

Ano People

The Sakamoto area in the north of Otsu is replete with rough stone walls that look so ancient they have blended into the landscape. Local sacred sites, from Hiyoshi Taisha Shrine all the way up to Enryakuji Temple at the top of Mt. Hiei, exhibit a similar style of stonework. These walls are the legacy of a group of people known as the Ano, who lived near Sakamoto. The Ano were not a distinct ethnic group, but rather a family of stonemasons who passed their knowledge down from one generation to the next.

Ano masons initially built foundations and retaining walls at Hiyoshi Taisha. When Enryakuji began building *satobo* retirement residences for older monks in Sakamoto, Ano craftsmen did the stonework, giving the town the distinctive look it retains today. After the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) laid siege to Enryakuji in 1571, one of his generals reported that the resilient Ano-built protective walls had not collapsed, even as the temple was engulfed by flames. In 1576, Nobunaga commissioned the Ano to build the foundations of his new Azuchi Castle on the eastern side of Lake Biwa, drawing the attention of other warlords to Ano stonework.

Unlike typical stoneworkers, Ano masons use no mortar or other adhesive to keep the wall together. They also do not shape or carve the stones they work with; instead, Ano masons simply choose from a range of natural rocks and stack them together, almost like a puzzle. This gives Ano stone walls a distinct texture with a mix of large and small stones and plenty of crevices. Putting the right stone in the right spot is crucial, as a single misplaced stone can mean an entire wall must be rebuilt. It is said that to make such fine judgments, Ano craftsmen must be able to *hear* where each stone wants to go.

Today, there is still one company of Ano masons using traditional techniques, although each stone is now labeled. The company works on the reconstruction of historic sites all over Japan, from Sakamoto to Kumamoto Castle in Kyushu.