

Asuka Jinja Shrine

Asuka Jinja Shrine is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and ancient place of worship. It is located at the foot of Mt. Horai on the banks of the Kumano River, Wakayama Prefecture. It is considered one of the most important sites of the Kumano faith, an ancient fusion of Shinto and Buddhism that is rooted in nature worship. Asuka Jinja venerates Mt. Horai, a mountain with a history of worship spanning two millennia. Both the shrine and mountain are on the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route between Kumano Hayatama Taisha and Kumano Nachi Taisha, two of the faith's three grand shrines (Kumano Sanzan).

At the base of Mt. Horai, more than 190 *kakebotoke*—round hanging tablets adorned with symbolic carvings—dating to the Yayoi period (300 BCE–300 CE) and Kofun period (ca. 250–552) have been found. They were discovered when a tree on the shrine's grounds blew over during a typhoon. Historians believe these *kakebotoke* to be offerings that date back further than the shrine itself. Local inhabitants would have made these offerings to the gods to protect their crops from river floods. The *kakebotoke* are on display in the shrine's museum.

The Chinese scholar Jofuku (Xu Fu) is enshrined here, at Asuka Jinja. Over 2,200 years ago, he was ordered by the Chinese emperor to sail to Japan to discover the elixir of eternal life on Mt. Horai. He found the herb *tendai uyaku* (*Lindera strychnifolia*), which he believed held the key to immortality. He is celebrated locally for introducing new farming and fishing methods.