

Aoi Aso Jinja Shrine

Aoi Aso Jinja dates from 806 and is the oldest extant shrine in the Hitoyoshi Kuma region. Most of the current shrine buildings date from 1610 and are a blend of different architectural styles with some unusual decorative details. These styles and details are used consistently across the structures, creating a distinct aesthetic that can be observed in later shrines throughout southern Kyushu. This consistency of design is uncommon among historic shrines since most shrines include buildings dating from different periods. The romon gate, the haiden worship hall, the heiden and honden halls, and the corridor connecting them are collectively designated a National Treasure.

The Sagara family, who ruled Hitoyoshi Kuma between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries, adopted Aoi Aso Jinja as their tutelary shrine after being appointed to govern the region by the shogun.

The romon gate is one of the shrine's most distinctive buildings. The two-story structure is 12 meters high and has pairs of carved white faces peering out from beneath the eaves at the four corners of its thatched roof. Representing pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy, they are the only known carvings of their kind in Japan. The transoms of the halls and the romon gate are carved with images of the Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety from Confucian teachings. The ornamentation is opulent in the style of the Momoyama period (1573–1615) and the design uses elements common in Zen temple architecture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Aoi Aso Jinja enshrines three deities: Takeiwatatsu-no-Mikoto, the grandson of Jinmu, Japan's first emperor; Takeiwatatsu's wife, Asotsuhime-no-Mikoto; and their child, Hayamikatama-no-Mikoto.