

特別展観

備中青江の名刀

The Bitchu Aoe School

NBTHK-AB Presentation

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東京国立博物館

OLD COUNTRY MAP OF JAPAN



The Bitchu Aoe School

(Modified after Fred Weissberg)

To properly understand the foundation and beginnings of the Bitchû Aoe School (備中青江) we must first study geography and history. The old Kibi (吉備国) region of Japan covered an area of Western Honshu that is mostly included in today's Okayama Prefecture. From ancient times until the Muromachi Era this area was comparable in cultural and political importance to that of the Kinai (畿内) and Kita-Kyushu (北九州) regions. This was largely due to the abundance of fine sand iron that was used not only for swords, but also to produce all kinds of iron tools for woodworking and farming since ancient times.

The Kibi (吉備国) region was divided into three almost equally sized areas by the presence of three major rivers that, starting from the Chugoku Highland, flowed southwards into the Seto Inland Sea. These rivers were the Yoshii, the Asahi, and the Takahashi. These rivers carried rich sand iron from the highlands down to the lower areas giving rise to the groups of sword smiths that eventually formed the major Bizen and Bitchû schools. These groups were the Fukuoka Ichimonji (福岡一文字) on the Asahi River, the Osafune (長船) on the Yoshii River and the Aoe (青江) on the Takahashi River.

The excellent workmanship of the Bitchû (備中) sword smiths was comparable to that of the smiths of the Bizen (備前), Yamashiro (山城), and Yamato (大和) traditions. Sword smiths mostly gathered around Aoe (青江), present day Kurashiki-shi in Okayama Prefecture, brought the prosperity of the Bitchû (備中) tradition forth. There were also known to have been some smiths scattered in adjacent areas of Masu and Seno.

The first artists of the Bitchû Aoe School (備中青江) came forth toward the end of the Heian period. The smith credited with starting this tradition is Yasutsugu (安次). Unlike the Bizen (備前) tradition that was prosperous until the end of the Muromachi era, the Bitchû (備中) School died out earlier. Some scholars say it ended with the end of the Nanbokucho era while others say it lingered on into the beginning of the Muromachi era. All agree, however, that no matter when it ended, the quality of the swords produced declined severely after the end of the Nanbokucho era.

The Bitchû Aoe (備中青江) tradition is divided into two major classifications, Ko-Aoe (古青江) and Aoe (青江), comparable to Ko-Bizen and Bizen. Ko-Aoe (古青江) is the term that refers to production from late Heian to the middle of the Kamakura era (around 1250). Aoe (青江) is the comprehensive name given to all Aoe smiths who worked from the mid-Kamakura period until the end of Nanbokucho.

One important difference between the Aoe tradition and the Bizen tradition is that unlike the Bizen tradition it did not form into cliques or sub-schools. Rather, the names of individual smiths were handed down for several generations with each characteristic workmanship style continued by successive smiths of the same name. This phenomenon makes it most difficult pin down production dates for the works of artists whose name was used for too many generations to make definitive distinctions. The key kanji for Aoe smith names was *tsugu* (次) corresponding to *mitsu* (光) in Bizen.

The quality of the Bitchû Aoe(備中青江) smiths of the Kamakura era was highly recognized and this is evidenced by the fact that three of the twelve *kaji* (smiths) invited by the Emperor Gotoba (r.1183-1198) to come to Kyoto to forge swords were smiths from Bitchû (備中). They were Sadatsugu (貞次), Tsunetsugu (恒次), and Tsuguiye (次家).

KO-AOE (古青江)

There were two families in the Ko-Aoe (古青江) school. The first is represented by Yasutsugu (安次) who was active in the late Heian period, and by his son Moritsugu (守次). Sadatsugu (貞次), Tsunetsugu (恒次), and Tsuguie (次家), all of who were *goban kaji*, followed these smiths. They were smiths appointed by the retired emperor, Gotoba. There were many other notable smiths in this family of smiths. The other family group was called Senoo. The first generation of this family was Noritaka (則高). Masatsune (正恒), Tsuneto (恒遠), Moriito(守遠), and others followed Noritaka (則高). There are no particular differences in the workmanship between the two families.

