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## **Real -Life *Kantei* of swords , part 8: *Oei Bizen* Swords - What we read and what we see.**

**W.B. Tanner and F.A. B. Coutinho**

### **Introduction**

There is already much written about *Oei Bizen* swords from a *kantei* and smith perspective. This article will not attempt to add anything new to the dialogue about this era or try to bring up any new theories or controversial hypothesizes, however we will compare a number of “*Oei Bizen*” blades from different smiths and try to understand what makes these blades in fact “*Oei Bizen*” and what the student could expect to find in the *kantei* of Bizen blades of this era. In a subsequent article we will also discuss the *kantei* of two potential *Oei Bizen Tantos* which appear to be nearly identical and were subject to *kantei* multiple times with differing results and hopefully shed some light on why this particular *kantei* was so difficult. Attributions varied between *Oei Bizen* and *Yamashiro Sanjo Heianjo mono*.

### **Schools to be considered**

What is considered in this article are *Oei Bizen* blades made in the Osafune area during the time period from late Nambokucho to middle Muromachi (Joji 1362 – Eikyo 1441). (5) During this 60-80 year time period there many changes going on both in the ruling of Japan and in the production of *Bizen* blades. From a political perspective Japan had just exited a turbulent time when the empire was divided between north and south courts and the swords at that time were wide, long and flamboyant. Masterpieces of strength! Now they were entering into a time of relative peace, just before the beginning of the 100 year war period (*Sengoku*). With that relative peace, Bizen smiths were able to focus on producing swords of a more varied nature without the pressures of wartime production demands. It was during this time that the *Oei Bizen mono* developed.

During the Oei era several schools existed in the *Osafune* area, for example: *Kozori*, *Omiya*, *Yoshii* and *Hatakeda* schools. All were considered parts of the *Osafune style*, which indeed dominated their workmanship. There are, however, differences and not all works conformed exactly to the style of the main *Oei Bizen* smiths. (5) Also there were smiths who moved into the *Osafune* area, such as *Yukikage*, who brought with them styles from other areas.

This article will focus on a narrow group of *Osafune Bizen* smiths and school – i.e. the “Three Mitsu” (*Yasu*, *Moro*, *Mori*) and the *Kozori* school from *Osafune*. However, for comparison purposes we will discuss one *Hatakeda* blade , two *Kozori* blades, a *Omiya* blade, a *Moromitsu* blade and a *Yukikage* (second generation) blade. This last blade is from a smith who moved into the *Osafune* area, but was trained in the *Oei Bizen* style. The purpose of this article is not to explain or generalize on the style of *Oei Bizen*, but to *kantei* six different real-life examples of blades produced during that time period and compare their similarities and differences.



### **Observations on the Kantei Blades**

To assist the reader in understanding the review of these blades, it is necessary to understand the terminology used to describe them. *Nihonto* terminology is often confusing with the use and definitions varying by expert. The terms and definitions we will commonly use are:

*Jigane* – structure of surface steel

*Jihada* – texture or patterns found in the surface steel. This is represented by the activity (*hataraki*) such as *Nie*, *Chikei*, and the forging pattern, *Itame*, *Mokume*, etc.

Hard and Soft Steel – more related to polishers assessment of the hardness of the steel, but from a visual perspective, does the steel appear to be excessively hardened with lots of *Nie* and hardened surfaces or not.

Wet *jigane* – Does the steel seem exceptionally clear and visceral, like it was dipped in water.

Standout (*hada tatsu*) *jihada* – is the grain structure highly visible, but not random as in rough or loose *jigane*. The assumption being that the smith intended it to look this way.

Tight/Refined *jigane* – the structure of the *jihada* is small and tightly formed patterns. Tight and refined *jigane* would be a superior form of forging, showing great skill of the smith.

Loose or rough *jigane* – does the grain structure seem unusually large, random and not tightly welded. The appearance of the *jihada* may have many large and open patterns in the grain.

Dark and light *jigane* – dark or black *jigane* has a bluish or darker reflection to it, light or white *jigane* will appear whitish and brighter.

Ko-XXXX – refers to small, i.e. *ko-mokume* is small and tightly formed *mokume* patterns.

