

# Mt. Aso and Volcano Worship

History and traditions of the mountain  
where the gods reside





## Aso Shrine

### A shrine with an international reputation

Aso Shrine is believed to have been founded in 282 BCE. Today it consists of two shrines: the lower shrine (*gegu*) in the city of Aso on the floor of the Mt. Aso caldera, and the upper shrine (*jogu*) located near the summit of the mountain, a little more than 100 meters below the volcanic crater. The official name of the upper shrine is Asosanjo Jinja, literally “Aso Mountaintop Shrine.” In both cases, the object of worship is the crater of Mt. Aso itself.

The lower shrine consists of numerous well-preserved buildings from the 1830s and 1840s, several of which have been designated as Important Cultural Properties. The upper shrine was built a little later, toward the end of the nineteenth century. The present upper shrine is a single modest concrete building dating from 1958.

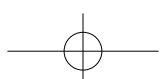
The purpose of volcano worship was to placate the deities of the volcano. If they were happy, the volcano would remain dormant; but if they were displeased, the volcano would erupt. Even minor volcanic eruptions could cause severe damage to crops, livestock, and human dwellings.

Mt. Aso volcano worship first receives mention in 636 in the *Book of Sui*, an official history of the Chinese Sui dynasty. Further details about how Mt. Aso came to be regarded as divine appear in multiple Japanese historical texts from the eighth and ninth centuries. This provincial shrine far from the capital of Kyoto merited so much attention because the behavior of the volcano was believed to foreshadow the fate of Japan as a whole. The priests of Aso Shrine would scrutinize the water at the bottom of the crater and report any change to the court. If the change was interpreted as a sinister portent, the court would command other shrines around the country to pray diligently to fend off an eruption and broader national harm.



Romon Gate at Aso Shrine (Important Cultural Property)

Asosanjo Shrine







## The Deities of Aso Shrine

### Two sides: One benign, one malign

Twelve deities are enshrined in Aso Shrine. Of the 12, three are of particular importance: Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto, his wife Asotsuhime no Mikoto, and their grandchild Hikomiko no Kami.

Japanese deities typically have a good side and a bad side: they are responsible both for nature's bounty and for natural disasters. In the case of the deities of Mt. Aso, their good side is expressed in the bountiful rice harvests of the Aso caldera, while their bad side takes the form of destructive volcanic eruptions.

## The Two Roles of Aso Shrine

### Preventing eruptions and ushering in good harvests

The rites and festivals performed at Aso Shrine serve two distinct functions: first, to prevent eruption of the volcano, and second, to ensure bountiful rice harvests. The two roles are interconnected, since the smoke and ash from even a small eruption could damage crops, livestock, and dwellings over a considerable distance. And since volcanic eruptions often last for months at a time, the cumulative damage can be very serious.

The annual harvest comes around with much greater regularity than volcanic eruptions, so the shrine conducts many more rites and festivals related to growing rice than to calming the crater.

## The Origin Myth of the Caldera

### Kicking the landscape into shape

In the distant past, the Aso caldera contained a lake. The caldera only became habitable and amenable to farming when part of its outer wall collapsed, allowing the lake water to flow out. According to local myths, the collapse was the work of the deity Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto, who first attempted and failed to kick down the wall at Futae Pass, about halfway along the eastern side of the caldera. A little further south, at Tateno, he gave the wall a second mighty kick, and there he was more successful. The wall crumbled, the waters flowed out, and the caldera was drained.

The place where the Shirakawa and Kurokawa rivers converge and flow out of the caldera today is called Tateno. This name (which means "unable to stand up") is said to derive from the story that Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto lost his balance and fell over after his second kick. By draining the lake, Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto made it possible for people to live and farm inside the caldera. For this reason, he is regarded as the "father of Aso" and the most important of the 12 deities associated with the Mt. Aso volcano.

