

Worship of Mt. Sanno

Mt. Sanno on Nakadori Island, the northernmost of the main Goto islands, has been considered sacred since distant antiquity. Towering cliffs and caves on the mountain's slopes were thought to be the domain of the divine. Devotees conducted rituals in these places, and some would spend extended periods of time on the mountain to practice spiritual discipline.

At some point the mountain came to be associated with the syncretic Sanno faith that draws on the teachings of the Buddhist priest Saicho (767–822), the founder of the Tendai school of Buddhism. The Tendai school is located on Mt. Hiei near Kyoto, and the Sanno faith centers on the worship of that mountain. The deities of Mt. Hiei are considered guardians of Tendai and manifestations of various buddhas and bodhisattvas. It is not clear how the Sanno doctrine arrived on Nakadori Island, but some suggest that it may have been brought over by medieval traders or priests who traveled between central Japan and China via Goto.

The locations of several ancient and medieval worship sites on Mt. Sanno have been determined, including the Ninomiya cave, in which was found 17 bronze mirrors dating from the second half of the thirteenth century to the eighteenth century. Such mirrors were considered mystical instruments of prayer that could be used to capture souls, and are known to have been left by devotees in places of religious significance.

Four Shinto shrines remain on Mt. Sanno today. Near the start of the trail going to the peak is a “remote shrine” (*yohaijo*) where devotees can pray to the mountain's deities from afar. From there, a steep path leads past Ichinomiya Shrine and the Ninomiya cave toward the 439-meter summit, which has two more shrines. A lookout on the peak provides views over the entire Goto island chain.