

## Foreword

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### Introduction

The Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2017. At the time of inscription, the evaluation of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) was different to the content of the nomination submitted by Japan, instead recommending that inscription should be limited to only the island of Okinoshima and its three attendant reefs. However, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee recognized Nakatsu-miya on Oshima, Hetsu-miya, Munakata Taisha on the Kyushu mainland (Tajima, Munakata City), and the Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group (Fukutsu City) as all constituting an integral part of the property, and approved the inscription in accordance with the nomination document submitted by Japan. Though, the Committee called for further work to be done relating to the property, in particular that, “Continuing and expanding research programmes on maritime exchanges, navigation and related cultural and ritual practices within the State Party and its neighbouring countries.”

In order to respond to the observations and recommendations for additional study set out by the Committee, the Preservation and Utilization Council of “Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region,” comprised of the organizations responsible for the preservation and management, and presentation and utilization of the property, namely Fukuoka Prefecture, Munakata City, Fukutsu City, and Munakata Taisha, decided to implement a special research project concerning “Maritime Navigation, Exchange and Religion in Ancient East Asia.”

### I . Implementation of the Special Research Project

In order to respond to the recommendation set out by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee at the time of the Property’s inscription, that, “Continuing and expanding research programmes on maritime exchanges, navigation and related cultural and ritual practices within the State Party and its neighbouring countries,” the Special Research Project on “Maritime Navigation, Exchange and Religion in Ancient East Asia” was initiated.

The specific research topics were “maritime navigation,” “exchanges,” “rituals,” and “continuity of faith,” reflecting the observations of the ICOMOS recommendations. Project researchers were invited from Japan, China, Korea, the Netherlands, the U.S., each of whom are experts in the abovementioned fields, to conduct thematic research. Three international review meetings and an international symposium on the Special Research Project were also held, relating to the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region. In these meetings, the members of the Advisory Committee of the Preservation and Utilization Council and invited researchers of the Special Research Project were joined by other specialist researchers from Japan, the Netherlands and other countries, which helped to develop a multifaceted study from an even broader perspective. Members of the Advisory Committee and researchers of the Special Research Project also engaged in visits and surveys of various related sites, including those in China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan (Noto and Tsushima), which provided useful insights into the research topic.

The Special Research Project was initially planned to be implemented over a three-year period from 2018 to 2020, but the global pandemic had a major adverse

impact on study and research, with the result that the project was extended to the end of fiscal 2022 (end of March 2023). The presentations and reports from the international review meetings, public lectures and symposium are all publicly available on the Preservation and Utilization Council website, both in summarized written form together with videos of presentations. The Special Research Project Outcomes Report Meeting held on March 12, 2023, also included a panel discussion in addition to reports, titled, “New Horizons for Research on Okinoshima: Looking back on five years of study.” It is through these various meetings and media that we seek to present an overall view of this project, and elucidate future challenges.

## II . Research outcomes of the Special Research Project

Aiming to realize the inscription on the World Heritage list of the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region, in order to demonstrate the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) from a globally-oriented and human perspective, the forerunner of the Preservation and Utilization Council, the World Heritage Promotion Committee of “Okinoshima Island and Related Sites in the Munakata Region” worked over a three-year period from 2010 to 2012 to conduct commissioned research on the value of the property, requesting the cooperation and insight of 31 appropriately qualified researchers from Japan and overseas.

Research was conducted to re-assess the historical value of Munakata and Okinoshima from a global historical perspective and at a contemporary academic level. Previously, the outcomes of the excavations of the Okinoshima ritual sites, which were conducted from 1954 with the support of the Munakata Shrine Revival Association, were compiled into two large and wide-ranging reports: *Okinoshima: Ritual Sites of Okitsu-Miya, Munakata Shrine*, and *Okinoshima: Ritual Sites of Okitsu-Miya, Munakata Shrine, Part II, Munakata*

*Okinoshima Archeological research (1969-1971) of religious sites on Okinoshima, Divine Island in Genkai-nada Sea*, Munakata Shrine Revival Association, (Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1958,1961 and 1979). Since then all subsequent research had been conducted in accordance with the outcomes of those esteemed and outstanding research reports.

The 80,000 ritual items excavated from the ancient ritual sites on Okinoshima were designated as important cultural properties in 1959 in view of their historical, cultural and academic importance, and in 1962 they were collectively designated as a national treasure, “Excavated Items from Okitsu-miya, Munakata Taisha, Fukuoka Prefecture.” The precincts of Munakata Taisha, comprising Okitsu-miya on Okinoshima, Nakatsu-miya on Oshima, and Hetsu-miya (Munakata Taisha) in Tajima on mainland Kyushu, were designated as the historic site of “Munakata Taisha Shrine Precincts” in 1971. In addition, the entire forest covering Okinoshima itself had already been designated as a Natural Monument known as “Okinoshima Primeval Forest” in 1926.

Subsequently, various initiatives were undertaken to disseminate the outcomes of research on Okinoshima to a wider audience, including the *Munakata Okinoshima Exhibition* co-organized by the Idemitsu Museum of Arts and the Munakata Shrine Revival Association in 1977, and a book targeting the general public by YUBA Tomonori, *The Shosoin of the Sea: Munakata Okinoshima*, (Heibonsha, 1979). However, it may well be that the outcomes of the initial reports may have been simply overwhelming in their scope, because thereafter research on Okinoshima did not develop in any novel direction thereafter. Deserving of special mention, however, is INOUE Mitsusada, who, in his retirement year lecture at the University of Tokyo, discussed the Okinoshima ritual site and artifacts, compiling his findings in *Nihon kodai no oken to saishi* [*Ancient Japanese Kingship and Ritual*], (University of Tokyo Press, 1984), and also the fact that an exhibition room of the National Museum of Japanese History was used to exhibit the Okinoshima ritual site

and other artifacts using a full-sized replica. In a museum setting where visitors can gain a comprehensive overview of Japanese history, this exhibition accorded historical significance to the ritual sites of Okinoshima.

