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Archaeology in the contemporary world

1.1 A scenario of contemporary archaeology

A cluster of pristine-looking wooden structures suddenly appear in front of those who approach a low-lying hill sticking out of the heavily wooded mountain range rising steeply from the rice paddy-covered terrain. The flood plain, stretching to the south until it meets the Sea of Ariake, a large Inland Sea famous for its large tidal movements and unique marine life, is dotted with hamlets, small factories, and occasionally, heaps of industrial waste. What you see is typical contemporary Japanese countryside, where the rural is gradually eroded by the ever-expanding urban and industrial. Against this background, the Yoshinogari Historical Park, which consists of a number of 'reconstructed' archaeological features, an on-site museum, and a huge visitor centre with large car parks, looks like a gigantic theme park pretending to be an exotic ancient fortress in a setting most unusual and at the same time most mundane (Figure 1.1). These pristine-looking wooden structures are 'reconstructed' Late Yayoi period buildings. The Yayoi period was the first fully fledged agrarian period in Japanese history.

The park is the first of its kind designated by the state, and under the care of, interestingly, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MLIT: www.mlit.go.jp/english/index.html), not of the Agency of Cultural Affairs (ACA: www.bunka.go.jp/english/2002-index-e.html), which is in charge of scheduling and protecting 'cultural properties' including archaeological sites and monuments, both tangible and intangible. The MLIT's legislative responsibility is 'to utilize, develop and conserve land in Japan in an integrated and systematic way; develop infrastructure necessary for attaining those goals; implement transportation policies; promote the progress of meteorological tasks; and maintain marine safety and security' (Article 3 of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport Establishment Law). The above suggests that the protection, care and utilisation of this particular site is taken by the state to be an issue as to how to 'utilize, develop and conserve' the land of Japan. By doing so, the state unwittingly but effectively reveals that it reserves the right to choose, when it regards it necessary, between the mere protection and utilisation of the cultural properties that it recognises to be of particular importance. It also means that when it chooses the latter, the state works as a stakeholder, competing with other entities, both private and public, which also develop and utilise the land of Japan. As we shall see later in the volume, the manner in which the state differentiates what is important from what is not concerning things to do with the



Figure 1.1 The Yoshinogari Historical Park (Photographs by the author).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)Figure 1.1 (*cont.*)

past is a direct consequence of the unique history of the modern nation-state of Japan (see Chapter 4).

The land now incorporated in the park,¹ owned by the state and the prefectural government of Saga, was once a mixture of forests, arable fields, tangerine groves, farmsteads and a local shrine. Back in June 1982, a plan was drawn up by a prefecture-led committee to turn the area into an industrial complex.² The existence of ‘buried cultural properties’ had been known throughout the area well before the decision was taken, and a series of test-trenchings was carried out between July and November of the same year, with another series between January and March 1986, which confirmed the dense distribution of archaeological features and artefact depositions. As a result, it was decided to preserve four pieces of land, where the distribution of archaeological features was particularly dense, about 6 hectares in total, tiny considering the size of the area to be destroyed, as ‘cultural property greens’, and to develop the remaining c. 30 hectares of land with known buried properties. The huge rescue work commenced in May 1986, with the plan being a three-year rescue dig and two additional years of post-excavation work (Saga PBE 1994, 18–24).

¹ 117 hectares (1,170,000 square metres), see Saga PBE 1997, 1.

² Saga PBE 1994, 18; Notomi 1997 provides precious first-hand accounts and thoughts of a member of prefectural personnel directly involved in the series of events described below.



Figure 1.2 Yoshinogari site under rescue excavation (permission for reproduction obtained from Saga Prefectural Board of Education).

What the excavation revealed, however, exceeded everyone's wildest expectations (Figure 1.2). It was almost the first time that a large Yayoi settlement with the characteristics of a regional centre, or 'central place', had been subjected to a large-scale excavation by stripping more than a couple of hectares, let alone literally tens of hectares, at one go. The sheer number and scale of features and the number of artefacts which suddenly emerged from the soil simply overwhelmed, first, the archaeologists, and subsequently, when the discovery was made public, the general public (Saga PBE 1994, 45).

