

### **Itsukushima Shrine: *Heike Nokyo* and Taira no Kiyomori**

The *Heike Nokyo* is a set of 33 highly ornate scrolls that was presented to the shrine in 1164 by the powerful Taira clan. It is invaluable as a work of art and conveys the high standing of Itsukushima Shrine at a crucial juncture in Japanese history, and is designated a National Treasure. The scrolls displayed here are reproductions.

The Taira were led by Taira no Kiyomori (1118–1181), who was well on his way to becoming the most powerful figure in Japan at the time the scrolls were donated. He already wielded great influence at court, and in 1167 became the first person of warrior origin to ascend to the office of *daijo daijin* (“chancellor of the realm”), the country’s chief administrator and de facto leader. Kiyomori, whose former posts included governor of Aki Province (present-day western Hiroshima Prefecture), had worshiped at Itsukushima Shrine for decades, and as he rose to power the shrine came to enjoy a special position among the aristocracy in Kyoto.

Donating opulently decorated sutra scrolls to shrines and temples was an established custom among the aristocracy in the Heian period (794–1185). Such offerings were made mainly to honor deities and to pray for spiritual attainment both in this life and the next. The *Heike Nokyo* contains the entire Lotus Sutra alongside the Amida and Heart sutras, all hand-copied by the Taira lords themselves to demonstrate their piety. It was decorated with the finest materials available at the time: gold, silver, and several coloring agents imported from China. The *Heike Nokyo* is accompanied by a handwritten message from Kiyomori, in which he professes his deep faith in the Kannon of Itsukushima, the bodhisattva of compassion and the shrine’s main deity at the time. Following the government-ordered separation of Buddhism and Shinto in 1868 that ended the syncretistic tradition that had dominated in Japan for more than a thousand years, the statue of Kannon was moved to Daishoin.