However, we had not seen young researchers working on new studies on Okinoshima's ritual sites and their place in ancient rituals for a long time. On the other hand, Japanese archaeology has also made great progress over the subsequent half-century, and the excavation of many ritual sites and artifacts has developed anew, with Shinto archaeological studies having come to be called ritual archaeological studies. In addition, there have also been many new developments in Japanese historiography relating to Shinto festivals and rituals in ancient history. Theoretical and religious studies of faith and festivals have also been greatly developed. Given that we stand on the cusp of a new stage for academic research in this area, the intention was to examine the ritual sites of Okinoshima not only from a Japanese perspective, but also from a global perspective. The many new findings and research outcomes that have emerged as a result of the commissioned research at the time of the World Heritage nomination dossier submission, and also as a result of this Special Research Project following inscription as the World Heritage Site, have brought about significant developments in studies relating to Okinoshima.

### **III. Other studies, research outcomes and their dissemination**

Separately from the Special Research Project, various studies and research relating to Munakata and Okinoshima are being implemented from different perspectives. The recording, investigation, and research of the current status of various historical sites and artifacts as the World Heritage Site and also as Japanese historical sites or national treasures are also being pursued from the standpoint of the respective cultural property managers. For example, the current status of the Okinoshima ritual

sites are being monitored as a World Heritage site by Munakata City, Fukuoka Prefecture, Munakata Taisha, and others, and records are being made through ongoing observation, understanding, and evaluation of the current status. Through such studies, the actual burden and impact on the archaeological sites caused by the streaked shearwater and natural disasters, etc., are being checked and monitored. In addition, the Shimpō-kan Museum of Munakata Taisha is also engaged in diligent efforts to preserve and manage the Okinoshima ritual objects that have been designated as national treasures. Detailed surveys of their current condition and the need for restoration are being conducted by Munakata Taisha, with the cooperation of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Fukuoka Prefecture, and experts in archaeology and conservation. Furthermore, at the Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group in Fukutsu City, which is a constituent component of the World Heritage property, excavation surveys to obtain data for site maintenance and disaster restoration are being conducted by Fukutsu City on an ongoing basis. These are beginning to clarify the specific shape, extent, and structure of some of the tumuli within the mounded tomb group.

The Preservation and Utilization Council publishes a journal called *Okinoshima Research Monograph* (currently Vol. 10), which features papers related to research and surveys by relevant specialists, curators and researchers from Fukuoka Prefecture, Munakata City, Fukutsu City and Munakata Taisha, who comprise the membership of the Council. The contents of *Okinoshima Research Monograph* are also publicly available on the Council's website.

On the Council's website it is also possible to view the research outcomes and report of the Special Research Project noted above, as well as the details of symposia, lectures and courses held to date. What is more, *Okinoshima Research* journal is also available as part of the digital archive. The website features contents targeting the general public and children, including

introductions to the property and pictures showing its current status. These are designed to be accessible and enjoyable for everyone to learn about the World Heritage Site. Please take a look if you have the opportunity.

### **Conclusion: Issues remaining for the future**

In the intervening time since the inscription of the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region in 2017, in accordance with the recommendation of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee that, up until fiscal year 2023 a great deal of time and effort has been expended on related research.

In the Special Research Project advanced predominantly by the Preservation and Utilization Council, researchers from Japan and overseas were commissioned as appropriate to conduct field surveys and elucidate new research results from various perspectives and in an interdisciplinary manner. The outcomes of research on ancient maritime navigation, exchanges, rituals, and beliefs as seen in relation to Okinoshima were discussed internationally with related researchers in Japan and overseas at the international review meetings in 2018-2022. After a general review meeting in 2022, we have been able to summarize the results in a final report in 2023.

In addition, basic surveys and research on the conservation, management, restoration, utilization, and dissemination of each component asset and historic site, etc., have also produced steady results. These studies and research outcomes have accordingly served to raise the historical and cultural value of the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region for the

world and humanity.

The outcomes of this Special Research Project are heard to be highly evaluated by UNESCO. The project thus adeptly underscores the critical importance of ensuring that the act of inscription itself is not an end in and of itself, but rather that endeavors continue to be made to clarify and further enhance the value of World Heritage Sites following inscription.

Incidentally, although this project has achieved significant results, it is of course not the end to efforts to elucidate the historical value of the World Heritage Sites. There is still ample room to pursue the issues highlighted by UNESCO. Research and surveys for the conservation, management, restoration, utilization, and dissemination of archaeological sites and artifacts also need to be continued. Based on this project, further efforts to elucidate and enhance the value of the World Heritage Site should be continued and expanded. It could well be said that a new next stage for research projects and the dissemination of their outcomes is now expected.

In addition, the establishment of an organization akin to a “World Heritage Center” that would bring together the national government, prefectures, cities, Munakata Taisha, local communities, and the public and private sectors is also being proposed and considered to serve as a base for such research and study projects, and to provide guidance on the World Heritage Site, and the dissemination of its value. We hope for cooperation and support from various sources in our ongoing efforts to set a future course that will further improve and enhance prospects for the World Heritage Sites.