

History of Aoshima Shrine

Aoshima has been considered sacred since ancient times, when the island itself is thought to have been worshiped as the abode of the divine. Long before a bridge was built to the island, people would wade to it at low tide, purifying themselves in the sea before conducting rituals. The earliest records that mention a shrine here date to the Heian period (794–1185). Aoshima Shrine grew in stature during the Edo period (1603–1867), when it benefited from the patronage of the Ito family, daimyo lords of the Obi domain (the southern coastal region of present-day Miyazaki Prefecture). In 1737 they lifted a ban that had until then prevented everyone except the shrine's priests and high-ranking officials from setting foot on the sacred ground of Aoshima.

Aoshima Shrine has close ties with the legend of Yamasachi-hiko and Princess Toyotama, which appears in the *Kojiki*, the first written chronicle in Japan, said to have been written in the eighth century. This story is one of the tales that follow the Japanese creation myth and explain the divine origins of the imperial line. It describes the love affair of Yamasachi-hiko, a master hunter, and Toyotama, daughter of the deity of the sea. The two meet by the sea, in a place described in Aoshima folklore as a location “where ducks come to spend the winter,” and have a child, but are ultimately separated for eternity—a key event in the myth that marks the split between the mortal world and the realm of the gods. Yamasachi-hiko, Toyotama, and Shiotsuchi, a figure who in the legend helps the two lovers find each other, are the deities enshrined at Aoshima Shrine, which was once called Kamotsukumiya (“the shrine where ducks rest”). The story of Yamasachi-hiko and Toyotama can be explored in more detail at the shrine museum.