

Takachiho Shrine: Main Sanctuary

Early chronicles suggest the Takachiho Shrine was founded during the reign of the legendary Emperor Suinin (est. BCE 29–CE 70), though the present buildings, including the main sanctuary, date back to 1778, when Naito Masanobu (1752–1805), third daimyo of the ruling Nobeoka clan, had them rebuilt. Recognized as an Important Cultural Property in 2004, the main sanctuary (*honden*) is a five-bay wide structure (*gokensha*) roofed in the *nagare-zukuri* (flowing) style, which features a sloping roof extending further over the front than at the back. Shrines in the *nagare-zukuri* style are not uncommon in this region, making it a distinctive feature of the landscape, but few are as large as the Takachiho Main Hall. Three bays are fitted with folding doors and the two outer bays with latticed panels. Other notable features of the shrine include the various decorative elements, including intricate sculptures and carvings.

Shrine Heritage

Among the deities enshrined in the main sanctuary are seven that are collectively known as the Takachiho Sumegami. These are actually three couples and include the deity Ninigi no Mikoto, grandson of sun goddess Amaterasu (from whom it is believed all Japanese emperors are descended), and his wife Konohana sakuya-hime as well as their son Ho-ori. As related in the early chronicles, Ho-ori was the grandson of Japan's first monarch, Emperor Jimmu, who is said to have reigned between BCE 660 and BCE 585. Also enshrined here are 10 deities known as the Jissha Daimyojin who are Emperor Jinmu's older brother, Mikeiri no Mikoto, and his wives and children. Among the sculptures inside the hall is one of Mikeiri, shown wielding a sword over the head of a demon. This is a depiction of a local legend about Mikeiri's battles with a fearsome demon named Kihachi, who had descended from his mountain cave below the mythical Futagami Shrine and terrorized local residents, kidnapping Princess Unome along the way. After two attempts Mikeiri eventually defeats the demon, cutting him up into three pieces, and rescues the princess, who becomes his wife. In addition to the statue, the influence of this legend can be found throughout the Takachiho area, including the annual Boar Offering Festival at Takachiho Shrine, which is held to appease Kihachi's spirit and ensure he never troubles residents again. Mikeiri is therefore seen as a divine protector against misfortune and the guardian of farming and other industries against evil deities that descend from the mountains and roam the region.

Architectural Highlights

The Main Hall is noted for architectural and decorative features more commonly found in Buddhist architecture than shrines: the phoenix carvings below the front-bay gable, curved rainbow beams connecting the roof's supporting pillars, and "frog's-leg" struts supporting the crossbeams. The facade shows signs of having been colorfully painted, but the colors have long since faded, leaving the structure in perfect harmony with its wooded surroundings.