The feeling of 'everything-happened-at-one-go' due to the stripping of the vast area seems to have determined the course of what has happened since then, both to the site and to the discourse which the site has generated. The initial stage of the rescue work revealed that the site was continuously occupied, at different scales and in different manners, at each phase (Figure 1.3), throughout the Yayoi period. This period, dating between c. 600/500 BC and AD 250/300, witnessed the introduction and

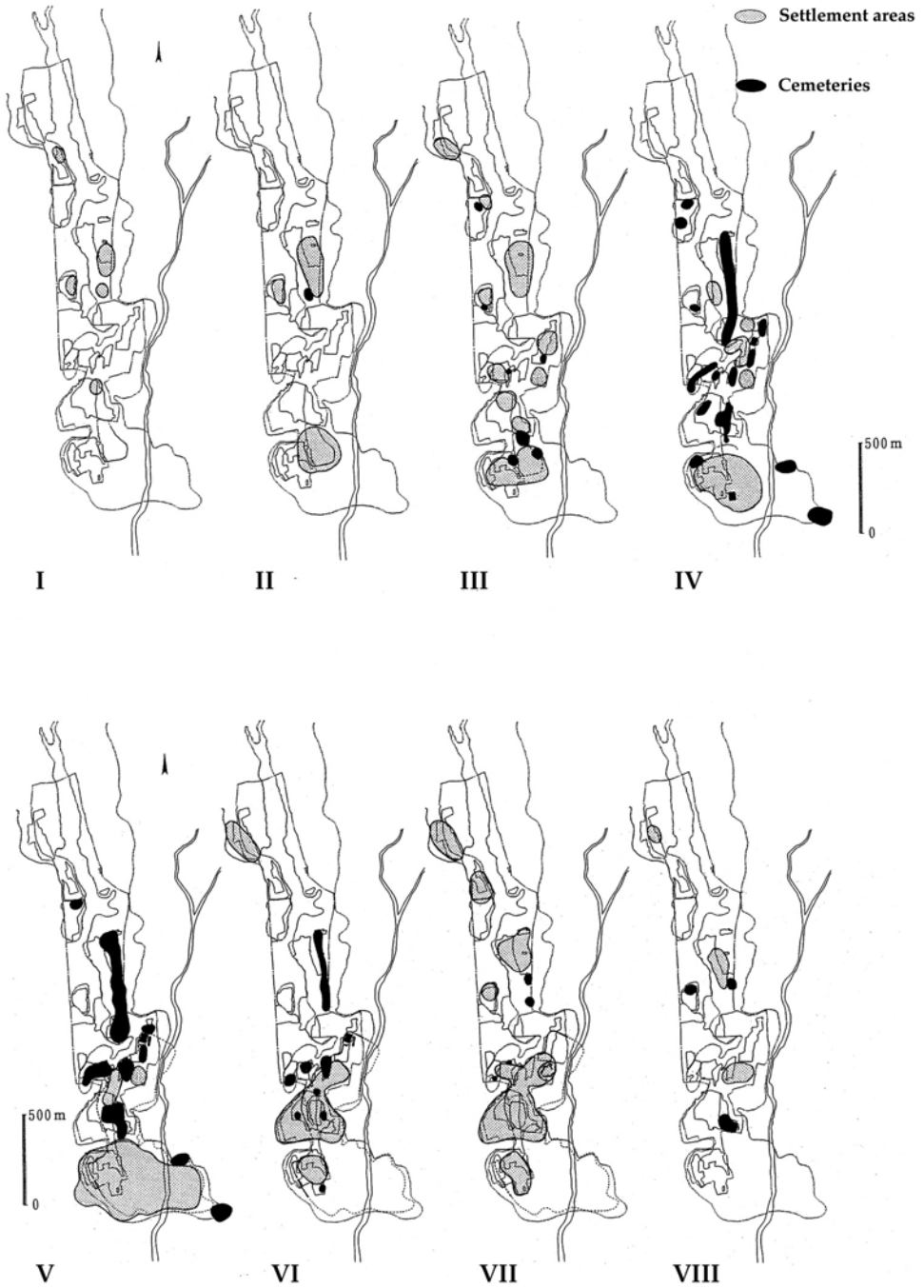


Figure 1.3 The formation process of the Yoshinogari phase by phase (modified from Saga PBE 1997).

