

Ueno Toshogu Shrine: Great Stone Torii

A massive stone torii (shrine gate) marks the entrance to Ueno Toshogu's grounds. Its sturdy but unremarkable appearance presides over a history of adversity and sometimes mystery going back to 1633. The gate was first erected by the daimyo lord Sakai Tadayo (1572–1636) to honor his former master, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616). Having been a trusted ally of Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, who had been declared a deity after death and was since 1627 enshrined at Ueno Toshogu, Sakai spared no expense, securing high-quality granite from faraway western Bizen Province (present-day Okayama Prefecture) for the torii.

Sakai's massive gate stood undisturbed for about 50 years. But sometime during the Tenwa era (1681–1684), it was dismantled and buried. Why this happened is unknown, but similar occurrences were far from rare in the Edo period (1603–1868). Even a family of high social standing could fall out of favor for one reason or other, and such a decline in reputation was often accompanied by the removal of monuments associated with the people in question. Regardless of what caused its temporary removal, the torii made a comeback in 1734, when Sakai Tadayo's descendant Sakai Tadatomo (1710–1772) had it dug up and re-erected in its original place. Perhaps because its feet are embedded up to 4 meters underground, the gate has endured all natural and human-inflicted disasters to hit Tokyo since 1734, including the 7.9-magnitude Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, which laid waste to the capital and killed more than 100,000 people. The torii is a designated Important Cultural Property.