

The History of Niutsumi Jinja Shrine

The exact origins of this shrine are lost in the mists of time, but it is considered one of the oldest in Japan. According to the ancient almanac *Harima no kuni fudoki*, Emperor Ojin dedicated this area to the gods in the fourth century.

Four gods are enshrined, with the main deity being Niutsumi, the younger sister of the most important deity of the Shinto religion, the sun goddess Amaterasu. While originally associated with weaving, Niutsumi gained a more martial image in the thirteenth century.

In 1274, the Mongols' first attempt to invade Japan failed due to a sudden violent typhoon. The shogunate deeply feared a second invasion, however, and sent emissaries to all of the major shrines to ask the gods for protection.

According to legend, this shrine received an omen prior to a second Mongol invasion in 1281. The four gods of Niutsumi Shrine, accompanied by a great crow, took the lead and flew to the island of Kyushu, where the invaders were landing. The great crow beat its huge wings, creating a divine wind that scattered the Mongolian fleet. The invasion was once again turned back by a typhoon, and in recognition of the four gods' intervention, the shogunate designated this as the main shrine of the Kii region (modern-day Wakayama).

Niutsumi Shrine's connection to Koyasan goes back even further. According to another legend, the goddess granted part of her sacred lands to the founder of Koyasan, the priest Kukai (posthumously known as Kobo Daishi; 774–835), to build his center for esoteric Buddhism. His first act upon establishing Koyasan was to raise a large Shinto shrine to thank the goddess for her generosity.

This kind of interreligious cooperation was common, as Buddhism and Shinto peacefully co-existed for over a thousand years after the former's introduction to Japan in the sixth century. Niutsumi Shrine and Koyasan are still deeply interconnected to this day, as those planning to climb up to Koyasan via the Choishi Michi (Stone Marker Route) pay their respects at the shrine.

The shrine was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004, as part of the Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range.