

# 1. Overview of the Special Research Project

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The Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region was inscribed in the World Heritage List at the 41<sup>st</sup> Session of the World Heritage Committee, held in Krakow, Poland in 2017. Among its recommendations at that time, the Committee advised that Japan should give consideration to “Continuing and expanding research programmes on maritime exchanges, navigation and related cultural and ritual practices within the State Party and its neighboring countries.”

This recommendation reflected discussions that had taken place in the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) on the value of the Property, with the outcome that in May 2017 ICOMOS had recommended that inscription should be limited to only the island of Okinoshima and its three attendant reefs. As a result of deliberations within the World Heritage Committee it was determined that all components of the property as nominated by Japan would be inscribed in the World Heritage List, but with the added recommendation as noted above that continuing and expanding research should be implemented.

It was in response to that recommendation that the Preservation and Utilization Council of “Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region” (Fukuoka Prefecture, Munakata City, Fukutsu City, Munakata Taisha) engaged in a five-year Special Research Project from FY2018 to FY2022. The Council was operated under the guidance of an Advisory Committee, and funded by a Cultural Arts Promotion Grant (Project to Promote Comprehensive Utilization of Local Culture) from the Agency for Cultural Affairs.

Due to the broad scope of the recommendation, a decision was made to proceed with the following issues, which represent a synthesis of the questions posed by ICOMOS at the time of inscription.

1. Maritime navigation: It is thought that the rituals of ancient Okinoshima were conducted to pray for safety of maritime navigation, so what was the reality of such ancient maritime voyages?

2. Exchange: Rituals were conducted against a backdrop of interaction and exchange with ancient East Asia from the fourth to the ninth centuries, so how did these interactions with different cultures influence the religious beliefs and rituals of Okinoshima?

3. Rituals: The location of ancient rituals and votive offerings changed over time, from the top of a giant rock to its base, and then to an open space away from the giant rock. Rituals were also performed not only on Okinoshima, but also on Oshima and the Kyushu mainland, where rituals were conducted in shrine pavilions that continue to this day. So, why did changes to the series of rituals occur and what do these changes tell us? What do the offerings made at each stage symbolize? How and when did belief in the three female deities of Munakata first emerge? Are there any other similar examples to be found in ancient East Asia of sacred islands and rituals relating to maritime navigation?

4. Continuity of faith: Can a line be drawn more clearly demonstrating the continuity between the ancient rituals on Okinoshima and the belief in the three female deities of Munakata?

The project was co-chaired by SATO Makoto (Chair of the Advisory Committee, Professor Emeritus, University of Tokyo), and MIZOGUCHI Koji (Member of the Advisory Committee, Professor, Kyushu University). Commissioned researchers were AKIMICHI Tomoya (Director General, Yamanashi Prefectural Fujisan World Heritage Center), WOO Jae-Pyoung (Professor, Chungnam National University, Republic of Korea), TAKATA Kanta (Associate Professor, National Museum

of Japanese History), TANAKA Fumio (Professor, Waseda University), and SASO Mamoru (Professor, Kokugakuin University). A further research collaborator was WANG Haiyan (Professor, Zhejiang University).

Furthermore, three international review meetings and field surveys of related heritage sites were implemented, in order to advance a cross-sectional understanding of the issues. The international review meetings were held on three occasions on the following themes.

- “Okinoshima and the Munakata Region seen from Navigation in Ancient East Asia” (1<sup>st</sup> International Review Meeting, February 26-27, 2019, Innovation Plaza, Kyushu University)
- “Interchanges of Beliefs and Rituals in Ancient East Asia” (2<sup>nd</sup> International Review Meeting, January 12-13, 2020, SME Promotion Center)
- “Ancient Maritime Faith in Ancient East Asia and Okinoshima, Munakata” (3<sup>rd</sup> International Review Meeting, March 21-22, 2023, Daimaru Elgala Hall)

Each of these three meetings addressed the ancient rituals that were conducted on Okinoshima and associated sites from the fourth to the ninth centuries, seeking to coalesce current knowledge in each field of expertise and region of East Asia, and consider the background to the rituals and the specific characteristics of Okinoshima in the Munakata region. For each theme researchers from Japan and overseas were invited to engage in discussions. In total 23 researchers were involved in this Special Research Project.

Onsite field visits were undertaken to China and Korea, to sites that have a strong relation with the theme of the Special Research Project, and also to cultural sites and museums, etc., in Japan relating to maritime navigation, inter-cultural exchange and religious beliefs.

The field visit to China (Dec. 23-30, 2018) involved onsite studies in Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, covering a wide area from the Zhoushan archipelago to Macau.

