

## Royal Sarcophagi and Ryukyu Funeral Customs

The method of preserving the royal remains at Tamaudun highlights the unique traditional funeral customs of the Ryukyu Islands. The indigenous Ryukyu religion places great importance on purifying and maintaining the bones of the deceased in a dignified way. This is particularly true for kings and members of the royal family, whose spirits are believed to protect the entire nation. Their interment centers on the practice of “exposure” (*fuso*), in which the body of the deceased is first allowed to decompose naturally. In past times, before the use of constructed tombs, this was usually done by simply laying the corpse outside or in an open cave, a practice that continues in some remote regions. With the introduction of tomb architecture, primarily from China, a special crypt was designated for this purpose, as at Tamaudun.

When the body is sufficiently decomposed, the ritual of reinternment, called *senkotsu*, meaning “bone purification” is performed. Remaining flesh is removed from the bones, which are then washed with *sake* and then carefully arranged inside a stone or ceramic sarcophagus. At Tamaudun, this task fell to female family members but was directed by a male, who often made just one symbolic gesture and left.

Royal sarcophagi (*zushi*) are generally shaped like miniature rectangular houses or palaces, called *udun-gata*. They are decorated with intricate reliefs and painted decorations, and their lids are shaped like tiled roofs. The urn of King Sho En was carved from diabase, a dark igneous rock, as were those of his daughter and one yet-unidentified person. Ryukyu coral limestone was used afterward until 1712. These were painted with images of Jizo Bosatsu, a guardian deity, and other Buddhist decorations, as well as text inscriptions. In the mid-eighteenth century, richly colored ceramic urns embellished with detailed sculptural relief were introduced. Similar urns continue to be preferred throughout the islands today. Several of the royal urns at Tamaudun are shaped like rounded jars with conical lids and are known as *bozha-gata*, in reference to their resemblance to the bald heads of monks.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the practice of reinternment was discouraged in Okinawa due to hygienic concerns. The bodies of the deceased are now usually cremated, as in the rest of Japan.