

Sado Island the Gold And Silver Mines in Japan. World Culture Heritage 2024

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Abstract

This paper analyses the work that, in these last 10 years (2014-2024) we realized with the scientific staff of Niitaga's Prefecture, World Heritage Inscription Promotion Office Cultural Administration Division Niigata Prefectural Board of Education. Since the XIV century, Sado Island has been famous for its gold and silver mines. The paper intends to analyze three particular aspects of the Japanese island and to illustrate the main activities of the research: urban archeology, industrial archeology, and archeology of the natural landscape. All the mines were closed permanently in 1989 and the present project aims to valorize the mines, the natural landscape, the villages of the miners, and their productive activities for a correct understanding and knowledgeable use of the territory.

Keywords: Japan, Sado Island, Mines, Cultural Heritage, Community, UNESCO.

Introduction

To northwest of Japan is Sado Island that belongs to Niigata Prefecture. Today in the island of Sado the gold and silver mines are a living cultural heritage and especially culturally active. Here the mining archeology is a very important material resource and it is the cultural value of the island, where the topic mining interacts with three main areas of the archeology contemporary: urban archeology, industrial archeology and archeology of the natural landscape (1, 2). Sado Island has a long mining history which dates back to the days of *Konjaku Monogatari*, compiled about a thousand years ago, and such mining sites have identified now even after such a long period of time. Although mining sites differ by age, the mines on Sado reflect a variety of mining that remains from various periods in history.

Background

In Japan Sado Island is famous for the gold and silver mines. Studying the history of the island we learn many interesting aspects. The Island is not important only for the mines but also for the main inheritance that are the temples and the shrines. In Edo period (1603-1867) there were almost 300 temples and 272 of them still exist now. There were also 354 shrines 250 years ago, 278 of which still exist.

These temples and these shrines today are an important Cultural Heritage of the island. Another important Heritage is the natural landscape and the ancient villages of miners, alongside to the industrial archeology of the mines (Nishiyama, H. 2013).

Methods

The main topic of this investigation in Sado Island is the relation between the archaeology and the landscape and the relation between the urban archaeology and the industrial archaeology. The *archaeology* is the study of human activity in the past, primarily through the recovery and analysis of the material culture and environmental data that they have left behind, which includes artifacts, architecture, bio-facts (also known as eco-facts) and cultural landscapes (the archaeological record). Because archaeology employs a wide range of different procedures, it can be considered to be both a science and a humanity and in the United States it is thought of as a branch of anthropology, although in Europe it is viewed as a separate discipline (Niglio, O. 2014a). In Japan the term *National Treasure* has been used to denote cultural properties since 1897. The definition and the criteria have changed since the introduction of the term. These archaeological materials adhere to the current definition and have been designated national treasures since the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties came into effect on June 9, 1951 (Nishimura, Y. 2004).

The word *archaeology* in Sado finds interesting and different connotations. The inspections carried out in September 2014 allowed us to evaluate these different connotations of the island's heritage. In fact the inspections of the mines (gold and silver) and of the villages have allowed us to reflect on these different meanings of the archeology as a study of the human activities.

Case history

The *archeology of the landscape* analyses the land use in different epochs. In Sado Island this study allows to search for traces of ancient mines and to know their configuration. Very interesting the excavations in Nishimikawa area (3).

The *urban archeology* analyses ancient villages of the miners. Today some of these villages have disappeared but on the territory is still legible traces of these ancient settlements. This study allows us to reconstruct the history of these villages

The *archeology of the architecture* introduces the stratigraphic study of the constructions. This study allows us to know the different methods and the different construction techniques of the traditional houses. It is possible to know and to analyze also the history of the restoration works (4).

The *industrial archeology* analyses the human heritage that for four centuries and with different methods has obtained fundamental natural resources that has transformed and distributed throughout Japan. This study allows us to know the ancient methodologies for the extraction and for the processing of the gold and of the silver (5).

Results

Today in Sado Island the culture of the gold and silver mines is still alive. The archaeology of the territory is part of the resources that the man has regenerated through new uses. An example are the old millstones; today these millstones are used as ornamental elements of gardens or foundations for the support of lightweight structures (Izawa, E. Nakanishi, T. Oda, Y. 2013). The *Architectural reuse* processes include adaptive reuse, conservative disassembly, and reusing salvaged materials. This definition is broad and inclusive permitting many different interpretations; however, the underlying objective is that architectural reuse be understood as an evolutionary process occurring over time. Adaptive reuse revises the function of a building while preserving the integrity of

architectural space. In order for a building to accommodate change, it must have a functional value as well as a commodity value. Buildings that offer an open arrangement of spaces and a flexible structural frame-work have the best potential for reuse.

This is the case of the Japanese architecture and especially of the traditional architecture in wood and earth where the configuration of the main structure allows to predict compatible reuses with the conservation of the old construction and with the needs of the new functions (Enders, S. Gutschow N., 2002). Then it is interesting to plan, for all ancient villages in Sado Island, a program of *Urban Restoration* that includes the old miners' houses and the public spaces; an integrated project between archeology and contemporary. This project finds important resources in the historical investigations and in the local analysis that the researchers of the Niigata Prefecture and Sado City are developing since many years. However, in this project is important to program activities of training and of information with the local community about the finalities of the urban restoration that includes the landscape, the architecture, the immaterial heritage (knowledge of ancient traditions), the production functions and then the archeology of the human resources (Niglio, O. 2014b).