The field visit to Korea (Aug. 19-26, 2019), with the kind cooperation of LEE Kang-Seung (Professor Emeritus, Chungnam National University), involved onsite visits

to cultural sites and museums relating to maritime navigation, inter-cultural exchange and religious beliefs from Heuksando Island to the west and south coasts of mainland Korea.

In Japan, field visits were conducted to the Jike site and other sites on the Noto Peninsula (Aug. 10-12, 2022), and to Tsushima (Nov. 4-5, 2022).

Based on these meetings, commissioned researchers compiled academic papers, and following discussions held at a general review meeting (ACROS Fukuoka, December 17-18, 2022), five papers were included in the Special Research Project Report (Note 1).

In “Okinoshima in prehistoric and ancient East Asian seas: Seafaring, Vessels and Maritime Networks,” AKIMICHI Tomoya covered the topic of ancient maritime navigation, and proposed a new Maritime World Heritage model. The study of voyages and exchanges with the Korean Peninsula from the respective standpoints of Korean and Japanese researchers was set out by WOO Jae-Pyoung in, “Exchanges between ‘Wa’ (Japan) and ‘Baekje’ (Korea) as seen from the ritual sites of Okinoshima and Jungmak-dong.” TAKATA Kanta’s paper was titled, “Sea routes in Japan-Korea negotiations during the Kofun period: Focusing on analysis of ancient Japanese materials from the south and west coast regions of the Korean Peninsula.” Furthermore, in “The Hata clan and the deities of Munakata: Seeking clues from the Hata-shi Honkei-cho,” from historical documents TAKATA Fumio studies the specific impact of exchanges with East Asia on the beliefs and rituals associated with Okinoshima and the changes in those rituals. In “The significance of the ancient rituals on Okinoshima in the Munakata region and their transformation through to the medieval period: From the perspective of human cognitive functions and environmental change,” from the standpoint of the interconnection between the geographical environment and the view of the divine and rituals, SASO Mamoru examines the continuity of belief between the ancient rituals of Okinoshima and belief in the three female deities of Munakata and changes in the

rituals, and by extension the transformation of rituals from ancient times to the medieval period.

At the meeting to report the outcomes of the Special Research Project, held on March 12, 2023, at Kyushu National Museum, in addition to reports on the five papers by commissioned researchers, other participants included the two co-chairs of the project, as well as OKADA Yasuyoshi (President, ICOMOS Japan) and SUZUKI Chihei (Senior Cultural Properties Specialist (World Heritage), Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan), all of whom took part in a panel discussion, titled “New horizons in research on Okinoshima.” The report meeting confirmed that the studies conducted over a five-year period under the auspices of the Special Research Project have served to broaden and deepen knowledge on all aspects relating to rituals, religious beliefs, maritime navigation and exchanges. In particular, Mr. Suzuki highly evaluated the fact that since the inscription of the property as a World Heritage Site, diligent efforts have been made to implement UNESCO’s recommendations, involving interdisciplinary research encompassing cognitive religious studies and other areas of expertise, and that the new body of knowledge about Munakata and Okinoshima is being disseminated widely, including plans for an English translation summarizing the outcomes. All panelists emphasized the necessity for further study in the future. Prof. Mizoguchi noted that the rituals that took place during the various stages of Okinoshima represent a condensed history of Japan’s struggle to establish itself as a nation and its maturation as an emerging power at the time, and that the project has real academic value that can provide insights into globalization and world systems

in ancient times. Prof. Sato highlighted the importance of continuing basic research and studies in local areas, including monitoring and reassessment of the items that have been excavated on Okinoshima. He also noted that the continuation and development of future research will reveal more about how reverence for the environment and nature has been cherished over the course of history, which will provide useful and timely suggestions about how we go about our own lives today in response to globalization. Mr. Suzuki stated that further research is needed to determine the continuity of faith not only from ancient times to the medieval period, but also how faith in the medieval period connects to our beliefs today, and how those ancient beliefs remain alive in us today. In addition to continuing to engage in research, Prof. Okada observed that the true essence of a World Heritage Site lies in how the objects there speak of their value, and he encouraged locally-led cooperative efforts in the preservation and management of the property to ensure that the condition of the site remains as it was at the time of inscription. Although this project came to a conclusion in FY2022, considerations are currently underway to see if it can be continued in a new format from FY2024 onwards.

(Note 1) Preservation and Utilization Council of “Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region,” *Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region: Special Research Project Report*, 2023. Available to download at the following site. <https://www.munakata-archives.asia/>