

## **Birth Stone**

Sumiyoshi Taisha has long been associated with safe childbirth. The shrine's legendary founder, the third-century empress-regent Jingū, is said to have carried her son Ōjin protectively in her womb for three years following the death of her husband, Emperor Chūai.

The legend of the Birth Stone begins with the birth of Shimazu Tadahisa (1179–1227), founder of the Shimazu samurai family. According to Shimazu family lore, Tadahisa's mother was Tango no Tsubone (?–1216), sister of warrior-noble Hiki Yoshikazu (?–1203), and his father was Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199), who would found Japan's first shogunate (1185–1333).

Yoritomo's wife, Hōjō Masako (1157–1225), had Tsubone falsely accused of a crime, prompting the pregnant Tsubone to flee Kamakura. On her way to Kumano in Wakayama, she sought refuge at Sumiyoshi Taisha, where she clung to this large stone as she gave birth to Tadahisa. As an adult, Tadahisa was appointed military governor of Ōsumi and Satsuma provinces (now Kagoshima Prefecture) by Yoritomo. Tadahisa's descendants became one of Japan's most preeminent samurai families, who at their peak ruled much of the island of Kyushu.

According to popular tradition, small stones picked up from within the fence around the Birth Stone are considered charms for a safe childbirth.