

Fudaraku-tokai: Crossing the Sea to the Southern Pure Land

This is a reconstruction of a Fudaraku crossing boat. Boats like these were used by head priests of Fudarakusan-ji Temple for the practice of Fudaraku-tokai. This was a ritual self-martyrdom in which devotees sought to be transported to Fudaraku, a Pure Land in the south presided over by Kannon, bodhisattva of compassion.

Fudaraku-tokai was attempted from coastal areas across Japan from medieval to early modern times, but this temple was a particularly well-known departure point. More than 20 such departures occurred from the temple between 868 and 1722, and these are listed on a stone monument in the courtyard. For the last few departures, however, the only voyager was a priest put on the boat posthumously.

Fudaraku Crossing Boats

The most striking feature of the boat's design is the sealed cabin. Nailed shut from the outside with no windows or doors, the cabin contained a limited supply of food, water, and lamp fuel so the priest could continue reciting sutras and appeals to Kannon until the very end.

The cabin was surrounded by a 49-paling fence painted bright vermillion. The fence had four torii, one on each side. This is more reminiscent of a Shinto shrine than Buddhist architecture, and reflects the syncretistic nature of the Kumano faith. The boat's design also evokes the funerary practices of Shugendo mountain asceticism, and Fudaraku-tokai may have been seen as similar to Shugendo austerities in its potential to bring great spiritual benefit both to the practitioner and the world at large.