

Agricultural rituals held in inner caves of Okinoerabujima

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There are over 300 caves in Okinoerabujima. The beautiful structures of nature, taking the form similar to an underground palace filled with abundant groundwater, have often been featured in the media, making it famous as an island with beautiful tourist caves. However, did you know that there are many caves that are very valuable as archaeological sites on Okinoerabujima?

One of these is the Nakafu cave ruins, known to have been used for approximately 6,000 years ago. Glass beads and cylindrical beads made of jasper worn on human bones have been discovered from Shoryudo cave, a famous tourist cave. Caves and rock shelters have been used since ancient times because they can help people avoid wind and rain and often have abundant spring water.

About a thousand years ago, the Southern Islands experienced major socioeconomic changes from the Amami Islands to the Yaeyama Islands. New tableware, cereal farming, livestock, ironware, and other items were introduced from Kyushu. The life of the hunter-gatherer society, which had been supported by rich reefs and forests as well as sporadic exchange, rapidly began to change into one of farming. These are some of the rituals that would have been held in the caves of Okinoerabujima during these turbulent times.

Hosudo cave is said to have a total length of over 2,179.7 meters and eight cave entrances. The Kansei Gakuin University expedition discovered a part of this in 1977, and the entire structure was revealed by the expedition of the fifth Okinoerabujima cave in 1998. A 2018 survey by TV Asahi discovered earthenware and human bones from the fourth cave, making it a “well-known archaeological site,” and the first archaeological excavation was conducted in 2011.

The opening of the fourth cave entrance is a vertical hole and can become as narrow as one meter. Descending this hole down a narrow sloping passage for 10 m leads to the bottom of a waterway. There is no large space inside, and many cave-in ceilings overlap. The lime in the caves sticks to the side walls, forming some narrow flat areas and slopes. There is no outside light, and it is a pitch-black darkness.

Earthenware and Kamuiyaki (Tokunoshima pottery) fragments have been discovered here without being buried at the bottom-most areas of the waterway, and surprisingly, bovine bones are also scattered here. One step above the waterway on the flat parts and slopes formed by the cave-in, there are many cracked earthenware remains almost without any burying, and traces of burned fire can be seen in places when the thin topsoil is taken off. The flat part can be ascended further in a spiral shape, and earthenware broken into quarters can be found even at that level. On the wall was a stone-enclosed hearth, above which was a charcoal layer 2 cm thick, where a quarter of the broken earthenware was placed.

The positions of the items were all recorded, and some of the earthenware, Kamuiyaki, bovine bones, human bones, and hearth soil were removed and taken back to the laboratory

for further analysis. The analysis results showed a surprising development. With the exception of some items, the bovine bones, charcoal from the heath, and the carbides attached to the earthenware were all dated to the 11th to 13th centuries. The results also showed that the charcoal in the heath contained only a large amount of barley that was dated to the 13th century.

The items and their production conditions were re-examined based on the results of this analysis, and the findings indicated that there was something unnatural about considering these to be living spaces, for these reasons. (1) There are other cave areas, but the items were concentrated only at the fourth cave entrance. (2) There are traces behind the pitch-black cave where light does not reach. (3) The flat part inside is very narrow, and without space where people can live day-to-day. (4) Despite the fact that the openings are barely over one meter at their narrow sections, bovine bones were found inside the cave (Were they cut up and brought in as pieces?). (5) Only half of the earthenware was brought inside the cave, intentionally broken, and placed separately. (6) Only carbonized barley was in the heath (usually detected as a group alongside rice, wheat, millet, etc.). (7) There are no marine shellfish or fish bones. (8) There are only a few pieces of earthenware and Kamuiyaki comprising tableware (usually, a large amount of talc stone pots, Chinese ceramics, ironware, etc. that are excavated as a set of utensils for daily life).

Integrating these eight aspects, the results indicate that this cave was not just a place of living or a shelter for disaster avoidance, but also that rituals and ceremonies related to farming were introduced and conducted in the caves at introduction and development stages of farming on the Southern Islands. Similar sites have not yet been confirmed on the Southern Islands. Using this excavation as an opportunity, we look forward to the day when locals will convey the value and charm of the cave on Okinoerabujima, which is not limited only to natural beauty.



Earthenware placed in front of an altar-like stone, with stalactites stuck into it, on a flat area at the top of the cave. Approximately a thousand years old but unburied (Hosudo cave's fourth cave entrance ruins).