Although there are many more terms used in describing *Nihonto*, we will limit ourselves to the above terms and descriptions in describing the steel of the blades. (9)

### **What is Oei Bizen Style**

It is frequently stated that the *Oei Bizen mono* was a return to the style and *sugata* of the late Kamakura era, particularly the *Ichimonji* traditions. However, there were several variations to that tradition that evolved into something rather unique to the era and later carried into the *Sue-Bizen mono*. Features such as reduced *sori*, as evidenced by the *Kozori* smiths, smaller and shorter *nagasa* and *nagako*, unique *hamon* and later as we enter in the *Sue-Bizen* era a standardized approach to signing, (the familiar *Bizen Kuni/Bishu Osafune xxxxxx* on the edge of the *nagako*) are all characteristics of Bizen blades made during that short time period. What didn't transition into the *Sue-Bizen* era, was the consistently refined and tight *Oei jigane* which was generally comprised of *mokume* with some *itame*.

Among *Nihonto* experts, the description of *Oei Bizen mono* varies slightly.

Nagayama-sensei states that the *sugata* of *Oei Bizen mono* is a copy of the *tachi sugata* of the Kamakura period, but with a shallow *sori*. He says “the *nagasa* is comparatively short, the blade is slender, the *kasane* relatively thick. The blade is compact and handy”. He explains that the *jihada* is a soft *mokume* mixed with *O-hada* and the *hamon* consists of *nioi* with a very soft and thick *nioi* line. The *nagako* is short and less tapered. (6)

Honma Junji-sensei stated that the *Oei Bizen mono* produced *hamon* described as “gorgeous *gunome* mixed with *choji* differing from continuous *ko-gunome* and *notare*” from the Nambokucho period. He also stated that they produced *suguha* on their *tantos* and *wakizashi* in *hira-zukuri* which often look like works of AOE at a glance. Another interesting point mentioned is they produced skillfully carved *horimono* of *ken* with *sankozuka* and *bonji* (the *Sue-Bizen mono* produced elaborate *horimono* of *kurikara* instead). What is important to note is that he believed they produced clear *utsuri* and soft *jigane* rather than the more powerful *jigane* and faint *utsuri* of the *Sue-Bizen mono*. (7)

Hinohara Dai of the NBTHK writes:

“The *Oei Bizen jihada* are *itame* mixed with *mokume*, the *hada* is visible, there are frequent *ji-nie* and *chikei* and *midare utsuri*. Also in either *suguha* and *midare hamon* this is often *bo-utsuri*....the *Oei Bizen nakago* tips are a wide *kurijiri* and the *yasurime* are *katte-sagari*” (Shijo *Kantei To No 707* – December 2015) An additional *hamon* development is the “well know *koshi-no-hiraita gunome* and/or *kataochi-gunome*” reminiscent of the style of *Kagemitsu*, *Motoshige* and the *Un* group of smiths.

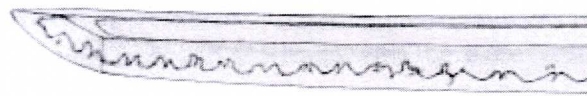
The NBTHK also discussed the development of a *Oei Bizen* style *boshi*, referred to as *rosoku-boshi* or candle flame *boshi*. Generally we find this *boshi* on the works of the “Three Mitsu’s”, particularly *hira-zukuri* blades. This *boshi* has *midare* running into the *kissaki* with a noticeably pointed tip. (8)

The *Nihon To Koza* points out that although there were minor work style variations among the *Oei Bizen* smiths, it is difficult to assign clear differences and definitions to each smiths style. However it is clearly stated their style is “modest in comparison to those of the *Soden-Bizen*, the *jitetsu* is extremely good.” (5)

Another interesting *kantei* point on *Oei* smiths comes from Markus Sesko who writes:

“The *Kozori* smiths adopted the style of the dominating *Osafune* main line, which was then represented by master *Kanemitsu* (兼光), but gave it a trend towards the so-called „*koshi-no-hiraita gunome-midare*“, i.e. a *gunome-midare* whose bases (*koshi*, 腰) are noticeably wider (*hiraita*, 開いた) as the tips (*yakigashira*, 焼頭). This trend can be seen for example at *Kozori Moromitsu* (師光, picture 1).





Picture 1: *tachi* of Kozori Moromitsu dated Eiwa two (永和, 1376)"

This will become relevant as we *kantei* the Moromitsu *Tanto* presented in this article. (10 - 2013/3/13)

One of the interesting things about the *Oei Bizen mono* is that is not as easily characterized or rigidly defined as the *Sue-Bizen mono*. It is a transitional style created out of the Nambokucho's well-defined and powerful *sugata* transitioning into the characterized style of *Sengoku Sue-Bizen* period with mass produced and standardized production. This is pointed out by the quote from Homna Junji-sensei in his article on Sue Bizen edited by Elliott Long.

