

### ***Morizuna***

This carefully maintained mound of white granite sand is called a *morizuna*, which literally means “piled sand.” It was created here during the Edo period (1603–1867) to purify the feet of imperial messengers as they entered and exited the temple through the gate just beyond. Just under the eaves on either side of the gate are a pair of simplistically carved *baku*, mythological tapir-like creatures with an elephant’s trunk and tusks that are said to ward off bad dreams and misfortunes.

The oblong shape of Eikandō’s *morizuna* and its eye-catching checkered pattern are both atypical, but the piles themselves represent a much larger cultural practice. Although this *morizuna* is only about two centuries old, the practice of piling sand for ritual purification in Japan can be traced back to the Muromachi period (1336–1573).

Mounds like this can be found at other temples as well, most famously at Kamigamo-jinja Shrine, located about 6 kilometers to the northeast. The shrine has two piles of sand just inside the *torii* gate in front of the Hosodono Hall. These mounds represent Mt. Kōyama, the mountain where the shrine’s resident kami first came down from the heavens. The configuration recalls the two piles of sand that were traditionally placed in front of reception halls or shrines in preparation for the arrival of an esteemed visitor, such as an emperor or daimyo, who traveled in a palanquin. The yoke of the palanquin would be lowered onto these two piles, allowing the passenger to step out.

A separate but related practice called *tatezuna* (“standing sand”) involves piling sand or salt in front of the entrance (*genkan*) to a shrine or new building to ward away evil. Additionally, in Kyoto and Kanagawa prefectures during Obon—the Japanese holiday commemorating deceased ancestors—there is a tradition of piling sand as a way to welcome the ancestral spirits down from the heavens.

The *morizuna* is dutifully maintained by the temple’s acolytes, who re-rake the mound if it is disturbed by rain or wind. It is said that the white sand was chosen for the way it reflects the glow of the moon overhead. In a time before electric lighting, this reflected moonlight was supposedly bright enough for monks to study by.