

*A Cultural Heritage  
for Future Generations*

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

Okinoshima  
*Okitsu-miya of Munakata Taisha*

Okitsu-miya Yohaisho

Nakatsu-miya  
of Munakata Taisha

Shimbaru-Nuyama  
Mounded Tomb Group

Hetsu-miya  
of Munakata Taisha

When overseas exchange flourished in ancient East-Asia, the local population in this maritime region nurtured a cultural tradition of worshipping the sacred island of Okinoshima.

Ritual archaeological sites on the island, together with an enormous quantity of votive offerings, have survived almost intact for over a millennium. A site that reveals five hundred years of ancient rituals in transition chronicles the formation of indigenous Japanese beliefs.

As religious faith in the three goddesses emerged, an ancient faith was passed down through traditional taboos that protect the island.

The Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region are an unparalleled piece of surviving evidence concerning the formation and transmission of this tradition.

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

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*Evidence for Ritual Development  
and Overseas Exchange*

# Ancient Rituals on Okinoshima

The sacred island of Okinoshima, situated between the Japanese archipelago and the Korean peninsula, has long attracted the devotion of the local population in the Munakata region, who possessed advanced nautical skills. Large-scale rituals utilizing an enormous quantity of precious votive offerings were conducted on the island to pray for safe ocean voyages from the 4th to the 9th centuries, a period of more than 500 years during which overseas exchange occurred frequently in East Asia.

Ritual sites bearing witness to the successive phases of ancient rituals that chronicle the formation of indigenous beliefs in Japan have survived to the present almost intact, because the island of Okinoshima, as an object of worship, has been protected by established taboos strictly limiting access to the island.

Okinoshima is a solitary island measuring 4 kilometers in circumference and 243 meters at its highest point. Twenty-two ritual sites are located on the island, mainly near huge boulders at altitudes of 80 to 90 meters.

