

ICOA1590: INTERPRETATION OF THE SACRED ISLAND OF OKINOSHIMA

Subtheme 03: Protecting and Interpreting Cultural Heritage in the Age of Digital Empowerment

Session 2: Use of Digital Technology for Dissemination and Interpretation

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The Sacred Island of Okinoshima

“The Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region” is the newest World Heritage property of Japan, which was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List under criteria (ii) and (iii) at the 41st session of the World Heritage Committee (Krakow, 2017).

“Located 60 km off the western coast of Kyushu island, the island of Okinoshima is an exceptional example of the tradition of worship of a sacred island. The archaeological sites that have been preserved on the island are virtually intact, and provide a chronological record of how the rituals performed there changed from the 4th to the 9th centuries AD. In these rituals, votive objects were deposited as offerings at different sites on the island. Many of them are of exquisite workmanship and had been brought from overseas, providing evidence of intense exchanges between the Japanese Archipelago, the Korean Peninsula and the Asian Continent. Integrated within the Munakata Taisha Shinto shrine, the island of Okinoshima is considered sacred to this day.”¹.

This property consists of 8 component parts located in two municipalities (Munakata City and Fukutsu City) of Fukuoka Prefecture: the sacred island of Okinoshima including ritual archaeological sites and a Shinto shrine,³ attendant reefs, a place to worship the island (or a deity enshrined there) from afar on Oshima Island, a Shinto shrine on Oshima Island including an ancient ritual archaeological site, a Shinto shrine in the mainland including an ancient ritual site, and a mounded tomb group in the mainland that has been selected from many ancient mounded tombs in the region as the most symbolic of relations between people and the sacred island at the time.



Fig.1– Sacred island of Okinoshima and three attendant reefs

¹<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1535>



Fig.2– Map of the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region

Miraculous “survival” of intact 4c-9c ritual archaeological sites and “discovery” in the 20th century

The sacred island of Okinoshima had been a secret protected almost intact for many centuries by local people, mainly fishermen, who have piously been observing traditional taboos that people are not allowed on the island, ban removing anything from the island, “even a twig or blade of grass” and all those who visit the island are prohibited to speak of anything they have seen or heard there; It was not until 1954 that the archaeological remains and artefacts on the island were studied in detail. The first archaeological excavations were carried out from 1954 to 1971 in three phases.

As many as 80,000 items of artefacts, including pot shards and very rare items such as gilt bronze dragon heads, have been found. It has tremendous archaeological value as testimony to ancient maritime exchanges between the Japanese Archipelago and the Korean Peninsula and cultural interchanges.

The results of the excavations revealed that this is the vital archaeological site to understand Japanese history. That is why they were collectively designated by the national government of Japan as a national treasure. There are no other cases like this in Japan. If it had not been for these taboos, archaeological remains and artefacts would not have been preserved so intact up to the present.

World Heritage List inscription – a paradigm shift from protection by hiding to protection by sharing

Before the aforementioned archaeological excavations in the mid-20th century, little had been done to introduce or interpret the sacred island of Okinoshima, which had instead been kept as a secret to a limited group of people. This archaeological discovery was called “a miracle in the 20th century” by Japanese archaeologists and reverberated throughout the country. These discoveries attracted much academic attention at the time and contributed substantially to the study of ancient rituals in Japan. It was a paradigm shift from protection by hiding the sacred island based on traditional taboos to protection by sharing the value widely.

