

Izumo Grand Shrine: Changes to the Main Sanctuary

Izumo Grand Shrine has been rebuilt many times since its founding. The tradition of *sengū* (“periodic rebuilding of the shrine”) has played a role in the changing appearance of the shrine precinct and structures—particularly that of the main sanctuary (*honden*). The “Izumo Grand Shrine and Its Rituals” gallery displays numerous versions of the main sanctuary as it is thought to have looked at various points in history.

Earlier versions of the sanctuary were said to be massive in scale, but until the archaeological discoveries in 2000, very little physical evidence existed. One exception was *Kanawa no gozōei sashi zu* (Diagram for the Placement of Metal Rings during Shrine Construction), a replica of which is on display in the exhibit. Dating to sometime between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, the diagram depicts the main sanctuary as a structure supported by nine pillars arranged in a three-by-three pattern. Each pillar is three meters in diameter and consists of a trio of logs bound together by metal bands. While the height of the building is not given, the entrance staircase is noted as roughly 109 meters long, indicating a structure of considerable size. In 2000, the discovery of the remains of several pillars near the current main sanctuary gave further credibility to the idea that a such a large structure once existed. The size and arrangement of the pillars are similar to the depiction in the *Kanawa no gozōei sashi zu* diagram, and radiocarbon dating indicates that the logs were likely installed in 1248.

Despite this new evidence, the exact appearance of the thirteenth-century sanctuary remains hard to determine. This is evident in the five different 1/50-scale models displayed in the exhibit; each one represents a different architect’s interpretation of how the sanctuary might have looked.

The models show the main sanctuary painted red—a reflection of the influence of Buddhist architectural practices. Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, Izumo Grand Shrine was closely affiliated with a nearby Tendai Buddhist temple. The museum gallery contains a diorama of the shrine precincts in 1609: the main sanctuary and other shrine buildings painted red, and a three-story pagoda (a traditionally Buddhist structure) standing on the shrine grounds.

During a major rebuilding of the shrine in 1667, a conscious effort was made to reduce Buddhist influence in the shrine’s architecture. The new main sanctuary and surrounding structures were left unpainted, and the shrine’s bell tower (another feature common to Buddhist temples) was demolished. The bell from the tower and the shrine’s grand three-story pagoda were donated to other religious institutions. These substantial changes in the shrine’s appearance are evident in another diorama, this one portraying the shrine as it looked in 1667. The current main sanctuary, constructed in 1744, looks very similar to the one from 1667.

While in past centuries the main sanctuary was periodically rebuilt, there has been no new construction since 1744—particularly once the current structure was designated a National Treasure in 1952. Instead, extensive maintenance is performed roughly every 60 years. This occurred most recently in 2013, when the sanctuary’s cypress-bark roof

was replaced. On the rear wall of the gallery, visitors can view an immense forked finial and billet that adorned the roof from 1881 until 1953.