

### **Kamo Wakeikazuchi Jinja Shrine (Kamigamo Jinja)**

Kamo Wakeikazuchi Jinja, more commonly referred to as Kamigamo Jinja, is one of the oldest Shinto shrines in Kyoto. It is located in the northeast of the city near the sacred Mt. Koyama, where the deity Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami is said to have descended to earth. Throughout its 1,300 years of history, Kamigamo Jinja has been considered an important and influential shrine, receiving support from the imperial court and powerful warrior clans. It is one of only 17 shrines in Japan regularly visited by *chokushi*, imperial messengers who deliver offerings and prayers to the deities. Kamigamo Jinja is a UNESCO World Heritage Site as part of the Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto (Kyoto, Uji, and Otsu Cities) and is the location of two National Treasures and 41 Important Cultural Properties.

#### *Enshrined Deity*

The principal deity worshipped at Kamigamo Jinja is Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami, who is believed to control natural forces and is often associated with lightning and thunder. The deity is said to provide protection from misfortune, lightning strikes, other natural disasters, and bad luck from inauspicious directions, as well as grant good fortune and sure victory. Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami is also regarded as the guardian deity of those who work in the electrical industry.

#### *Legend of the Shrine Founding*

The Kamo clan credited with founding Kamigamo Jinja claims descent from Kamo Taketsunumi no Mikoto, a deity most renowned for taking the form of a three-legged crow (*yatagarasu*) and serving as a guide to Emperor Jinmu, the legendary first emperor of Japan. Kamo Taketsunumi no Mikoto had a daughter named Kamo Tamayorihime no Mikoto. One day, as she was purifying herself in the Kamo River, a vermilion arrow came floating downstream. Thinking this mysterious, she took the arrow home and enshrined it there. That night, she became pregnant by the divine power of the arrow and in due time bore a son named Mikogami. When the child came of age, Kamo Taketsunumi no Mikoto invited many deities for a lavish feast and asked his grandson to identify his father among the guests. In reply, Mikogami announced that his father resided in the heavens and then ascended there himself with a clap of thunder.

After Mikogami's mother prayed to meet him once more, he appeared to her in a dream and instructed her to make ceremonial preparations. These included sacred garments, decorations made of *aoi* (wild ginger) and *katsura* tree branches, and a ritual that involved

horses. When the deity's wishes were carried out, he descended to Mt. Koyama in an adult form, taking the name Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami. This is considered to be the origin of Kamigamo Jinja and the Kamo Festival (also known as the Aoi Festival), one of the most famous festivals in Kyoto.

### *Shrine Grounds*

Kamigamo Jinja is a large shrine that occupies approximately 76 hectares just east of the Kamo River and south of the sacred Mt. Koyama. The shrine grounds can be broadly divided into three segments: the area between the first and second torii gates, the area between the second torii gate and the Romon Gate, and the main shrine area.

Entering through the first torii gate, visitors walk along a white gravel path between two open fields toward the second torii, passing several large weeping cherry trees along the way. On certain days, the shrine's sacred horse occupies a small stable at the end of the path. Beyond the second torii gate are various shrine halls, a traditional Japanese garden, and several subsidiary and auxiliary shrines. The Romon Gate leads to the main shrine area, where priests conduct prayers and make offerings at the Honden (Main Sanctuary). Several small streams flowing through the shrine grounds converge into the Nara no Ogawa Stream that later joins the Kamo River.

Mt. Koyama is considered an integral part of Kamigamo Jinja despite the 2-kilometer distance between the two. The rounded shape of the forest-covered mountain can be clearly seen from the path beside the shrine office. In the layout of the Kamigamo Jinja grounds, the main shrine area is oriented in such a way that worshippers praying there are facing the sacred mountain.

