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Dewitt, Lindsey E.

Japan Society for the Promotion of Science : Postdoctoral Fellow | Kyushu University : Visiting Researcher

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Report on the 2017 Inscription of "Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region" as a UNESCO World Heritage Site

LINDSEY E. DEWITT

ON 9 July 2017, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) inscribed "Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region" on its World Heritage List.¹ The decision marks the culmination of a nearly decade-long effort, and puts a spotlight on the rich religious and cultural landscapes of Kyushu, Japan, and the broader maritime sphere of Japan, the Korean peninsula, and the continent. The tiny size and remote location of Okinoshima 沖ノ島 belies its great cultural and historical significance. Rituals on the island can be traced over the course of five hundred years in four distinct forms. At the same time, the reasons for the sacredness of the remote island—a place difficult to navigate to and anchor on in fine weather, let alone storms, and off limits to nearly all visitors today—and the locus of the ritual practices remain unclear.² Unlike many other ancient sacred sites in Japan, however, the role of Okinoshima and Munakata 宗像 in the mythol-

ogy of the early Yamato rulers' imperial-style sphere (fifth–eighth century) can be confirmed. The 712 *Kojiki* 古事記 (Records of Ancient Matters) and 720 *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan) describe Okinoshima as the sacred abode of one of the three Munakata goddesses, who are today worshipped at the three locations of Munakata Grand Shrine (Munakata Taisha 宗像大社).³

Three intensive rounds of archaeological excavations on Okinoshima (1954–1955, 1957–1958, 1969–1971)

1 Note that, in Japanese, the name of the site differs slightly from the English: "'Island where gods dwell' Munakata Okinoshima and the Associated Heritage Group" ("Kami yadoru shima" Munakata Okinoshima to kanren isan-gun 「神宿る島」宗像・沖ノ島と関連遺産群).

2 A concrete harbor was built by the government in 1951 to provide access to the island for military personnel.

3 Munakata Shrine assumed its current name, Munakata Taisha, in the wake of its 1901 designation by the Meiji government as a major imperial shrine (*kanpei taisha* 官幣大社). Okitsumiya 胸形之奥津宮 (rendered as 遠瀛 in the *Nihon shoki*) on Okinoshima enshrines Takiribime no mikoto 多紀理毗売命 (alternatively, Okitsushimahime no mikoto 奥津嶋比売命). Nakatsumiya 中津宮 on Ōshima, eleven kilometers off the coast, enshrines Takitsuhime no mikoto 湍津姫命. Hetsumiya 辺津宮 in Tashima on the Kyushu mainland enshrines Ichikishimahime no mikoto 市杵島姫命 (alternatively, Sayoribime no mikoto 狭依毗売命). The *Kojiki* and versions of the *Nihon shoki* present slightly different names (e.g., Tagorihime 田心姫, Tagorihime no mikoto 田心姫命, and Tagirihime no mikoto 田霧姫命) for the goddesses, and only one version of the *Nihon shoki* specifies Okitsumiya as Tagorihime's dwelling. Takeda and Nakamura, ed., *Kojiki*, p. 35. A digital version of the *Kojiki* is available from the Japanese Historical Text Initiative, University of California, Berkeley, <https://jhti.berkeley.edu/Kojiki.html>, p. 22, paragraph 2 (trans. Donald Philippi). *Nihon shoki*, vol. 1, pp. 106–107. For an English translation of the *Nihon shoki*, see Aston, *Nihongi*, pp. 34–35.

yielded some eighty thousand artifacts dating from the fourth to the ninth century. The excavations revealed that four styles of rituals were performed on the island at twenty-three sites over five centuries: (1) rituals atop rocks (late fourth–early fifth century); (2) rituals in rock shadows (late fifth–seventh century); (3) rituals partly in rock shadows and partly in the open air (late seventh–eighth century); and (4) open air rituals (late eighth–end of ninth century). The ritual goods range from a miniature golden loom to gilt-bronze horse trappings, bronze mirrors, iron swords, comma-shaped beads, ceramics, and much more; they are collectively designated a National Treasure (*kokuhō* 国宝).⁴