SUGATA:

Extant works are limited to *tachi* only. *Tantô* must have also been produced, but none have been found to date. The *sugata* is typical of the period being slender with a *ko-kissaki* and marked *funbari*. The *koshi-zori* is very deep and is distinguished from that of Bizen by the fact that the deepest part of the *sori* is at the *habaki-moto*. That is slightly farther down the blade than that of the Bizen and Yamashiro schools of that time. The *sori* in the upper part of the blade, however, is very shallow.

JIHADA:

Ko-Aoe blades have a distinctive feature called *chirimen-hada*, in which *mokume* and *o-hada* tend to be prominent. The closest translation into English would be crepe-silk *hada*. Also, *sumigane* or dark spots are also frequently seen in the steel, and *jifu*. Often *utsuri* and *chikei* will appear showing the close ties with Bizen production.

HAMON:

Ko-Aoe hamon is usually *nie-deki*, in *suguha* or *ko-choji/ko-midare*. In either instance the *hamon* will be lined with a great many *nie*. *Kinsuji*, *ashi*, and *inazuma* will be found and the *ha-hada* is visible. The *nioi-guchi* tends to be subdued. In late Ko-Aoe, *nie* becomes less apparent and the *hamon* is inclined to have more *nioi*, showing considerable influence of Bizen tradition workmanship.

HORIMONO:

Occasionally *bo-hi* is found. Other types of *horimono* are almost never seen.

BÔSHI:

The *bôshi* is in proportion to the *hamon*, becoming *suguha* or *midarekomi*. The *kaeri* will be short and occasionally an *Ichimonji kaeri* will be found.

NAKAGO:

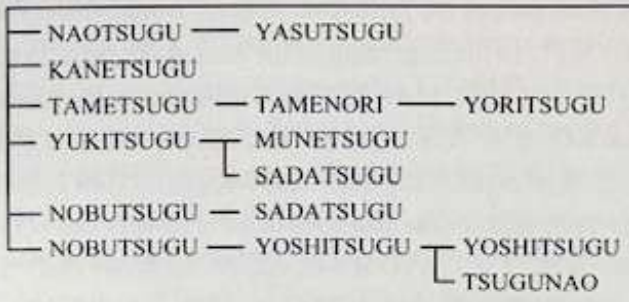
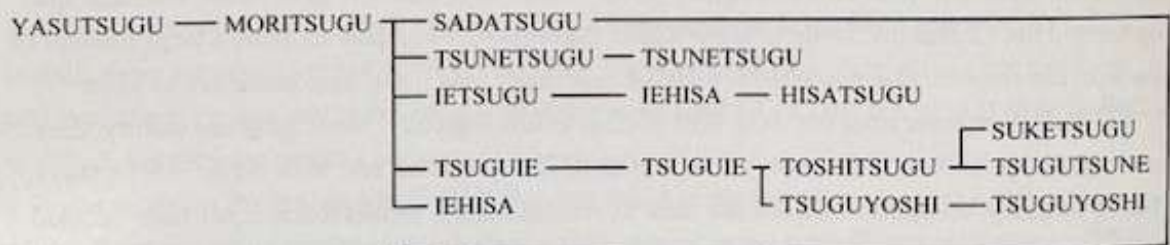
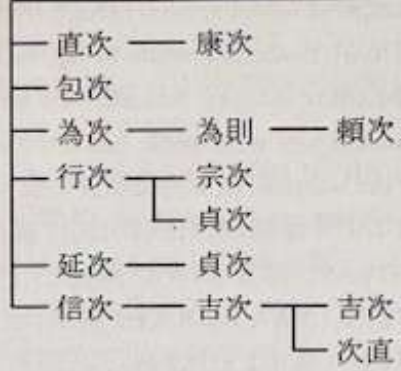
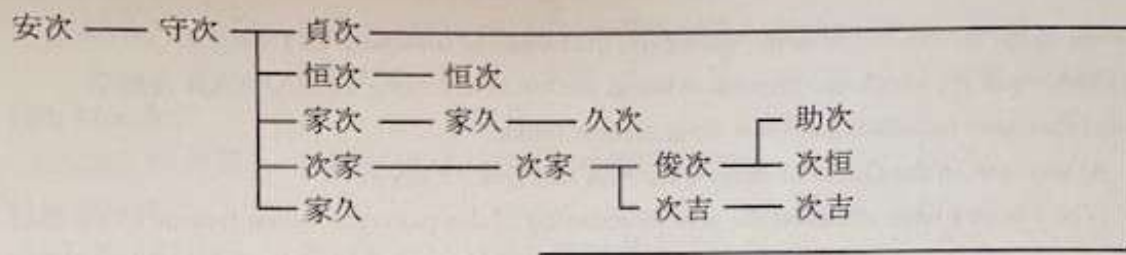
The shape of the *nakago* is generally long with *sori*. Those with *niku* on the *ha* side are most common. Occasionally there are some that are *kijimono*. As for the *saki* (tip of the tang), a slender shallow *kurijiri* or a *kirijiri* is most common. The *yasurime* becomes *o-sujikai*.

