

### **Ao-uma Shinji (White Horse Rite)**

The Ao-uma Shinji, or “white horse rite,” is a New Year’s purification ritual that takes place on January 7. In the past, many Shinto shrines kept white horses for ceremonial purposes, but today the practice is extremely rare. Sumiyoshi Taisha’s horse, Shirayuki, is normally stabled offsite, and is brought to the shrine for the Ao-uma Shinji.

During the rite, Shirayuki is led to each of the four main shrines, the buildings that house Sumiyoshi Taisha’s patron deities. The horse is then led in a circuit of the grounds. The ritual stems from a belief that white horses drive out evil spirits. According to tradition, anyone who sees Shirayuki at New Year will be protected from illness for the year.

Sumiyoshi Taisha is said to have kept white horses since the time of its founder, the legendary third-century empress-regent Jingū. According to tradition, Jingū brought the first horse back from the Korean peninsula after she led an invasion of the kingdoms there. The shrine’s horses are also connected to a number of legends and folk beliefs, including one that says eating three soybeans from Shirayuki’s fodder can cure teeth-grinding.