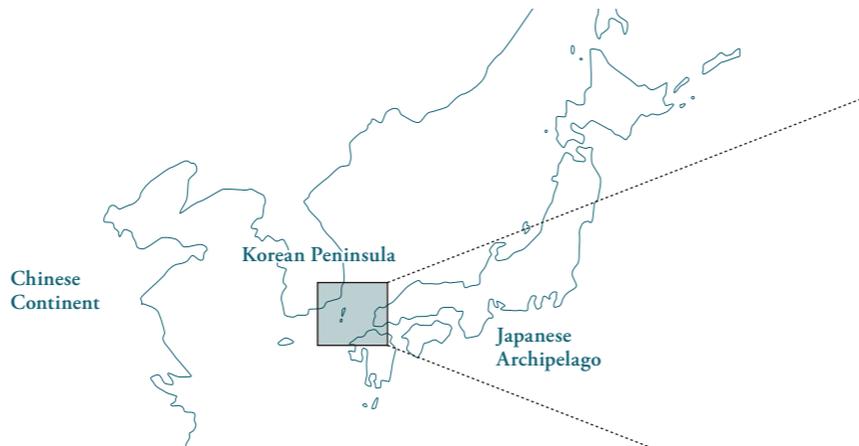


# Ancient Overseas Exchange in East Asia

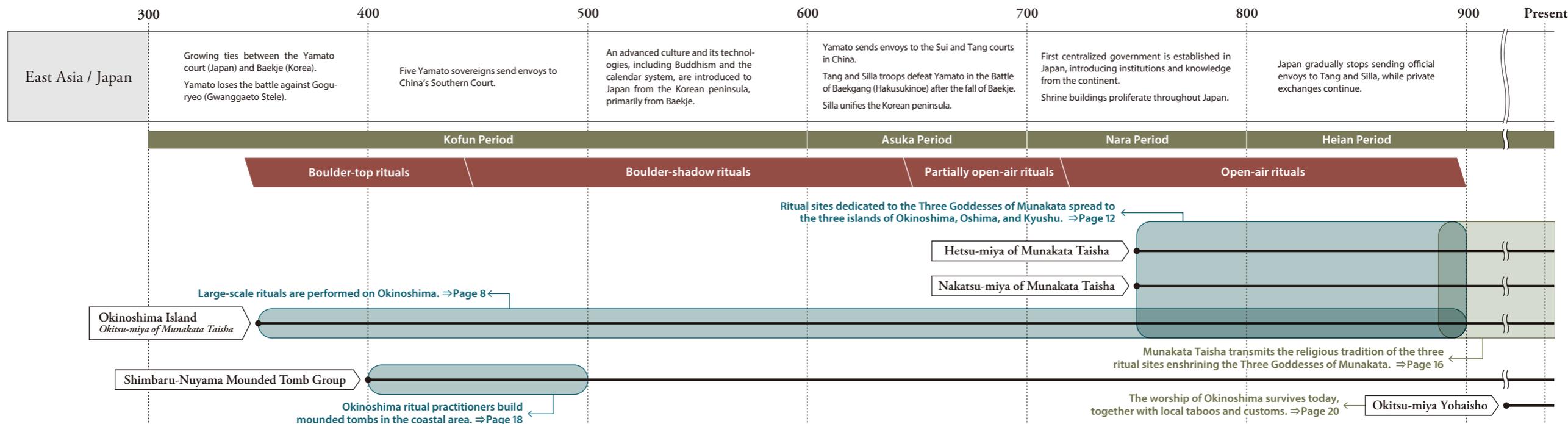
## Prayers for Safe Voyages

Against a backdrop of increasing interaction in the late 4th century between the Yamato court in the Japanese archipelago and Baekje on the Korean peninsula, large-scale rituals to pray for safe ocean voyages and fruitful overseas exchanges were performed near huge boulders on Okinoshima, a solitary island located in the strait between the two countries. These rituals were practiced continuously until the end of the 9th century, during a period when overseas exchange was flourishing in East Asia.

In this maritime region, the people of Munakata with their advanced nautical skills played an important role in such exchanges. Ritual sites had soon spread from Okinoshima to two other locations where the Three Goddesses of Munakata were also worshipped. New cultural traditions and refined objects brought from the continent contributed to ancient Japan's advancement in the political, social and religious realms; and the state paid special attention to the three goddesses as the guardian deities of the ocean exchange routes.



Okinoshima has been worshipped as a sacred island from that time onward, and its ritual sites have survived almost intact to the present day. Archaeological investigations have revealed the changes in rituals connected to nature worship over a period of some 500 years. Rituals on the island were first conducted atop gigantic boulders, then in the shadows of these boulders, and finally in flat open-air parts of the island; in the process, faith in the Three Goddesses of Munakata began to take shape. As ritual styles evolved over time, ritual offerings including precious objects from abroad also changed. Approximately 80,000 votive offerings have been collectively designated as national treasures of Japan, further illuminating how these rituals underwent changes, and the nature of overseas exchange at that time.





Site 17. Twenty-one mirrors as votive offerings were discovered among the boulders, including the bronze TLV mirror pictured at right.



## Rituals performed atop boulders



Site 21. Pebbles that had shifted over a long period of time are rearranged to represent what research has shown to have been the original composition of the altar. Gods are said to have descended to the large center rock during the rituals.

Rituals were first performed atop these boulders in the late 4th century, when overseas exchanges were occurring frequently. Offerings were arranged neatly in small spaces between them and covered with stones. These artifacts are similar to many burial objects found in mounded tombs dating to that period, including bronze mirrors, iron swords and other weapons, and comma-shaped beads. The combination of mirrors, swords, and beads (also called “jewels”), which constitute the imperial regalia of Japanese mythology, characterize ritual offerings spanning several centuries.

By the middle of the 5th century an altar had appeared set atop a boulder, with a large stone in the center, surrounded by pebbles arranged in a square configuration. Offerings of flat iron ingots that the Yamato court procured from the Korean peninsula also reflect something about the nature of overseas exchange at that time.

From the second half of the 5th century onward, rituals were performed in the shadows of boulders. Offerings from this period include iron weapons, miniature knives and axes, and highly ornamented gilt-bronze harnesses. These objects were crafted using advanced technologies from the Korean peninsula at that time. In particular, a gold ring that bears a striking resemblance to those found in the royal Silla tombs is an important piece of evidence for the active exchanges that were taking place at this time. Shards of Persian glass have also been discovered on the island, presumably brought to Japan by way of the distant Silk Road. Those who engaged in dangerous ocean voyages laid out these treasures on the ground beside boulders as offerings to the gods.



