



Worship hall of Okitsu-miya Yohaisho

By the seventeenth century, shrine buildings were constructed among the groups of huge rocks where ancient rituals were performed. By the eighteenth century, Okitsu-miya Yohaisho was built on Oshima to worship the sacred island of Okinoshima from afar.



Shrine buildings of Okitsu-miya

At the top of Mt. Mitakesan (224 m above sea level), which commands a view of Okinoshima, open-air rituals similar to those performed on Okinoshima were held. At the Mitakesan ritual site, relics of offerings have been unearthed that are similar to those excavated from the sites of open air rituals on Okinoshima. In more recent times a shrine building was constructed at the foot of Mt. Mitakesan. The shrine and ritual site atop the mountain are connected by a mountain path, and together they comprise the precinct of Nakatsu-miya.



Shrine buildings of Nakatsu-miya

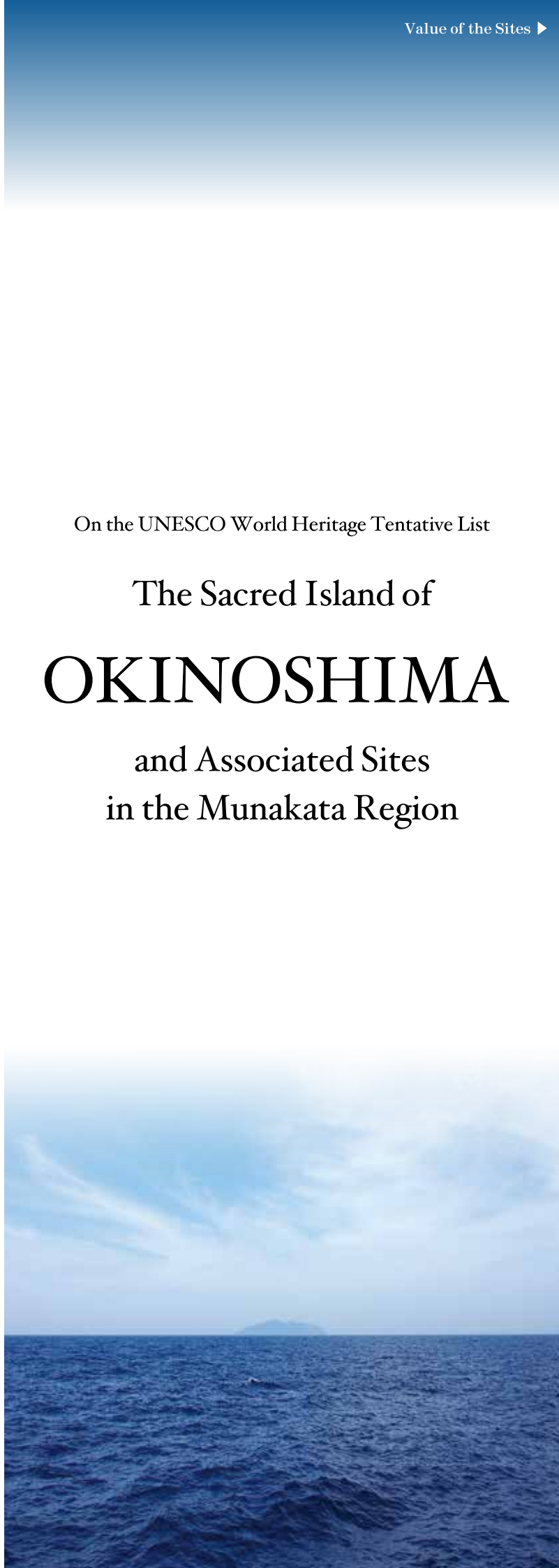
On the main island of Kyushu, evidence for open-air rituals similar to those performed on Okinoshima was discovered on the slopes of Mt. Munakata, which is situated beside what was once a sea inlet. At the Shimotakamiya ritual site, archaeologists have unearthed relics of offerings similar to those found on Okinoshima and at the Mitakesan ritual site. By the twelfth century a shrine had been constructed at the foot of the mountain; the present shrine buildings, which were reconstructed at the end of the sixteenth century, have been designated an Important Cultural Property. Part of the ritual site has been converted into the Takamiya Saijo ("ceremonial site"), where Shinto services are still observed today.



