

War ruins that connect memories to the future

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I saw war for the first time with my own eyes. The former Japanese Army ammunition arsenal in Tean; the observatory in Nishikomi; the Shinyo suicide motorboat storage trenches in Nominoura, Kakeromajima; the Kaneko-Tezaki defense station in Ankyaba. These are the feelings felt at the sites of many war-related ruins (war ruins) that remain in Setouchi town, located in the southern part of Amami Oshima. War is a memory of my grandparents. Since I was born after the war, it is a story I heard from those who experienced the war while I was on a school trip at the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum. I also learned a difficult decision at the Chiran Peace Museum. A war that I thought was an extraordinary event, far removed from myself, it is still in front of me in Amami Oshima even after the war. I was overwhelmed by the power of the real thing.

As I look around with interest, I notice that many war ruins remained close to me. For example, traces of the war remain in current living areas where the houses are lined up, such as the remains of the Oshima Fortress Command Center and the Hoanden in the center Koniya, Setouchi town, and the three radio towers looming over Akaogi, Tatsugo town. The war ruins have remained there all this time, but they are “invisible” without any interest or knowledge. However, once recognized, they become storytellers of the history of the areas affected by war.

There are countless war ruins in the Amami Islands that are surprisingly well preserved. We have been exploring the war ruins of Amami Oshima with students from Kagoshima University since 2016. We have learned through this process that we can directly confront the real existence of these areas as a result of the efforts of many people, including cultural property managers and local historians, who continue their research to connect the memories of the war to the future; residents who voluntarily perform management work such as mowing so that people can safely visit; and guides who help visitors develop a deeper understanding. Meanwhile, there are many war ruins that decay without being of interest to anyone.

I was asked at Kakeromajima, “Why are archaeologists interested in war ruins?” The entire history of humankind, not just the prehistoric period where no written records exist, is the subject of archaeological research. There has been increased interest in recent years, in researching, preserving, and utilizing war ruins following the 1984 advocacy by a researcher in Okinawa Prefecture for war ruins archaeology in the Pacific War.

Many war-related documents were lost because they either disappeared during the war, were intentionally destroyed at the end of the war, or disposed of alongside postwar development. Nevertheless, materials such as concrete structures on the ground as well as military ammunition and tableware unearthed from archaeological excavations remain. We can infer from the large quantity of rocks and coral mixed into the concrete that conditions at the end of the way were difficult. The painful and abominable past of repeated failures is an important aspect of history, in addition to the bright aspects of favorable development.

It is the responsibility of modern people to record the “memories of loss” and convey to the future generations the folly of choosing war as a means of solving problems. There is a major role to be fulfilled by archaeology, a discipline that seeks ways to live in the future by knowing the process by which the present world is constructed from a long-term perspective.

During my surveys with students, I did not know the location of the destination that I had checked in advance, and I asked for directions in Sani village in Kasari town. I heard a detailed story of the “Banzai Rock,” which was the place where the locals last saw young boys being shipped off to war. It is an important place for the people of Sani; however, this would be an ordinary rock if this story were not known. There are memories of the war revolving around not only artificial structures such as military facilities but also natural landscapes and places, but these cannot be known without human language. Things alone are meaningless. If the knowledge or experience were not left behind as records now, they will be gone forever.

Is there something we can do? We first thought that it was important to know, and we began to be involved in the battlefields of Amami Oshima, centering on the archaeology seminars of the Faculty of Law, Economics, and Humanities in Kagoshima University. Recently, people have become more interested in the project. We are now collaborating with the anthropology and social science education seminars.

Now is the only opportunity to directly compare the testimony of war survivors (humans) and war records based on historical documents (events) with the war ruins (things / locations), and verify the mutual value and historical awareness. We hope that you will watch over us—who do not know war—as we find new value in war ruins as a cultural heritage of the region and seek to connect the memories and records related to the war to the future.



Survey scene at the former Japanese Army ammunition arsenal in Tean, Setouchi town