

World Heritage Candidate- The Iwami-Ginzan Silver Mine Ruins

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Introduction

The ruins of the Iwami-Ginzan Silver Mine lie on the western side of the Japanese archipelago. Facing the Sea of Japan, the mine is situated roughly in the center of Shimane Prefecture. From the medieval ages, until modern time, the mine has a 400-year working history as a prominent silver mine in Japan. From the 16th until the beginning of the 17th century heydays, the production of silver from the Iwami-Ginzan mine and its consequent trade with Asia widely circulated around the world. Resulting in a measurable impact on the world economy at the time.

It was esteemed that the state of the preserved ruins were in excellent condition, and thus it was determined that the ruins be added to a provisional list for world heritage in the year 2000. At present, the historic remains of the mine lie in the center of the Sannai mining area. In the surrounding area there lies the remains of a medieval castle and a port with a total area of approximately 320 hectares. Also there exists a protected area with the main road called the "Ginzan Kaido" and two rows of traditional styled houses.

The world famous Iwami-Ginzan Mine as the birthplace of Japanese mining techniques

Francis Xavier, who brought Christianity to Japan, recognized Japan to be "the island of silver". He also explained that Japanese silver would be very advantageous for trade relations with the Spanish Crown. It is well known that Europeans at the time had a keen interest in Japanese mining, and this included the Iwami-Ginzan mine; one of the prominent mines of the time.

Because the Iwami-Ginzan Silver Mine was located in the village of Sama, the silver became known as "Plate Soma". The Ancient Western European Map, made in the later half of the 16 century lists an area called "silver mine" near Iwami giving evidence of its reputation.

With Japan's entry into the Age of Exploration she was compelled to enter into cultural exchange with the Western European world. Westerners bearing firearms made their way to Japan to attain silver. It is known in history that through the introduction of firearms, silver that was mined was used to fund the military reserves of the warring daimyo leaders such as Mori, Ouchi, Amago and Ogasawara. During the age of the rival chiefs the silver mined in Iwami-Ginzan was used as financial resources to help Toyotomi and Tokugawa unite the shogunate system.

During the prime of the Iwami-Ginzan days, Silver from Japan accounted for one third of the world's silver output. It is said that half of this was produced in Iwami. Once or twice there were disputes with Mexico over export volume. The amount of silver production and circulation around the world illustrates the extent to which Japanese silver was seen to be of high quality.

Japanese silver quality was supported by the smelting technique at the time. The first half of the 16-century saw the introduction of a revolutionary smelting method introduced from the Korean Peninsula. This method was first introduced to Iwami-Ginzan and resulted in a significant increase in production. After the introduction of the amalgam method in 1571, from the South American Potosi Mine, Iwami gained much attention. This method was passed on from Iwami to various gold and silver mines including Sado and Ikuno. This method led to a pioneering achievement in the development of these various mines. This led to Iwami-Ginzan being coined as "the birthplace of Japanese mining techniques".

The brilliant history and unique ruins of the Iwami-Ginzan mine became clear through the results of the multi-directional research report. The report started with an excavation investigation conducted in 1996. The three cities of Oda, Yunotsu, and Nima investigated the mine's historical documents, stone work, tower house, harbor, mine shaft and folklore. The drilling, mining and smelting ways of the past were examined through the unearthed data and relics collected during the scientific and excavation investigations.

Sennoyama Mountain, with a height of 537 meters lies in the center of the Iwami-Ginzan Mine ruins. As to protect the area a fence "Sakunouchi" was erected in the Edo Period. From the peak to the base of the mountain there is a vast number of level lands in a staircase pattern. These lands include over 600 walkways, and open cast mining ruins. We are able to catch a glimpse of not only the earth's surface but also the extent of the prosperity of the mine.

From 1993 until 2002 there was an excavation investigation of ruins that lied at the peak of the Sennoyama Mountain. Where these ruins lied there was a district by the name of "Ishigane Fujita". Beside a center road with a diameter of 2 meters, there lied several sites. These sites had a width of approximately eight meters and a depth of 18 meters. It became clear that these sites named "fukiya" were smelting establishments. There was also the breakthrough discovery of fireplaces used for the cupellation method.

Due to the abundant relics that were excavated it can be seen that both industry and lifestyle became one. Furthermore the unearthed ceramics were of a wide origin, including China, Korea and South East Asia. This is evidence of the extent and consumption of silver as a commodity. There is also supportive evidence of an urban mining settlement at the peak of the mountain.

Registration as a World Heritage Site and Protection activities

If registration of the mine were successful, the mine would become the first industrial ruin in Japan to be listed as a world cultural heritage site. The mine has been registered as a historical property illustrating the extent in which the history, architecture and beauty has been recognized not only domestically but around the world.

The Iwami-Ginzan mine gained wide attention during the Age of Exploration as an industrial asset that was politically, economically, and culturally influential, not only throughout Japan, but the world. It is quite meaningful that the universal value of the mine be appreciated in various fields.

It is our duty to preserve the ruins of the Iwami-Ginzan Silver Mine for the future. There exists a growing sense at the local community level to encourage citizens to be involved in the application for registration. Many groups existed in the past including; "The Group for the Protection of Cultural Assets in the Omori District" and "The Omori Humane Youth group" was founded. Also, lately there has been the development of volunteer groups who are aimed at independent protection of the site, including the "Group for the World Heritage Listing of Iwami-Ginzan Silver Mine" and "The Iwami-Ginzan Mine Volunteer Guide Group". We, on the administrative side, must cooperate with these many organizations and endeavor to preserve the ruins as best we can.



Street Reserved Area:Omori



Japan Area Map made by Luiz Teixeira in 1595



Excavation in Ishigane Fujita Area



Shipment Port of Silver:Tomogaura

It is necessary that we don't forget to make important conditions that the ruins be maintained well. We must be active and continue to maintain the signs, the walkways and the ruins of the mine. It is also necessary for us to conduct research investigations and establish a reference center.

In conclusion

Iwami-Ginzan Silver Mine is a collection of historical ruins with complex elements. We hope for the perfect protection of the ruins. At present we are aiming for registration as a world heritage site and scaling up as an historical place. For full disclosure we continue to conduct investigations. As a two way street we hope to attain understanding and cooperation at the community level and strive for this mutual goal.