MEI:

Ko-Aoe artist's *mei* in most cases consists of two characters incised with a thick chisel. *Tachi-mei* in general on works produced by other schools in the Heian and Kamakura periods were chiseled principally on the *haki-omote*, while the works of the Bitchû Aoe artists are often found on the *haki-ura* of the *tachi*. *Nagamei* and *nenki* (dates) are almost never seen.

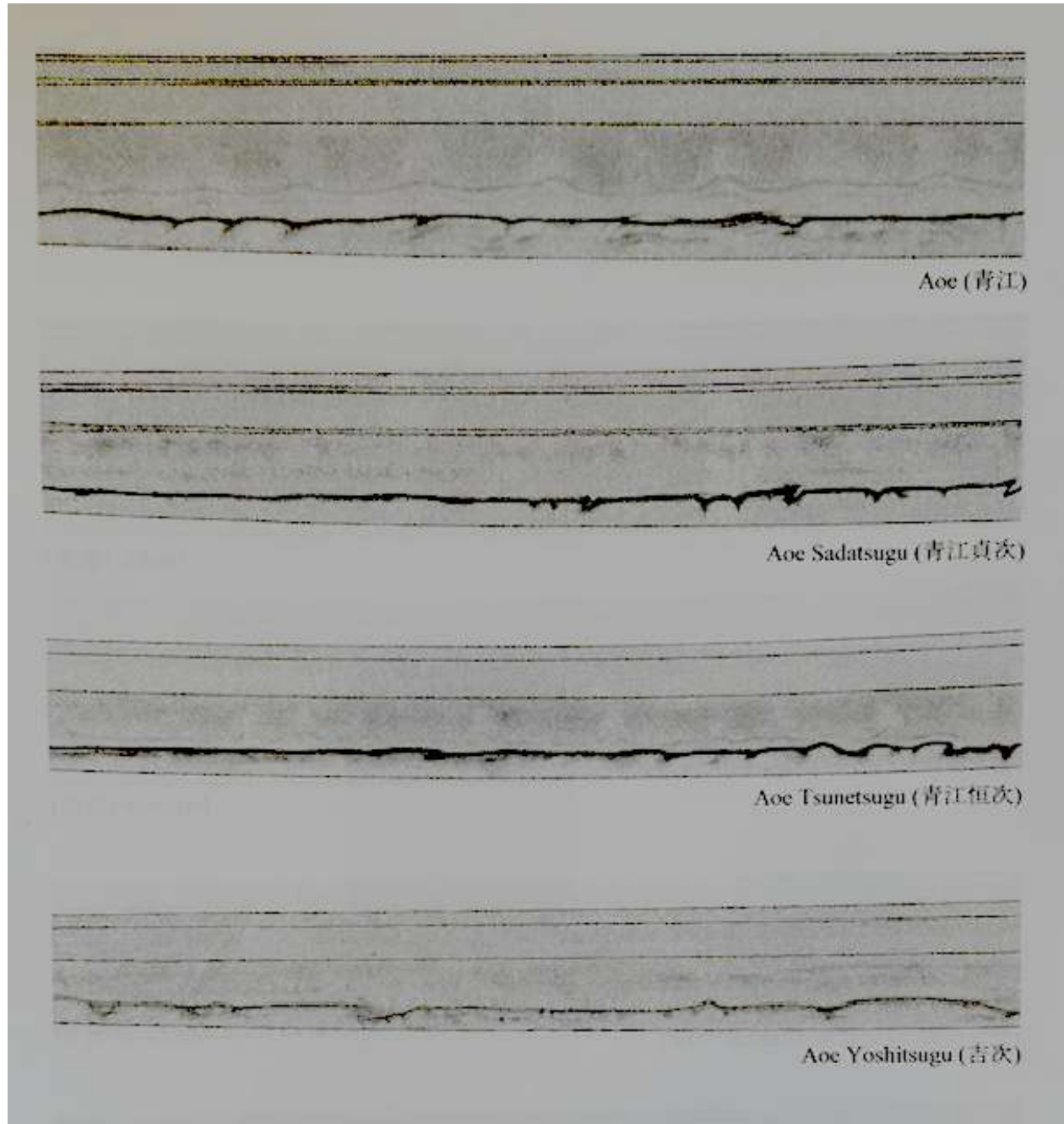
AOE (青江)

