

Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine and its Cultural Landscape

When Iwami Ginzan was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007, it was recognized for three main reasons: for the mine's impact on the world economy in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, for the well-preserved archaeological evidence of silver production found throughout the area, and for the integrity of both the mine itself and the sites related to it, from mining settlements to transportation routes and ports.

Iwami silver and global trade

The silver mined at Iwami Ginzan had a significant impact on the world economy from the mid-1500s onward. The warlord-led families that controlled the mine during this time used the silver for foreign trade. Demand came from Ming China, which had recently moved to a silver-based economy and needed vast quantities of currency to finance the defense of the empire against Mongol forces encroaching from the northwest. Silver initially flowed from Japan to China directly, but this trade was soon taken over by Europeans. Portuguese traders based in Macau bought Chinese silk and exchanged it for Japanese silver, which they then sold to the Ming. This pattern of trade greatly enriched the Portuguese, who came to refer to Japan as “the silver islands” and circulated Iwami silver throughout their maritime empire. It is now estimated that at least 10 percent of all the silver traded around the world in the late 1500s came from Iwami Ginzan. This exchange flourished until the early 1600s, when the new Tokugawa government restricted foreign contacts and introduced a standardized silver currency.

Traditional silver production

The second reason for Iwami Ginzan's World Heritage status is the well-preserved physical evidence of traditional silver production found in the area. The mine was operational from the discovery of silver at Iwami Ginzan in 1527 until 1923, but industrial mining equipment and methods were introduced only in the late 1800s, once Japan's isolationist foreign policy ended. Consequently, archaeological evidence of traditional mining, smelting, and refining remains intact at Iwami Ginzan. Some of the mining tunnels, production facilities, and settlements have been excavated, allowing visitors to understand the techniques used and lives led by mine workers and their families, but many more sites remain all but untouched on the forested slopes of Mt. Sennoyama and in the nearby valleys.

The full picture

The Iwami Ginzan mine and the sites related to it—ports, transportation routes, castles and other fortifications, administrative facilities, residential areas, and religious sites—survive as an organic whole. Some of the mining tunnels and shafts can be entered, the roads from the mine to the Sea of Japan can be walked, and the former homes of merchant families who made their fortunes here can be visited in the town of Omori. Together, these sites tell the story of the mining community from medieval times to the 1920s. They reveal how the mine was expanded and altered to meet different goals over time, how a highly specialized economy developed around the mine, and how its administration evolved over the 400 years during which silver was mined at Iwami Ginzan.