In April 2000 I bought three swords from Deryk Ingham. He was in pursuit of his second blade from the A.Z. Freeman collection, the Yamato-Shizu that I have waxed lyrical about in many previous papers. 9 years on I still hold two of the three swords, both are Hizen blades. The first is a mumei, suriage katana in a shirasaya with a presentation inscription dated October 1920. This sword was papered to one of the later Tadayoshis (the 4th) at the NTHK Shinsa in London in 2003.

The second is a somewhat more complicated proposition and attempting to unravel exactly what it is has taken me in a lot of different directions at different times during the past 8 or 9 years. It is a suriage wakazashi in shirasaya. It has a niji mei “Tadayoshi”. The shortening and reshaping of the nakago has resulted in the extreme edge of both characters being shaved off, making a firm attribution more difficult. The blade was polished in 1969 by the famous polisher and author Inami Hakusui. He also wrote an Origami stating it to be the work of the Sandai. It was subsequently submitted to the NBTHK in 1971 who papered it to Tadayoshi. Based on the convention of the day the absence of a generation being specified on the paper is interpreted as referring to the Shodai.

This is a high class problem. Of all the generations of Hizen Tadayoshi the shodai and sandai are regarded as the greatest. Which comes first is a matter of opinion and the major texts differ. The Sandai undoubtedly produced the best Jigane but the Shodai was the founder, great innovator and must still figure amongst the top 5 or 6 Shinto Sword Smiths.

**The Sword.**

As mentioned above the blade is a suriage wakazashi. The nagasa is 48.4cm, Sori 0.9cm and Kasane 0.6cm.

The Jigane is extremely tight konuka hada. It has a rich covering of ji-nie and small chickei. The hamon is a very gentle midare with a very thick nioi-guchi. There is nijuba and nie runs all the way through the hamon. The nie in places looks quite large, it is extremely bright. The kissaki is chu-kissaki and the boshi is classic ko-maru, again there is nie within it.

The Nakago although shortened and reshaped retains some of the original yasurimei which look very slightly Katte-agarri (slightly sloping up to the right).
Based on the workmanship visible within the blade and the characteristics of the Yasurimeii it is easy to see why Inami Hakusui thought this to be the work of the Sandai. After the first 5 or 6 months of study I was happy to leave it at that.

However there are a number of issues with accepting that attribution. And over the following years I have spent many hours looking at every reference I could, discussed the sword with such Western experts in Hizen work as Roger Robertshaw and Clive Sinclair and have wavered back and forth between Sandai and Shodai with the great regularity.

The starting points for my concerns were as follows:

1. If the workmanship is so obviously that of the Sandai why did the NBTHK attribute it to the Shodai?
2. Immediately after the second war Inami Hakusui published his book “Nihon-To” to help the occupying forces understand the Japanese sword better. It has been suggested that this was less than popular with some within the Japanese Sword establishment of the day.
3. As a result of this disagreement with the establishment Hakusei’s reputation suffered and the accuracy of his attributions and papers were questioned. More latterly his reputation became re-established. While the above is here-say and conjecture it did and does have some bearing on ones confidence in the accuracy of the Sandai attribution.
With regard to the sword:

4. The Sandai’s signed works are rare (he mainly produced daimei for his father and died before him.)
5. Niji Mei Tadayoshi blades are extremely rare in general and for the Sandai I have found no illustrated examples.

My confusion was further increased after I sent a scan of the mei to Roger Robertshaw. After a lot of research he came to the conclusion that the mei was that of the Shodai. Although he did add that the differences in these two kanji between Shodai and Sandai was not obvious, not least because of the many variations found in the Shodai’s signature. He also said that his view was based on the rarity of the Sandai’s’ work and there being no evidence that he ever signed niji mei.

While not doubting Roger’s conclusion, it was based purely on the Mei. Examining the sword in total gave a far less conclusive result. All of the characteristics other than the mei pointed towards the sandai, the quality and tightness of the Jigane, the amount of nie in both hada and hamon and the katte-agari yasurimei were all features of the sandai rather than the shodai.

So at that point I left it. As said earlier this was a high class problem and regardless of who made it was a very fine blade indeed.
My interest in reaching a conclusion on this was stimulated recently by reading an article on identifying gimei work written by Michiro Tanobe Sensei, Director of the NBTHK. Within this article he went into some detail about how to identify generations of Tadayoshi through variations in their mei and the direction of chisel cuts. As an exercise I re-examined the mei on this blade, comparing it to the description in Tanobe-sans paper. What it told was that the way particular strokes were cut confirmed that the mei was………
either the Shodai or the Sandai!!!.
So here we are again. This time however I had more reference material available, I knew better what I was looking for so I dug in an attempt to reach a conclusion.
As previously mentioned the Shodai’s mei does have significant variation throughout his Tadayoshi days, and some of his signatures are very similar to the Sandai. However in this case there were sufficient characteristics relating to several of the strokes to confirm Roger’s opinion that this likely to be the work of the Shodai. More specifically the Shodai working in Keicho 17 and 18.