SUGATA:	Tachi sugata is that of the late Kamakura era transitioning to that of the Nanbokucho period. <i>Naginata naoshi</i> are often seen. Tanto are <i>hira zukuri</i> , often <i>sun-nobi</i> in length, with little <i>sori</i> .
JIHADA:	The <i>chirimen hada</i> becomes tight <i>itame hada</i> with less <i>mokume</i> . <i>Ji-nie</i> are less prominent. <i>Sumitetsu</i> may be present ("there are questions as to whether this is something to be praised or something to be disliked"). <i>Midare utsuri</i> is often seen, sometimes <i>dan utsuri</i> ; this is different from Bizen-style <i>midare utsuri</i> .
HAMON:	The hamon becomes <i>nioi</i> -dominant, the <i>nioi-guchi</i> is tight, and the workmanship becomes bright and vivid. The hamon is <i>chu-suguha</i> with <i>ko-gunome</i> , <i>saka-ashi</i> , <i>nezumi-ashi</i> and <i>yo</i> are prominent. In tanto there are two types: <i>suguha-cho</i> , or a dramatic <i>saka-choji</i> .
HORIMONO:	<i>Bo-hi</i> is common. Other types of <i>horimono</i> are almost never seen in tachi. <i>Bo-hi</i> and <i>soebi</i> are common on tanto.
BÔSHI:	The <i>bôshi</i> is in proportion to the <i>hamon</i> , becoming <i>suguha</i> or <i>midarekomi</i> . The <i>kaeri</i> will sometimes be long.
MEI:	<i>Nijime</i> and <i>nagame</i> are seen, usually signed <i>tachi-mei</i> . <i>Nenki</i> (dates) are often seen, especially on tanto.



Examples of Aoe Hamon

(Note dan-utsuri, especially in Aoe and Tsunetsugu)



