuighigaiba appearing in the hamon. It is only after Keicho 10 that he seems to concentrate on the Yamashiro, Rai utsushi style of Umetada Myoju incorporating ko-mokume (konuka) hada and Suguha hamon.

In support of the mass production theory it is highly possible that the Nagase temple workshop was producing bundle swords around this time. Hideyoshi's Korean campaigns put a great demand on the Hizen swordsmiths to arm the troops being despatched by Naoshige. However this was by no means their total output.

It is interesting to note that Munetsugu received the title Iyo no Jo in Keicho 11 (1606) and was declared Tsukasa no Kashira (Head of all Hizen Smiths) in Keicho 13 (1608). This was some 9 years after Tadayoshi returned from his first trip to Kyoto. At about the same time Tadayoshi moved from Nagase to Saga as the Nabeshima wanted direct Fief control over the smithies. Tadayoshi was declared overall head of the Hashimoto smiths. Is it possible that having separated from Munetsugu and the school in Nagase, and in an attempt to differentiate his work from his former masters, Tadayoshi became much more focussed on emulating the Koto Rai and Enju blades of Yamashiro which ultimately led to the development of the style of sword now universally described as Hizen. None the less Eguchi concludes, with justification, that at this time Munetsugu was regarded as being of a higher rank than Tadayoshi.

So during the early days of the Tokugawa shogunate there are two established Hizen Smithies, the original at Nagase under the Priest sword-smith Munetsugu who was a retainer of the Ryuzoji family. And his former best pupil and rising star Tadayoshi whose career has come under the control of the Nabeshima family.

At this point it is worth examining the political background of the lords of Hizen and how that may have affected the fortunes of the various smiths working in Hizen at the time.

Ryuzoji and Nabeshima.

Ryuzoji Takanobu (1530-1585) was a powerful warlord who controlled the plains area around Saga. With the support of his foremost retainer Nabeshima Naoshige (1537-1619) Takanobu defeated an invading army from Bungo under Otomo Sorin (1530-1587) and was subsequently able to build his power base over time until he became established as Governor General in Hizen, Bungo, Higo, Chikuzen, Iki and Tsushima.

Ryuzoji Takanobu was killed at the battle of Shimabara (the same battle in which Tadayoshi's Grandfather died) and control of Ryuzoji affairs passed into the hands of his capable retainer Nabeshima Naoshige. The transfer of power was finalised in 1592.

However there was a written agreement between the Nabeshima and Ryuzoji that power would revert to Ryuzoji Takafusa when he reached the age of 15.

Nabeshima Naoshige appears to have been a strong supporter of Hideyoshi. He worked hard to establish a strong economic base in Hizen creating a Ceramics industry and developing sword smithing. He also sent troops on Hideyoshi's Korean expeditions. It was perhaps in a further attempt to gain favour that Naoshige despatched Munetsugu's most able pupil, Tadayoshi, to Kyoto to study under Umetada Myoju who was highly regarded by Hideyoshi.

Between 1592 and 1600 Naoshige established a strong power base around Saga. After the death of Hideyoshi, Naoshige found himself on the wrong side in the ensuing power struggle. The defeat of the Western Army under the Toyotomi by Tokugawa Ieyasu left Naoshige vulnerable and in real danger of losing his Fief. He sent his second son

Tadashige as a hostage to Edo and as a result came under the protection of the Tokugawa and was confirmed in his Fiefdom.

However there still existed the agreement between the Nabeshima and the Ryuzoji that power would revert to Takafusa on his 15th. Birthday. This did not happen and Takafusa committed seppuku in 1607. The resultant bad feeling between the leading families of the Ryuzoji and Nabeshima led to confrontation which in turn resulted in the best lands passing from retainers of the Ryuzoji to the Nabeshima.

It is only possible to speculate what effect this may have had on Munetsugu. He was after all a long established retainer of the Ryuzoji. Although receiving the title of Head of Hizen swordsmiths a year after the death of Takafusa, the fact that Nabeshima Naoshige relocated his top pupil to Saga suggests that he was trying to establish sword manufacture under his own control away from the historical association with the Ryuzoji. It is also tempting to believe this had some influence on Tadayoshi's focus on The Umetada Myoju style of forging some 8 or 9 years after his return from Kyoto. Whatever the reality, there appears to have been a distancing in the relationship between Naoshige and the Nagase swordsmiths. As a result much of Naoshige's efforts in marketing Hizen workmanship centred on the Saga Forge and Tadayoshi.

