

Hata-age Benzaiten Shrine

Hata-age Benzaiten Shrine is located on a small island in the Genji Pond on the eastern side of the Tsurugaoka Hachimangu grounds. It enshrines Benzaiten, the deity of knowledge, beauty, and the arts. Benzaiten is associated with water, and shrines dedicated to her are often located near a pond, lake, or the sea. Originally the Hindu goddess Saraswati, Benzaiten has been venerated in Japan since shortly after the introduction of Buddhism in the mid-sixth century and at Tsurugaoka Hachimangu since it was founded in the late twelfth century. According to legend, Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199) prayed to the deity **for victory** before he attacked the rival Taira clan in 1180. He eventually vanquished his enemies and established himself as the ruler of Japan, with Kamakura as his seat of government and Tsurugaoka Hachimangu as its spiritual center.

Benzaiten was traditionally venerated as a syncretic deity, as no clear distinction was made between Buddhism and the native Shinto faith until 1868. In that year, the government ordered the two religions to be separated, and Tsurugaoka Hachimangu became an exclusively Shinto shrine. The current building dates to 1980, when it was rebuilt based on drawings from the Bunsei era (1818–1830) to commemorate the 800th anniversary of Tsurugaoka Hachimangu.

White banners modeled on those used by the Minamoto in battle are now dedicated and displayed at Hata-age Benzaiten. The red-lacquered building has a carving above the stairs that depicts Benzaiten playing a *biwa* (short-necked lute). Behind the shrine is the Masako Stone, named after Yoritomo's wife Hojo Masako (1156–1225), where people pray for a happy marriage and fertility.