Okinoshima's immense and ritually specific material treasures, combined with its mytho-historical record, have catapulted the island to global fame, inspiring grand narratives about Japan's origins and pre-modern polity. The findings also pose many questions concerning cultural exchange in East Asia before the consolidation of "state" Buddhism in Japan in the mid-eighth century. In quantity and value, the "discovery" of Okinoshima's treasured goods in the middle of the twentieth century came as a great surprise to many. Munakata Shrine officials certainly had some previous knowledge of the cache, as they already held in their archive several objects (e.g., bronze mirrors) said to have been deposited on the island between the fourth and sixth century. Moreover, military personnel had been stationed on the island regularly since the seventeenth century, first at the behest of the Fukuoka domain, and later, the Meiji government. These people, too, must have known something of the island's treasures, many of which were visible on the ground, but apart from a fantastic tale of flying treasures and godly wrath included in an eighteenth-century shrine history, nothing about them was officially reported. The first documentary evidence concerning the wealth of ritual goods on the island is a scholarly report of 1891 that includes

rough sketches of some of the items that would be rediscovered decades later.⁵

Okinoshima's modern World Heritage narrative begins with Idemitsu Sazō 出光佐三 (1885–1981), a petroleum tycoon and Munakata native. Idemitsu, self-described as "richly blessed with divine favour from childhood," attributed his success in business to his faith in the three Munakata goddesses.⁶ When Idemitsu visited Munakata Shrine in 1937 and witnessed the "undeserved decay" of its buildings and precincts, he made a "solemn vow" to restore them, and in November 1942 organized the Society for the Restoration of the Munakata Shrine (Munakata Jinja Fukkō Kiseikai 宗像神社復興期成會). In addition to spearheading efforts to restore the shrine in Tashima 田島, the society sponsored extensive historical investigations, which resulted in several major publications, and funded the large-scale archeological investigations on Okinoshima.⁷

The movement to make Okinoshima a World Heritage site took shape in earnest through the efforts of local residents of the city of Munakata (which today includes Ōshima 大島). The locally formed Okinoshima Tales Executive Committee (Okinoshima Monogatari Jikkō linkai 沖ノ島物語実行委員会) organized the "Munakata Grand Shrine Great National Treasures Exhibition" (*Munakata Taisha dai kokuhō ten* 宗像大社大国宝展) in 2002. The same year, a symposium was held in Munakata; it was there that archaeologist Yoshimura Sakuji 吉村作治, an authority on Egyptian studies, affirmed publicly that "Okinoshima is worthy of World Heritage."⁸

When the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō 文化庁) sought proposals from local governments for candidates to be added to the World Heritage Tentative List in 2006, Fukuoka Prefecture submitted "Okinoshima and Associated Sites" (*Okinoshima to kanren isan-gun* 沖ノ島と関連遺産群) for consideration. Three years later, in May 2009, "Munakata, Okinoshima and Associated Sites" (*Munakata, Okinoshima to kanren isan-gun* 宗像・沖ノ島と関連遺産群) was added to

4 The first attempt to designate objects from Okinoshima as National Treasures in 1959 was unsuccessful; the items instead were assessed as Important Cultural Properties (*jūyō bunkazai* 重要文化財). More items were added and the listing was upgraded to the status of National Treasure in 1962. Subsequent excavations revealed many more items, which were designated as Important Cultural Properties in 1978 and 2003. The entire lot of eighty thousand objects was collectively designated as a single National Treasure in 2006, as "Artifacts from the Okitsumiya ritual site of Munakata Grand Shrine" (*Fukuoka-ken Munakata Taisha Okitsumiya saishi iseki shutsudohin* 福岡県宗像大社沖津宮祭祀遺跡出土品).

