

ACCESS GUIDE



Ohmiwa Jinja

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大神神社

Ohmiwa Jinja



Ohmiwa Jinja

the old Top Shrine (Ichi-no-miya)
of Yamato province,
also called Miwa Myojin

Enshrined Deities:

Ohmononushi-no-ohkami
Ohnamuchi-no-kami
Sukunahikona-no-kami

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Location:

1422 Miwa Sakurai-City, Nara Prefecture

Annual Grand Festivals:

Spring Grand Festival (Reisai) on 9 April, and
Autumn Grand Festival (Taisai) on 24 October



History

The main deity of this shrine is Ohmononushi-no-ohkami whose soul inhabits Mount Miwa, the sacred mountain. He is also known as Ohkuninushi-no-kami, also called Yamato-no-ohmononushi-kushimikata-no-mikoto, and worshipped as the deity (*kami*) of the development of the country. According to the myths recorded in the old books such as Kojiki and Nihon-shoki written in early 8th century, this deity is the guardian of human lives who developed the country in cooperation with Sukunahikona-no-kami and who tried to increase the happiness of people, for example, by developing agriculture, industry and commerce, by establishing the concept of the avoidance of bad directions and the ways of curing illness, by practising charms, by brewing rice wine (*sake*) and making medicines, by protecting land and sea transportation, and by promoting marriage.



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Through his own volition his soul, Sakimitama and Kushimitama, remained at Mount Miwa, also called Mimuro-no-kamunabi, for all eternity. Since then, the whole of Mount Miwa has itself become an object of worship, which is why there is no main building (*honden*) to house the Deity, a circumstance very different from that of other shrines and which to this day has perpetuated the way of worship practised in olden times. As this peculiarity of worship indicates, the shrine is the oldest in Japan.

The Miwa area where the shrine is located had been the cradle of culture in Yamato province and was also the political, economic and cultural centre. Tsuba-ichi, the oldest market place in Japan, was established at the lower end of the Hatsuse River from where roads stretched in many directions. The Miwa area was an important place for transportation together with the Yamanobe-no-michi, the oldest industrial road which passed near the shrine. During the reign of Emperor Sujin, the 10th emperor, the Miwa area attained its highest stage of cultural prosperity.

The Ohmiwa Jinja was already worshipped as the Top Shrine (*Ichino-miya*) of Yamato province during medieval times and won popular faith as one of the 22 shrines to which the Imperial House paid special respect. Furthermore, "Miwa Shintoism," which introduced a new system and philosophy to the ancient faith, was advocated during medieval times as a special religious philosophy.

Note

1 The term "shrine," in English, tends to mean a tomb or casket containing holy relics, or an altar or chapel with special religious associations or hallowed by some event. Japanese shrines are different and are, rather, respected places for worship where deities (*kami* in Japanese) stay or descend; they do not contain holy relics. "Shrine" is called "jinja", "jingu", "taisha" or "myojin" in Japanese.

2 "The Top Shrine (*Ichino-miya*)" was an honorable designation employed in the past to distinguish the most respected and popular shrine in the province.



三輪山

Mount Miwa

Mount Miwa has been praised since antiquity as Yamato-no-aogaki-yama, Mimuro-yama, Kami-yama and Miwa-yama. Indeed, it is a graceful conical mountain of 467m in height, some 16 km in girth and 350 ha in surface area. It found fame early in poems, including those of Manyōshū, the oldest anthology in Japan, edited in 8th century. The mountain itself has been an object of worship because people believe that it is the home of the holy spirit. The ancient cedar trees at the centre of the mountain have stood there since olden times and are famed as "the old cedars of Miwa." In *Makura-no-soshi*, an essay written about 1,000 years ago, there is reference to the cedars of Mount Miwa, "the shrine is that of cedar trees and it is interesting that it has a miraculous virtue," suggesting that it was once called "the shrine of cedar trees" and that the trees were notable even then.



