

Mikasa Forest

[表のキャプション]

This modest grove, once a larger forest, has an illustrious history. Linked to an empress, named in one of Japan's first written records, and the inspiration for a love poem written by a respected poet, Mikasa Forest is a tranquil place to connect with Dazaifu's distant past.

[裏の解説]

This forest's name, Mikasa no Mori, means "hat forest." It derives from a legend about Empress Jingū Kōgō (traditional dates 169–269). The empress was supposedly traveling near the forest when a sudden whirlwind blew her conical hat into the trees. This tale was recorded in the eighth-century historical chronicle *Nihon shoki*, one of Japan's oldest written records.

In the eighth century, officials traveling to and from the imperial capital in Nara passed through Mikasa Forest and admired its beauty and serenity. Some of them wrote poems mentioning it, among them Ōtomo no Momoyo, a high-ranking eighth-century official in the Dazaifu government. Momoyo's love poem is included in the *Man'yōshū*, the oldest surviving collection of Japanese poetry. In it, Momoyo proclaims his sincere devotion to his beloved:

omowanu o
omō to iwaba
ōno naru
mikasa no mori no
kami shi shirasamu

Were I to profess
a love I did not feel,
the spirit that dwells
in Ōno's Mikasa Wood
would surely know me false.

Today, Mikasa Forest is a quiet spot with a small shrine to Empress Jingū Kōgō and a

large stone inscribed with Momoyo's poem.