

The Legend of the Nine-tailed Fox and the “Killing Stone”

At the southeastern foot of Mt. Chausu lies a barren patch of earth littered with rocks. One dark boulder is draped with a *shimenawa* and *shide*, the hemp rope and hanging paper streamers that signal a sacred space in Shinto tradition. This is the Sesshō-seki, or “Killing Stone”—a foreboding site steeped in local legend.

In Japanese folklore, foxes are mystical animals able to take human form, and the oldest, wisest, and most powerful foxes have nine tails. Long ago, a wicked golden fox with nine tails took the guise of an elegant court lady. Calling herself Tamamo no Mae, she served in the court of Retired Emperor Toba (1103–1156) and soon gained his favor. When the Retired Emperor took ill, however, the fox’s identity was revealed by a court diviner, and it escaped to Nasu. After a long battle, the emperor’s troops killed the fox. Its body transformed into a boulder, but the fox’s malevolence lived on: the boulder continued to exude an evil aura and noxious gases. Anything that lingered near the rock died, and it was thus dubbed the “Killing Stone.”

Centuries later, the Buddhist monk Gennō (1329–1400) came to Nasu. Hoping to break the spirit’s power, he struck the stone with a great hammer, shattering it into three pieces. One flew to Fukushima Prefecture, another landed in Hiroshima, and the final piece remained in place. Since then, a nighttime ritual called Gojinkasai has been conducted on the last Sunday in May to appease the fox’s spirit. Torch-bearing participants lead the way from Nasu Onsen Shrine to the Sesshō-seki, where drummers dressed in white with golden wigs and fox masks beat special taiko drums (called “Nine-Tailed Taiko”) in front of a huge bonfire.

Science offers a partial explanation for the Killing Stone legend. The boulder sits beside one of Mt. Chausu’s volcanic vents, which emit sulfur dioxide and hydrogen sulfide gases. Warmed by the escaping vapor, the ground around the boulder attracts small animals—particularly in winter—and the poisonous fumes kill them in their sleep. The famous poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), who visited in 1689, mentions in *Oku no hosomichi* (*Narrow Road to the Deep North*) that the dead butterflies and bees were so thick on the ground around the boulder that one could not see the sand beneath.

In 1957, the Killing Stone was designated a Tochigi Prefecture Cultural Asset. The tale of the nine-tailed fox appears in plays for the noh, kabuki, and puppet (*jōruri*) theaters.