"There is not any particular definition of the term for '*Sue-Bizen*'. Though, it is quite obvious that the term is used for the Bizen smiths who demonstrate a different workmanship from that of the Oei-Bizen smiths and it can be said that their workmanship became more characterized"

#### **Blades to be discussed.**

The 6 blades reviewed all have papers either from the NBTHK or NTHK, all are signed (one had the *mei* removed) and two are dated. All are *ihori-mune* with a *ubu nagako*. From the above it may appear that the identification of each smith should be trivial. This is not the case. The papers in each of these cases do not state the generation and directories list many smiths with the same name. Also the directories are not consistent. For example, the first smith listed below ( Bishu Moriye) technically should be classified as un-listed because the signature Bishu Moriye is not in the *Nihon To Meikan* ( 1) . However the NTHK identified him as a smith working around BunAn so it is reasonable to consider him a descendent of the Hatakeda School.

The examples we used are the following:

#### **Hatakeda Mono:**

Bishu Moriye *Katana* (descendant of Hatakeda school) – NTHK- 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> generation – BunAn (1444).

#### **Independent:**

Bishu Osafune Yukikage *Sunnobi Tanto* – NBTHK Hozon – Oei era

#### **Traditional Oei Bizen Mono:**

Moromitsu *Tanto* (*nijimei* -removed) – NTHK –Oei era

Iyemitsu *Tanto* – *nijimei* – NBTHK Tokubetsu Hozon – Oei era

Bishu Osafune Iyesuke *Wakizashi* – dated Oei 20 – NBTHK Hozon

Bishu Osafune Tsuneie *Wakizashi* – dated Eikyo 6 – NBTHK Tokubetsu Hozon

### History of the smiths to be examined

A brief history of each smith, will help understand the differences in their style and why they may or may not fit the traditional definition of *Oei Bizen mono*.

Yukikage – The sword represented here is from second generation (*nidai*) Yukikage. It is reported that his father originally came from or also worked in Inaba. However, the *Nidai* was a student of Yasumitsu of the Three Mitsu's fame, so technically he should be similar to the *mono* of *Oei Bizen*. When we closely examine this blade we see that it doesn't completely fit into the *Oei Bizen mono*.

Moriye – The sword represented here is from the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> generation smith Moriye who was a later descendant of the Hatakeda *mono*. He worked from late Eikyo until BunAn era. The first generation Moriye from mid Kamakura era was considered the founder of the Hatakeda *mono*. The Hatakeda area where these smiths worked was believed to exist within confines of the Osafune area (11) and is considered a break-off of the Osafune school. Although the later generations of Moriye no longer possessed the flamboyance of the first two generations, this example of the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> generation Moriye has many characteristic of the Osafune *mono* of the Oei era.

Moromitsu – This *Tanto* is attributed to the second generation (*nidai*) Moromitsu (one of the Three Mitsu's) and has many distinct characteristics of the *Oei Bizen Mono* and *Nidai* Moromitsu.

Iyemitsu – This Sunnobi *Tanto* is from the first generation (*shodai*) Iyemitsu son of Ōmiya Morikage (大宮盛景) of the Bizen Omiya school. (11) We will provide a brief discussion of the Bizen Omiya group later in the discussion. This smith was relatively easy to identify. There are only four smiths with this name listed and this is the only one who worked mainly in Oei.

Iyesuke – This is a *shobu-zukari Wakizashi* from *shodai* Iyemitsu of the Kozori group, which according to records is the son of a later generation Nagamitsu (長光) and a student of Kozori Morikage (盛景). An interesting characteristic about this sword is that is *Mu-Ku*, it has no core. (11) We will provide a brief discussion of the Bizen Kozori group later in the discussion. As mentioned above, the identification of a smith is not so simple. The Hozon paper does not say who he is. Looking at the swordsmith directory by Shimizu (1998), there are eight smiths that signed Bishu Osafune Iyesuke. In this case however only one is said to have worked mainly in Oei era. Since this blade is dated Oei 20 the smith described above is probably correct. In addition, we found an *oshigata* with a matching signature, which settles the matter.

Tsuneie – This *Wakizashi* is from 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Tsuneie of the Kozori group. His father was Oei Tsuneie whose first name was Yajirō (弥次郎) and was the son of Kozori Morikage (小反守景). He worked from 1392 to 1429. Third generation worked from 1429-1452. (Sesko Index). Again it is difficult to identify precisely who this Tsuneie is. In the swordsmith directory by Shimizu (1998) there are five smiths listed. Again only one worked mainly in Eikyo and it was the third generation which was also confirmed by an *oshigata*. (His father worked until Eikyo 1)



It is interesting to note that in the older literature (Hawley 1978) the *Oei Bizen mono* is divided in two branches: Oei Yasumitsu and Oei Kozori Morikage. Also there are Iyesukes and Tsuneiyes in both branches.

