

Aso Shrine: The Lower and Upper Shrines

Two shrines, one purpose

Aso Shrine is believed to have been founded in 281 BCE. It consists of two shrines in two different locations. The lower shrine (*gegu*) is in the city of Aso on the caldera floor, while the upper shrine (*jogu*), officially named Asosanjo Jinja (literally, “Aso Mountaintop Shrine”), sits near the summit of Mt. Aso, a little more than a hundred meters below the volcanic crater. In both cases, the object of worship is the Mt. Aso crater itself.

The lower shrine has numerous well-preserved buildings dating from the 1830s and 1840s, several of which have been designated as Important Cultural Properties. The upper shrine was built a little later, toward the end of the nineteenth century, after the Meiji government’s forceful separation of Shinto and Buddhist deities resulted in the closure of the Buddhist temples near the crater that also practiced “volcano worship.” The present upper shrine is a single concrete building dating from 1958.

The purpose of volcano worship was to placate the deities thought to dwell within the volcano. As long as they felt respected and happy, it was believed the volcano would remain inactive; should they be angered, however, the volcano would erupt. Any volcanic eruption, even a minor one, had a major impact: the smoke and ash would damage crops, livestock, and human habitation.

Mt. Aso volcano worship first appears in 636 in the *Book of Sui*, an official history of the Sui dynasty, rulers of China from 581 to 618. Further details about the process whereby Mt. Aso came to be regarded as divine are mentioned in the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan) and other Japanese historical texts from the eighth and ninth centuries.

Why did a provincial shrine almost 500 kilometers from the center of power in Kyoto attract so much attention, even internationally? The behavior of the volcano was believed not just to have negative effects in the Aso area, but to be a bad portent for the fate of Japan as a whole. The priests of Aso Shrine would monitor the state of the water at the bottom of the crater (the “divine spirit pond”) and alert the court in Kyoto to any change in its color, level, or behavior (vigorous bubbling, for example). If the water was thought to be behaving in a sinister way, the court would command other shrines around the country to pray diligently to prevent an eruption of Mt. Aso and the harm such an event

would foreshadow for the country as a whole.