Shrine Buildings

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It was mentioned above that since olden times there has been no main building (*honden*) to shelter the holy spirit in the Ohmiwa Jinja but that, instead, the Worship Building (*Haiden*) has been deemed of great importance. The present Worship Building was reconstructed in 1664 by Tokugawa Ietsuna, the 4th shōgun of the Tokugawa Shōgunate, and has been designated by the State as an important cultural asset because of its outstanding architectural and artistic value. It faces west, the central main support beam running 21m and the roof cross beams 7m. At the front there is a large T'ang-styled gable about 5.5m wide. On both sides of the inner front of the building are shelves on which to place offerings to the Deities.

Two additional buildings, one on each side of the Worship Building, are connected with it by roofed passageways. The building on the right is the Mansion for the Imperial Envoy (*Chokusi-den*), in olden times used as a resting place for the Imperial envoy when he visited the shrine. The building on the left is called Kimbansho, where guards were stationed in earlier times. Both of these buildings have been designated as prefectural cultural assets. East of the Kimbansho and north of the Worship Building, is the Offerings Office (*Shinsenjo*) where offerings to the Deities are prepared.





Miwa Torii (Mitsu-Torii)

There stands a special *torii*, a wooden gate called “Mitsu-Torii,” behind the inner front of the Worship Building, that is, between the Worship Building and the *Kinsokuchi*, the especially sacred area at Mount Miwa. Since ancient times people have been worshipping at Mount Miwa through this special *torii*, which is actually a combination of three Myojin-style *torii*s.

This type of *torii* exists only in the Ohmiwa Jinja; it is also called “Miwa Torii” and is one of the characteristic features of the shrine. Although it remains unknown when and how this special style was invented, an old shrine document records that “this is a mystery of this shrine” and has itself been deemed especially sacred as an alternative to a main building which does not exist there. The *torii* is 3.6m high at the central front and 2.6m high at the sides. Holy Fences (*Mizugaki*) with superb wood-carved fanlights run along some 29m on both sides of the *torii*. The Miwa Torii and the Holy Fences (*Mizugaki*) were designated important cultural assets by the State in 1953.





Sake-matsuri



Nyodo-sai

Main Festivals

Divine Fire Festival (Nyodo-sai) at 1:00am on 1 January

This is the festival of receiving the Divine Fire from the Deities at the beginning of the year. The fresh fire is received from the Deities in a traditional manner and is transmitted to a big torch which the priests of the shrine carry to 18 sub-shrines located at the foot of Mount Miwa.

Festival of Prayer for a Good Harvest (Onda-sai) on 6 February

This festival in early spring is devoted to invocations for a good harvest. It is served by men and women dressed in the manner of rice farmers who perform cultivation activities before the Deities.

Spring Grand Festival (Reisai, Haru-no-Ohmiwa-matsuri) on 8, 9 and 10 April

This is a grand festival, famous for its 2,000-year tradition, and is performed in accordance with traditional rituals in which Ohtataneke-no-mikoto served as a priest of the Ohmiwa Jinja during the reign of Emperor Sujin. It is notable for the passage of festive mobile shrines (*mikoshi*) on 9 April and for the *noh*, a traditional Japanese play, ritually dedicated to the Deities on 10 April.

Medical Herbs Festival (Hanashizume-no-matsuri) on 18 April

This festival has been celebrated for 2,000 years to prevent diseases when the spring flowers have gone and people become remiss due to the arrival of warm weather. At the Ohmiwa Jinja and Sai Jinja medicinal herbs are offered to the Deities as well as food.

Autumn Grand Festival (Taisai, Aki-no-Ohmiwa-matsuri) on 24 October

This is a grand festival in autumn. Local worshippers march to the beat of a drum on a mobile stage and children carry small mobile shrines.

Rice Wine Festival (Sake-matsuri) on 14 November

A festival of prayer for safety in brewing rice wine (*sake*). It is said that the Deity, Ohmononushi-no-ohkami, himself brewed rice wine. Sacred papers (*gohei*) and balls made of cedar leaves (*sirushi-no-sugitama*), symbols of brewing rice wine, are presented to brewers, beginning on this day.

Note

This is a translation of the original Japanese version with some omissions and additional notes. The translator, YAMAGUCHI Satoshi, is indebted to the shrine's first brochure in English translated by Mr. INOUE Shunji.

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