Shrine buildings of Hetsu-miya

On the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List

The Sacred Island of OKINOSHIMA and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region





Open-air rituals

(Eighth to ninth centuries)

During the eighth century, rituals were performed in a flat, open area some distance from the huge rocks where they had previously taken place. At Site 1, numerous offerings were unearthed within an area of 194 sq m, indicating that rituals were repeatedly performed in the same area.



Site 1

Small Nara-style three-colored jar

This Nara-style three-colored jar was produced in Japan using the Tang three-colored ceramic method. A similar Nara-style jar was unearthed at the Mitakesan ritual site on Oshima, which suggests an affinity between the ritual style there and that of the open-air Okinoshima rituals.



"Fujushimpo" coin

The Fujushimpo is one of the ancient copper coins (including the Wadokaichin) minted by the ritsuryo state, which was ruled by established laws and adopted the Chinese monetary system. The Fujushimpo coin was first minted in 818 CE.

Steatite figures

In open-air rituals, a variety of figures representing people, horses, boats, and other objects were used as offerings. These figures were made of steatite, which was available in the region.



Person



Horse



Boat

Okitsu-miya

Okinoshima Ritual sites



Nakatsu-miya

Mitakesan Ritual Sites



Steatite figures unearthed from the Mitakesan ritual site



Fragments of Nara-style three-colored jars unearthed from the Mitakesan ritual site

Hetsu-miya

Shimotakamiya Ritual Sites



Takamiya Saijo



Steatite figures representing boats



710	712	720	794	838	894	907
Japan's capital is relocated to Heijo-kyo (Nara).	The Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters) is compiled.	The Nihonshoki (Chronicles of Japan) is compiled.	Japan's capital is relocated to Heian-kyo (Kyoto).	Last Japanese envoy is dispatched to Tang Dynasty.	Sugawara-no-Michizane suggests suspending dispatch of envoys to Tang Dynasty.	Fall of the Tang Dynasty.



Rock-shadow rituals

(Late fifth to seventh centuries)

From the late fifth to seventh centuries, rituals were performed in the shadows of overhanging rocks. An excavation team discovered offerings preserved in their original forms beneath a thick layer of fallen leaves.



Site 7

Harness

The harnesses from Silla that were unearthed on the island include a metal fitting with spangles that attached to the crupper straps, and a leaf-shaped metal pendant that hung from the straps.



Flat pendant

Crupper strap divider with spangles

Gold ring

A ring of this same type was excavated from a royal tomb of Silla in Gyeongju, South Korea, which indicates that in ancient times people on Okinoshima engaged in trade with Silla.



Shards of a cut-glass bowl

These shards are part of a cut-glass bowl with wheel-cut facets. Similar objects have been unearthed in Gilan Province, Iran and in China, suggesting that this cut-glass bowl was likely brought to Japan via the Silk Road.



Partial rock-shadow rituals

(Late seventh to early eighth centuries)

These rituals were performed mostly out in the open but still partly in the shadows of rocks.

Site 5 bears traces of rituals in which several pieces of earthenware were arranged in regular patterns.



Site 5



Photograph by Fujimoto Kenpachi

Tang-style three-colored bottle-shaped vase with long neck

Tang-style three-colored ceramic objects, to which three different types of glaze were applied, were produced only in China. Okinoshima is the first place outside of China where this style of Tang pottery has been discovered.

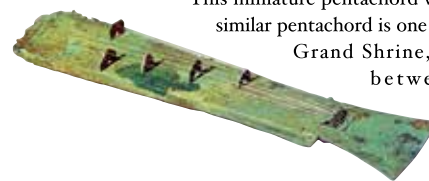
Gilt-bronze dragon head

This dragon head was attached to the end of a pole, and a banner or canopy was hung from its mouth. A similar dragon head appears in a painted mural in the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang. In Japan, Okinoshima is the only site where this type of artifact has been unearthed.



Gilt-bronze miniature pentachord

This miniature pentachord was produced for ritual use. A similar pentachord is one of the treasures housed at Ise Grand Shrine, indicating a relationship between the rituals held on Okinoshima and those performed on the main islands of Japan.



478

King Bu of Wa (Emperor Yuryaku) pays tribute to the Liu Song Dynasty

538

Buddhism is introduced to Japan from Baekje.

589

The Sui unifies China.

607

A Japanese envoy led by Ono-no-Imoko is sent to the Sui Dynasty.

618

The Sui Dynasty falls and the Tang Dynasty is established.

