

The Bitchu Aoe School

Introduction.

Recently I have had the opportunity to study a blade attributed to Tsunetsugu of the Bitchu Aoe School. As I have done previously with other swords, I have attempted to summarise the attributes of the School below and then compare those characteristics with the blade under review to help understand why it has been given the attribution it has. The Aoe School is not one that automatically springs to mind when thinking of the great traditions of the Kamakura and Nambokucho periods, at least not to my mind. I think this is a great pity as, since during their working period, and throughout subsequent millennia they have been very highly regarded by Japanese sword scholars

. The Aoe School was short lived when compared to its neighbours in Bizen. Established in the late Heian period it had, by the early Muromachi, largely ceased production. There is no doubt, however, that in their relatively brief history they made a considerable impact on the world of sword manufacture. The cloistered emperor Gotoba included three Aoe smiths amongst his twelve companion smiths. A sword by one of these smiths, Tsunetsugu, is listed as one of the Tenka Goken (5 pre-eminent swords of Japan) in the "list of famous things" produced during the Muromachi period. The Sword is named Juzumaru supposedly after the habit of the monk who carried it of looping his prayer beads over the tsuka.

Bitchu province sat within Western Honshu in the old Kibi region which today is largely covered by Okayama prefecture. Kibi was sub-divided into 3 almost equally sized areas by the 3 main rivers which had their sources in the Chugoku Highlands and ran in to the Seto inland sea to the south. These rivers carried iron sand from the mountains to the lower areas of Bizen and Bitchu, supplying the raw material not only for sword manufacture but the production of other iron tools and implements.

Schools formed alongside these rivers, with the Fukuoka Ichimonji establishing itself on the Asahi River, The Osafune School on the Yoshii River and the Aoe School on the Takahashi River.

Although there were other schools within Bitchu the majority of work appears to have focussed in the Aoe School. As mentioned above the Aoe School was established towards the end of the Heian period. The originator of the school is said to be Yasutsugu but none of his works have been confirmed and only oshigata of his mei can be found in old references. The early extant works are by Moritsugu, Sadatsugu and Tsunetsugu. The period of manufacture is divided into the ko-Aoe, chu-Aoe and sue-Aoe. The workmanship of the ko-Aoe and sue-Aoe is consistent. However within the chu-Aoe there is greater variation in style and as a result there is some disagreement within the standard references as to the span of each of these sub divisions. For the following I have taken what I believe to be the most widely accepted definitions which are:

Ko-Aoe: - Late Heian to mid Kamakura

Chu-Aoe: - mid to late Kamakura/early Nambokucho

Sue-Aoe: - Nambokucho to early Muromachi

Regardless of these divisions it is known that by the early Muromachi the Aoe School had virtually ceased to exist.

The Ko-Aoe School

Originating in the late Heian, by the mid Kamakura the reputation of ko-Aoe smiths was well established. As previously mentioned 3 ko-Aoe smiths, Sadatsugu, Tsunetsugu and Tsuguie were named amongst the cloistered Emperor Gotoba's 12 attendant sword smiths. The quality of their workmanship was both consistent and of a very high standard. The raw material available to them came from much the same source as that used by the contemporary and better known Bizen Fukuoka Ichimonji School. However what they did with that material resulted in something which, while comparable in quality, had a markedly different appearance.

Workmanship

Sugata:

There are only tachi in existence. The ko-Aoe may have made tanto but none have been identified. Their tachi were narrow relatively thick with deep koshi-zori. This is differentiated from Bizen work of the same period by the fact that the deepest part of the sori is at the habaki-moto. Blades also exhibit a fairly high shinogi. They produced ko-kissaki and their blades had fumbari. The length of the blade was very much in line with the standards of the time.

When reading the description of the sugata it has many similarities with Yamashiro blades produced at the same time.

Jihada:

A distinctive feature of Aoe work is the combination of ko-itame and ko-mokume hada which results in what is described as chiremen hada. Chiremen translates as "crepe silk". The jigane is rich in ji-nie and small chickei. There are also areas of plain dark steel known as sumegane. This appears to be composed of softer iron but there is disagreement as to whether its presence should be regarded as a positive characteristic or a fault. Jifu is also present. O-mokume may also be present if the blade is nie based.

Hamon:

Suguha mixed with ko-midare and ko-choji with ashi and yo. The hamon will be rich in nie and there is a lot of activity within the hamon in the form of kinsuji, ashi, sunagashi. The ha-hada will also be visible.

Boshi:

The boshi is proportionate to the hamon and is midare komi or suguha with a short kaeri

Nakago:

Long and with sori. Yasurimeai are O-sujikai.

Mei:

Generally signed with two character signature and most often Katana mei which is unusual for this period.