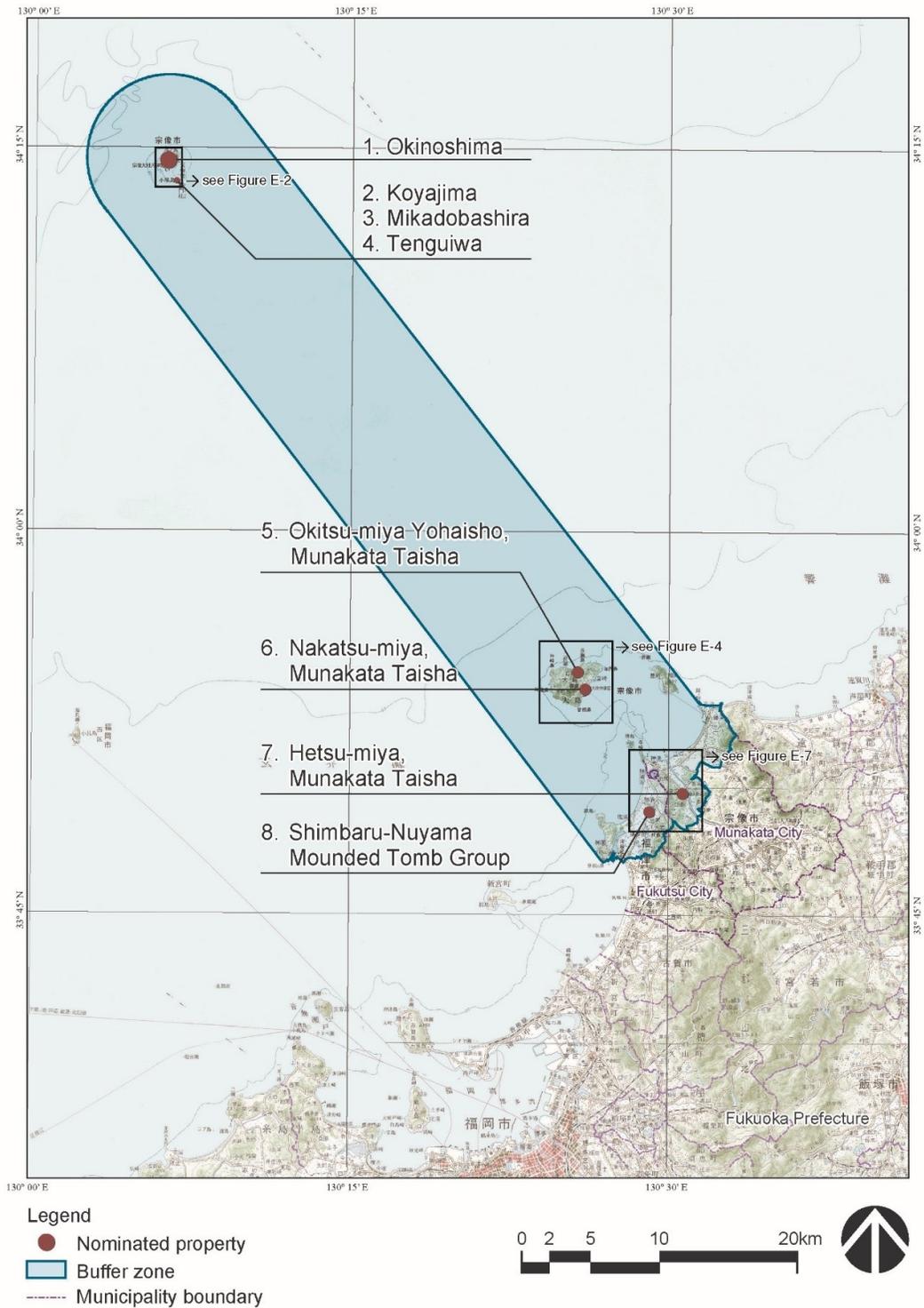


Fig.3– Map of the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region (property and buffer zone)



Fig.4– Yohaisho, the special building on Oshima Island for worshipping the sacred island of Okinoshima from afar

The past efforts for the interpretation of the forbidden island of Okinoshima

Various efforts for the interpretation of the forbidden island of Okinoshima have been made already, which can be categorized into three stages in relation to World Heritage inscription process, as is summarized below.

Stage 1: After the archaeological excavations in the mid-20th century

After the archaeologists revealed the tremendous archaeological value of the island of Okinoshima, which resulted in the designation of 80,000 excavated artefacts as a national treasure in 1962 and the shrine compounds of Munakata Taisha as a historic site in 1971. Originally, the purpose of the archaeological excavation is to explore the origin of Munakata Taisha by Munakata Taisha Revival Association established in 1942 by Idemitsu Sazo, the founder of the petroleum wholesale company Idemitsu Kosan Co., Ltd.; this group worked to renew the shrine compounds by repairing the buildings. To spread the result of this discovery, special exhibition facilities is made for publishing the results to people.

1980:*Shimpokan* (literally, “divine treasure museum”) was built by Munakata Taisha, within its shrine compounds, meeting the technical requirements necessary for displaying national treasures (including the employment of a qualified curator) and started to display mirrors and other precious unearthed items on display as well as a scale model diorama of the island of Okinoshima.