The following years between 1615 and 1624 were difficult for both Smithies.

Munetsugu's star was fading within Hizen. Tadayoshi had marital problems which weighed heavily on him and resulted in differences in his work. However these difficulties are considered to have been character building for Tadayoshi. It is also interesting to note that there appears to have been a strong and ongoing positive relationship between Nagase and Saga. There is strong evidence that Munetsugu's son Muneyasu worked with Tadayoshi, producing daimeiri Tadahiro works. Both smithies were lively and producing good work.

Eguchi concludes that it was not so much that Munetsugu fell out of favour it was more that Tadayoshi received special treatment.

Musashi Daijo Tadahiro and Tosa no Kami Tadayoshi.

It is well documented that Tadayoshi made a second trip to Kyoto to spend time with Umetada Myoju and to seek his support in gaining an honorary title. His petition to the Imperial court was successful and in 1624 he was awarded the title of Musashi Daijo and granted the right to use the Fujiwara clan name. At the same time he took what at first sight seems the unusual step of changing his art name to Tadahiro.

There has been some considerable debate and speculation as to why he would do this. For many years scholars argued that Tadayoshi and Tadahiro were two different people. However the current view is that they were one in the same person. It is difficult to understand why someone who was becoming recognised and highly regarded should change their name when they are granted a title rather than just adding it to and enhancing the existing one.

It is known from contemporary documentation that the Nabeshima were delighted with the award of the title. But it also seems that the Tadayoshi signature was associated with later sword production as there were few if any famous Smiths called Tadayoshi from the Koto period. Therefore the conclusion was that in 1624 the Tadayoshi name was not seen

as particularly valuable and He believed that changing to Tadahiro in combination with his newly gained title and clan name would be of greater benefit. So in 1624 Shodai Tadayoshi became Musashi Daijo Fujiwara Tadahiro.

It is recorded that for a short period Tadayoshis pupil Masanaga inherited the Tadayoshi name. However within a year following the Daimyos instruction he changed his name to Masahiro (later to become Kawachi Daijo Masahiro, shodai of the Masahiro branch Hizen School). So once again the Tadayoshi name became available and at this point Tosa no Kami Tadayoshi appears.

Examining the work of Tosa no Kami it has little in common with Tadayoshis School in Saga. Generally his work is in Soshu den. The Habuchi is covered in Nie and contains Kinsuji, yo and Sunagashi. This work style points towards Munetsugu rather than Tadayoshi. Likewise some of the characters in his signature are more closely aligned to Munetsugu than Tadayoshi. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Tosa no Kami Tadayoshi was Munetsugus pupil. Equally it seems logical that as the Tadayoshi name was relinquished by Munetsugus best student, it should be taken up by his second student and the Tosa no Kami title passed on at the same time.

Over the following years the standing of Tadayoshi within Hizen fell from ranking second amongst Shodai Tadhiros pupils in 1627 to fourth in 1629. This may be due in part to the number of talented smiths now employed in Saga within the Tadayoshi School. It may also be indicative of the further decline of the Ryuzoji supporters within Hizen.

Eguchi notes that the fortunes of Munetsugu declined further in the following years and his school moved to Isahaya which was still governed by the Ryuzoji.

An interesting point is that by the time the third generation smith of the mainline Tadayoshi School had reached maturity he opted to take the Tadayoshi name rather than Tadahiro. This is believed to be because by this time the Tadayoshi name had become more famous with the famous Gojimei Tadayoshi swords being highly prized and sought after. In comparison the large number of student made blades carrying the Tadahiro named had to some extent devalued it. So in a reversal of the Shodais' original thinking the Sandai felt Tadayoshi to be the more valuable name.

The Influence of Umetada Myoju.