In the reference books (Homma and Koizume -1994) all the smiths used in this article are considered Atari-Dozen.

### **Kozori and Omiya School Overviews**

The *Kozori* school was a term applied to groups of smiths who did not follow the mainline Bizen traditions, such as Kanemitsu, Chogi, Motoshige or Yoshii schools, during the Nambokucho era. These smiths utilized a mixture of traditional Bizen style and other styles prevalent at the time, such as Soshu. Some of the famous smiths of this school are Morikage, Morishige, *shodai* Moromitsu, *shodai* Tsuneie, Iyesuke and others. The origin of the term *Kozori* is somewhat surrounded in mystery, but one popular belief is that it means swords with small *Sori*, i.e. *Ko-Zori*. Whether that is true or not is subject to conjecture, however we do know the style that represented *Kozori* smiths during the Nambokucho era. *Kozori* swords were made with *jigane* that was a mix of *itame*, *mokume* and *nagare* that was very visible (stands out), however, the *jihada* is generally not as refined as mainline Bizen smiths. The *hamon* is mostly *Ko-Notare*, or a mix of *gunome* which may be visibly mixed with *choji* and *togari*. Weak *utsuri*, normally *jifu* or *midare* appears on the blades. They also tended towards angular *midare gunome* and the yakiba is rather narrow in relation to the width of the blade. The *boshi* tends to be *midare-komi* or *sugu-boshi*, *ko-maru* with a small turn-back (*Kaeri*). *Kozori* smiths also tended to sign in larger characters down the middle of the *nagako*, but not always as demonstrated in various NBTHK Token Bijitsu *kantei* results.

Towards the end of first decade of the Oei era the *Kozori* smith's style evolved into what is commonly referred to as the *Oei Bizen mono*. It is these later *Kozori* smith's blades, such as Iyesuke and Tsuneie that we are examining.

The Omiya School presents another mystery in the study of *Nihonto*. Some believe it originated during the middle of the Kamakura era in the Yamashiro area known as Inokuma Omiya. That is where it's legendary founder Kunimori was from and then later moved to the Bizen area. Others believe that Omiya is a location in Fukuoka where the Omiya smiths lived and worked. In either case it is a branch of the Bizen Osafune school and follows many of the traditions of that school. Although the school formed in the middle of the Kamakura era and thrived into the Muromachi era, there are no known works from the Kamakura era. Most of the works we have today are from the Nambokucho to middle Muromachi era.

Omiya blades characteristically have tightly forged *Itame* mixed with *mokume* and a lively form of *choji midare* with *midare utsuri*. The blades tend to be a wilder interpretation of the Bizen Osafune tradition and are sometimes compared to Soden Bizen blades which possess a mix of Soshu and Bizen styles. The *jigane* is more refined than those of the *Kozori* smiths, but not of the level of

Kamakura era mainline Bizen smiths. Some of the famous Omiya smiths are Morikage, Morokage, Moritsugu, Iyemitsu and Morishige.

### Sword Specifications

Below is a table of the characteristics and specifications of the swords we will examine.