5 Etō, Masazumi "Okitsushima-kikō."

6 Okinoshima Gakujutsu Chōsatai and Okazaki, *Munakata Okinoshima*, p. 614.

7 Munakata Jinja Fukkō Kiseikai, ed., *Munakata jinja shi*; Munakata Jinja Fukkō Kiseikai, ed., *Okinoshima*.

8 Maeda Toshio 前田敏郎, "Seikai isan Okinoshima 'ichibu jogai'" 世界遺産 沖ノ島「一部除外」, *Mainichi shinbun* 毎日新聞, 2017.5.7, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20170507/dtl/k40/040/272000c?ck=1>.

Japan's Tentative List for World Heritage inscription. A World Heritage promotional committee was formed that same year, a collective effort of the cities of Munakata and Fukutsu, and Fukuoka Prefecture.⁹ The nomination remained on the Tentative List for seven years, during which time the promotional committee sponsored more than twenty conferences, symposia, and exhibitions, and commissioned four volumes of study reports by Japanese and international scholars.¹⁰

On 28 July 2016, the Bunkachō selected “Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region,” a grouping of eight sites in total, for official consideration by UNESCO and its external advisory body, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Six weeks later, on 8 September, New Caledonia archaeologist Christophe Sande was dispatched from ICOMOS to survey all eight sites, including the restricted island. The ICOMOS evaluation that followed recognized only Okinoshima and its three neighboring reefs as having “Outstanding Universal Value” (UNESCO terminology).¹¹ ICOMOS determined that the value of Munakata Grand Shrine and the mounded tomb group was limited to the domestic level, and recommended that all other constituent assets be dropped from the inscription (with the name changed simply to “Sacred Island of Okinoshima”).

The Bunkachō responded that ICOMOS simply did not understand the connection between the eight properties, or the history of the Munakata region and Munakata Grand Shrine. Fukuoka Prefectural Governor Ogawa Hiroshi 小川洋 lamented the “very regrettable and harsh recommendation” (*hijō ni zannen de kibishii kankoku* 非常に残念で厳しい勧告).¹² Munakata City Mayor Tani Hiromi 谷井博美, similarly disappointed but inspired by local sentiment, announced that they

would still endeavor to register all eight sites. The Bunkachō prepared an easy-to-understand (illustrated) rebuttal to present to World Heritage Committee members at the annual meeting in order to persuade them to adopt the eight-property serial inscription. The Japanese delegation argued that the ICOMOS presentation of Okinoshima as an isolated site with no connection to other ritual sites or cultural practices ignored significant archaeological evidence from the seventh through ninth century that was excavated not only on Okinoshima but on Ōshima (Mitakesan 御嶽山) and Tashima (Shimotakamiya 下高宮), the two other Munakata Shrine locations. They emphasized that the earliest surviving chronicles about Japan, the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* (sources contemporaneous with Okinoshima's use as an active ritual site), link the three specific sites by name with three deities. From the perspective of the Japanese delegation and Munakata Grand Shrine, all eight proposed sites had formed an active and ongoing cultural landscape from at least the eighth century.

At the forty-first session of the World Heritage Committee, held in Poland in July 2017, ICOMOS presented its judgment, and the inscription was put to a vote. First, however, the Japanese delegation was asked to explain the tradition of male-only access. Their response was brief: “As a matter of principle, the access to the island of Okinoshima has been restricted to the priests of the Munakata Grand Shrine and priests are male by its tradition.” No further discussion on the controversial ban was permitted, save a brief statement by World Heritage Centre Director Mechtild Rössler reminding Committee members that other sites that restrict access to either women or men have received World Heritage designations in the past.¹³ Of note, the

9 The promotional committee was known as “Munakata, Okinoshima to kanren isan-gun” Seikaiisan Suishin Kaigi 「宗像・沖ノ島と関連遺産群」世界遺産推進会議.

10 See “Munakata, Okinoshima to kanren isan-gun” Seikaiisan Suishin Kaigi, ed., *Munakata, Okinoshima to kanren isan-gun chōsa kenkyū hōkoku*, 4 vols.