630

The first Japanese envoy is dispatched to the Tang Dynasty.

645

Taika Reform (Isshi Incident).

660

Fall of Baekje.

663

Japan is defeated by Tang and Silla in the Battle of Hakuson-ko (Baekgan.)

668

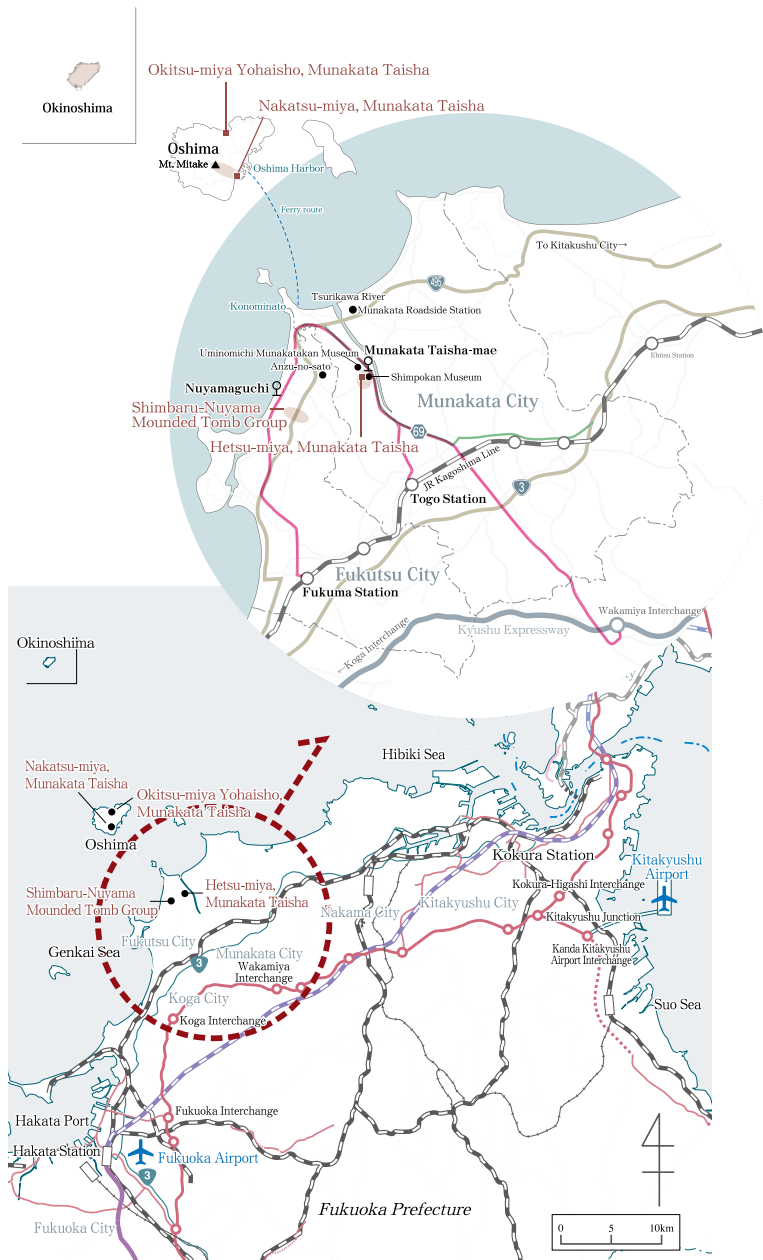
Fall of Goguryeo.

676

Silla unifies the Korean Peninsula.

701

The Taiho Code is enacted.



Directions

- **Hetsu-miya, Munakata Taisha**
JR Togo Station → Nishitetsu bus → Munakata Taisha-mae (two-minute walk)
- **Nakatsu-miya, Munakata Taisha**
JR Togo Station / Fukuma Station → Nishitetsu bus → Konominato Hatoba stop
Konominato Harbor → Ferry → Oshima Harbor (Five-minute walk to Nakatsu-miya, Munakata Taisha)
- **Okitsu-miya Yohaisho, Munakata Taisha**
JR Togo Station / Fukuma Station → Nishitetsu bus → Konominato Hatoba stop
Konominato Harbor → Ferry → Oshima Harbor (Twenty-minute walk to Okitsu-miya Yohaisho)
- **Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group**
JR Fukuma Station → Nishitetsu bus → Nuyamaguchi (twenty-minute walk to the Tomb Group)

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Munakata Okinoshima Search

Rock-top rituals

(Late fourth to fifth centuries)



Rituals on Okinoshima were first performed atop huge rocks on the island. Offerings such as mirrors, accessories, weapons and tools have been unearthed from the ritual sites in their original forms. At Site 21 an entire altar was discovered on top of one of these rocks.