Conclusions

The analysis of the values of the Cultural Heritage in Sado Island allows us to reflect on future development opportunities. Following are some suggestions:

1. To design *archaeological mining parks* with cycling routes or special country walks (with maps). These routes allow you to appreciate another important heritage of the island of Sado: large plantations of rice and their terraces.

2. To define the perimeter of the old mining villages and to establish appropriate standards for *the restoration of the architecture and of the landscape*. It can be interesting to elaborate an *Manual* in cooperation with the local architects and carpenters with the objective of establishing special rules for Sado Island. This Manual must be supported by historical and archival research, geometric reliefs, study of traditional building techniques, study of natural materials (wood and earth), environmental analysis and by studies of individual architectures for to define objective rules and not general rules.

To organize a *local and permanent School* for to learn the Architectural Restoration of the traditional houses and for the conservation of the natural and agricultural landscape. This School will be also an opportunity for the local community for to learn as to preserve the Tangible and Intangible Heritage of Sado Island. In the restoration of the villages is also interesting to program small hotels in traditional houses.

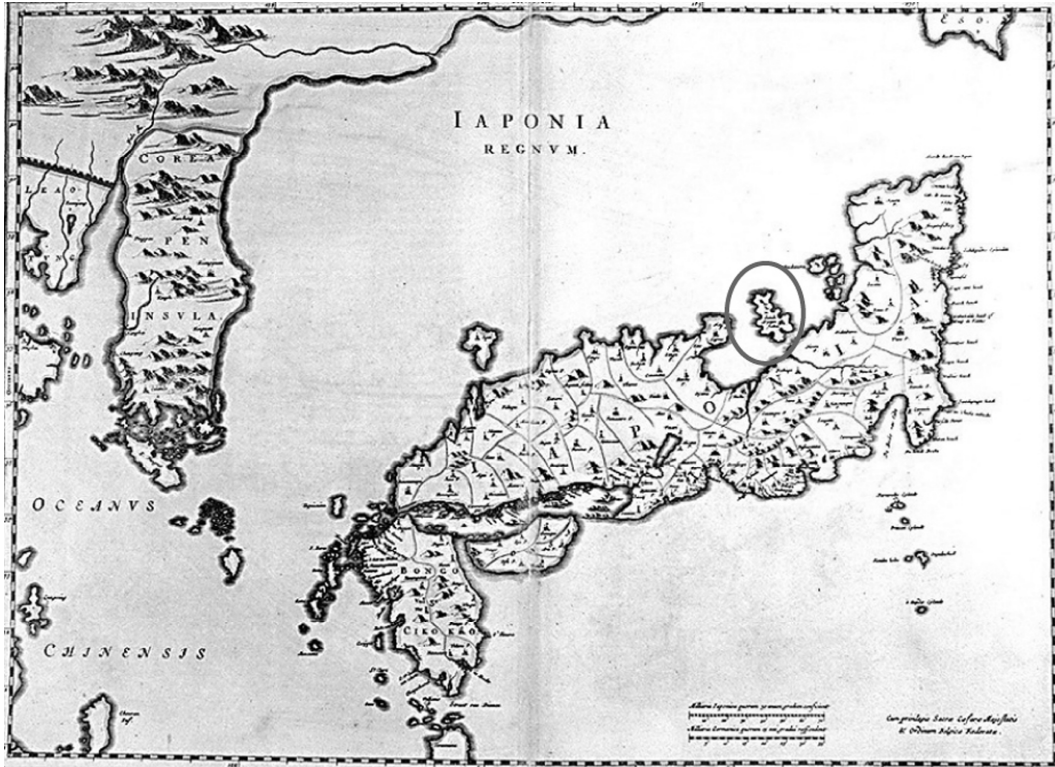
3. To design the *archaeological park of industrial processes* that since the sixteenth century have characterized the extraction of the gold and of the silver. This is a cultural heritage of inestimable value that can also be evaluated by activating training courses to learn and to develop different techniques of mining and processing of precious minerals. With these important assumptions "Sado Island Gold Mines" was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List at the 46th World Heritage Committee meeting in New Delhi, India, on July 27, 2024 (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1698>).

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1) Aikawa. The mines (the mountains), the industrial archaeology , the ancient village of the miners with the new architectures of the XXI century (Niigata Prefecture, 2011).



2) Japan and Sado Island (circle), XVII century (Yonemoto M., 2003)



3) Sado Island. The excavations in Nishimikawa area for to know the ancient surface mines of the gold (O.N. 2014).



4) Aikawa. Traditional house realized with wood and earth, a construction method still in use (O.N. 2014).



5) Aikawa. The reconstruction of the ancient methodologies for the processing of the gold and of the silver (O.N. 2014).

Message from Japan
July 30, 2024 (6:13 am in Italy)

Dear Dr. Olimpia Niglio,

I hope this e-mail finds you very well.

I am Yuka Takahashi. I am writing on behalf of Mr. Sawada Atsushi, a Director of World Heritage Inscription Promotion Office, Niigata Prefecture.

“Sado Island Gold Mines” was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List at the 46th World Heritage Committee meeting in New Delhi, India, on July 27, 2024.

We deeply appreciate for your support and contributions over the years, without which the inscription would not have been possible.

We are committed to research on the property to enhance its values.

Additionally, we will make efforts to conserve our precious heritage and pass them on to the future generations.

We look forward to your continued support and advice.

Best regards,
Yuka Takahashi

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