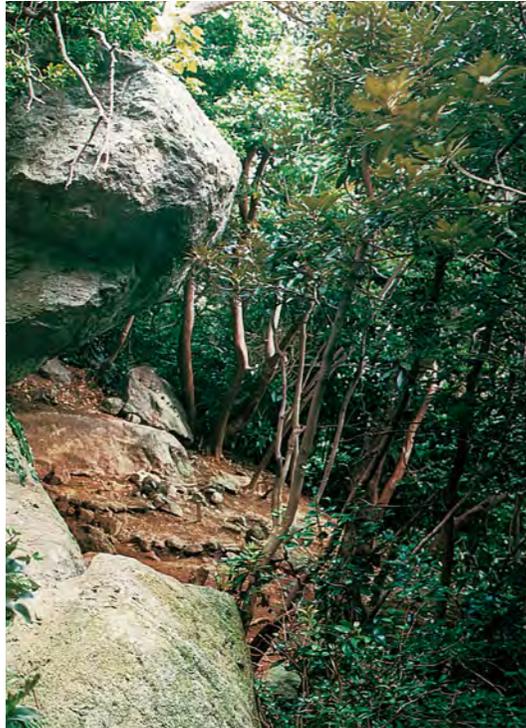
Many fine offerings from Silla, including a gold ring and gilt-bronze harness, were found at Site 7 to the right of the boulder and at Site 8 to its left.

## Rituals performed in shadow



*Intact ritual sites discovered  
over the course of a millennium*

1. Gold ring 2. Gilt-bronze buckles  
3. Gilt-bronze leaf-shaped pendant  
4. Gilt-bronze heart-shaped pendant  
2-4 Harness. All items pictured here were likely brought from Silla.



Site 22. Altar composed of a rock arrangement, with pottery placed beside the boulder, outside of its shadow.

### *Ritual transformations due to upheaval in East Asia*



Site 22. Gilt-bronze miniature spinning and weaving tools inside a rock enclosure, representing a new ritual style.

In the early 7th century, as the period characterized by rituals performed in the shadows of boulders came to an end, offerings shifted from items resembling burial objects found in mounded tombs to gilt-bronze miniature spinning and weaving tools, human figurines, and other objects. In the late 7th century, rituals were performed only partly in the shadows of boulders, but mostly out in the open. Artifacts crafted especially for these rituals include gilt-bronze miniature spinning and weaving tools and pentachords, pottery, and other items.

During this period the Sui unified the long-divided Chinese continent; the Tang then replaced the Sui and grew increasingly powerful. The Yamato court sent envoys to cultivate relations with the Sui and Tang rulers. After the Tang toppled Baekje, which had long been allied with Yamato, however, Yamato sent in troops and suffered a huge defeat by Tang-Silla allied forces in 663. After the loss, Yamato accelerated its efforts to establish a centralized government modeled on the Tang.

Rituals in Okinoshima appear to have changed with the times. The ritual style that emerged in this period became the basis of indigenous Japanese ritual practices that still survive today. These gilt-bronze artifacts resemble the divine treasures still in use today at Ise Shrine. Written records of ancient rituals in Japan appear only from the 8th century onward, so the ritual sites on Okinoshima are an essential source of information about the formative stages of indigenous faith in Japan.

Very rare artifacts brought from China have also been found at ritual sites partly shaded by boulders. Japanese envoys to China likely brought back these artifacts and made offerings of them on Okinoshima.



1. Gilt-bronze dragon head. 2. Fragments of Tang-style three-colored bottle-shaped vase with long neck.  
3. Gilt-bronze miniature pentachord.  
Objects 1 and 2 are presumably from China. Object 3 is the same type as that found among the divine treasures dedicated to Ise Shrine; pentachords are traditionally used in rituals.

## Rituals performed partly in shadow



Site 5. Arrangement of pottery as investigations have confirmed that it was used in rituals.



1.



2.

1. Okinoshima Ritual Site 1. A large quantity of pottery remains scattered across a broad area measuring 194 square meters.
2. Nara-style three-colored small jar made in Japan, modeled on Tang-style coloring techniques.
3. Boat-shaped steatite objects.