The meibutsu Nikkari-Aoe had originally a blade length of 2 shaku and 5 sun (~ 75.8 cm) but was later shortened to the present-day nagasa of 1 shaku 9 sun and 9 bu (~ 60.3 cm) which makes it in terms of sword nomenclature an ō-wakizashi (大脇指), a large wakizashi. On the tang there is the gold-inlayed name of its past owner but parts of this kinzōgan-meī are lost due to the shortening. The remaining signature reads “Hashiba Gorōzaemon no Jō Naga...” (羽柴五郎左衛門尉長). Hashiba was the self-chosen former name of Toyotomi Hideyoshi when he was a retainer of Oda Nobunaga. The name Hashiba (羽柴) is actually a composition of two characters of Nobunaga’s most famous generals, namely Niwa Nagahide (丹羽長秀, 1535-1585) and Shibata Katsuie (柴田勝家, 1522-1583), together pronounced as “Hashiba.” This was not a pure playing around of Hideyoshi but a clever tactic because so he was able to secure the goodwill of two of the most powerful military leaders of his time. Well, but who is now meant with “Hashiba Gorōzaemon no Jō Naga...”? – Niwa Nagahide’s common name was Gorōzaemon but the family name Hashiba can not be applied to him because he himself was the name patron for this conglomerate. So we come to his oldest son and heir Niwa Nagashige (丹羽長重, 1571-1637) who inherited together with the headship of the family also the common name from his father. In the 15th year of Tenshō (天正, 1587) he participated in Hideyoshi’s campaigns against Kyūshū but was punished because of inappropriate behaviour to one of his retainers. At that time such a punishment meant basically a transfer to another fief with a lesser income. From the large amount of 1,230,000 koku from his father’s provinces of Echizen, Wakasa, and Kaga, only 40,000 koku were remaining in his new Mattō fief (松任, present-day Ishikawa Prefecture).

But Hideyoshi probably used this punishment only as a pretext for strongly reducing the power of the Niwa family. Five years later Nagashige participated also in the Korean invasions, namely as one of the so-called “Hashiba Followers” (Hashiba-jijū, 羽柴侍従) – in his case as “Hashiba-Mattō-jijū” (羽柴松任侍従, lit. “Hashiba Follower from Mattō”). Thus the complete signature of the sword read originally probably “Hashiba Gorōzaemon no Jō Nagashige shoji” (羽柴五郎左衛門尉長重所持), “in the possession of Hashiba Gorōzaemon no Jō Nagashige.”*1

We can now speculate about the shortening of the blade. First we can say that Nagashige had inlayed his name on the tang after he had received the sword from his father and second, that the blade had then already been shortened from 75.8 to 60.3 cm. That means it is possible that Nagashige himself had the blade shortened for

whatever reasons – maybe it got damaged towards the base – and subsequently added his name on the tang. Also unclear is the second shortening that took place, i.e. when the tang was cut a few centimeters right after the character for Naga. The most easiest assumption is that the blade was shortened to the desired blade length regardless what was written on the tang. This practice was very common and also the adding additional peg holes was handled not particularly demurely: In many cases they go mercilessly through characters of the signature.

Another reason for the shortening could be that the blade came into the possession of a wealthy merchant because except the bushi class now one was allowed to wear a blade measuring more than 2 shaku (~ 60.6 cm). Often this was pushed to its limit, i.e. to the last millimeter, and nouveau-riche merchant class openly displayed their cultural and financial catch up to the warrior class with wearing high-ranking swords and fittings. But this is a theoretical thought because the sword was continuously in the possession of the Kyōgoku family (京極), more about that later.

A third option for the shortening of the tang up to the character for Naga could be that the then owner tried to erase Nagashige's name and instead allude to Nagahide as previous owner. As mentioned, Nagashige was transferred for disciplinary reasons and when he sided with Ishida Mitsunari at the Battle of Sekigahara he ended in ruin and as impoverished rōnin (浪人). Well, three years after Sekigahara he was again given a fief with an outcome of 10,000 koku and after participating at the Ōsaka campaigns at the side of the Tokugawa he again gained reputation, but in contrast to his father, his „career“ was regarded as fail by many of his contemporaries. So maybe the owner tried to erase his name from the sword as mentioned above.