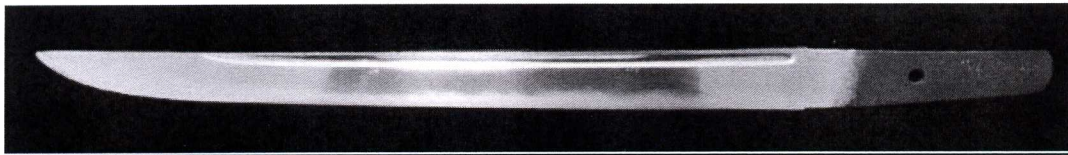
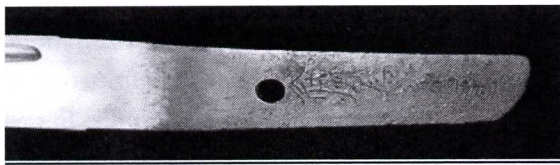
| Name                                     | <i>Nagasa</i> | <i>Sori</i> | <i>Boshi</i>                     | <i>Motohaba - Sakihada</i> | <i>Kasane</i> | <i>Jihada</i>                                                   | <i>Hamon</i>                                           | <i>Horimono</i>                       | <i>Utsuri</i>       |
|------------------------------------------|---------------|-------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Yukikage<br><i>Sunnobi Tanto</i>         | 31.5cm        | 0.0cm       | Ko-marū, short kaeri             | 2.6cm                      | 0.52cm        | Itame & Mokume mix                                              | Suguha based with angled gunome choji & Ashi           | Bohi both sides                       | Bo-utsuri           |
| Moriie<br><i>Katana</i>                  | 62.8cm        | 2.2cm       | Midare komi with longish kissaki | 2.8cm/1.5cm                | 0.62cm        | Itame & Mokume mix                                              | niedeki Gunome midare and choji midare mixed -         | none                                  | Bo utsuri           |
| Moromitsu<br><i>Tanto</i>                | 23cm          | Uchi sori   | Ko-marū short kaeri              | 2.0cm                      | 0.52cm        | Ko-itame & Mokume mix                                           | Midare gunome, & Ashi                                  | Goma bashi, both sides                | Faint midare utsuri |
| Iyemitsu<br><i>Sunnobi Tanto</i>         | 31.5cm        | 0.0cm       | Ko-marū short kaeri              | 2.54cm                     | 0.4cm         | Ko-mokume, very tight and refined                               | Suguha based with nioi deki gunome choji, & Ashi       | Bohi both sides, Tsume (dragons claw) | Bo utsuri           |
| Iyesuke<br><i>shobu zukari Wakizashi</i> | 34.6cm        | 0.8cm       | Ko-marū short kaeri              | 2.54cm                     | 0.4cm         | Ko-itame with tight grain. This sword is MU-KU and has no core. | Ko-niedeki gunome midare and ko-choji midare mixed     | Remnants of a Ken                     | Midare utsuri       |
| Tsuneie<br><i>hira zukari Wakizashi</i>  | 38.2cm        | 0.6cm       | Ko-marū short kaeri              | 2.56cm                     | 0.68cm        | Ko-itame & Mokume with refined grain                            | Ko-neideki choji midare and small gunome midare & Ashi | Bohi both sides                       | Bo utsuri           |

In examining the above chart and from a “paper *kantei*” perspective there appear to be many similar characteristics of these blades and they seem to fit into the standard Osafune or *Oei Bizen mono* characteristics. However, closer physical examination of the blades reveals several differences in the color and refinement of the *jigane* and complexity of the *hamon*. The depth and clarity of *utsuri* also



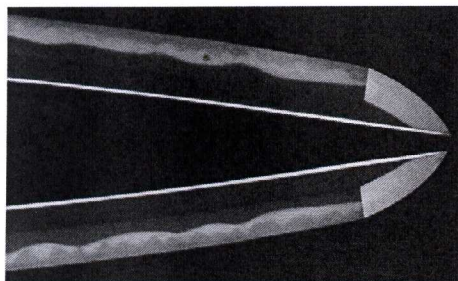
varies by blade, but could be attributed to the polish and condition of the blade. We will examine each blade individually and provide additional commentary based on physical observation.

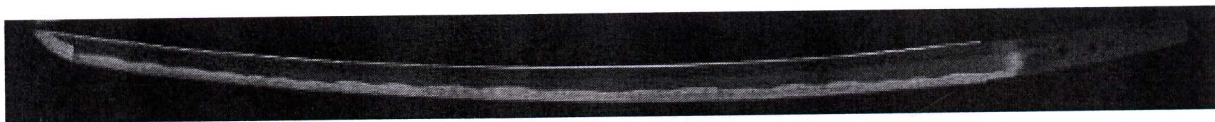
### Yukikage



This *Sunnobi Tanto* possesses many of the characteristics of Yukikage's teacher Yasumitsu. It has a classic *Oei Boshi*, angled *midare gunome hamon* and visible *bo-utsuri*. At a glance it looks typical *Oei Bizen mono*. However on further examination we find that the *jihada* is much rougher and looser than would be found on a blade from one of the Three Mitsu's. We also find the *jigane* is much darker than typical *Oei Bizen jigane*. Not quite black, but definitely darker. Also, the *Hamon* interpretation, although typical *Oei Bizen* style, is not executed as beautifully and lacks uniformity and clarity of the *gunome* structures and habuchi line. This is clearly an *Oei Bizen* work, but from a less skilled smith, or a smith who is mixing traditions. When you recognize that Yukikage's father came from *Inaba* and practiced a different tradition, you can understand why *Nidai* Yukikage's swords are not a perfect rendition of his teacher Yasumitsu.