The Chu- Aoe School

Tachi are most common but there are tanto as well. Also nagamaki and naginata were produced.

Sugata:

Tachi blades become wider with chu-kissaki although some blades have a stretched or elongated chu-kissaki. Tanto are of two types, the first of around 26cm with uchi-zori a thick kasane and narrow mihaba, the second is larger (ko wakazashi) hira zukuri with saki-zori, a wide mihaba and thin kasane.

Jigane:

Because of the variation within the chu-Aoe period there is some contradiction in the available descriptions of jihada produced by the chu-Aoe School. Some references refer to it being less attractive and lacking the lustre of the ko-Aoe. However most describe it as being tight ko-itame with ko-mokume creating chiremen hada which is covered in jinie and small chickei. Jifu or shirake utsuri may occasionally be seen but the O-hada seen in Ko-Aoe is missing and there is less sumegane visible. In the words of the Nihon-To Koza the hada of chu-Aoe is one level more clear.

Hamon:

There appear to be two types of hamon suguha and midare. The nioi guchi becomes tighter and has abundant ko-nie. There is a great deal of activity within the hamon as with the ko-Aoe. Particularly characteristic is the presence of saka choji and saka ashi in a backward slanting pattern. Kinsuji, yo, Sunagashi are also seen.

Boshi:

Suguha and notare are both seen returning in a pointed maru and with a fairly long kaeri. There will be nie in the boshi.

Nakago:

The Nakago has shallow sori. The most common Yasurimeai is o-sujikai but sujikai and kiri are also seen.

The Sue Aoe School

There is some disagreement regarding how long the sue-Aoe School lasted. Some believe it ended at the end of the Nambokucho others that it continued in to the early Muromachi. What is clear however is that by the end of the Nambokucho the production of top quality swords had ceased.

Sugata

Tachi produced in this period were O-dachi in excess of 90cm long. They have wide mihaba, shallow sori and an O-kissaki. Tanto also became larger with increased sori.

Jigane:

The hada continues to be tight ko-itame with some mokume. There is occasionally a hint of shirrake utsuri but sumehada is rarely seen.

Hamon:

The nioiguchi is tight and clear. There are narrow suguha and saka-choji-midare. The hamon becomes showier than in the chu-Aoe. However the most important distinguishing feature is that it is exclusively nioi based.

It is interesting to speculate that at a time when other schools in the area were coming under the influence of the Soshu School and introducing nie into their work, why the sue-Aoe School opted to make nioi based blades. Is this ultra conservatism? Or could it be possible that as the skill within the school started to decline the smiths were less able to work at the higher temperatures required to create nie from their raw material.

Boshi:

Works with a suguha hamon have a suguha boshi with standard kaeri. Midare based works exhibit a midare komi boshi with a strong kaeri.

Nakago:

Because of the original size of Tachi from this period the vast majority of extant works have been shortened for use in later periods. As a result few examples of ubu blades survive.

In an attempt to Summarise and interpret the history of the Aoe School it would appear that the Aoe characteristics were established by the early Kamakura and progressed and refined through the mid and late Kamakura. After the attempted Mongol invasions and in common with other schools the sugata began to increase in length and width in the late Kamakura and continued to reach the huge O-dachi proportions seen in the Nambokucho. Also in common with many other schools quality began to decline in the Nambokucho with production of any great quality ending in the early Muromachi. It should be stressed however that this decline was from a very high starting point. As said before Aoe swords have been held in extremely high regard since the earliest times. In terms of quality they

are on a par with the neighbouring Fukuoka Ichimonji School and the contemporary Yamashiro Rai School and they share many common features with both. Which is better is I think a matter of subjective taste. There is no doubt that Ichimonji blades are immediately more eye catching and flamboyant. Yamashiro hada is tight and refined and gives an impression of quiet conservative taste combined with subtle power. Perhaps the easiest way to view Aoe is a combination of the two made using materials common to Bizen but in a style more typical of Yamashiro.

The Sword Under Review:



The Sword is an O-suriage tachi with a nagasa of approximately 67cm. It has a shu-meï attributing it to Aoe Tsunetsugu. There is a Sayagaki by Honami Kozon confirming this attribution. The sword was awarded Juyo papers in 1965. The papers attribute the blade to the Aoe School of the late Kamakura period.

Last year I wrote a paper about a Shikkake Nagamaki Naoshi wakazashi and quoted the definition from the NBTHK as to what is required for a blade to achieve Juyo papers. I have repeated these definitions below:

"Juyo Token

1) Blades made in a period from Heian to Edo, having Tokubetsu Kicho, Koshu Tokubetsu Kicho, Hozon or Tokubetsu Hozon papers, of extremely high quality workmanship and state of preservation, and judged as close to Juyo Bijutsuhin, may receive Juyo Token paper.