establishment of systematic rice paddy-field agriculture in the archipelago of Japan (cf. Mizoguchi 2002, Chapter 5). Naturally, the features constituting the site and the spatial structure they made up underwent a number of changes (Figure 1.3) (Saga PBE 1997). However, the complexity of these spatio-temporal ‘differences’ needed to be ‘reduced’ in order to enable the general public make sense of and appreciate the importance of the site. The support of the general public was desperately needed in order to stop the planned destruction. This simplification had to be guided and guarded by the principle that the narrative, or way of talking about and describing the site, should be coherent, attractive and persuasive, and so a powerful narrative line was chosen. It functioned as the principle by which to differentiate what is and what is not desirable to be retained in the simplified version: selecting features, regardless of the phases they belonged to, and comparing them with what are depicted to have constituted the court of the famous Queen Himiko, the figure recorded in the Chinese official imperial chronicle of *Weizhi*. The queen, *Weizhi* records, was chosen to reintegrate the polity of Wa, thought to have covered wide areas in the western and parts of the eastern portion of the archipelago, in a momentary turmoil sometime during the earlier half of the third century AD (cf. Wada and Ishihara 1951, 37–54). The story of Queen Himiko contains many ‘riddles’, such as the location of Yamatai, the polity where she reigned, the location of her court, effectively the capital of the polity of Wa, how she was chosen, and the nature of the religious practice *Weizhi* recorded she conducted. These questions have attracted immense public attention and curiosity, and the quest for answers has developed into a popular and highly marketable genre in the publishing world in Japan. We will return to the issue concerning the cause of the popularity of the Yamatai discourse later (Chapter 4). What is important to note here is that the selection of the excavated features, to be presented as most appropriately exemplifying the character of the site, was made, despite their different dates of construction and use, because they fitted into the description in *Weizhi* of the residence of Queen Himiko (Wada and Ishihara 1951, 37–54). These were

- (1) outer and inner moats/ditches (the former dug in the late Middle and early Late Yayoi and the latter Late Yayoi),
- (2) the structures situated where the inner moat/ditch protrudes, inferred to have been ‘watch towers’ (the validity of this inference is strongly disputed),
- (3) a rectangular-shaped tumulus containing a number of jar burials many of which contained a bronze dagger and some other grave goods (dating from the early Middle Yayoi: cf. Mizoguchi 2002, 142–147).

In spite of their different dates, they have all been ‘reconstructed’, and today stand as if they actually constituted a unified entity that was the *Yoshinogari*, the embodiment of the story of Queen Himiko (Saga PBE 2000, 2003, 1; Sahara 2003, 302–306).

In other words, the significance of the site was represented as being mediated by a type of *origin* narrative, the origin narrative of the Japanese nation in this case (cf. Saga PBE 2000, 1; see also Chapter 4.3 of the present volume), and was packaged

by tacitly ignoring the flow of time during which the site underwent a number of changes and transformations.

The stripping of a vast area in one go revealed an 'archive' of the traces of human activities accumulated through time and enabled the selection of features which fitted a specific narrative line. In other words, the depth of time through which the site was formed, and the timelessness of the site as a phenomenon situated in the present/now, came together, deliberately confused, and was all used to promote of the importance of the site.

Once the initial outcome of the excavation, packaged with the above-mentioned narrative, was released to the media, the reaction by the general public was literally explosive: within two months of the press release, a staggering one million people had visited the site (Saga PBE 1994, 45). Both the importance of the site and the human drama behind the struggle to protect the site from imminent destruction to make way for an industrial park attracted media attention. This even included TV coverage of the family life and family history of Mr Tada'aki Shichida, who was in charge of the excavation (cf. Notomi 1997, 56), adding a sense of humility and contemporaneity to the movement. (We shall come back to the involvement of such human drama in the reproduction of the typical image of the archaeologist shared by the general public in Chapter 5.3.) Overwhelming pleas for the preservation of the site came from academic communities and various other sectors. Finally, the then prefectural governor decided to halt the planned construction of the industrial complex (cf. Saga PBE 1994, 45; Sahara 2003, 301–338).

It is as if the rescue excavation worked as a theatre production in which various interest groups, each with its own value judgments, both economic and emotional, played mutually affected parts, and created a drama which particularly well reflected the conditions in which we live. First of all, there was a group which tried to revitalise the local economy by constructing an industrial complex on the land. Retrospectively, the idea of stimulating the stagnant agriculture-based local economy by simply introducing production industry had come to the end of its currency by the late 1980s; the Japanese economic structure had been transformed from production-industry based 'heavy capitalism' to service and high-tech industry based 'light capitalism' (cf. Bauman 2000b) between the 1960s and 1980s (e.g. Tomoeda 1991, 139–149), and the wave of relocation of production lines to developing countries with much cheaper production costs was about to begin. Nowadays, those local governments which are running successful industrial complexes, or industrial parks, are investing large sums of money for the improvement of the environment in which the factories/laboratories function efficiently in terms of welfare for workers, access to main transportation routes, and so on. In other words, the construction of a new industrial park, by the late 1980s, had become a high-risk choice which inevitably incurred a large investment. Meanwhile, once approved, local government-run projects are notoriously difficult to halt, even if an objective calculation reveals that it will not generate wealth efficiently. The Saga prefecture, where the Yoshinogari is located, had already had previous experience of constructing industrial parks, some in the vicinity of the

