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A REVIEW OF WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY

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Rescuing archaeology affected by the Japanese earthquake and tsunami

Antiquity's Japan Correspondents,
Simon Kaner & Junko Habu
(with a first-hand report from Akira
Matsui)

23 June 2011

Many cultural assets, including archaeological remains, archives and art objects, were caught up in the massive earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan on 11 March 2011. Archaeologists and those involved in cultural heritage around the world have, along with the rest of the global community, been shocked and saddened by the terrible loss of life and devastation caused by the disaster. We offer our condolences and sympathies to all those affected by the catastrophe, and our help for those directly involved in the rescue and rebuilding work.

As the relief efforts become redirected to recovery and rebuilding, many archaeologists and those involved in cultural heritage issues are considering how to help with the rescue of these damaged cultural properties. The affected region is home to many important archaeological sites and places of historical significance. Fortunately, many sites were not too badly affected, including the major cluster of Jomon period prehistoric shell middens on the Pacific Coast such as Satohama, Ohora and Numazu. Other cultural sites, however, including Sendai Castle and the famous pottery kilns at Tsutsumi Town in Sendai and at Mashiko in Tochigi Prefecture were damaged in the earthquake and subsequent aftershocks. Museums in the area directly affected by the tsunami were the worst affected, with curators among the victims of the disaster.

While the emphasis of the rescue effort is on the people directly affected, a large number of individuals and institutions are now involved in rescuing cultural assets. Much of this work is being undertaken on an individual basis: people helping out where they can often when they have personal relationships with the affected institutions. The National Institutes for Cultural Heritage (*Kokuritsu Bunkazai Kiko*) and the Agency for Cultural Affairs are working to restore an effective system for protecting cultural properties affected by the disaster. People around Japan and elsewhere are doing what they can to help. In addition to the institutional and individual responses to the disaster, informal networks such as the Consortium for Earthquake Damaged Cultural Heritage (CEDACH) have been sending out information and providing assistance where they can.

Article details

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Palaeolithic open-air sites revealed in the Kuran Buzan Valley, Central Zagros, Iran (</projgall/alibaigi329>)

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Multiperiod archaeological reconnaissance in the Debed river valley, north-eastern Armenia (</projgall/egeland329>)

A simple aid for pottery drawing (</projgall/frankel329>)

A conference about the impact of the disaster on cultural heritage, in particular archives, was convened on 11 June at the Tokyo National Museum and a special symposium will be held in London in October, at which Professor Akira Matsui, Director of the Centre for Archaeological Operations at the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, who has been directly involved in the rescue efforts, will speak. His first hand-account of the response of the heritage authorities is presented here.

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Further information

The Agency for Cultural Affairs has issued as list of 558 important cultural assets including those designated as National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties that were damaged. The Commissioner for the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Seiichi Kondo, published a statement in English encouraging all kinds of cultural activity to assist with the recovery effort. Further details are available on the website of the Agency for Cultural Affairs: <http://www.bunka.go.jp/english> (<http://www.bunka.go.jp/english>)

The Research Center for Disaster Mitigation of Urban Cultural Heritage, Ritsumeikan University shows a map giving the areas of cultural heritage damaged by the tsunami. (http://www.rits-dmuch.jp/jp/project/c_heritage_E.html (http://www.rits-dmuch.jp/jp/project/c_heritage_E.html))

These links are accurate as of 23 June 2011, but are expected to change as the situation develops. Updates will be posted on the website of the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures (www.sainsbury-institute.org) (<http://www.sainsbury-institute.org>).

Why rescue cultural heritage? Actions and questions in the aftermath of disaster

Akira Matsui

The earthquake and tsunami that hit northern Japan on 11 March 2011 caused enormous damage to cultural heritage as well as terrible loss of life. At the request of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (NNRICP), for which I work, together with the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Heritage, undertook an assignment for a project rescuing cultural property in the area affected by the disaster. In late April, I went to the disaster area in the Tohoku region of north-eastern Japan as a member of the NNRICP rescue team, and engaged in the project for six days.

The first target of our rescue project was the Ishinomaki Cultural Centre in



(projgall/kaner329/images/figure1big.jpg)

Figure 1. Store room of the museum at Ishinomaki.
Click to enlarge.

A walrus-tusk belt plaque from an Ottoman-Turkish castle at Barcs, Hungary ([/projgall/gal329](http://projgall/gal329))

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Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture, which houses the important Mouri Collection (Figure 1). This collection, accumulated by a wealthy local resident, Soshichiro Mouri (1888–1975), includes more than 20 000 archaeological objects unearthed from the Numazu Shell Midden in Ishinomaki City, in addition to various articles from the medieval and pre-modern periods found at the Ishinomaki Mint of the feudal clan period, such as mirrors, netsuke carvings, yatate (portable writing sets in the shape of tobacco pipes) and cosmetic kits.

