

Great Ginkgo and Stone Staircase

The grand stone staircase that leads to the Main Shrine was built in the twelfth century, and there is a superb view over the city of Kamakura and out to sea from the top. A giant ginkgo tree that was estimated to be more than 1,000 years old stood next to the staircase until recently. There are a number of famous incidents associated with the tree, foremost among them the assassination of Minamoto no Sanetomo (1192–1219). Sanetomo, the third Kamakura shogun, was killed by his nephew Kugyo (1200–1219) on or near the staircase. A later retelling of the event mentioned the assassin hiding behind “a great ginkgo.” This version took hold in the popular imagination and provided inspiration for many kabuki plays and other dramatizations.

The famous tree toppled in March 2010, but new growth sprang from one of the roots of the original tree. One of the shoots has grown into a thriving sapling which will become the new symbol of the shrine. The stump of the Great Ginkgo has been preserved, as has a section of the trunk, which is now displayed in the cafe of the Tsurugaoka Museum, Kamakura, located on the shrine grounds.