

Higashi no Oiwake: The East Fork

Seki Juku was already a key transport node in the eighth century, almost a thousand years before it prospered as one of the official stations on the Tokaido road connecting Edo to Kyoto. It also connected Kyoto and Edo to Ise, the home of Ise Grand Shrine, one of the oldest and most sacred Shinto sites.

Pilgrims who wished to make their way to Ise had to turn at Higashi no Oiwake (East Fork), a junction at the east end of the town's main street. They would then head south for 60 kilometers, perhaps two or three days' walk, on the Isebetsu Kaido. Currently, a wooden torii gate from Ise Grand Shrine spans the entrance to the road to Ise. This was presented to Seki Juku in 2013, when the shrine was being dismantled and rebuilt according to the regular 20-year cycle that has been observed since 1690 (although the practice itself dates back a further 1,000 years). Typically, building materials from the old shrine are shared out among the other 123 shrines in the Ise complex, so it was a great honor for Seki Juku to be given the torii, reflecting the role the town has played in feeding and housing pilgrims to the shrine for more than a millennium.

During the Edo period (1603–1867), pilgrimages to religious sites were one of the few forms of travel not prohibited by the Tokugawa shogunate. According to experts, Ise received several hundred thousand visitors every year, and several times that number in “lucky years” (*okagedoshi*). In 1830, which was one such year, it is estimated that between four and five million pilgrims went to Ise. Although not all of them would pass through Seki Juku, those figures give some idea of the town's importance as a transport hub.