

Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine

The Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine, located east of Mt. Sanbe in the city of Ōda, was the most productive silver mine in Japanese history. From its discovery in 1526 until the end of the nineteenth century, Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine supplied the majority of Japan's silver. In fact, at peak production in the early 1600s, the mine produced roughly a third of the silver used worldwide. The mine had a significant impact on international trade and the commercial development of countries in East Asia. Silver was the primary currency for trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and coins made from Iwami Ginzan's superior-grade silver were valued more highly than other currencies.

According to legend, the mine was discovered when a merchant named Kamiya Jutei (dates unknown), spotted a shining mountain while sailing in the Sea of Japan. The mountain was found to contain rich veins of relatively pure ore as well as disseminated deposits (fine particles of ore distributed throughout the rock).

In 2007, the Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In addition to its historical and cultural significance, the mine was also recognized for its environmentally sound practices. Silver mines usually require extensive logging and cause significant disruption of the natural landscape, but Iwami Ginzan's controlled forestry practices and minimal contamination of the soil and water had a comparatively light ecological impact. The site is also very well preserved. The mine, mining settlements, and infrastructure were largely abandoned after their closure in the 1920s, and much of the district has remained unaltered in the century since.