

Ishigane Settlement Site

Near the summit of Mt. Sennoyama, around which the Iwami Ginzan silver mine grew from the mid-1500s onward, is a relatively flat, terrace-like expanse covered with low grass. This is Ishigane, where a major mining community flourished in the early 1600s. Populated during the silver mine's greatest period of prosperity, the settlement centered on a road that led down the hillside into the Hondani valley, another important mining hub. This road, now reconstructed, was about 2 meters wide and lined with buildings on both sides. As evidenced by the remains of refining pits, crushed ore, and other items excavated here, miners and their families both lived and worked in these houses, dressing, smelting, and refining silver ore mined in nearby tunnels. The homes had clay walls for fire safety, and fresh water—a prerequisite for life in a place this isolated—was carried from a nearby well.

The stone foundations of one miner's home and workshop have been partially reconstructed near the middle of the former settlement, in front of a narrow mining tunnel. The excavation of this site in the 1990s turned up one of the most significant archaeological finds in the modern history of Iwami Ginzan: a sixteenth-century iron pot that was used to refine silver using the *haifuki* (cupellation) method. Historical documents suggest that this technique, the key to producing high-quality silver at the time, was introduced to Japan from the Korean peninsula in 1533, but the iron pot discovered at Ishigane was the first physical evidence tying the *haifuki* method to Iwami Ginzan.

The excavation at Ishigane also helped shed light on the structure of mining communities at Iwami Ginzan. It appears that mining and processing silver was a job that families often performed together as units. One poignant find at the site was a lock of a woman's hair tied to form an amulet of sorts, perhaps a lucky charm given by a wife to her husband to keep him safe down in the mines.