1983:The National Museum of Japanese History opened at Sakura City, Chiba Prefecture near Tokyo Narita International Airport, in which the ritual archaeological sites of Okinoshima was presented in the first exhibit room, making a life-size scale model of a part of the ritual archaeological site, which is still impressive today. This exhibition room was added urgently in the midst of the museum construction, because the exhibition of sacred island of Okinoshima as an archaeological site is indispensable to understanding the history of Japan.



Fig.5– Conventional presentations using scale models of the island at Shimpokan museum at Munakata City, Fukuoka Prefecture (left) and ritual archaeological sites at the National Museum of Japanese History at Sakura City, Chiba Prefecture near Tokyo Narita International Airport (right)

Stage 2: World Heritage nomination

A special exhibition was held at the Munakata Taisha Shimpokan museum when additional designation of artefacts excavated from Okinoshima as national treasure was made in 2002. This eventually triggered the movement by local community to pursue the nomination for inscription on the World Heritage List. After the decision was taken to pursue World Heritage inscription, it became an issue how to interpret the value of the sacred island of Okinoshima. In this stage, digital technologies were introduced as an effective way to “show” the island to people and introduce worships and festivals associated with the sacred island. Attention was also paid to explaining a wider range of values related to the potential Outstanding Universal Value of the property such as interchanges of human values as well as the World Heritage Convention itself.

2009: A movie was produced by Fukuoka Prefecture, Munakata City, and Fukutsu City to introduce candidate components.

2012: Munakata City set up a 3-D theatre at a city-run museum (*Uminomichi Munakatakan*), introducing Okinoshima, other components, festivals associated with them, and the nature of the island, as well as anime stories (different periods in ancient Japanese history).

2014-2015: The Comprehensive Preservation and Management Plan of the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region was developed. In this plan, the property area was divided into sub-zones for interpretation and management purposes in consideration of specific characteristics of different places in the property and the buffer zone. The decision was taken to continue to close the sacred island of Okinoshima to the general public with a view to protecting this practice as a cultural tradition closely associated with the Outstanding Universal Value of the property and to maximize the use of museums on Oshima Island and the mainland and encourage people to experience *yohai* as the traditional style of appreciation. The traditional way of worshipping the island of Okinoshima is to worship it from afar. This practice is called *yohai*. In this process, airborne laser measurement technology was used to obtain detailed terrain data of Okinoshima and Shinto shrine compounds. This map revealed the whole details of the island, including the war-time remains of the Second World War, and provides useful baseline information for monitoring purposes.

2015: A new video was produced for nomination purposes. 3-D models of ritual archaeological sites on the island of Okinoshima and a mounded tomb group were created as a measure to interpret archaeological sites that are not always easy to understand. These models reveal the shape of the archaeological sites; massive rocks on Okinoshima and the tombs without trees; it is useful for monitoring these sites and examining how to present the burial mound group. These models were updated in 2017.

2015: A "super high-vision theatre" was set up (open since 2016) at the Kyushu National Museum in Dazaifu City, in which 8K movies are shown on a 320-inch screen at a resolution of 33 million pixels. Drone-borne images of the island of Okinoshima were newly taken to provide clearer images of archaeological sites, the natural environment, etc. of the island.



Fig.6– 3-D theater at Uminomichi Munakatakan Museum, Munakata City (left) and digital terrain data obtained by airborne laser scanning technology (right)