11 The six criteria that delineate “Outstanding Universal Value” for cultural sites include: a “masterpiece of human creative genius,” an “important interchange of human values,” a “unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition,” a monument, a human settlement, or a living tradition. UNESCO, *Operational Guidelines* 2016.

12 “Seikaiisan Okinoshima igai ‘sekai kachi nai’ jogai 4-ken ni ikomосу” 世界遺産 沖ノ島以外「世界価値ない」 除外4件にイコモス, *Mainichi shinbun*, 2017.5.6. <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20170506/ddg/001/040/003000c>.

13 “Gender equality is a priority for UNESCO, but I wish to inform the World Heritage Committee that it had taken other decisions on sites where women have no access like for example Mt. Athos in Greece. There are many World Heritage sites where men cannot access certain parts of the site or women cannot access certain parts of the site and we have written about this extensively. I will be very happy to give you further information but we are running out of time” (41st Session of the World Heritage Committee, Krakow, Poland, 9 July 2017). To my knowledge, three UNESCO-related publications exist that address gender exclusion: UNESCO, “In Focus,” a special edition of *World Heritage*, the official UNESCO publication from the World Heritage Centre; UNESCO, *Gender Equality*, a 2014 report on gender equality and culture; and UNESCO, *UNESCO's Promise*, a digital UNESCO document. First, Rössler's preface to “In Focus: World Heritage and Gender Equality,” for which

nomination file written by Japanese authorities and accepted by the World Heritage Committee does not specifically mention the fact that women are banned from Okinoshima. When Okinoshima was added to Japan's World Heritage Tentative List in 2012, the official proposal mentioned taboos that are "still observed today, such as purifying oneself before setting foot on the island, banning women from entering, and prohibiting anyone from taking a single item from the island."¹⁴ The external advisory body evaluation by ICOMOS notes twice that no women are allowed on the island.¹⁵ Yet the "Statement of Outstanding Universal Value" accepted by the World Heritage Committee, which will hereafter institutionalize perceptions of the island, states only that "[e]xisting restrictions and taboos contribute to maintaining the aura of the island as a sacred place."¹⁶

Next, the delegation from the Republic of Korea, in an oral intervention to the session, reprimanded Japan for neglecting Okinoshima's important connection to Korea, and urged caution to the Japanese government concerning the portrayal of Okinoshima visually and in writing as an exclusively "Japanese" site.¹⁷ Korea is largely omitted from the UNESCO narrative

on Okinoshima, although travel routes between mainland areas in Japan, Korea, and China were crucial to Okinoshima's significance as a ritual site from the fourth through ninth centuries, and to the eighty thousand ritual remains excavated there in the twentieth century. Unearthed articles dating from the second half of the fifth to the first half of the sixth century found at Jungmak-dong, a ritual site on the southwestern coast of the Korean Peninsula, which are almost identical to the objects found at Okinoshima, point to transregional and transcultural ties from the earliest phase of Okinoshima rituals. This fact also has been marginalized in World Heritage documentation.¹⁸ When voting commenced, the Korean delegation did vote in favor of the inscription, although they sided with the ICOMOS evaluation that the island alone was worthy of World Heritage status. The remaining twenty members of the World Heritage Committee voted unanimously for inscription of all eight sites in a somewhat rare reversal of the ICOMOS recommendation.¹⁹

Okinoshima is known locally as the "island of mystery" (*shinpi no shima* 神秘の島), and indeed it is mysterious. Who ventured across the rough waters of the

