

World-Famous Iwami-Ginzan Silver Mine

The remains of the Iwami-Ginzan Silver Mine look toward the Chinese continent from their location near the Sea of Japan coastline, on the western flank of the Japanese archipelago and the eastern end of East Asia. One of Japan's most prominent mines, Iwami-Ginzan was active for almost four hundred years, from its discovery in 1526 by the merchant Kamiya Jutei of Hakata, Kyushu, until its eventual closing in 1923.

Iwami-Ginzan was the only silver mine in Japan known to the Europeans in the 16th century Great Age of Discovery. This is evident from the fact that the maps of Japan and Asia produced at the time in Europe indicated Japan as the "Silver Mine Kingdom" and Iwami-Ginzan as the only "Silver Mine" in the Kingdom. Owing to its high quality, the silver mined from Iwami-Ginzan - known as "Soma silver" because the mine was in the village of Sama - was given the highest trading credit in East Asia.

There is no denying that Iwami-Ginzan played a pivotal role in East Asian trade, where silver was the key currency. The remains from its heyday are well preserved to this day.



Mt. Sennoyama

Townscape of Omori Town

Sakunouchi Area and townscape of Omori Town

There is a three-fold universal value to this remarkable site:

1. It reshaped the East Asian economy and triggered cultural exchange between the East and the West.

In the 16th century, the Haifuki* (cupellation) method of metal refining was introduced to Iwami-Ginzan from overseas, to get local silver production started. The assemblage of labor-intensive small units handling everything ranging from ore mining to refining made it possible to produce large quantities of quality silver. The innovative technology and production method spread quickly to other mines in the country, bringing prosperity for Japan's silver production, which holds a unique place in the history of the country. This led to the circulation in East Asia via trade of a large volume of silver between the 16th and early 17th centuries. Coinciding with the start of international trade by Europeans, who sailed beyond their own civilization sphere in search of gold and silver, it also widened the scope of global economic activity and triggered cultural exchange between the East and the West.

*Details on page 11.



"Map of Japan" - Fernan Buez Drad (1568)
An area in Iwami is indicated as "R AS MINAS DA PRATA=Silver Mine Kingdom."

"Map of Tartaria" - Abraham Orterius Drew (1570)
An area of Japan is indicated as "minas da prata" (Silver Mine)

2. It achieved sustainable silver production with little environmental stress.

The unique production method and technology at Iwami-Ginzan made it possible to produce large volumes of quality silver, circulate that silver outside the country to give the mine international status, and continue developing mines thereafter.

At Iwami-Ginzan, the entire process from ore mining to refining was done manually. This labor-intensive process and the large number of production units were behind the production of large volumes of quality silver. Everything needed for refining was procured from the mine area and its vicinity: the materials to construct the smelting refinery, the large amounts of fuel, the tools and materials for the process. By setting up a system for growing firewood that took advantage of the country's warm, humid climate - ideal for raising trees - the mines managed to produce a supply fuel without depleting forest resources.



Panorama of Sennoyama Mountain

3. The entire industrial system, from silver production to shipment, is well preserved.

At the Iwami-Ginzan Silver Mine Ruins, the entire industrial system from silver production to shipment remains in good condition. There are the remains of mines where digging through to refining took place, mountaintop castles used to defend the mines, roads to transport silver and materials, ports where the silver was shipped, and old towns where the people involved in the silver production and shipping lived. This provides a rare example, unparalleled in the world, of the uniting of industrial remains and the surrounding natural bounty to form a holistic cultural landscape.



Inside the Okubo Mabu Mine Shaft



Townscape of Omori Town



Iwami-Ginzan Silver Mine Road (Tomogaura Route)



Tomogaura Port and Settlement