

World Heritage Designation

The Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region became Japan's 21st UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2017. Several aspects of the region, with Okinoshima at its heart, set it apart from other World Heritage sites in Japan. Besides the sheer quantity of artifacts discovered on Okinoshima—more than 80,000 pieces—it was the integrity of both the objects and the locations where they were found, that made the island a site of Outstanding Universal Value. Strict taboos governing the island meant that the artifacts were likely untouched for hundreds of years.

Developing Rituals

By studying the objects found in different sites on the island, researchers concluded that when the first known rituals on Okinoshima were performed, offerings were left on top of rocks, open to the sun and moon. Offerings were placed on large boulders near the center of the island, around the fifth century. Mirrors and iron ingots have been found at these sites. Over the next two centuries, these offerings moved to areas in the shade of large rocks, under deep overhangs. By the eighth century, they were placed in the partial shade of the rocks, then transitioned around the ninth century to clearings, near the current site of the Okitsu-miya shrine building. These discoveries provide valuable insight into the development of the Shinto religion from its origins as a form of nature worship. The mostly votive objects also reveal a great deal of exchange between Japan and its Asian neighbors from as early as the fourth century, and the prestige the Munakata family enjoyed under Japan's early rulers.

Preserving the Past for the Future

The significance of the island did not wane even as the types of rituals changed and worship from across the strait on Oshima and Kyushu became the norm after the ninth century. Okinoshima was declared an exceptional example of the tradition of worshipping a sacred island by UNESCO, through direct offerings made on the island and through distant worship from Kyushu and Oshima. Ultimately, it is thanks to the devotion of local people, who have kept the traditions of the region alive for over a millennium, that the important findings of Okinoshima and its environs can be shared with the rest of the world.