Yoshinogari itself,³ and that would have made the stoppage of the project even more difficult.

Interestingly, the above-mentioned transformation from heavy to light industry in Japan coincided with a transformation in the logic used for the protection of cultural resources ('cultural properties' in Japanese terminology) from a Marxist-oriented logic (see Chapter 4.2 below) to a logic appealing to the rather naïve sentiment of the general public. The former condemned the destruction of cultural properties as the exploitative destruction by monopolistic capitalist corporations of the heritage of the nation in socio-economic, in other words fairly hard, often academic, terms, and the latter evoked the sense of attachment to threatened sites/cultural properties by depicting them as the heritage from 'our' ancestors in a soft, non-academic, narrative style. We shall come back to the implications of this transformation in Chapter 5. What seems to me of particular importance for the current argument is that the narrative created by the archaeologists, another interest group involved in arguing in favour of the protection of the Yoshinogari, exactly embodied this trend. This narrative, regardless to what extent it was consciously designed as such, evoked a sense of attachment to the site by depicting it as one to which the origin of the Japanese nation, whose culture is widely regarded as being fundamentally based upon rice agriculture, could be traced back (Saga PBE 2000, 1). It also depicted those who were involved in the rescue, and the protection movement for the site, as slightly eccentric local heroes, men of the earth in the world of deindustrialisation, struggling for the sake of the threatened heritage of the nation inherited from *our* ancestors. No need to say that, in the narrative, *our* ancestors also were the people of the earth toiling to make ends meet by cultivating the land.

What is most remarkable about this narrative is that, initially created for the promotion of the importance of the site, it came to actually influence the way the academic discourse of the site was constituted. What you see at the Yoshinogari today are mostly reconstructed features which either date from the time of the recorded reign of Queen Himiko, i.e. the late Late Yayoi, or which do not date from that time but fit into the description in the record, the Chinese imperial chronicle of Weizhi. The buildings had to be reconstructed from mere postholes, their configuration, sizes and structures, artefacts excavated from and in the vicinity of them, and their function inferred from their reconstructed structure and location in the site. The argument is bound to be circular, e.g., inference (A) from the configuration of the postholes the building would have been like this, and inference (B) if the building had been like this, the configuration of the postholes would be understood to fit the structural demand (cf. Kensetsu-sho 1997). Without inferential/speculative reference to ethnographic data or other sources such as documents like Weizhi, this circular argument cannot be resolved. From this, it can be deduced that there were only two choices for those who are involved in the presentation of the site: (1) do not do any reconstruction on the grounds that no reconstruction supported by convincing evidence and reasoning

³ The construction of one of them resulted in the destruction of the important Yayoi cemetery site of Futatsukayama, yielding a number of burials with grave goods: Saga PBE 1979.

is possible; or (2) reconstruct, admitting that the outcome is speculative, and adding an explicit description of the way the speculation was made.

In the case of the Yoshinogari, the latter was chosen and the choice was made with certain conviction: a series of volumes have been published which list the sources referred to in the reconstruction of buildings, including ethnographic parallels, figurative depictions on artefacts, excavated architectural parts, documents, and so on, and a number of experts in individual subjects were involved in the compilation of the volumes and in reasoning the references and decisions taken (e.g. Kensetsu-sho 1997, 2000). What has to be noted here, though, is that the involvement of a large number of expert scholars and the meticulous listing of numerous pieces of relevant (or inferred to be relevant) information does not itself ensure the validity of the speculative inferences, although that might enhance the *authoritative* value and aura attached to the inferences (e.g. Kensetsu-sho 1997, 12).