## Open-air rituals

### *Nature worship gave rise to personified deities*

In the 8th century rituals began to be performed in flat, open areas, some distance away from the group of boulders where they had been performed until that time. The remains of a stone altar with a large rock at its center were discovered, with an abundance of votive offerings deposited in the surrounding area. Rituals were performed continuously on this site for about 200 years, until the end of the 9th century. Offerings consisted mainly of a wide variety of pottery and steatite objects in the shapes of people, horses, and ships. While these offerings share some common features with those associated with the new ritual style that prevailed at that time in Japan, some ritual objects—such as those made of pottery perforated with holes—are characterized by shapes and materials unique to the Munakata region. Rituals with a local flavor were performed within the new framework of the state.

By the second half of the 7th century, rituals similar to those performed on Okinoshima were carried out at the Mt. Mitake ritual site on the island of Oshima and the Shimotakamiya ritual site on the main island of Kyushu, both in the Munakata



3.

region. The oldest Japanese historical documents, the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, both of which were composed in the early 8th century, mention that the people in Munakata worshipped the Three Goddesses of Munakata at Okitsu-miya, Nakatsu-miya, and Hetsu-miya. Okinoshima corresponds to Okitsu-miya, Mt. Mitake on Oshima to Nakatsu-miya, and Shimotakamiya on Kyushu to Hetsu-miya, respectively, and the evidence shows that the inhabitants of Munakata indeed carried out these rituals dedicated to the three goddesses.

Worship of the personified Three Goddesses of Munakata emerged from the practice of nature worship on Okinoshima, and these two strands have coexisted ever since as the foundation of local religious traditions. This property is unique in the world in the sense that the material evidence found there illuminates the process by which worship practices changed over time.



Mt. Mitake ritual sites on Oshima. Boat-shaped steatite objects unearthed here are similar to ritual offerings found on Okinoshima

### *Three Maritime Ritual Sites Dedicated to the Three Goddesses of Munakata*



The open-air ritual site at Takamiya that was restored in the 20th century. Beneath it lies the ancient Shimotakamiya ritual site.

Inhabitants of Munakata prospered as a large inlet of the sea formed there in ancient times. The three open-air ritual sites forming a nearly straight line emerged as the three shrines of Munakata Taisha. By the 18th century Okitsu-miya Yohaisho had been established on the island of Oshima as a site from which to worship Okinoshima, which the local population was not allowed to visit.

Okitsu-miya Yohaisho

Nakatsu-miya of Munakata Taisha

Tagitsu-hime-no-Kami

Shimbaru-Nuyama  
Mounded Tomb Group

Hetsu-miya of Munakata Taisha

Ichikishimahime-no-Kami

Okinoshima Island  
*Okitsu-miya of Munakata Taisha*

Tagorihime-no-Kami

*A Living Tradition  
of the Munakata Region*

## A Legacy of Faith in the Three Goddesses of Munakata

In the second half of the 7th century, rituals similar to those conducted on Okinoshima began to be performed also at Nakatsu-miya on the island of Oshima and Hetsu-miya on the main island of Kyushu. At that time Munakata Taisha was established as these three sites, linked by a vast stretch of sea, for the worship of the Three Goddesses of Munakata. The cultural tradition of worshipping the island of Okinoshima has been passed down to the present time in the form of devotion to the three goddesses.

The Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group offers evidence connected to the lives of the people in the Munakata region who played a key role in overseas exchanges by performing these rituals. The tomb group was built from the 5th to 6th centuries on a coastal plateau overlooking the sea near Okinoshima. Okitsu-miya Yohaisho on the island of Oshima represents the tradition of worshipping Okinoshima from afar, as taboos strictly prohibit visiting the island.



1.

## The Three Shrines of Munakata Taisha



Drawing of Oshima included in the *Chikuzen-no-kuni zoku fudoki furoku*, dating to the 18th century (owned by the Hiraoka Family). A mountain path connects the shrine buildings of Nakatsu-miya with the summit of Mt. Mitake. Also depicted here are Okitsu-miya Yohaisho, located on the island's northern shore, and Okinoshima.

1. Shrine buildings of Okitsu-miya, located amidst huge boulders where ancient rituals were performed.
2. Shrine buildings of Nakatsu-miya, located at the foot of Mt. Mitake, on a high plateau overlooking the sea.
3. Shrine buildings of Hetsu-miya, which have played a central role in the rituals of Munakata Taisha.



