

Isonokami Jingū Shrine

This small, tree-shaded shrine on the eastern outskirts of Tenri is best known today for its roaming flocks of fowl, but Isonokami Jingū's modest grounds bely the depth of its history. As one of the oldest shrines in Japan, Isonokami Jingū traces its roots back through history and legend. It began as a center of spiritual power and a storehouse for ancient relics, and for over 2,000 years, it has been the site of the annual *chinkonsai* (p. XX), an ancient ritual to pray for the long life of the imperial family and the well-being of the country.

The shrine was founded around 91 BCE by the Mononobe clan, who served the imperial court as warriors as well as in religious matters. The shrine was built to house the Futsu no Mitama sword, a divine blade said to have been wielded by the first Japanese emperor. Today, Isonokami Jingū houses many sacred artifacts, including the seven-branched sword called the Shichishitō (p. XX), believed to have been brought from the kingdom of Baekje (18 BCE–660 CE) on what is now the Korean Peninsula. Over

the course of history, the shrine has dutifully continued to serve the imperial family as a caretaker of many priceless treasures.