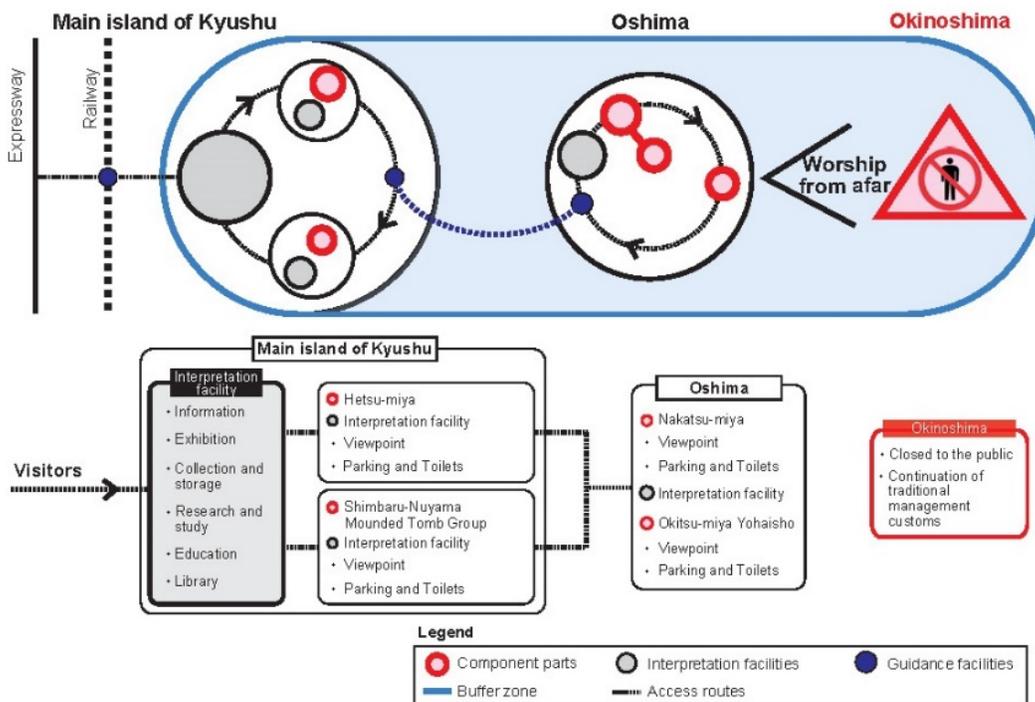


Fig.7– Schematic figure showing the strategic interpretation of the forbidden island of Okinoshima

Stage 3: After World Heritage List inscription up to the present

Since World Heritage List inscription in July 2017 up to the present, further efforts have been made to strengthen the interpretation with the introduction of technically and economically viable digital technologies. This stage (only a few months after inscription) is basically the continuation of Stage 2 with technological updates.

July 2017: Munakata City set up a gigantic screen at a community museum on Oshima Island. A new program was made, focusing on the relations between the island of Okinoshima and people of Oshima Island instead of exposing visuals of Okinoshima itself. Prior to building this facility; Munakata City has held opinion exchange meetings with representatives of residents of Oshima many times. People living on Oshima did not want to show detailed inside images of the sacred island at this facility. As a result, the movie has been designed to introduce cultural practices and traditions such as taboos associated with Okinoshima as well as thoughts of local people about Okinoshima spoken in their own words.

September 2017: VR goggles (with technical assistance from a major telecommunication company of Japan, NTT docomo) were introduced to allow people to enjoy a virtual island tour of Okinoshima and a virtual walk from the *torii* gate to the gigantic rocks where ritual archaeological sites exist.



Fig.8– New gigantic screen theater, Oshima, Munakata City

Consideration for future interpretation

The history of interpretation efforts for Okinoshima over the past several decades shows evolution in terms of the method (use of digital technologies) and the content of interpretation.

It has been and still is an ongoing trial-and-error effort, through which several issues have been identified, both of universal nature and specific to the sacred island of Okinoshima.

Following World Heritage List inscription, there is a growing interest in Okinoshima. These demands can conflict with the feelings that have been observed by local people, which are important for the protection and transmission of the Outstanding Universal Value of this property to future generations. Indeed, people of Oshima Island who have been guardians of Okinoshima are not comfortable with the excessive disclosure of inside views of the sacred island still today.

In this particular case of the island of Okinoshima, powerful advanced digital technologies today can be a threat to vulnerable cultural traditions and respecting traditional spiritual relations of local people.

Digital technologies must be planned and designed to respect and complement the real and traditional experiences and even enhance them in combination with conventional interpretations, such as display of original artefacts, replicas, and/or scale models at museums.

On the other hand, ritual sites and mounded tombs can be virtually reconstructed with great accuracy, using 3-D models. Digital technology is very effective in interpreting archaeological sites. It also contributes to the management of the property in various stages ranging from the acquisition of data useful as the baseline of monitoring to the presentation of those data.

Now that the sacred island has become a World Heritage property, continuous efforts need to be made to interpret the Outstanding Universal Value of the property, including the historical backgrounds and beliefs associated with it, to people who have different cultural backgrounds. In order to promote interpretation while striking a balance with faith and other living cultural traditions, digital technology is expected to continue to contribute in the future. In the new stages of interpretation, the sacred island of Okinoshima will provide opportunities to put such possibilities to the test at a World Heritage property, an experience to be shared within and outside Japan.

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