

Pilgrimages to Ise

Seki Juku was always an important place due to its geographical location. The town gets its name, Seki, from the Suzuka Barrier (Suzuka no Seki), a security checkpoint that was one of three barriers constructed in the Nara period (710–794) to protect the imperial capital region. The Suzuka Barrier sat on the Tokaido road at the west end of the town.

The town also stood at the junction between the east-west Tokaido road and the Isebetsu Kaido, the road that leads to Ise Grand Shrine 60 kilometers to the south. From the Heian period (794–1185), people from the emperor on down would make pilgrimages to Ise, Japan's oldest and holiest shrine, where the Sacred Mirror, one of the Three Sacred Treasures of the imperial family, is kept.

In part because the shogunate otherwise restricted people's freedom of movement around the country, shrine pilgrimages became both a popular pastime and something of a social safety valve during the Edo period (1603–1867). Pilgrim numbers sometimes hit quite extraordinary levels. For example, some four or five million people (out of a population of 32 million) are estimated to have traveled to Ise Grand Shrine in the "lucky year" (*okagedoshi*) of 1830. A pilgrimage to Ise was considered particularly beneficial if conducted in a lucky year; household servants and laborers would sometimes set off on the journey without getting permission, supporting themselves by begging for alms along the route. It was said that ordinary people "dreamed of seeing Ise once in their lifetime."

During the Edo period, Seki Juku became the 47th of the 53 official post stations between Edo and Kyoto on the Tokaido, one of the Five Routes connecting the shogunate's capital of Edo to the rest of the country. A scene set at one of the town's primary inns (*honjin*) makes an appearance in the famous ukiyo-e series *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido Road* by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858). In Seki Juku itself, the Sekijuku Hatago Tamaya Historical Museum has a small display of ukiyo-e of typical post-town scenes, including the 12-panel *Tokaido Meisho* (*Famous Places on the Tokaido Road*) by Utagawa Yoshitora (1836–1880).