However, regarding the nickname Nikkari-Aoe, three different traditions exist. First I would like to present the version of the Kyōhō Meibutsu Chō. We are in the early Azuchi-Momoyama era (安土桃山時代, 1568-1600). In the Gamō district (蒲生) of Ōmi province there was rumour about a demon stroke terror around the local Mount Hachiman (八幡山). Lord of these lands was Nakajima Shūridayū (中島修理大夫) and he was forced to act. So he – other traditions say it was his brother Kuridayū (九理太夫) – went to the mentioned area. On his belt he wore his sharpest sword, a blade by the Aoe school from Bitchū province. The forrest became more and more dense and night came in. Suddenly Nakajima encountered a women with a child in her arms. She sat the kid on the ground and asked with a gauntly grin if the honourable man would pick up the small children. When it crawled towards him he immediately thought by himself: “A woman with her child here in the deep forest and at that time, this is quite odd and the demon must be involved in this!” He drew his sword and cutted down at the kid but then the woman laughed the more gauntly and approached him: “Then you should hold me in your arms instead!” But Nakajima gave her a short

shrift and cut down in a straight blow whereupon both of them, the woman and the child vanished. The next day Nakajima tried to get to the bottom of this matter and hurried to the place where everything happened last night, assuming that two bodies must be there.

But instead of them he found two mossy stone lanterns (ishidōrō, 石灯籠, see picture above) whose upper parts were lying on the ground nice and neatly severed. “So that must had been the demon?!” he thought by himself and returned home, whereupon he gave the sword the nickname Nikkari-Aoe. Nikkari (にっかり) or also nikkori (にっこり) means “grin, sneer.”

The second version of the story is found in the Jōzan Kidan (常山紀談), a collection of anecdotes compiled by the Confucian scholar Yuasa Jōzan (湯浅常山, 1708-1781). The main protagonist of this tradition was a retainer of Asano Nagamasa (浅野長政, 1547-1611). As stated in this story, Nagamasa on his side was a retainer of Toyotomi Hideyoshi and was granted with the districts Kōga (甲賀) and Kurita (栗太) of Ōmi province due to his long-standing loyalty and military achievements. The income of rice of both districts was 20,300 koku. One day this vassal was on the way from Kōga to the south-eastern province of Ise and had to cross the Suzuka mountain range (鈴鹿山脈). He had to hurry because it already got a dark. As Nakajima, he suddenly met a young woman. Sceptically he stopped and addressed her but the woman just grinned in a fearsome manner whereas he drew his sword and cutted her down. With a loud plump her head felt to the ground. The next morning he looked for the place again to examine where she had been but was only able to find a stone statue of the deity Jizō (地藏) which are frequently seen at the wayside – the head of the statue lying to the side in the grass. So he gave the sword the nickname Nikkari-Aoe.

And the third version goes back to the tradition of the Kyōgoku family. It deals with a certain general Koma Tango no Kami (駒丹後守 or 狛丹後守), commander of the tenth battle line (jūban-zonae, 十番備) of the Sasaki family (佐々木). One night Koma was on the way in Ōmi’s Gamō district near the village of Chōkōji (長光寺) when he encountered a female figure. Because she was smiling Koma approached her but as it turned out that she was a shapeshifted demon he too drew his sword and killed her with one single blow. Of course, he called his sword Nikkari-Aoe after this incident.

