

Mt. Hōman

Mt. Hōman (elev. 829 m) to the northeast of Dazaifu has been the site of prayers and rituals since ancient times. Distinctive rock formations on its summit made the mountain a sacred peak that once drew the worship of mountain ascetics, and now draws hikers seeking sweeping views of Dazaifu and Hakata Bay.

Mt. Hōman is thought to have been a site for Nara-period (710–794) border rituals—ceremonies intended to spiritually delineate and safeguard the realm. Viewed from the south, the mountain forms a near-perfect triangle; consequently, it has been revered as the dwelling place of deities since prehistoric times. This sacred character made Mt. Hōman the natural place to consecrate the country's northwestern limit and seek the deities' protection against invasion by forces both tangible and supernatural.

The region's proximity to the Asian continent made Hakata Bay a favored port for ships traveling to and from China and the Korean Peninsula. Turbulent straits made the sea crossing very hazardous, and many envoys and other officials are said to have climbed Mt. Hōman to pray for a safe journey. One of them was Saichō (767–822), a priest who returned from his religious studies in China to found the Tendai school of Buddhism. Before departing, he is said to have carved a statue of Yakushi, the Medicine Buddha, and left it as an offering.

During the Kamakura period (late 12th century–1333), Dazaifu's appointed officials (*kanjin*) lived and conducted political affairs in an administrative complex located at the foot of the mountain.

In the late thirteenth to mid-fourteenth centuries, Mt. Hōman became a pilgrimage site for practitioners of Shugendō, a syncretic religion blending elements of Buddhism, Shinto, Taoism, and mountain asceticism. Remote mountaintops, grottos, and waterfalls are particularly sacred locations in Shugendō, and the mountain is said to have had over 370 priests' residences. During the Edo Period (1603–1867), Hōman's head priest (*zasu*) lived in a particularly large dwelling close to the summit. Today, its tall stone walls and well-made stone steps still exist, a testament to the prestige of its occupant.