

Akama Jingū Shrine

Akama Jingū Shrine's striking red gate, located a short distance east of Karato Market, is a Shimonoseki landmark. The current shrine buildings were constructed after World War II (1939–1945), but the shrine's history dates back centuries and encompasses both Buddhist and Shinto traditions.

According to legend, the Buddhist monk Gyōkyō had built a shrine to the deity Hachiman at the site as far back as 859. The shrine became forever associated with the child emperor Antoku (1178–1185) after his tragic demise at the Battle of Dan no Ura. Many centuries later, Akama Jingū Shrine was officially recognized as Antoku's final resting place.

According to Buddhist belief, the spirit of the deceased emperor needed to be pacified to ensure he did not return as a vengeful ghost and seek retribution. In 1191, a memorial hall was built at a temple that overlooked the bay where Antoku had drowned, and rituals were performed to placate his spirit. That temple, called Amidaji, had been established in 1185. It is believed to have been built for the thousands of warriors who perished alongside Antoku at Dan no Ura.

A nun named Mea (dates unknown), believed to have been a wet nurse to Antoku's mother, assisted in performing the rituals for the repose of Antoku's spirit. Perhaps she was inspired by the words of Nii no Ama (Taira no Tokiko, 1126–1185), the young emperor's grandmother, who had leapt with him into the waves. When it had become clear that her family would perish at Dan no Ura, Nii no Ama is recorded as saying that she hoped the women would be spared so they could hold rituals for the spirits of the men.

Centuries later, in the Meiji era (1868–1912), the formerly intertwined practices of Shinto and Buddhism (*shinbutsu shūgō*) were officially made separate, and Amidaji was reclassified as a shrine and renamed Akamagū. In 1940, Akamagū was made Akama Jingū, a shrine of the highest rank. Then, in the early hours of July 2, 1945, American B-29s dropped incendiary bombs on Shimonoseki, and the shrine was destroyed in the ensuing fire. It was rebuilt in 1965.

Notable Buildings

The entrance to the shrine is through the Suitenmon, an arched gate topped with a bright red upper story. The shrine complex's lower offering hall (*gehaiden*) and upper offering

hall (*naihaiden*) are particularly noteworthy. The latter contains a shallow water feature representing Ryūgū-jō, the legendary undersea “dragon palace.” It is said that Nii no Ama reassured the young emperor as they prepared to plunge into the sea, telling him they were going to the fabled dragon palace. To the west of the main sanctuary hall (*gohonden*) is Emperor Antoku’s mausoleum, Amidaji no Misasagi.

Hōichi the Earless

Akama Jingū is the origin of the ghostly tale of Hōichi, a *biwa* lute player robbed of his ears by the ghosts of Heike warriors. The story was popularized in *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904) by Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904). A beautifully expressive, camphor-wood sculpture of Hōichi by Oshida Masao (1920–2008), a local artist from the city of Hōfu, is enshrined behind the *hōbutsuden* hall.

Senteisai Festival

Each year from May 2 to 4, the shrine holds a festival to commemorate Emperor Antoku. A part of the Shimonoseki Strait Festival, it features a procession of women dressed as courtesans accompanied by children and by men representing their bodyguards. The procession honors the twelfth-century courtesans who, having survived the battle, are said to have made yearly visits to offer flowers at Antoku’s mausoleum.