

Itsukushima Shrine: Swords

Swords and shrines have shared a close relationship throughout much of Japanese history. The weapons have been worshiped as deities, as is famously the case at Atsuta Jingu in the city of Nagoya. That ancient sanctuary enshrines the legendary Kusanagi no Tsurugi, a sword counted among the three imperial regalia of Japan. Swords have also been donated to shrines as offerings to be symbolically “used” by a deity, but more commonly as gifts intended to increase the efficacy of one’s prayers or as gratitude for good fortune. This practice emerged in the late Heian period (794–1185), when the influence of the warrior class grew to eclipse that of the aristocracy. Samurai would donate swords to pray for success on the battlefield. Such a donation was a significant expression of faith because the sword was often a warrior’s most prized possession.

Itsukushima Shrine possesses more than 200 swords, including two designated National Treasures. These weapons were donated from the late Heian period through the Edo period (1603–1868), signifying an enduring appreciation for and belief in the shrine among the warrior class. Many of these swords were given by the Ouchi, Mohri, and Asano families, the successive rulers of Aki Province (of which Miyajima is part). The Ouchi and Mohri are particularly notable for having donated valuable weapons during the 1500s, when rival warlords struggled for supremacy throughout Japan and swords were needed mainly for their original, martial purpose.