

## **The Name “Shirakawa”**

The name Shirakawa, meaning “white river,” has been used for the area around the Sho river valley in present-day Gifu Prefecture for centuries. The “white river” epithet refers to the waters of the Sho, which often appear cloudy due to hot spring minerals that are emitted from beneath nearby Mt. Haku, a dormant volcano, into one of the river’s tributaries. During the Edo period (1603–1867), Shirakawa encompassed 42 settlements, which together were referred to as Shirakawa-go (“Shirakawa township”). Unlike most areas in Japan at the time, which were administered by local samurai lords or daimyo, Shirakawa-go was under the direct control of the Tokugawa shogunate (central government). The shogunate procured mainly timber, but also some precious metals, from this comparatively sparsely populated part of the country. After the fall of the shogunate and the accompanying restoration of imperial rule in 1868, Shirakawa-go was split into two administrative units, Shirakawa and Shokawa. Twenty-three of the 42 settlements became Shirakawa village, which survives to this day. The rest were allocated to Shokawa village, which is now part of the city of Takayama. The name Shirakawa-go is still used in reference to the historical area, but should not be confused with the smaller Shirakawa Village.