### Moriye

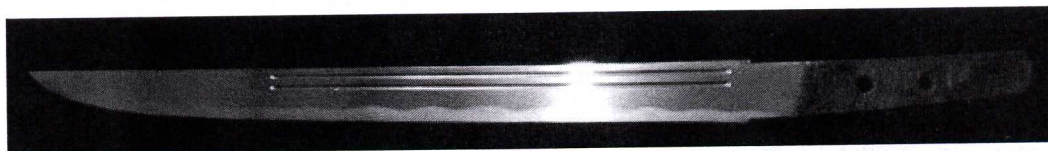
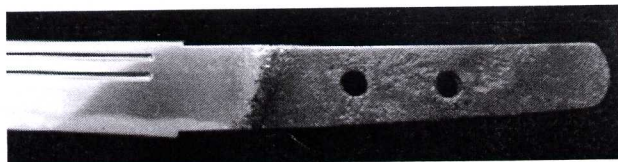




This later generation Moriye *katana* possesses a typical *Oei Bizen Sugata*. It has noticeable *koshi-sori*, but not the typical *saki-sori* of the *Oei Bizen mono*. However, there is more curvature in the last third of the blade than you would find in older blades. Some Nihonto Experts, such as the late Yoshikawa Kentaro, describes swords like this as having both *koshi sori* and *saki sori*. (This is the description of the shape of blades in almost all volumes of the *Token to Rekishi*). There is tapering from the *motohada* to the *sakihada* and it possesses a longish *kissaki*. It also has a large signature down the middle of the *nakago*. At a glance it looks like a 2/3 size version of a middle to late Kamakura Bizen blade. The short *nagasa*, more curvature in the last third of the blade compared to older swords, and the *nakago* are the major giveaways to this being a post Nambokucho blade.

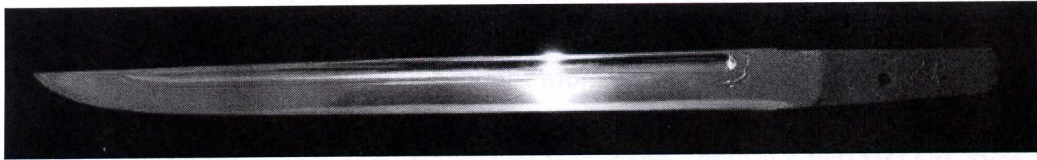
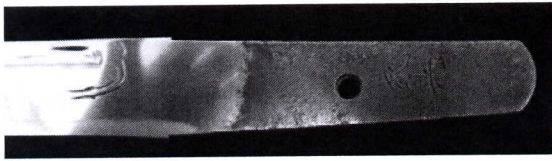
When you look closer at the blade it is apparent this smith is not following the strict *Oei Bizen mono*. The *jigane* is an *itame mokume* mix, more average than refined. The *hamon* is a classic Bizen traditional *gunome* and *choji* mix, but more subdued than the early Hatakedo school *hamon*. In style it clearly follows the traditions of the earlier Moriye smith. In fact, when examining a couple of *oshigatas* from *Shodai Moriye* (Kamakura), the similarities in the *hamon* and *sugata* are apparent. However, the *boshi* is a typical *Oei Bizen*/candle flame *boshi*, *ko-maru* with a point, pointing to an *Oei Bizen* time period.

#### Moromitsu

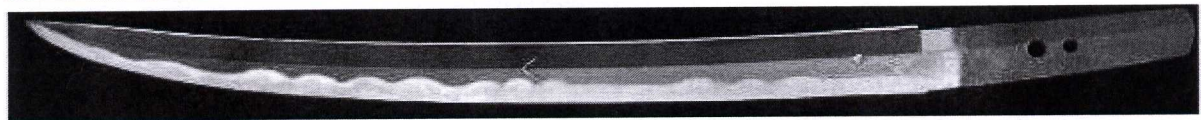
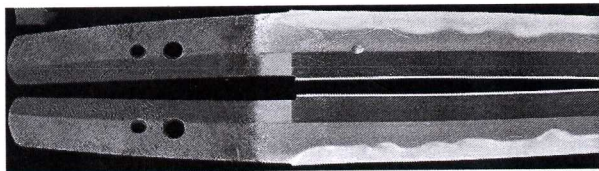


This blade is a conundrum which we will write about in another article. It has two sets of *kantei* papers and had the *nijimei* purposely disfigured beyond recognition. This *tanto* is a small diminutive blade with refined *ko-mokume* and *itame* and distinctive *koshi-no-hiraita gunome* *jidare hamon*. It has faint *midare utsuri*. The *boshi* is a traditional Bizen with *midare* and a rounded *ko-maru* and short *kaeri*. It does not possess a *Oei Bizen boshi*. Since it does not possess a *Oei Bizen boshi* and lacks clear *bo-utsuri*, the *kantei* must be based on the *hamon* and *jigane*. However, based on the characteristics one could assume this is a much older blade than *Oei* and possibly the work of *Shodai Moromitsu*, rather than *Nidai*.

