

Shirakawa Hachiman Shrine and Cedar Trees

Shirakawa Hachiman Shrine is the main Shinto sanctuary in the village of Ogimachi. It is thought to have been established on its present site in the seventeenth century by Yamashita Ujikatsu (1568–1653), a samurai general who ruled Ogimachi on behalf of the family of the warlord Uchigashima. The growth in influence of the warrior class locally during that period resulted in places of worship throughout Shirakawa-go being converted to Hachiman shrines, where people worship the guardian deity of warriors. During the Edo period (1603–1867), Shirakawa Hachiman was the head shrine of the 42 villages and hamlets that together were referred to as Shirakawa-go (“Shirakawa township”).

Also from the seventeenth century are the giant Japanese cedar tree by the shrine’s torii gate, as well as the Buddha statues housed in the Shakado Hall, next to the main sanctuary. The large tree, along with other old cedars such as a pair of trees in front of the main sanctuary that are grown together near the ground, are part of the Shirakawa Hachiman shrine grove, which is thought to be the domain of the divine and is in itself an object of worship. The Buddha statues were donated by Yamashita Ujikatsu and are a reminder of a time when Shinto and Buddhism were intimately linked in Japan. Many Buddhist structures and statues were removed from Shinto shrines or destroyed after 1868, when the government ordered the two traditions to be separated, but these developments had relatively little impact in remote Shirakawa.