Site 21

Bronze mirror

In ancient times, bronze mirrors were used as special instruments for rituals. More than 70 mirrors offered by the Yamato court have been unearthed on Okinoshima. At no other ritual site in Japan has such a large number of mirrors been excavated.



Magatama

(Comma-shaped beads)

A wide variety of beads, were used as offerings on Okinoshima. They were made from various materials, including jadeite, glass, crystal, agate, amber and steatite.

Iron sword

All three sacred treasures of the imperial regalia—mirrors, swords, and beads—were offered to deities on Okinoshima. In ancient times, swords were regarded as important offerings to deities; and obtaining iron was one of the main reasons the Yamato court first initiated exchanges with the Korean peninsula.





Former sea inlet (in ancient times)

The faith tradition of a maritime people

The Tsurikawa River, which flows near Hetsu-miya, was once a sea inlet. In the *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), the Chinese characters 海浜 (lit. “sea beach”) are used to refer to Hetsu-miya. The Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group is also located on the plateau facing this former sea inlet, and commands a view of the sea route linking Oshima, Okinoshima, and the Korean peninsula. The fact that the Munakata clan selected this location for their tombs likely reflects their wish to stay close to the sacred island even after death.

Since visiting Okinoshima is almost entirely prohibited, local people developed a tradition of worshipping the sacred island from afar. From Okitsu-miya Yohaisho, which is situated on a coastal plateau in the northern part of Oshima, on a clear day visitors can see Okinoshima.

Over time, Okinoshima faith spread to Oshima, and to the main island of Kyushu. All these sites, together with the sea that links them together, have long been revered as a sacred precinct, and the entire spiritual landscape has been preserved to this day thanks to the religious devotion of local people.

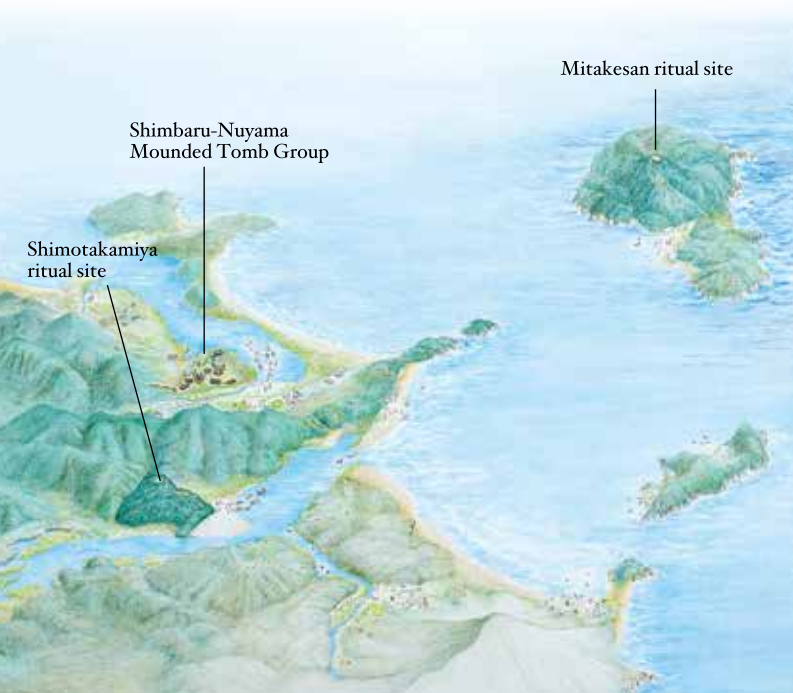


Illustration by Kitano Yoko



Sea procession at the Miare Festival
(October 1)



Land procession at the
Miare Festival (October 1)



The Kannabi Festival
(October 3)

Festivals and Taboos: The Continuity of Okinoshima Faith

The Grand Autumn Festival of Munakata Taisha starts with the Miare Festival, observed annually on October 1. The Miare Festival features the performance of rituals revived from medieval times, in which the deities of Okitsu-miya and Nakatsu-miya are invited to Hetsu-miya. The highlight of the festival is a dynamic sea procession of hundreds of fishing boats from seven bays in the Munakata region. They accompany the sacred boats carrying the goddesses from Oshima to the main island. On the final day of the Grand Autumn Festival, the Kannabi Festival is observed to inform the three deities that the series of festivals have been completed.

