

Myths of Mount Aso

Kicking the landscape into shape

Twelve deities are enshrined in Aso Shrine. Of the 12, three are of particular importance: Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto, his wife Asotsuhime no Mikoto, and their grandchild Hikomiko no Kami.

Japanese deities have a good side and a bad side to their characters: they are responsible both for nature's bounty and for natural disasters. In the case of Mt. Aso, their good side is expressed in support for the bountiful rice harvests of the Aso caldera, while their bad side manifests in destructive volcanic eruptions.

In the distant past, the Aso caldera contained a lake. The caldera only became habitable and amenable to farming when part of its outer wall collapsed, letting all the water escape. Local myths attributed this transformation to the deity Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto. As the story goes, having first attempted and failed to kick a hole in the wall at Futae Pass, about halfway along the eastern side of the caldera, he moved south a little way and gave the wall a second mighty kick at Tateno. There he was more successful, and the water flowed out. (Tateno is the point where the Shirakawa and Kurokawa rivers converge and flow out of the caldera today.)

The name Tateno, which means "unable to stand up," is said to come from the story that Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto lost his balance and fell over backward after his second kick. Because he drained the lake and made it possible for people to live and farm inside the caldera, Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto is regarded as the "father of Aso" and the most important of the 12 deities associated with the volcano.