### **History of Kamigamo Jinja**

#### *Seventh to Twelfth Century: Shrine Protecting the Capital*

The first shrine buildings at Kamigamo Jinja were constructed in 677. After Emperor Kanmu (735–806) moved the capital to Kyoto in 794, he made a pilgrimage to Kamigamo Jinja to pray for peace in the country. Since the northeast is traditionally considered an inauspicious direction, Kamigamo Jinja was viewed as an important shrine protecting the capital from misfortune. Over time, the shrine continued to gain influence and receive official patronage from the imperial court. In the Heian period (794–1185), Kamigamo Jinja became one of the highest-ranked Shinto shrines in the country, and several emperors visited the shrine to pay respects to Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami. In 1036,

Kamigamo Jinja began the practice of *shikinen sengu*, the ritual rebuilding of all sacred structures, which took place every 21 years. From the ninth to the thirteenth century, the importance of the shrine was further enhanced by the special appointment of an unmarried princess to serve as a Saio priestess who participated in certain shrine rituals.

#### *Twelfth to Nineteenth Century: Support from Powerful Warrior Clans*

When samurai clans rose to prominence in the twelfth century, powerful warlords and daimyo supported Kamigamo Jinja in place of the emperor's court. Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1199), the first Kamakura shogun, bestowed his protection on the shrine during a period of unrest. Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), regarded as the first great unifier of Japan, provided a horse for the Kamo Kurabeuma horse racing ritual. His successor Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) sponsored one of the costly *shikinen sengu* reconstructions. Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), the first Tokugawa shogun, made a pilgrimage to the shrine in 1600, the year he fought in the Battle of Sekigahara. The subsequent Tokugawa shoguns continued to provide support to Kamigamo Jinja for more than two centuries.

#### *Nineteenth Century to Modern Era: Landmark Shrine of Kyoto*

After the last Tokugawa shogun formally stepped down in 1867, Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) made a pilgrimage to Kamigamo Jinja in 1868 to inform the shrine deity that governing power in Japan had been returned to the emperor. In the following years, the official ranking system of Shinto shrines was revised and Kamigamo Jinja became one of the highest-ranked government-supported shrines. The grand procession of the Kamo Festival was revived around the same time. At present, Kamigamo Jinja remains one of the most prominent shrines in Kyoto and receives recognition from the imperial court through annual visits of *chokushi* (imperial messengers), who play a principal role in the Kamo Festival. Each year, countless people visit Kamigamo Jinja to take in the historic architecture, admire the scenery, and pay respects to the deity of the shrine.

#### *Aoi Crest*

The crest of Kamigamo Jinja depicts a plant with two heart-shaped leaves and a small flower bud. The plant is called *aoi*, or more specifically *futaba aoi* (*Asarum caulescens*), a species of wild ginger that appears as one of the ceremonial decorations in the legend of the shrine founding. The *futaba aoi* crest can be seen on roof tiles, lanterns, decorative metalwork, *ema* votive tablets, and *omamori* charms. The plant itself is carefully cultivated on the shrine grounds near the Shokei'en Garden. *Aoi* is also featured in the

Kamo Festival, where all participants traditionally wear decorations of *futaba aoi* leaves twisted around thin branches of the *katsura* tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*).

During the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate (1610–1867), a ritual involving *aoi* from Kamigamo Jinja was conducted each spring. An envoy called *aoi tsukai* (*aoi* messenger) would collect *aoi* plants at the shrine and transport them to Edo (modern Tokyo) to be presented to the shogun as a prayer for further victories. The ritual was inspired by the fact that both the Kamigamo Jinja crest and the Tokugawa family crest feature *aoi* leaves.

#### *Influence of Yin-Yang Philosophy*

The Kamo clan who founded Kamigamo Jinja lived in the area long before Kyoto became the capital. Its members have traditionally held senior positions at the shrine and served as high-ranking court officials. Beginning from the Heian period (794–1185), the Kamo clan became known as skilled practitioners of *onmyodo* (“the way of yin and yang”). *Onmyodo* was used at court to perform rituals for purification and protection, identify lucky and unlucky directions, and predict the future using astronomy, calendar dates, and observations of nature. The yin-yang philosophy of balance between contrasting and complementary forces is represented in various ways on the shrine grounds. Examples include the sacred *komainu* and *karajishi* guardians in the main shrine area, the *tatesuna* sand cones in front of the Hosodono Hall, and the Onmyoseki (“yin and yang stone”) in the Shokei’en Garden.