

Aso Shrine

A shrine with an international reputation

Aso Shrine is believed to have been founded in 281 BCE. Today it consists of two shrines: the lower shrine (*gegu*) in the city of Aso on the floor of the Mt. Aso caldera, and the upper shrine (*jogu*) located near the summit of the mountain, a little more than 100 meters below the volcanic crater. The official name of the upper shrine is Asosanjo Jinja, literally “Aso Mountaintop Shrine.” In both cases, the object of worship is the crater of Mt. Aso itself.

The lower shrine consists of numerous well-preserved buildings 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. The present upper shrine is a single modest concrete building dating from 1958.

The purpose of volcano worship was to placate the deities of the volcano. If they were happy, the volcano would remain dormant; but if they were displeased, the volcano would erupt. Even minor volcanic eruptions could cause severe damage to crops, livestock, and human dwellings.

Mt. Aso volcano worship first receives mention in 636 in the *Book of Sui*, an official history of the Chinese Sui dynasty. Further details about how Mt. Aso came to be regarded as divine appear in multiple Japanese historical texts from the eighth and ninth centuries.

This provincial shrine far from the capital of Kyoto merited so much attention because the behavior of the volcano was believed to foreshadow the fate of Japan as a whole. The priests of Aso Shrine would scrutinize the water at the bottom of the crater and report any change to the court. If the change was interpreted as a sinister portent, the court would command other shrines around the country to pray diligently to fend off an eruption and broader national harm.