2) Blades that meet the criteria given above and made in or before Nambokucho may receive Juyo Token paper even if they are mumei. Blades made in Muromachi and Edo periods, as a rule, have to be ubu and zaimei to receive Juyo Token paper."

Again the sword in question is o-suriage and mumei. It must therefore exhibit sufficient characteristics of the school concerned to leave no doubt as to its origin.

Sugata:

The first thing that struck me when examining the sword was that it was big! Had I not been told it dated from the late Kamakura I would have guessed it belonged in the

Nambokucho period. The second immediately obvious fact was that it was heavy. Six months ago I had the opportunity to examine a tachi by Rai Kunimitsu and was amazed at how heavy that blade was. Now less than a year later I was holding another Koto blade that was equally substantial. I think this is important as it dispels the belief that all Koto blades are “Light in the hand” as a result of the way they were made. I think that in their original condition many were as heavy as later works. Is it possible that the lightness noticed in the past is the result of only having access to swords which have undergone numerous polishes and lost a lot of their substance?

Getting back to the sword under examination: It is O-Suriage. The sori is shallow koshi-sori (the majority of the sori being lost when the blade was shortened) It is wide with a relatively high shinogi. The kissaki is an extended chu-kissaki.

Jigane:

The hada is tight ko-itame and ko-mokume covered in sporadic ji-nie and with numerous small chickei. Jifu is present. The hada is beautiful, it exhibits a dark clarity which is difficult to define and which I have only seen once before on an Awataguchi tachi.

Hamon:

Based on Suguha the hamon has ko-midare and ko-choji. The nioiguchi is tight and interspersed with ko-nie. There is a great deal of activity in the form of ashi, kinsuji and sunagashi as the ko-nie joins and extends in to the hamon. Ha-hada is visible. There are areas along the hamon where the nie becomes larger and coarser.

Boshi:

The boshi is suguha with a sharp maru and medium kaeri .It is hakikake and has a great deal of nie.

Nakago:

The Nakago is O-suriage with 3 mekugi-ana and the yaurimei are o-sujikai.

Based on the above it is not difficult to see why three different assessments confirmed an attribution to the Aoe School of the late Kamakura. The hada and hamon are classic Aoe workmanship of the highest order. The tight ko-itame and ko-mokume combined with small chickei and jifu point to Aoe. The shape precludes the sword being ko-Aoe it is too large, wide and has an extended chu-kissaki. It must therefore date to either the chu or sue-Aoe periods. Although the sword is large it is not of the excessive proportions associated with sue-Aoe work The original nagasa was around 80cm the kissaki, although elongated is a chu-kissaki rather than o-kissaki. Most telling of all is that the hamon incorporates nie and there is ji-nie present as well. Based on these points the sword can

only be the work of the chu-Aoe School. The two original appraisals went further attributing it to a smith, Tsunetsugu. However the Juyo paper makes it clear that this is not the work of the ko-Aoe Tsunetsugu of Gotoba fame. According to Nihonto-Koza there was another Tsunetsugu working between 1310 and 1330 and I assume the attributions are pointing to him.

Conclusion:

As stated at the beginning of this paper I think the Aoe School has been largely overlooked in the west. This is a great pity as even a superficial review of existing literature confirms the quality of their work. They certainly deserve to stand alongside the Ichimonji, Awataguchi and Rai schools in terms of quality and beauty.

Other important points, at least to me, which I gained from this exercise, were:

1. Forget the “Koto Swords are light” myth. In less than twelve months I have seen two indisputable koto blades well over 600 years old and which were heavy to hold.
2. It has often been said (or at least I interpreted what was said) that swords became bigger in the Nambokucho as a result of lessons learned from the Mongol invasions. The last Mongol invasion was in 1281, the Nambokucho began in 1334 so what happened in the intervening 53 years? Well if this is an example there was a gradual transition from the slender sugata of the mid Kamakura to the oversized robust work of the Nambokucho. As part of this transition swords of the type being discussed here were produced in the late Kamakura.

I think as students of Nihon-To we are extremely fortunate that we have the opportunity to study work that is approaching 700 years old and remains in an almost perfect state of preservation. It is important that our knowledge is built up through studying these pieces in detail. When we do so, we should not be afraid to question some of the opinions which originated in earlier study when such examples were less generally available outside of Japan.

Bibliography

In writing the above I have once again leaned heavily on the sources listed below. I am particularly indebted to Mr. Fred Weissberg for allowing me to use images from his website of the sword discussed and for information contained in his article “**The Bitchu Aoe School**” which may also be found on his website www.nihonto.com. Other sources include:

Nihonto Koza Koto part two

The connoisseurs book of Japanese swords by Nagayama

The NBTHK monthly journal Nihonto Bijutsu vol 618 and others