As mentioned above it was well known that Umetada Myoju was well regarded and working for the Toyotomi family. It is not unreasonable to assume that part of Naoshiges reasoning in sending Tadayoshi to Kyoto was to demonstrate to Hideyoshi his commitment to his Lords values. Umetada Myoju was developing and enhancing forging technology based on the principals of Koto Yamashiro work. It is therefore also reasonable to assume that Tadayoshis specialisation in producing Yamashiro style blades is a result of the time spent in Kyoto. However it is recorded that Munetsugu was amongst other styles also producing Rai and Enju school copies before Tadayoshi went to Kyoto. It is therefore likely that in the twelve years Tadayoshi spent with Munetsugu prior to his first Kyoto trip he had already received a good grounding in Yamashiro forging techniques. Eguchi also points out that for some 9 years after his return from Kyoto his work showed very little influence of Umetada Myoju. He continued to produce

Yamato and Soshu style swords. It was not until Tadayoshi left Munetsugu and set up a forge in Saga that he began to focus on the Yamashiro Rai utsushi. Perhaps on his return from Kyoto Tadayoshi felt constrained to continue to work in the style of his original master, using what he had learned to enhance the quality of the schools output. Perhaps the value of his trip to Kyoto was more political and in marketing than technology. His association with Myoju enhanced his reputation and made it easier for the Nabeshima to promote his work at a very senior level.

When he did start focussing on the subtle, unassuming style which ultimately epitomised the Hizen School was it because the market he was trying to serve was the nobility that his master wanted to impress? The restrained style combined with elegant sugata of Yamashiro blades was greatly admired by in the ultra conservative hierarchy of the time. Alternatively, perhaps his focus on a less flamboyant style was influenced by the effect of his marital difficulties on his overall mood. In dealing with these difficulties he was able to refine his technique to an unsurpassed level. Or maybe as with everyone else's life it was a combination of all these factors that enabled Tadayoshi to grow in ability to become one of the five leading exponents of Shinto sword making, and the Father of one of the most successful schools in sword making history.

Conclusion.

When I began looking in to the background of the development of the Tadayoshi School I thought I had a clear understanding of its history. I learned very quickly that I had made the basic error of viewing a sequence of events in isolation, failing to take account on what else was happening at the time and what effect that might have on the main theme. Once I started looking beyond the Sword-Smith and school many new factors came in to play. As I said at the beginning in any work of this nature what the reader is ultimately left with is the authors' opinion. In this case mine formed out of studying and trying to interpret works by much more learned people than me, who have spent a lifetime researching the subject. With regard to firm conclusions I believe I have established the following to my own satisfaction at least:

1. There was an established sword making tradition within Hizen and its surrounding provinces during the Koto period.
2. Following the loss of his parents Tadayoshi spent 12 years learning sword making under a highly skilled sword-smith Munetsugu.
3. Although Tadayoshi did gain technically from his time in Kyoto with Umetada Myoju the initial advantage was marketing/commercial/political.
4. The special treatment afforded to Tadayoshi was due in part to his prestigious talent but also from a desire of the Nabeshima to develop a recognised Sword production centre using retainers loyal to them rather than their predecessors.
5. The style of sword which is now universally recognised as Hizen was developed out of the smith attempting to address the requirements of his Masters targeted clients. It was

also possibly influenced by the effect of his difficult domestic situation at a formative stage of his schools development.

Finally I believe that whatever the circumstances which led to the formation of the Hizen Tadayoshi School, it is undeniable that the shodai established a supremely successful enterprise that remained at the pinnacle of the swordsmiths art throughout the Shinto and Shin-Shinto period. Although influenced in degree by some of the points described above this success was only possible because of the extraordinary talent of the Shodai Tadayoshi and the determination of his followers to maintain a very high standard of excellence. To quote from Ginsato Kataoka "Random Thoughts on Hizen Swords" (Art and the Sword vol. 4) "Every generation as a matter of course, and even including the collateral families, was strongly influenced by the techniques of the first generation Tadayoshi to which they devoted their every effort."

Shodai Tadayoshi fully deserves his reputation as one of the top five swordsmiths of the Shinto Period. His legacy resides in the not only his but the work of subsequent generations of the Hizen Tadayoshi school.