

The Sacred Island of Okinoshima

From the latter half of the fourth century up until the present day, the sacred island of Okinoshima has attracted the devotion of the seafaring people of the region, and has been protected as an object of worship.

KUMIKO SATO

OKINOSHIMA is a remote island in the Genkai Sea, roughly 60 km off the coast of Munakata City, in Fukuoka Prefecture. The people of the Munakata region call Okinoshima “*kami yadoru shima*,” meaning “sacred island” (or literally, “island where god dwells”). For a period of roughly 500 years, from around the latter half of the fourth century, large-scale religious rituals were conducted on the island. It has been carefully protected to this day as an object of worship; a sacred island that people are not readily allowed to approach. It is because of this that untouched primeval forests and the remnants of ancient ritual sites remain on the island to this day.

According to Japanese mythological documents compiled at the beginning of the eighth century, three goddesses—born as daughters to Amaterasu-omikami (the sun goddess)—are enshrined, respectively, at the ritual sites of Okitsu-miya on Okinoshima, Nakatsu-miya on the island of Oshima, and Hetsu-miya in mainland Munakata City, connected to Okinoshima and Oshima by a straight line across the ocean. Together these sites formed a wide-ranging place of oceanic worship which

eventually evolved into the Munakata Taisha (Grand Shrine) of today.

The worship of Okinoshima developed into the worship of the Three Goddesses of Munakata under the family, and that governed over their worship and the navigation of the Genkai Sea during those ancient times, was the powerful Munakata clan. The tombs of the Munakata clan can be seen today in the Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group, in the neighboring city of Fukutsu. In July 2017, the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region (including these ancient tombs) were added to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

“We know that the people of the ancient kingdom of Yamato engaged in interactions with other countries in East Asia via sea routes across the Genkai Sea. When doing so they used Okinoshima as a kind of seafarer’s guidepost. The island also has fresh water, so they could use it as a place of refuge, to keep them alive when seas were rough. For reasons such as this, Okinoshima was an important island for ancient mariners, which was fraught with danger, and so it was probably because of this that it eventually came to be deified,” says Hirokazu Ohtaka, Senior Technical Staff in the Fukuoka Prefectural Government’s World Heritage Registration Promotion Office.

The Munakata clan also prospered by engaging in trade with overseas countries during the Middle Ages, and despite the discontinuation of the clan at the end of the sixteenth century, people in the region still continued to worship the Three Goddesses of Munakata.

All photos: Courtesy of the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region



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- 1 The Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region
- 2 Okitsu-miya Yohaisho, Munakata Taisha: Tangible evidence for the living tradition of worshipping Okinoshima from afar
- 3 Nakatsu-miya, Munakata Taisha: A place of worship on the island of Oshima
- 4 Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group: Evidence related to the people of Munakata who performed religious rituals on Okinoshima in their role as key supervisors of overseas exchanges.
- 5 A gold ring (Shimpokan Museum, Munakata Taisha collection)
- 6 Gilt-bronze dragon heads (Shimpokan Museum, Munakata Taisha collection)

Although fishermen sometimes visit the port of Okinoshima, they do not enter the deeper parts of the island itself, and even priests entering the island to conduct religious rituals must first disrobe and purify their bodies in the ocean, in a ritual of purification known as *misogi*. Okinoshima has been protected by a set of strictly observed, unwritten taboos that forbid actions such as removing anything—even a single stone or blade of grass—from the island, or divulging anything seen or heard there.

While the sacred island of Okinoshima had been secretly protected by the people of the region, from around the 1940s momentum heightened for the restoration of Okinoshima, and surveys were started to clarify the island's history. Three academic surveys were conducted from 1954 onwards, leading to the discovery of twenty-two ritual sites and an enormous amount of votive offerings also being unearthed; a wealth of historical evidence emerging from the world of myth and legend. In addition to items such as bronze mirrors, comma-shaped beads, gilt-bronze harnesses and pure gold rings, there were also shards of glass presumably brought to Japan by way of the distant Silk Road. Approximately 80,000 precious and lavish items discovered on the island have now been designated as Japanese national treasures.

At the same time as this, numerous rituals that were carried out at Munakata Taisha during the middle ages were also revived. The Grand Autumn Festival, in particular, is an important festival in which the Three Goddesses of Munakata come together at Hetsu-miya. At the Miare Festival held on October 1

of each year, hundreds of fishing boats from seven bays in Munakata fly *tairyō-bata* (flags signifying a large catch of fish) and come out to escort two *gozabune* ships carrying *mikoshi* portable shrines from Okitsu-miya and Nakatsu-miya to the mainland. It is a magnificent and unparalleled maritime ritual.

Over the course of three days of the Grand Autumn Festival, until its closing with the Kannabi Festival (which takes place at Takamiya Saijo, which was Hetsu-miya's ancient place of ritual), various displays of ritual performances such as *yabusame* (horseback archery) and *kagura-mai* (a type of dance) are given, and the grounds of Munakata Taisha bustle with large numbers of visitors.

“Although the shape and form of worship has changed with the times, the island of Okinoshima itself is still worshipped today as a deity. This originates from the fact that the starting point for Japanese religious beliefs was in nature worship,” says Ohtaka.

Worship of the Three Goddesses of Munakata, praying for safe voyages across the seas, spread widely across the whole of Japan. The Three Goddesses of Munakata are also the enshrined deities at other significant Shinto shrines including Itsukushima Shrine, in Hatsukaichi City in Hiroshima Prefecture (which was an important strategic location for shipping and maritime trade), and Enoshima Shrine, in Fujisawa City in Kanagawa Prefecture. Even today, people continue to pray for the well-being of seafaring people, and to express their feelings of awe and reverence towards nature. 