Tada'aki Shichida, the prefectural government officer who played a vital role in the rescue excavation and the movement for the preservation of the site, and has been a key figure in the management of the site since it was designated as a national historical park, informed me that from his perspective the reasoning behind the reconstruction at the Yoshinogari site went thus: without reconstructing them in one way or another, further argument cannot be generated concerning how they could be better reconstructed or amended in future, or indeed how the site itself should be taken care of (Tada'aki Shichida pers. comm. March 2004).

His comment sounds as if it is inspired by reflexive sociological theory or theory of communication; should the horizon of uncertainty, which leads to various attempts to make sense of it, not be generated, communication could not and would not continue (e.g. Luhmann 1995, Chapter 4; and Chapter 3 of this volume). In other words, Shichida is justifying what has been done to the site by claiming that without *problematization* there would be no research progress. This sounds reasonable enough, provided problematization is undertaken by making clear the limitations and potential shortcomings of the work, e.g., listing as many potential referents for the reconstruction of an archaeological phenomenon as possible, checking how/to what extent the reconstructed picture is coherent, and examining how well the picture fits the configuration of the archaeological evidence available. However, in the case of the Yoshinogari the work does not appear to have been conducted in this way. Instead of listing possible referents, the description in Weizhi was used as the dominant framework by which the range of the referents used for the inference was determined, and other possibilities and indeterminacy were either ignored or not mentioned. Of course, other types of knowledge such as architectural history, the ethnography of other rice paddy-field agricultural communities in Asia, and archaeological evidence from elsewhere were mobilised (Kensetsu-sho 2000). However, when no substantial clue is available, the Weizhi description appears to be prioritised and referred to as the 'last instance' (e.g. Kensetsu-sho 2000, 54, especially bullet point 3: 'Documental evidence').

The media, yet another interest group/stakeholder, and newspapers in particular, invariably covered the matter by quoting the similarities between the site and

the Weizhi description of the residence/court of Queen Himiko. It is a well-proven fact that Himiko- and Yamatai-related stories sell very well, and the comparison by archaeologists of the site with Weizhi was most welcome from the media's point of view; or rather, it is most likely that the archaeologists, who knew it quite well, utilised this tendency of the media in order to arouse public interest.

Immediately after the initial decision was taken for preservation, criticisms concerning the accuracy and validity of the comparison began to be expressed (e.g. Oda 1990), many of which touched upon the difficulty of reconstructing standing structures from postholes, and the validity of reconstructing the features on the areas where the inner ditched compound protrudes as 'watch towers' depicted in Weizhi in particular (Oda 1990). These criticisms were expressed in a rather muted manner from fear that expressing them out loud might reduce the effectiveness of the campaign for the preservation of the site. However, it is important to note that, at that stage, the boundary between utterance for the sake of preservation of the site and that for the development of archaeological knowledge was acutely felt and sharply drawn. Ironically, the fact that the site was worth preserving, even if some potentially erroneous over-inference had to be made, made the archaeologists aware that it was of vital importance to clearly draw the boundary between what *could* and *could not* be said 'archaeologically' with confidence. When necessary, things which could not be said with confidence had to be told to the public for 'strategic' reasons, and in such cases the potential damage needed be minimised by maintaining the credibility of the discipline in the form of fully grasping what could and could not be said.

However, as time has gone by, this boundary appears to have become blurred. In particular, once the reconstructed buildings came into existence, the subject of debate inevitably shifted from how the preserved site could be better represented to how good or bad/accurate or inaccurate the reconstructed features were, and because the range of referents for the reconstruction had already been determined to be within what was written in Weizhi, the debate naturally came to concentrate on the appropriateness of the 'reading' of the referents, i.e., the reading of Weizhi, rather than on examining the validity of the range of the referents chosen. Consequently, the discursive space generated and reproduced around the site has ended up being dominated by arguments about Weizhi and Queen Himiko, regardless of whether the opinions expressed were to promote the importance of the site or to advance archaeological knowledge (Kensetsu-sho 2000, 22–25).

The most interesting thing about all this is that the majority of those who took part in the reproduction of this discourse appear to have been aware of its problematic nature in one way or another. A number of criticisms on specific points of the reconstruction and on the understanding of the character of the site have been put forward (e.g. Takesue 1990, 25–27). However, they are neither put together to form a coherent alternative narrative which can replace the present one nor are they uttered *within* the discourse itself. In other words, the mainstream Yoshinogari discourse can carry on unscathed despite the number of criticisms hurled at it. There even seems to exist an atmosphere in which those who are not involved in the Yoshinogari project and who criticise elements of it are labelled irresponsible bystanders. It is as