2.



3.

### *Living Places of Worship Linked to Ancient Ritual Sites*

#### Religious sites with shrine buildings

Munakata Taisha is a shrine that consists of three distinct worship sites—Okitsu-miya on Okinoshima, Nakatsu-miya on Oshima, and Hetsu-miya on the main island of Kyushu, all of which are located within a broad area that measures some 60 kilometers in breadth. These are the living places of worship that are linked to ancient ritual sites. The original form of worshipping the Three Goddesses of Munakata has been passed down to the present day in rituals conducted mainly at the shrine buildings.

No shrine buildings originally existed on Okinoshima, but those of Okitsu-miya had been constructed by the middle of the 17th century, amidst the huge boulders where ancient rituals were performed. The entire island of Okinoshima constitutes the sacred precinct of Okitsu-miya; with no permanent inhabitants

until the 17th century, the island itself has long been the object of worship. Today a Munakata Taisha priest stays on the island in full-time ten-day shifts, offering a religious service each day at the shrine.

By the 16th century, the Nakatsu-miya shrine buildings on the island of Oshima had been constructed at the foot of Mt. Mitake, upon the peak of which ancient rituals were performed. A path links the shrine buildings with the mountain's summit, together forming the sacred precinct of Nakatsu-miya.

The Hetsu-miya shrine buildings had been constructed by the 12th century at the latest, at the foot of the hill where the Shimotakamiya ritual site is located. Hetsu-miya is situated on the main island of Kyushu, near the Tsuru River, which was an inlet of the sea in ancient times. Hetsu-miya has become the central venue for Munakata Taisha's rituals, which are deeply connected to the sea, the river, and the Three Goddesses of Munakata.

### A maritime precinct

The people of Munakata, with their advanced nautical skills, performed the ancient rituals on Okinoshima while taking part in overseas exchanges. In performing state-sponsored rituals, they began to worship the Three Goddesses of Munakata at the three shrines of Munakata Taisha.

The Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group, which was constructed with an ocean orientation from the 5th to the 6th centuries, offers tangible evidence for the existence of Munakata's inhabitants at that time, who developed the living cultural tradition of worshipping the sacred island. The Munakata region forms an integrated sea space that links Kyushu, where a large sea inlet once existed, with Okinoshima and Oshima, which is situated between them. The Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group is located beside the farmland that was once a

sea inlet, on a plateau overlooking the sea that stretches out toward Okinoshima. It consists of both large and small burial mounds, including keyhole-shaped, round, and square mounded tombs built close together along the plateau. These tombs bear witness to the lives of Munakata's maritime inhabitants, who played a key role in overseas exchanges and nurtured a tradition of worshipping Okinoshima.

Their descendants have passed down the worship of the Three Goddesses of Munakata to the present day. Fishermen have particularly devout faith in Okinoshima and take pride in their role as guardians of the island. They pray for abundant catches and safe fishing voyages. The three goddesses come together at Hetsu-miya by means of a large fleet of fishing vessels on the occasion of the annual Miare Festival. This festival represents a revival of a medieval ritual, and it is now the most symbolic religious event associated with the Three Goddesses of Munakata.



The Miare Festival procession at sea. Hundreds of fishing boats from seven bays in Munakata escort Tagorihime-no-Kami and Tagitsuhihime-no-Kami from Oshima to the port of Konominato, where Ichikishimahime-no-Kami awaits.

## Bearers of a Religious Tradition

The Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group has been preserved in good condition to the present day, together with its surrounding terrain. Oshima is visible across the sea, which stretches all the way to Okinoshima.

Photo by Yasunori Yoshimura

### *The Seafaring People of Munakata*



Miare Festival procession on land. The three goddesses come together at Hetsu-miya when the traditional Grand Autumn Festival is staged as the main ritual of Munakata Taisha.



Okitsu-miya Yohaisho is located 48 kilometers southeast of Okinoshima. When the sky is clear, the silhouette of Okinoshima is visible on the horizon.

