

Munakata Taisha Okitsu-miya (Introduction)

The island of Okinoshima, located in the strait between Kyushu, Japan and the Korean Peninsula, occupies a unique place in Japan's history. As both a sacred site and stop-off point to and from the Asian continent, it has much to teach us about the development of Japan's indigenous religion, Shinto, as well as the country's exchange with the outside world in ancient times.

Ancient artifacts

Archaeologists in the twentieth century found this small, rugged island to be a treasure trove of artifacts dating as far back as 1,500 years. The island and its artifacts were remarkably well preserved, in part due to strict taboos restricting access to the island by the public, and prohibiting any item—even a pebble or twig—from being removed. This excellent state of preservation and the development of rituals over centuries earned Okinoshima and its related sites a World Heritage designation in 2017.

Preserving the island

The strict rules are still in force today; only Shinto priests from Munakata Taisha are permitted on Okinoshima. These priests live in isolation for stretches of 10 days on a rotational basis, maintaining the grounds and conducting age-old rituals for the deity enshrined here: Tagorihime no Kami, one of the Three Female Deities of Munakata.

Worship and trade

The Munakata family, which governed the Munakata region of Kyushu from the seventh century until 1586 (when the last high priest of Munakata Taisha, Munakata Ujisada, died without a male heir), is believed to have established Okinoshima as a site of worship as early as the fourth century. The Yamato court (300–710) sought divine protection for their sea crossings from the deities residing in the island's natural environment—its primeval forests, dramatic rocky outcroppings and cliffs—and left precious votive offerings to them. These practices continued for 500 years. Over this time, they evolved into the more formal worship style we see today, with shrine buildings to house the deities.