Faith in the Three Goddesses of Munakata has spread throughout Japan. As home of the three deities, Munakata Taisha continues to attract many worshippers. Fishermen in the Munakata region are particularly devoted believers; offering fish, they pray for the safety of their fishing expeditions and for good catches. They have also helped to preserve the natural environment of Okinoshima.

Since ancient times, the local people of Munakata have observed festivals and traditional taboos. Although ritual styles have changed over time, their religious devotion has been passed down through the generations.

Taboos on Okinoshima

Okinoshima and its ancient ritual sites have been preserved intact because of the taboos that people continue to observe to this day.



Sacred ablutions

Okinoshima is almost entirely closed to the public. Once a year, 200 men are permitted to land on the island to participate in services held there. Shinto priests serve at the shrine on the island one at a time, in ten-day shifts, as well as on festival days. All visitors to the island, including these priests, must perform special ablutions before they can land there, by purifying themselves through ritually bathing naked in the sea.

Verbal taboos

It is forbidden to speak a word about anything that one has seen or heard on Okinoshima.

Ban on taking objects

Visitors are forbidden to take anything from Okinoshima, not even a twig, a blade of grass or a pebble.

History of the Sites

On Okinoshima, people began performing rituals in the late fourth century. During the fifth and sixth centuries, when rock-shadow rituals were being performed, the Munakata clan that conducted the rituals built a group of tombs on a plateau with a commanding view of the sea stretching to Okinoshima. A large keyhole-shaped tomb (Tomb 22) was constructed in the late fifth century. A medium-size keyhole-shaped tomb (Tomb 12) was built from the early to mid-sixth century. Smaller, round burial mounds (Tombs 34–43) were built during the late sixth century along the margin of the plateau. An iron ax similar to the one unearthed from a ritual site on Okinoshima was excavated from Tomb 7.

In the late seventh century, similar rituals were performed on Oshima and the main island of Kyushu. Together with the Okinoshima sites, both are mentioned in the Kojiki and Nihonshoki. In later years, shrine buildings were constructed in the vicinity of the ritual sites. In addition to the buildings, the three shrines encompass the ritual sites and a vast maritime precinct that links them together. Today the three shrines of Munakata Taisha enshrine the three deities: Tagorihime-no-Kami at Okitsu-miya, Tagitsu-hime-no-Kami at Nakatsu-miya, and Ichikishimahime-no-Kami at Hetsu-miya. The faith in the three goddesses of Munakata has spread throughout Japan. By the eighteenth century, Okitsu-miya Yohaisho had been built on the northern part of Oshima for the purpose of worshipping Okinoshima from afar.

Okinoshima together with its related sites in the Munakata region consists of these component parts, which together attest to the cultural tradition of worshipping a sacred island as it has evolved and been passed down from ancient times to the present.

Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group



Aerial photo of Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group



Tombs 34–43



Tomb 22



Tomb 7



Tomb 12



Iron adze unearthed from Tomb 7

Okinoshima (Okitsu-miya, Munakata Taisha)



Okitsu-miya Yohaisho, Munakata Taisha



Nakatsu-miya, Munakata Taisha



Hetsu-miya, Munakata Taisha



Proposed Outstanding Universal Value

Okinoshima (Okitsu-miya, Munakata Taisha) served as an important landmark for ancient people voyaging from Japan to the Korean peninsula and Asian continent. Because of its awe-inspiring appearance, Okinoshima was worshipped as a sacred island.

In the late fourth century, as exchanges between Japan and the Chinese and Korean dynasties became active, rituals were conducted on Okinoshima to pray for safety in ocean navigation and for successful overseas missions. The large-scale rituals that were performed on Okinoshima are known as “state rituals,” sponsored by the ancient Japanese state (the Yamato court or *ritsuryo* state), to distinguish them from smaller local rituals. These “state rituals” would have been impossible, however, without the participation of local people, particularly the Munakata clan. Only through its ties with the Munakata clan could the ancient Japanese state conduct these rituals and engage in exchanges with its Chinese and Korean counterparts.