## Rites and Festivals of Aso Shrine

The major festivals of Aso Shrine correspond to the seasons of the agricultural cycle: planting the rice in spring; fending off drought, excessive rain, excessive heat, and insect damage in summer; and thanking the deities after the harvest in autumn. In 1982, in recognition of their cultural significance, Aso's agricultural festivals were designated an Important Intangible Folk-Cultural Property by the Agency for Cultural Affairs.

The shrine holds a "fire-swinging" festival (Hifuri-Shinji) in March, when torches made of reeds are swung around to celebrate the marriage of one of the shrine's 12 deities to his wife (who is represented by the branches of a sacred tree brought from another local shrine). Their union is believed to usher in a good harvest.



Hifuri-Shinji





Onda Festival

The Onda Festival at the end of July is also dedicated to prayer for a good harvest. The shrine deities are taken on a tour of the local rice paddies in four portable shrines accompanied by the shrine priests on horseback, 14 women (known as *unari*) dressed from head to foot in white and bearing food offerings on their heads, and three local boys carrying stick figures topped with the heads of a man, a woman, and an ox. Spectators throw ripening ears of rice at the portable shrines. The more ears that stick onto the shrines' roofs, the better the harvest will be.

In late September, the "festival of the fruit of the field" (Tanomi-sai) is held to celebrate the rice harvest. A display of horseback archery is dedicated to the deities.

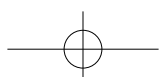
In addition to rites focused specifically on agriculture, priests from Aso Shrine conduct a "crater-calming ritual" every year in early June. They chant a Shinto prayer and fling three wooden wands decorated with paper streamers down into the crater of the volcano as offerings to the three deities of Mt. Aso.



Horseback archery at Taminori-sai



Crater calming ritual







Fire walking ritual at Saigandenji

## Saigandenji Temple: A Short History

With a roughly 1,300-year history, Saigandenji is one of the oldest temples in Kyushu. It is said to have been established in 726 by a monk from India named Saiei. The current small structure, which dates from August 2022, replaced a larger 1890 building that was badly damaged by the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes and the volcanic activity that followed them.

The temple has been battered by the tides of human history as well as by natural disasters. It was once a thriving center of volcano worship (*kazan shinko*), a place of pilgrimage for courting couples, and the focus of a complex of rustic temples and hermitages occupied by mountain ascetics. At the start of the Meiji era (1868–1912), however, the new nationalist government decided to forcibly separate Buddhism and Shintoism, treating the former as an unwelcome foreign import. It forced the closure of the temple because both the Eleven-faced Kannon (a Buddhist bodhisattva) and Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto (the Shinto deity of the mountain) were worshipped there. The main temple was transferred to the town of Aso in 1871. As anti-Buddhist fervor gradually faded over time, however, the mountaintop temple was rebuilt in 1890 to serve pilgrims.

## The Role of Saigandenji Temple

Saigandenji Temple has played an important role in the life of the Aso region for well over 1,000 years. Even now, every morning, the chief monk of the main Saigandenji branch in the city of Aso ascends the mountain to chant sutras for the temple's principal object of worship, the Eleven-faced Kannon. The purpose of this ritual is to prevent Mt. Aso from erupting. The smoke and ash the volcano spews into the sky damage the rice in the paddies, harm the cows grazing on the hillsides, and pollute the drinking water.

In addition, the chief priest entreats Kannon to answer the prayers of visitors to the temple. These prayers are written on the cloth strips hanging in bunches at the temple entrance. Each color represents a different theme: white to ward off danger, yellow for prosperity in business, green for passing examinations, purple for recovery from sickness, and red for luck in love.

One unique ritual that survives at the main temple of Saigandenji in Aso City is fire walking (*hiwatari-shinji*). Every spring, the temple monks walk across a flaming pathway several meters long consisting of the burning embers of branches and *goma-gi*, flat pieces of wood inscribed with prayers.





