

Mt. Haku: A Sacred Peak

Mt. Haku, or Hakusan, is, along with Mt. Fuji and Mt. Tate (also Tateyama, in Toyama Prefecture), considered one of the three great sacred peaks of Japan, and has been an object of reverence from prehistoric times to the present. The 2,702-meter volcano has erupted repeatedly over the centuries, most recently in 1659. Its unpredictable power has throughout history inspired awe and respect in the local population, which nevertheless depended on the peak for water, food, and other necessities of life. Organized worship of Mt. Haku is believed to have originated in the eighth century, when Buddhist ascetics began using the mountain as a training ground. These devotees would ascend to the summit and often spend extended periods of time on the slopes to instill themselves with spiritual discipline.

In time, the ascetics' beliefs spread to settlements on all sides of the mountain, where sanctuaries for worshiping the deities of the peak from afar were established. Such "Hakusan shrines" are most common throughout the nearby prefectures of Gifu, Ishikawa, and Fukui, but are also numerous particularly along the Sea of Japan coast, from Akita in the north to Fukuoka in the south. This distribution is likely due to the Hakusan faith having been disseminated by seafarers, for whom the peak was an important landmark that provided a sense of direction in what were often stormy and treacherous waters.

In Shirakawa-go, worship of Hakusan has been a central element of local religious practice since at least medieval times. Two ancient trails are known to have led to the peak from this area, though most of the early Buddhist ascetics who worshiped the mountain ascended it from other directions. Hakusan shrines remain numerous throughout the Sho river valley.