## Distant Worship and Taboos

### Protective Religious Traditions

The ritual sites and natural environment of Okinoshima have been preserved almost intact to the present day because of their geographical location, which defies easy access, and local religious traditions such as strict taboos that protect the sacred island. The ancient faith in Okinoshima survives to this day.

Okitsu-miya Yohaisho, which had been built on the northern shore of Oshima by the 18th century, is the place from which to worship Okinoshima, which people are not normally allowed to visit. It functions as a hall for worshipping the sacred island from afar.

The Munakata Daiguji (high priest) family, which prospered through its engagement with international trade, continued the tradition of worship at Munakata Taisha when ancient rituals

were no longer performed there. Even since the family's lineage was interrupted at the end of the 16th century, priests and local people have supported the tradition to this day. The people of Munakata have long fished the waters near Okinoshima, and guards were stationed on the island from the 17th century onward to protect its ocean boundaries; yet customs such as taboos strictly forbidding ordinary people from delivering or removing any object to or from the sacred island have continued to be respected. Taboos prohibiting women from traveling to the island and prohibiting the eating of four-legged animals on the island still survive today. The Okitsu-miya Grand Festival, held on May 27th each year, is the only opportunity for ordinary people to visit the island, and that number is limited to some 200 people. Even on this occasion, people are required to strictly follow traditional rules.

## Taboos on Okinoshima

### Vow of Silence

*One must never speak a word about what one has seen or heard on Okinoshima. People even refrain from uttering its name, and respectfully refer to it instead in other ways, such as by calling it the "island whose name cannot be spoken."*

### Removal Prohibited

*Removal of any object from Okinoshima is prohibited. According to legend, the breaking of this rule during the Edo period (17th century) brought divine retribution. Thanks to this tradition, the ritual sites and treasures on the island have been preserved almost intact.*

### Purification

*No one can disembark on Okinoshima without permission from Munakata Taisha. Even the priest who offers a religious service there every day must purify his mind and body by immersing himself in the sea before he lands on the island.*





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

### Nominated as a World Cultural Heritage Site

A World Heritage Site is a place listed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), that is considered to be of outstanding universal value to humanity, based on the World Heritage Convention. The World Heritage List consists of cultural, natural, and mixed properties. The World Heritage Committee decides whether a property meets the criteria necessary for it to be inscribed on the list.

The Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region have been on Japan's Tentative List of World Heritage Sites since 2009, and are being considered according to the following three criteria:

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

### Criterion (iii) *To bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared.*

This property serves as a rare piece of evidence chronicling an ongoing process: the formation of the cultural tradition of worshipping this sacred island, within the context of how ancient ritual changed and developed. Archaeological sites that survive almost intact on Okinoshima offer a chronological account of ritual development there. Rituals dedicated to the Three Goddesses of Munakata were performed at the three shrines of Munakata Taisha, located on the islands of Okinoshima, Oshi-

ma, and Kyushu. The Shimbaru-Nuyama Mounded Tomb Group survives as tangible evidence concerning the inhabitants of Munakata who created this cultural tradition. Okinoshima itself is the object of worship. The taboos and customs related to worshipping the sacred island from afar have been passed down to the present day at Okitsu-miya Yohaisho on the island of Oshima and other sites.

### Criterion (ii) *To exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design.*

The change and development of rituals from the 4th to the 9th centuries to which the archaeological evidence of this property bears witness represent the overseas exchange of human values in ancient East Asia. The inhabitants of the Munakata region who worshipped Okinoshima for maritime safety played a sig-

nificant role in overseas exchange, which contributed to ancient Japan's advancement in the political, social and religious realms. Okinoshima's ritual artifacts include many rare objects from abroad that serve as valuable pieces of evidence for overseas exchange at the time.

### Criterion (vi) *To be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.*

The worship of Okinoshima, which originates in the ancient connection between the local population and nature, has been passed down continuously to this day as the worship of the Three Goddesses of Munakata, a tangible expression of Japanese indigenous beliefs. This faith still survives among the local population in Munakata, together with taboos prohibiting

visits to the sacred island, as a living tradition that is integral to the people's daily lives. The Three Goddesses of Munakata are worshipped at some 6,000 Shinto shrines throughout Japan. The ritual archaeological sites on Okinoshima, where this system of belief originated, bear witness to the formation of this set of indigenous beliefs and its survival to the present day.