**But if the mei is the Shodai why is the workmanship text book Sandai??**

At this point I sent an email to Clive Sinclaire, I had run out of ideas and didn’t know where to go next. A couple of days later I received a reply which I think may have answered most of the questions. Based on the mei He considered this to most probably be the work of the Shodai. He also agreed the likely dating. He confirmed that niji mei Tadayoshi swords were extremely rare, in fact he had only ever seen two and these were both by the Shodai. He had previously asked about this when in Japan and was told that the Shodai signed niji mei on swords that were made for presentation to important figures, such as visiting Daimyo. Typically these blades were a level higher in quality than his normal work (remembering that his normal work was already amongst the best). If this is the case, and the general consensus is that it is, it would explain why this sword has the very tight hada with ji-nie and chickei, why there is so much nie in the hamon and boshi.

As with all later generations of the Tadayoshi line the sandai strived to emulate the work of the Shodai and produce the iconic Hizen-To that the school had become famous for. It is also recorded that he destroyed any blades that he produced that did not reach his very demanding standard. If he was trying to copy his grandfather it is not unreasonable that he would follow the best examples available to him, i.e. those of superior quality made for special presentation. This being the case it would explain why this blade has more in common with the quality of existing sandai work than many of the shodai’s extant works.

The only sticking point now was the yasurimei. It is a recognised kantei point that the Shodai’s yasurimei are very slightly katte-sagari while the sandai’s are slightly katte-agari. I mentioned above that in this sword the remainder of the original nakago appeared to be slightly katte-agari. I also mentioned that the mune of the nakago had been shaved when the blade was shortened and the nakago re-shaped. On closer examination it is possible that the re-shaping was sufficient to just re-align the yasuri sufficiently to give a false impression of their direction (equally this may be wishful thinking on my part in trying to achieve a water-tight conclusion). I am still attempting to draw this out to prove the validity of the argument (or not).
Conclusion:

When I first bought this sword it was without doubt the best quality blade I had ever purchased. When buying a new sword I usually write a registration record that confirms dimensions and characteristics. In my enthusiasm for this work I quoted George Cameron Stone, author of the famous “glossary of arms and armour” he described the Japanese sword as “The nearest thing to perfection ever made by human hand” and in looking at this piece it was a feeling I shared.

Over the past twelve months I have taken the decision to reduce my collection by half and hopefully to have fewer, but better quality pieces. My obsession for all things Hizen has cooled a little. I still believe them to be amongst the best Shinto swords and that the first and third are the best of the best. However over years of study, experience and a little understanding can cause tastes to change. Having taken the decision to sell a reasonable number of blades, including several Hizen works, this Wakazashi was soon identified as the one to keep above the 6 or 7 other works from the same school.

When I bought it I desperately wanted it to be by the Sandai, believing as many others do, that he was the best of the school. Of course it could still be by him. However the consensus believes it to be the work of the Shodai. More importantly it could be a high quality piece by him destined for an important person that the Daimyo of Hizen wanted to impress with an important gift.

I think that is a pretty good pedigree to have.

Regardless of who made it it remains a beautiful sword and one that hopefully will remain as part of my core collection for many years to come.

Paul Bowman May 2009

Additional notes:

In January 2011 I took delivery of the first 4 volumes of the NBTHK Juyo Token Zufu catalogues which present Oshigata of all he blades attributed Juyo status between 1958 and 1960. In volume 2 I found an oshigata of a niji mei Tadayoshi katana. I immediately compared this oshigata to the wakazashi and confirmed to my own satisfaction that firstly the midare hamon illustrated in the oshigata was very, very similar to that of the blade under review. Secondly the mei was almost identical. There was one vertical stroke in the Tada character which is marginally shorter in the wakazashi; otherwise they are a very good match. Examination of the description (with gratitude to Markus Sesko for his expert help in translation) confirmed much more about the features of the Juyo blade. From the description the following points were apparent:

1. As previously discussed niji mei blades by Tadayoshi are very rare.
2. This blade was believed to date from keicho 16/17 (1611/12)
3. The jigane is more zanguri than usual and shows beautiful chickei, and the hamon is interpreted in a classical manner.

These comments tie in very closely to what is seen in and has been surmised about the wakazashi. In Nihonto Koza Zanguri is defined as course pear skin, in other works just course. I am assuming in this case it means visible and prominent as it then
describes beautiful chickei. In the original description one of the points made was the tightness of the hada (more nashiji than konuka). Also the amount of ji-nie and small chickei are shared characteristics with the illustrated blade.

Based on the above I now believe that the original tentative conclusion in this paper is in all probability correct. The wakazashi was made by the Shodai in or around 1611/12. It was possibly commissioned as a presentation piece for Nabashima to present to an important client or fellow Daimyo. As a result it is signed niji mei and exhibits superior workmanship.

Paul Bowman Jan. 2011