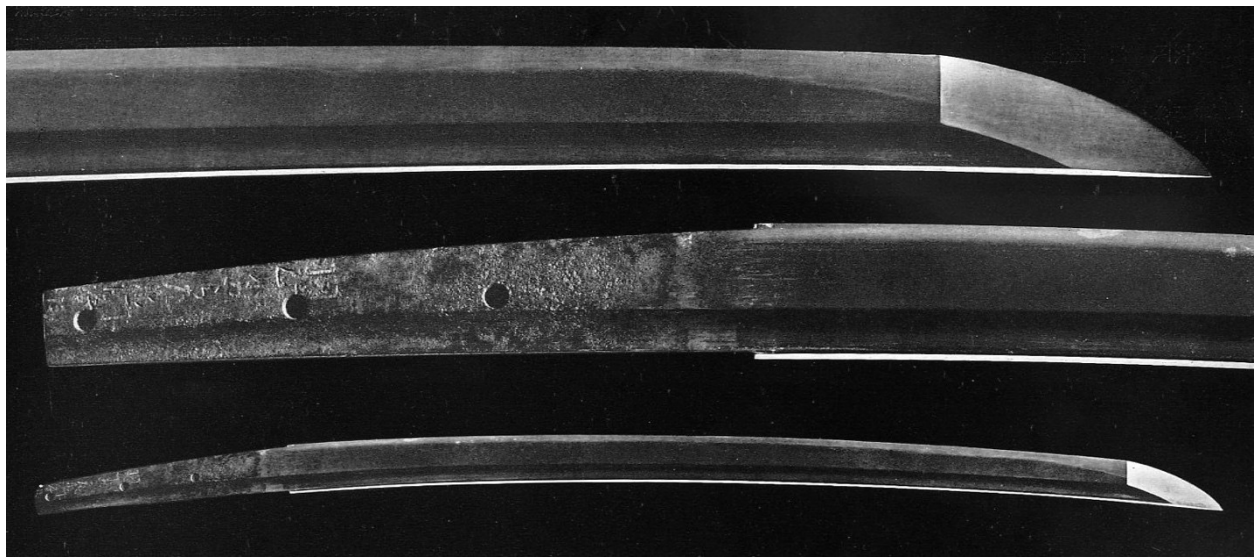
But now to the historical facts. Oda Nobunaga entrusted Shibata Katsuie in the first year of Genki (元亀, 1570) with the defense of Chōkōji Castle (長光寺城) because Rokkaku Yoshikata (六角義賢) who was introduced in this story was just on the way to reconquer it from Nobunaga. During the siege of the castle the one and only spring

of Katsuie dried up and only three water jugs were remaining. Katsuie ordered his men to empty those jugs with in one go as if there's no tomorrow and shashed them demonstratively. Egged by this "samurai-like" behaviour of their lord the men achieved a true victory and drove away the Rokkoku besiegers. Later Mt. Chōkōji on which the castle once stood was popularly called Kamewari-yama (甕割山, lit. "jug-smasher mountain").

Katsuie was officially installed as castellan of Chōkōji and when he heard of a legendary sword called Nikkari-Aoe going somewhere round in his lands associated with the castle he ordered that it shall be confiscated. He presented it to his son Katsutoshi (勝敏, 1568?-1583). But Katsutoshi had no luck with this sword when he participated at the age of 15*2 in the Battle of Shizugatake (賤ヶ岳) in Tenshō eleven (天正, 1583). The Shibata suffered a defeat and when his father committed seppuku the remaining retainers advised him to flee but he stayed and was captured and executed by Niwa Nagahide.

And this was probably how the sword Nikkari-Aoe came as war spoils in the possession of Nagahide. Later the sword came into the possession of Hideyoshi who – being taken with the story behind it – had a special storage box made for it. Hon'ami Kōtoku's records from about that time say that it then measured already only 60,3 cm and that the tang was cut off right after the character for Naga.

As mentioned before, the thoughts about a shortening by a wealthy merchant were just theoretical but should nevertheless be quoted as a background information in which context such shortenings could have been carried out. Hideyoshi's son Hideyori had two mountings made for the blade, one of them can be seen in the picture below. The precise circumstances how the sword came into the possession of the Kyōgoku are not handed-down but it is most likely that the Nikkari-Aoe was once a present of Hideyori to Kyōgoku Takatsugu (京極高次, 1563-1609). Takatsugu's successor, viscount Kyōgoku Takanaga (京極高修), received in 1940 the status jūyō-bijutsuhin for the blade. After World War II it was owned by a certain Aonuma Mitsuo (青沼光夫) but in 1997 it was bought by the city of Marugame (丸亀, Kagawa Prefecture on Shikoku) because the Kyōgoku were the lords of the Marugame fief of the same name. Since then the Nikkari-Aoe is preserved in the Historic Archive of the City of Marugame.



jūyō-bijutsuhin Nikkari-Aoe, mei: Hashiba Gorōzaemon no Jō Naga..., nagasa 60.3 cm, sori 1.2