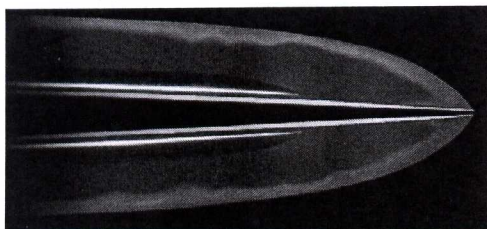


Iyemitsu

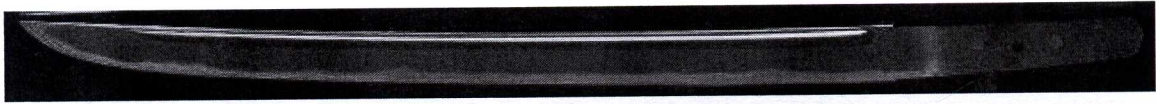
This Omiya Iyemitsu Sunnobi *Tanto* is a beautiful and stunning work of art. The *jigane* is tight and well refined, looks wet and sparkles in the light with *ko-nie*. It is by far the nicest *jigane* of the blades presented. The *jihada* is a very fine *ko-mokume* with a *suguha* based *hamon*. The *hamon* has many small *choji* structures and *ashi* and *bo-utsuri*. The blade has an *Oei Bizen boshi*, but rendered in *suguha*. What makes this blade unusual is the *jigane*. It is a little darker than typical *Oei Bizen* and much more refined. We would need to look at more Omiya Morikage blades to determine if this was a characteristic of his father and teacher, or an anomaly for this blade. In either case, the blade does possess a typical *Oei Bizen sugata* and many of the stylistic characters of the *Oei Bizen Mono*.

Iyesuke

This shobu-zukari *wakizashi* is probably the most typical *Oei Bizen mono* blade of the group. It possesses all of the typical *Oei Bizen* characteristics. It has a classic *Oei Bizen boshi*, the *hamon* is *koshi-no-hiraita gunome-midare*, the *jihada* is a nice mix of refined *mokume* and *Itame* with clear *midare utsuri*. It also has the typical *Oei Bizen horimono* of a Ken. The only thing that makes this blade unusual is that it is made of a single piece of steel with no core. (*mu-ku*)

Tsuneie





This long *hira-zukari wakizashi* from Tsuneie is also a beautifully forged work of art, better than the average Kozori work. The third generation Tsuneie was known for his excellent forging and this blade is no exception. It has beautiful wet looking refined *ko-itame* and *mokume* mix and *jihada* with an active *hamon* of well-defined *ko-gunome* and *ko-choji* structures full of *hataraki*. The *hamon* is not a typical *Oei Bizen* style. It is a little more subdued and controlled version, probably closer to what you would find in earlier works of the Kozori smiths. Although you might mistake this for an earlier work, the fact that it is dated makes that impossible. Also it does possess a typical *Oei Bizen/Candle Flame boshi* and the *zamei* signature is down the middle of the *nakago*.

### Conclusion

In analyzing the six blades it was apparent that to do proper *kantei* you need to view blades in hand and not rely solely on the “*Paper Kantei*” information. When they were examined in hand, paying careful attention to *jigane* and *jihada*, we found many unique characteristics of the *jigane*, such as color and refinement that would not be visible on paper, or even in pictures. We also started to question the commonly understood characteristics of what is “*Oei Bizen mono*”.

For example, it is stated by a few *Nihonto* experts that *Oei Bizen* blades possess a unique *boshi* referred to as the *rosoku-boshi* or candle flame *boshi*. We did some analysis of this by comparing twenty seven *Oei Bizen* Blades in the NBTHK Token Bijitsu *Kantei* series and nine *Oei Bizen* blades in the *Nihon Koto Meisaku shu – JUKKEN* and found that with the exception of Yasumitsu, this rule does not apply. In fact 18 of the 36 blades (50%) did not possess this *boshi* and there was little correlation as to whether they were *hira-zukari* or *shinogi-zukari*. However, we did determine that if it was a Yasumitsu blade, then it should have a candle flame *boshi* (75% did). If it was a Morimitsu, then it generally would not have a candle flame *boshi* (80% did not). If it was a Moromitsu then it was almost even probability. Other than the “Three Mitsu’s”, there was no rule on who used this *boshi* and who didn’t. For *kantei* purposes, we should only consider that a blade with a candle flame *boshi*, it is most likely an *Oei Bizen*.