she served as editorial director, introduces the Kii mountains in Japan as having "separate access for men and women only." This claim, which presents nearby Inamuragatake as a mountain for women, is false. As noted in DeWitt, "A Mountain Set Apart" (p. 155), Inamuragatake is a popular day hike enjoyed by both men and women; no worship facilities or ritual sites are present along the trail or at the summit. Second, *UNESCO's Promise: Gender Equality, a Global Priority* emphasizes that UNESCO employs an approach of "gender mainstreaming in all programmes and activities" (p. 3), and defines gender equality as situations in which "women and men equally enjoy the right to access, participate and contribute to cultural life" (p. 14). Finally, in *Gender Equality: Heritage and Creativity*, Rössler describes Ōminesan as an example of "gendered heritage" (p. 60), and notes that the World Heritage Centre received letters of protest in regard to the male-only mountain's potential World Heritage inscription. "Outstanding Universal Value" is a universal right, Rössler concludes, but inscribing a site on the World Heritage List also "enshrines the gendered traditions, history and rituals." Rössler cites two sources for her information on Ōminesan: a 2004 article from *The Japan Times* newspaper and the website for "JapanVisitor," an internet tourist guide.

14 Government of Japan, *Munakata, Okinoshima to kanren isan-gun*, pp. 3-4.

15 International Council on Monuments and Sites, *ICOMOS Evaluation*, pp. 2, 12.

16 World Heritage Committee, *41COM 8B.19*.

17 Referencing a photograph of the boat parade of Munakata Grand Shrine's Miare Festival, which reunites the three Munakata goddesses yearly at the Hetsumiya Shrine in Tashima,

the delegate from the Republic of Korea requested an oral intervention and expressed the following concern: "As far as I am not mistaken the ritual covers the time span around A.D. fourth century to ninth century, but I recognize the Japanese national flag together with two rising sun flags on the ship adopted by the Japanese imperial army during the second world war, so I think I am very doubtful all of a sudden—is the justification for worshipping for security and safety, for navigational purposes, or some kind of other politically motivated purposes?" Republic of Korea, 41st Session of the World Heritage Committee, Krakow, Poland, 9 July 2017.

18 Objects found at Jungmak-dong in excavations sponsored by the Chonju National Museum in 1992 include celadons from the Northern Wei (386-534), Jin (265-420), and Southern and Northern dynasties (420-589) of China, as well as horse trappings together with soft stone imitations of objects (sickle, cuirass, adze, knife) from Korea, nearly identical to those excavated on Okinoshima. On the Jungmak-dong ritual site, see Ko, "Kankoku ni okeru saishi iseki"; Woo, "Chikumakudō"; Nelson, *Gyeongju*.

19 From 2006 to 2009, roughly 14 percent of ICOMOS' recommendations against inscription were reversed by the World Heritage Committee. Tabet, *ICOMOS*, p. 72. The exact number of decision reversals is difficult to estimate, given that ICOMOS may recommend one of three options (inscribe, defer, or refer back to the State Party for further information), and the same three options are presented to the World Heritage Committee. Serial nominations like the eight-property Okinoshima inscription, which received partial recommendation for inscription by ICOMOS, comprise a rare but growing category of nomination.

Genkai Sea with valuable objects to perform rituals there, and why did they do it? How did the cache of artifacts that are so treasured today end up forgotten by most from the ninth century until modern times? What are the historical roots of the taboo against women? Answers to these inquiries and others are not forthcoming, at least not yet. Moving forward to the present day, many are wondering what the future will hold for Okinoshima in its new capacity as a World Heritage site. A delicate balance exists between caretakers dedicated to preserving the so-called “untouched” (although this is hardly true, considering the human history of the island) sanctity of Okinoshima, and critics dissatisfied that a site of “Outstanding Universal Value” is off-limits—and for historically unsubstantiated reasons—to half the world’s population. Okinoshima’s gender taboo has been sensationalized by the media, but it seems doubtful that critics voicing cries of discrimination will be answered anytime soon. In the wake of the World Heritage inscription, Munakata Shrine authorities have taken measures to restrict the island even further. In addition to canceling the yearly on-site celebration of Japan’s historical naval might, the shrine has just implemented another new policy stipulating that no men at all, except for the single male shrine priest, will be permitted on the island (members of the media and most researchers will now be banned as well). Okinoshima seems destined to remain enigmatic for now, a World Heritage site floating alone out at sea.

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