

Semizuka (“Cicada Mound”)

The famed haiku poet Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) undertook a 156-day journey from Edo (present-day Tokyo) through Japan’s northern Tohoku and Hokuriku regions in 1689. He traveled mostly on foot, accompanied by his disciple Kawai Sora (1649–1710). Together, they followed in the footsteps of Saigyō, (1118–1190), a poet Basho greatly admired, and visited many sites Saigyō and others famously captured in verse. Their journey was the basis for *Oku no hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Deep North), a travel narrative that blends poetry and prose.

Basho and Sora visited Yamadera—on the thirteenth day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar—at the suggestion of residents of Obanazawa, a nearby town where they had lodged. Inspired by the tranquility and beauty of the forested mountain temple complex, he composed his cicada haiku:

<i>shizukasa ya</i>	Such stillness—
<i>iwa ni shimiiru</i>	The cries of the cicadas
<i>semi no koe</i>	Sinks into the rocks

(Translated by Donald Keene)

The Semizuka (“Cicada Mound”) stone monument stands along the path to Yamadera’s upper reaches. Throughout the years many poets have visited to pay their respects, including famed local poet and essayist Mokichi Saito (1882–1953).