## The Temple of Love, Past and Present

Just to the left of Saigandenji Temple is a lava-rock path known as the Shakyogabashi ("bridge of sutra copying"). Before the modern road was built, the Shakyogabashi was the main route up to the crater. Only monks and priests were allowed to go all the way up to the top; ordinary people were stopped by a barrier after some 150 meters. As a pre-marriage tradition, many young couples would visit the place in a practice known as *ondakesan-mairi*.

*Ondakesan-mairi* pilgrims came to the temple on the spring and autumn equinoxes. Until the late 1860s, the mountain ascetics who lived in great numbers on the open ground to the west of the temple would guide the pilgrims up the mountain. But even after the ascetics had been evicted and Saigandenji closed in 1871 by government edict, the pilgrims continued to come. Reports from the Taisho era (1912–1926) describe long lines of women in red kimonos making their way up the mountain, looking from a distance like a row of red spider lilies.



Shakyogabashi



Saigandenji Okunoin and the statue of a seated cow

Marriage and romantic ties (*enmusubi*) have long been a key theme of Saigandenji. In a modern take on the same idea, the temple was designated an official "Lovers' Sanctuary" (meaning a romantic spot perfect for proposing marriage) in 2011. The statue of a seated cow was installed in November 2022. Visitors are encouraged to make a wish as they pat it.



A signpost in front of Saigandenji



Autumn leaves at the gate of Saigandenji





Furubochu Historic Remains

## What Was the Furubochu?

Saigandenji Temple is said to have been founded in 726 by a monk from India named Saiei. Over time, the temple became established as a major center for volcano worship and mountain asceticism. By the fourteenth or fifteenth century, several hundred *yamabushi* mountain ascetics occupied the relatively flat stretch of land extending west of the temple, which was divided into 92 plots of differing sizes. They are said to have constructed 37 substantial wooden temples and 51 simple thatch huts there. This loose community of ascetics and monks became known as the Furubochu. *Bochu* means “an assemblage of monks,” while the prefix *uru* means “old.”

The ascetics would spend their days meditating, fasting, and chanting sutras; inspecting the pond inside the crater for signs of the volcano deities’ moods and intentions; and guiding pilgrims to the highest permitted point, where they would worship the crater from afar.

Small stone pagodas were found here in the 1960s when a farmer bulldozed the area to make it easier to graze his cows. In the 2000s, Watanabe Kazunori, a professor of vulcanology at Kumamoto University, conducted some preliminary excavations. He discovered burnt pampas grass roof thatching from *yamabushi* huts, as well as wooden pillars from the temple buildings.

## History of the Furubochu

A community of monks and ascetics who occupied a complex of temples and huts, the Furubochu flourished from the late twelfth century until the sixteenth century. But as rival local clans battled for control of Kyushu, life became increasingly dangerous even on this remote mountaintop during the Tensho era (1573–1592). By the late sixteenth century, the buildings were all but abandoned.

In 1588, warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi awarded Kato Kiyomasa (1562–1611) control of Higo Province (modern-day Kumamoto Prefecture) to thank him for his help in defeating the Shimazu clan and pacifying Kyushu. Eleven years later, in 1599, Kiyomasa secured Hideyoshi’s permission to revive the *bochu* in the town of Aso and recall the monks and hermits who had lived and worshipped there. This new complex was given the name of Fumoto-bochu (“assemblage of monks at the foot of the mountain”) to distinguish it from the original mountaintop Furubochu (“old assemblage of monks”). The Hosokawa family, who took over Higo Province following the exile of Kiyomasa’s disgraced son in 1632, continued to patronize and protect the Fumoto-bochu.