As we entered into the cultural centre, we saw cars that had been carried by the tsunami and smashed into the building and now sat in the entrance and lobby. The first floor was covered with a massive amount of sand from the sea bed and heaps of all kinds of debris. At first we could not even get close to the artefacts to check their condition because of all manner of obstructions. An old cart and document cases exhibited in the lobby before the disaster had been pushed by the force of the wave into a storage room, breaking through the door. Everyone in the rescue team spent the first few days removing these obstacles. At last, by the afternoon of the second day, we could begin moving items, including registers, drawings, and historical archives from the storage rooms, pitch-black because of electricity cuts, to better-lit conditions where we could sort through them very carefully, while continuing to remove more of the debris.

We had to call out a locksmith to open up the storage room for the most valuable items, as the door lock was clogged and corroded by saltwater. Fortunately though, once inside, we found that most of the Mouri Collection had survived the disaster. However, there were still rooms in the Ishinomaki Cultural Center that we could not enter and find a secure footing, because of the collapsed piles of storage containers and items scattered everywhere. Further rescue activities need to be carried out in a systematic and cautious manner.



(/projgall/kaner329/images/figure2big.jpg)

Figure 2. Satohama shell middens are located to the left of and beneath the hill: a scattering of cars brought in by the tsunami.

Click to enlarge.

I parted from the rescue team and, with some archaeologists, went to Miyato Island, in Higashi-Matsushima City, Miyagi Prefecture, and the cities of Rikuzen-Takata and Ofunato, in Iwate Prefecture. The Satohama Shell Midden, a National Historic Site dating to the Jomon period, is on Miyato Island. When I was a student at Tohoku University, I participated in the

excavations of this site. Next to the shell midden is the Historical Museum of Jomon Village Okumatsushima. Although the people living on the island were cut off and isolated for more than two days after the disaster as the access bridge had collapsed, damage from the earthquake and tsunami was relatively small. Although many cracks caused by the quake could be seen around the area of the Satohama Shell Midden, fortunately no large-scale landslides had occurred. Importantly, the tsunami did not reach the area of the shell midden itself (Figure 2).

Akira Matsui). 2011. Rescuing archaeology affected by the Japanese earthquake and tsunami. *Antiquity* Project Gallery 85(329): <http://www.antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/kaner329/>

I have often wondered why almost all the shell midden sites in the Kanto and Tohoku regions were located only on top of small hills, with very few sites being found on the low-lying land near the coast. In the course of our rescue activities, I have been made painfully aware of the reason for this. The ancient Jomon inhabitants of the area obviously chose the higher ground for their habitation space, safe from the reach of tsunamis. Similarly, settlements from after the Jomon period, dating to the Yayoi (500 BC–AD 250) and Kofun (AD 250–710) periods on the Sendai Plain, inland from Miyato Island, were not damaged at all, suggesting that ancient coastal dwellers chose to live on higher ground, thus avoiding the danger of tsunamis. In the same way, historical documents of the Edo Period (1603–1868) record the extent of damage caused by earlier disastrous tsunami, describing the number of houses swept away. I found myself wondering when it was that people began to live on low-lying land, despite the risk.

It was raining heavily when we arrived in Rikuzen-Takata City in Iwate Prefecture (Figure 3). The library next to the Rikuzen-Takata City Museum was completely destroyed and staff from Iwate Prefectural Museum and other municipal organisations involved in the preservation of cultural properties were struggling with the



(/projgall/kaner329/images/figure3big.jpg)

Figure 3. The Rikuzen-Takata City Museum.

Click to enlarge.

rescue activity. The walls of the City Museum building that faced the sea had been built with no windows in order to lessen the potential tsunami risk. But this time the waves of the tsunami struck the museum from the other three directions. As it rushed back out to sea, a massive volume of water flooded the second floor, bursting through the ceiling, cascading onto the first floor, and sweeping away a great number of artefacts, including those on exhibition and in storage. It also took the lives of all six members of the museum staff.

Confronting this overwhelming catastrophe, I kept asking myself, 'For what purpose should we protect these cultural assets?' But I found I could justify our project of rescuing these cultural properties in the following way: 'It is surely axiomatic that if we just leave irreplaceable historical materials such as ancient documents, handed down to us through the centuries, to be scattered, lost, and decayed, we will desperately regret our behaviour when the areas directly affected by the disaster begin to recover'. Archaeology is of further, perhaps unexpected, interest for some of those victims who survived the disaster. In the near future, some coastal hamlets may collectively decide to move their habitation areas to higher ground, rather than restoring their homes on the lower ground where they had lived before the tsunami. A large number of archaeological sites are located on the many small hilltops that are found in these areas. Even if these survivors hope to rebuild their individual houses, buildings, or even entire hamlets to these new upland locations as quickly as possible, the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties requires that archaeological investigations be carried out prior to any construction taking place. It will be up to archaeologists and

related authorities to ask people who desperately hope to begin living a normal life again as quickly as possible to understand the necessity for these investigations, and to be patient while the surveys and excavations required by law are undertaken.

What should the role and mission of archaeology be in cases such as this? I will continue to put this question to myself and to others, while the rescue of cultural property continues.

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