The ancient ritual sites on Okinoshima are preserved today almost intact due to the island’s remote location and local taboos limiting access to it. Archaeological excavations on Okinoshima have yielded some 80,000 precious ritual artifacts, all of which have been collectively designated as a National Treasure of Japan. Ritual styles on the island changed over a period of some 500 years, from the late fourth to the end of the ninth centuries, in four stages: they were first performed atop huge rocks on the island; then in the shadows of these rocks; then partly out in the open; and finally entirely out in the open. The Okinoshima ritual sites are the only archaeological sites in Japan that bear witness to the process by which ancient nature worship rituals were formalized and developed into a form that still survives today.

The Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group comprises tombs of the Munakata clan, whose members performed rituals on Okinoshima. From the fifth to the sixth centuries, they built mounded tombs on a plateau overlooking a sea inlet. The view from atop this plateau extends seaward to Oshima and beyond to Okinoshima and the Korean peninsula. The Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group bears witness to the local population that worshipped Okinoshima.

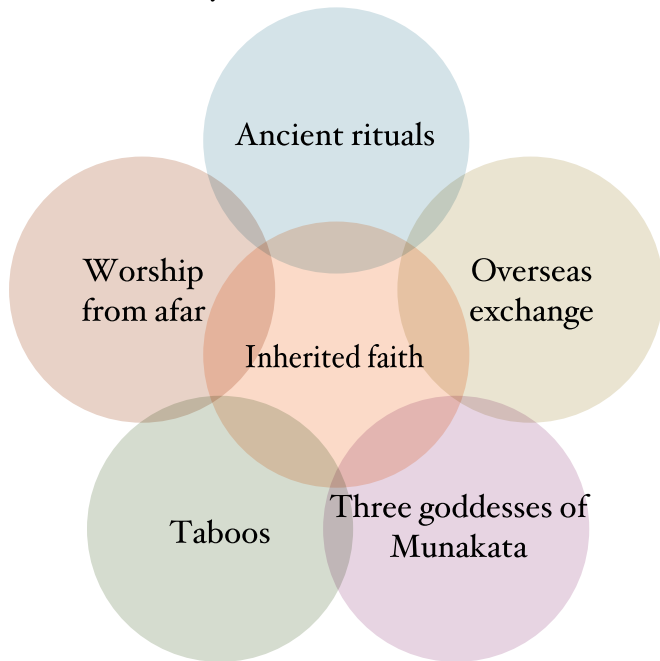
During the period when open-air rituals were being performed on Okinoshima, similar rituals were also conducted at the highest point on Oshima, and on a plateau facing a sea inlet on the main island of Kyushu. All three sites are mentioned in Japan’s oldest historical records, the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) and the *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), which were compiled in the early eighth century. The three sites are mentioned by the names of Okitsu-miya (lit. “offshore shrine”), Nakatsu-miya (lit. “midway shrine”), and Hetsu-miya (lit. “seaside shrine”), where the Three Goddesses of Munakata respectively resided. Munakata Taisha consists of the three shrines of which together form a single vast maritime precinct where the goddesses continue to be enshrined and worshipped today.

Okitsu-miya Yohaisho was built on the northern part of Oshima for the purpose of worshipping Okinoshima from afar, since taboos strictly prohibited lay people’s access to it. The existence of this shrine shows the continuity of people’s faith in the sacred island.

Okinoshima and related sites in the Munakata region are an exceptional example of the cultural tradition of worshipping a sacred island, a tradition that has evolved and has been passed down from ancient times to the present day.



Keywords for the Sites



The Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region

Okinoshima and its related sites are an exceptional example of the cultural tradition of worshipping a sacred island, which has evolved and been passed down from ancient times to the present.

From the fourth to the ninth centuries, rituals were performed on Okinoshima to pray for safe voyages and successful trade missions. A large quantity of priceless artifacts has been unearthed at these ritual sites, and many of these objects attest to exchanges that occurred between people on either side of the Genkai Sea.

During the late seventh century similar rituals were first performed on Oshima and the main island of Kyushu. Over time, the worship of the sacred island developed into faith in the “Three Goddesses of Munakata.”

People in the Munakata region have nurtured a deep faith in the sacred island of Okinoshima, together with a set of strict taboos that have proven to be effective in protecting the environment on the island. Their deep faith in the island has been passed down for many generations to the present day.