The same applies to the unique *hamon* (*koshi-no-hiraita gunome-midare*) that is characterized as *Oei Bizen Mono*. We found that if a blade had this *hamon* structure, it could generally be considered as part of the *Oei Bizen Mono*, but most of blades we reviewed did not have this *hamon*.

The *jigane* was complicated by the differences in descriptions used by the NBTHK, NTHK and others. For example, the distinction between *mokume* and *itame* is not clear. One expert referred to the blade as having well forged *itame* and another said the same blade had well forged *mokume*. In *kantei*, it is probably best to consider the refinement or tightness of the grain structure, rather than whether it is *itame* or *mokume*. In examining the six blades, the refinement level of the *jigane* did vary, but further analysis would need to be done to determine if it was significantly different than pre and post *Oei* era *Bizen* blades.



Another area of confusion was the appearance of *utsuri*. Some experts stated that *Oei Bizen mono* needed to have clear *bo-utsuri*, others stated it needed clear *midare-utsuri* or either. In our examination of the six blades and review of many *kantei* results, the *utsuri* question was never completely resolved. What should be assumed is that all *Oei Bizen mono* blades should have *utsuri*. The type and clarity of it will vary by smith and condition of the blade.

Another point of *kantei* which could be used was the use of *horimono* on the blades. In the six blades we examined as well as many of the *kantei* blades we looked at, the use of *ken* with *sankozuka* and *bonji* was very common.

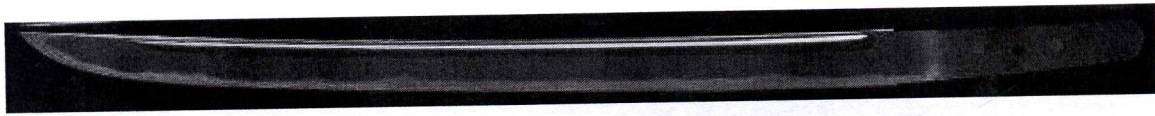
Signature placement is another area of *Kantei* that should be closely examined. Prior to and during the *Oei Bizen* era, most of the signatures on blades were placed close to the middle of the *nakago*, particularly on Tanto and Wakizashi. As we move closer to the *Sue-Bizen* era, we find the signatures moving to the edge of the *Nakago* and using a more standardized approach. Only the *nijimei* (two character) would sometimes remain in the center. The six blades we examined followed this pattern.

An area of *kantei* that we were not able to verify was the point that *Oei Bizen mono* blades would be made with *saki-sori*, rather than the traditional *Bizen koshi-sori*. This is because only two of our blades had *sori*. The others are *mu-sori*. The two blades that have *sori*, show *saki-sori* or could be described as having both *saki-sori* and *koshi-sori*. The use of the term *sori* in these cases is not defining the place of the blade that is further way from a line drawn from the tip of the *kissaki* to the end of the *mune machi*, it only refers only to curvature. Old swords (*kamakura jidai*) have little curvature in the last third of the blade compared to *muromachi* blades. This is not accidental. The *muromachi* blades were adapted to new and emerging fighting methods on foot, not horseback.

In reviewing the six swords, we realized that many of them came from smiths names that were used by several generations. Where you have multiple generations of the same smith, it is not easy to determine which generation the blade represented. In cases where the blade was signed and dated, we could narrow it down based on the date, or an *oshigata*, but with *mumei* blades the process is more complicated. For example, the Moromitsu tanto had many characteristics, such as the *boshi* and *sugata* of the first generation blades. These were not characteristics of the second generation. However, the *hamon* was typical of the second generation, not the first.

In summary, the *kantei* of *Oei Bizen* blades is sometimes full of contradictions and anomalies. When you have a signed and dated blade possessing all the characteristics of the *Oei Bizen mono*, the process and conclusions are apparent. However, as we have seen in the above six examples, these types of blades may prove to be the exception rather than the normal. In most cases, one needs to look very closely at the blade for characteristics of the era and area and then use a process of elimination to narrow it down to a school or smith.





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