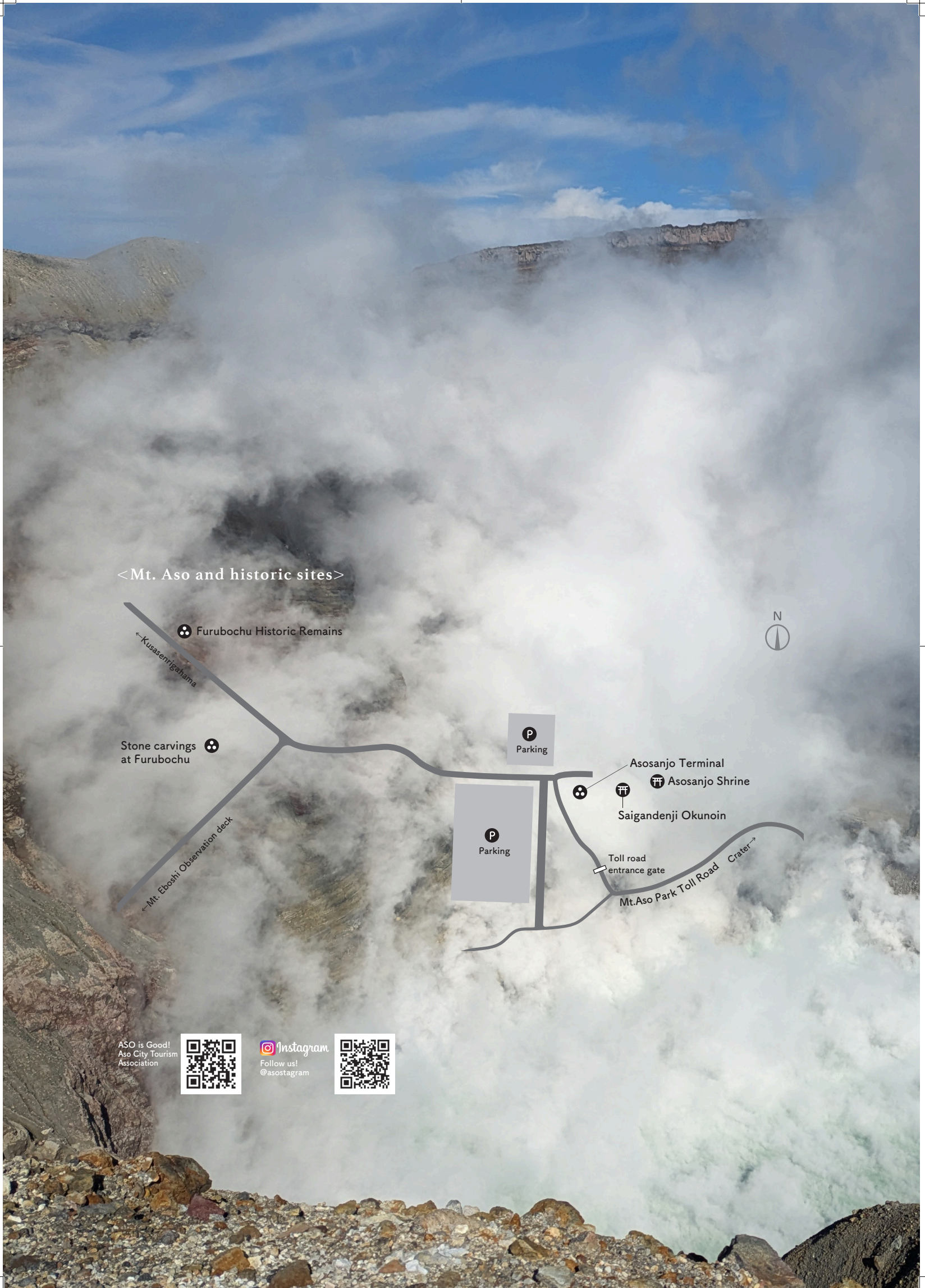


Saigandenji



Gyoja-dori (a road that runs straight south from Aso Station toward Saigendenji)





<Mt. Aso and historic sites>

←Kusasenrigahama  
Furubochu Historic Remains

Stone carvings  
at Furubochu

←Mt. Eboshi Observation deck

P  
Parking

P  
Parking

Asosanjo Terminal  
Asosanjo Shrine  
Saigandenji Okunoin

Toll road  
entrance gate

Mt.Aso Park Toll Road Crater→



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