

Hirakiki Jinja Shrine

Hirakiki Jinja Shrine sits at the base of Mt. Kaimondake, sheltered under the sprawling arms of ancient camphor trees. It enshrines the deity of the mountain, and hikers often stop there to pray for safety before heading for the trailhead.

Records indicate the shrine was likely established by imperial decree in 708. In addition to its long history, the shrine is known for its brightly painted vermillion structures. In the Shinto tradition, red represents a burning force capable of warding off evil spirits and other calamities.

One unique feature of the shrine is the main hall's Dragon Pillar. This support column in the inner shrine is elaborately carved and painted to look like a dragon. It was commissioned by the head of the ruling Shimazu family in 1786 in preparation for his forty-second birthday. A man's forty-second year is thought to be unlucky in Japan, and his gift to the shrine was

a way to avert disaster through a virtuous deed.

At the center of the grounds is another elaborately painted structure called the envoy hall (*chokushiden*), where imperial envoys made ritual offerings. Beneath the undulating gables of the roof, the eaves are painted with delicate chrysanthemums that indicate the shrine's connection to the imperial family. There are also paintings of elephants with golden tusks and fierce lion dogs (*shishi*), as well as less common images, such as daikon radishes, which are auspicious symbols in their own right.