

Honden (Main Sanctuary)

The Honden is the main sanctuary of Izumo Ōyashiro Shrine. It houses the shrine's principal deity, Ōkuninushi no Kami. It is one of the finest examples of *taisha-zukuri*, a style based on ancient palace architecture. The Honden was last rebuilt in 1744, and it is 24 meters high—making it the tallest shrine building in Japan. It was designated a National Treasure in 1952.

The Honden has nine support pillars arranged in a three-by-three grid. The centermost of these pillars, called the *shin no mihashira*, is the thickest and most important of the building's supports. The two pillars that support the center of the gable ends (directly north and south of the center pillar) are nearly as large and extend all the way to the roof. The shrine is roofed with thickly layered *hinoki* cypress bark that was replaced during shrine restorations in 2013. The roof ridge is adorned with two forked finials (*chigi*) measuring over 7 meters, as well as three cylindrical wooden billets (*katsuogi*) wrapped in copper sheeting.

The Honden is entered from the south. The building's interior is divided into four quadrants, with the two quadrants furthest from the entrance (the northeast and northwest) having a slightly higher floor. The inner sanctuary where Ōkuninushi is enshrined is located in the northeast quadrant and faces west. When making offerings to Ōkuninushi, priests ascend a staircase on the southeastern side of the Honden. Once inside, they cannot approach the deity's sanctuary directly because of a partition that extends from the central pillar to the center of the eastern wall. This screens the deity's inner sanctuary from the outside, and requires the priests to turn left and walk clockwise through three of the four quadrants in order to reach it.

In addition to Ōkuninushi, several other deities are enshrined in the Honden. Five deities known collectively as the “Separate Heavenly Deities” (Kotoamatsukami) are enshrined in the northwest quadrant just outside the inner sanctuary. According to the *Kojiki*, Japan's oldest written record, the Kotoamatsukami are the first five deities that appeared at the beginning of creation. Another deity—a son of Ōkuninushi named Wakafutsunushi no Mikoto—is enshrined near the central pillar. Wakafutsunushi is said to have worked alongside Ōkuninushi in promoting agricultural development of the land.

The ceiling of the Honden is decorated with paintings of billowing, multi-colored clouds symbolic of Izumo. The association comes from a poem said to have been composed by the deity Susanoo no Mikoto after his defeat of the “eight-headed serpent” (Yamata no Orochi). Considered Japan's earliest poem, it describes the billowing clouds that covered the land where he built his home. It is this image that gave Izumo—which means “emerging clouds”—its name.

The Honden has been rebuilt many times since the founding of Izumo Ōyashiro. For much of its history, the sanctuary may have looked quite different. It is said that in ancient times the structure was even grander, as tall as 48 meters. Surviving illustrations dating from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries depict a structure painted in red and white, indicating the influence of Buddhist temple decoration. During the Edo period (1603–1867), the Honden was rebuilt using unpainted wood. This was a deliberate effort to restore the shrine to how it might have looked before the arrival of Buddhism in the sixth century.