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## Mythological Links to Shinto Architecture

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Shinto (“The Kami Way”) is the native religion of Japan that centers on the worship of kami, or spirits. Shrines are major components of the religion, as each shrine is dedicated to specific kami. The location of a shrine is very important. Some of the most ancient and famous shrines were founded at places where mythological events were reputed to have occurred.<sup>1</sup> For example, The Ise shrine is dedicated to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, who appeared to Princess Yamato and said, “It is a secluded and pleasant land. In this land I wish to dwell.”<sup>2</sup> Shinto worship in its earliest form did not occur at a shrine building, but at a sacred tree of life in which the spirit of the kami dwells and operates, which originates from the myth of the High Tree Deity declaring that he would place a sacred tree and a sacred enclosure in heaven to pray for the prosperity of the emperor.<sup>3</sup> The move to shrine worship involved the construction of various structures, some symbolic and others purely ornamental. The exterior of a shrine compound is mainly composed of walls, *torii*, bridges, and guardians. Depending on the location, shrines can include one or multiple buildings. These buildings each serve specific purposes and may be built in different architectural styles. The purpose of this investigation is to examine the different elements of a Shinto shrine and the mythological significance of each element.

A Shinto shrine is typically enclosed by one or multiple (depending on size) protective walls, with a *torii* marking the entrance. The word *torii* is formed from the characters meaning “bird” (鳥 *tori*) and “to be” (居 *i*), together having the meaning “bird perch”.<sup>4</sup> The structure generally consists of two vertical poles supporting two horizontal poles. The name *torii* acts as a commemoration to the birds whose singing helped the heavenly kami bring Amaterasu out of the cave from which she had retired.<sup>5</sup> There are more than twenty types of *torii*, each one named for the shrines with which they are associated.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Herbert, *Shinto: the Fountainhead of Japan* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1967), 92-93

<sup>2</sup> Yasutada Watanabe, *Shinto Art: Ise and Izumo Shrines*, trans. Robert Ricketts (New York: Weatherhill/Heibonsha, 1974), 27

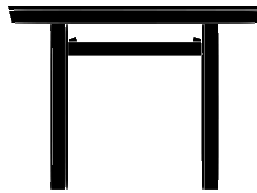
<sup>3</sup> Herbert, *Shinto: the Fountainhead of Japan.*, 94

<sup>4</sup> Sokyo Ono, *Shinto: The Kami Way* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc., 1962), 28

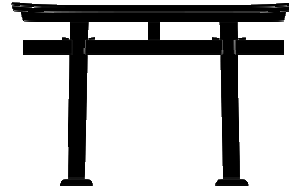
<sup>5</sup> Herbert, *Shinto: the Fountainhead of Japan.*, 95



*Ryobou-torii*



*Ise-torii*



*Myojin-torii*

Images courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

The *torii* are important because they are reminders of a significant event in Shinto mythology: the return of goodness and light to the world. Shrines are dwellings for kami and the *torii* marks that clearly. The *torii* also indicate a departure from the human world and entrance into the world of kami. The different styles of *torii* may be representative of the different kami who dwell at each shrine.

Beyond the first *torii* (there can be multiple before reaching the shrine building), there is a path called “the approach”.<sup>6</sup> Traditionally, the path bends before a visitor reaches the main sanctuary, as only the emperor and kami were allowed to take a straight path. This path often includes one or more bridges, with the last bridge marking the beginning of the kami world. This final bridge can be very steep and difficult to cross, which indicates the significance of the journey. Entering the shrine means entering the realm of a deity, which is something that would not be very simple.

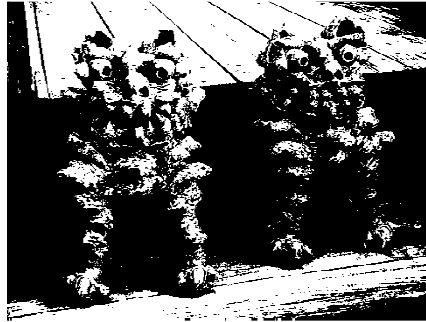
Another major component of the exterior of the shrine compound is the use of guardians. These are figures that are meant to ward off evil spirits and misfortune.<sup>7</sup> There are two animal statues, typically of lions or dogs, which are placed on either side of the first *torii*, along the approach, or within the sanctuary. At different shrines, there are different animals that are believed to be attendants of residing kami.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ono, *Shinto: The Kami Way*, 31

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*,32

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*,33



Guardian animals

There are generally three types of shrine buildings: *honden*, *heiden*, and *haiden*. The *honden* is the main sanctuary, where the kami is enshrined; the *heiden* and *haiden* are building for priests and devotees, respectively.<sup>9</sup> All shrines do not include all three buildings, but the *honden* is always present, making it the most important building. Within the *honden* is a sacred object or objects related to the kami that resides there. For instance, the shrine at Ise is said to hold the sacred mirror which was used to lure Amaterasu from the cave as well as her sacred beads and sword. A *honden* can be built in one of many architectural styles (*zukuri*). The roof of the *honden* may include finials known as *chigi*. The way the *chigi* is cut can indicate the presence of a male or female kami. When the *chigi* is cut vertically, the kami is male and when the *chigi* is cut horizontally, the kami is female<sup>10</sup> (See Appendix Figures 1 and 2). The shrine at Izumo uses *Taisha-zukuri*, with the construction being detailed by the kami it is dedicated to, Okuni-Nusi. According to the *Kojiki*, Okuni-Nusi wanted it to be built “like the heavenly dwelling where rules the heavenly sun-lineage...firmly rooting the posts of the palace in the bedrock below, and raising high the crossbeams unto Takamo-no-hara itself”<sup>11</sup> (See Appendix Figure 1). This indicates that the shrines were built to please the kami as well as commemorate them.

Ancient shrines were built after a kami appeared to a human being. The kami often appeared in dreams or visions, detailing locations and instructions on how the shrine should be built. The variety of styles of shrine architecture indicates the vast number of kami that exist. In Shinto mythology, kami were always being created. The creator kami, Izanagi and Izanami had many offspring together. When Izanami died giving birth to the fire kami, more kami were created even in her death.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert, *Shinto: the Fountainhead of Japan.*, 107

<sup>10</sup> Herbert, *Shinto: the Fountainhead of Japan.*, 111

<sup>11</sup> Donald L. Philippi trans., *Kojiki.* (University of Tokyo Press: 1968), 134

The shrine at Ise is composed of two shrines, one dedicated to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and the other dedicated to the deity of grain Toyouke Okami. The practice of rebuilding the shrine every twenty years represents a rebirth. In ancient times, the shrine was burnt down, which seems to be symbolic of the loss of light after Amaterasu retired to her cave. During this time of darkness, nothing would have been able to grow as there was no light to nurture any plants. Evil had control over the world, until the other kami devised a plan to lure Amaterasu out of the cave. Her return to the world meant everything returned to perfect order and that is why the shrine at Ise is so important.

The varying sizes and styles of shrines seem to demonstrate this idea of never-ending kami. While Shinto may no longer be Japan's main religion, the shrines that remain are reminders of the ancient mythology. Structures such as the *torii* are very common but do not completely lose their meaning because there are still different styles that represent the different spirits that exist in nature. The *torii* still act as markers of sacred grounds and the beginning of a potentially difficult journey (the approach). The shrine architecture demonstrates the endurance of the mythology to this day.

Appendix

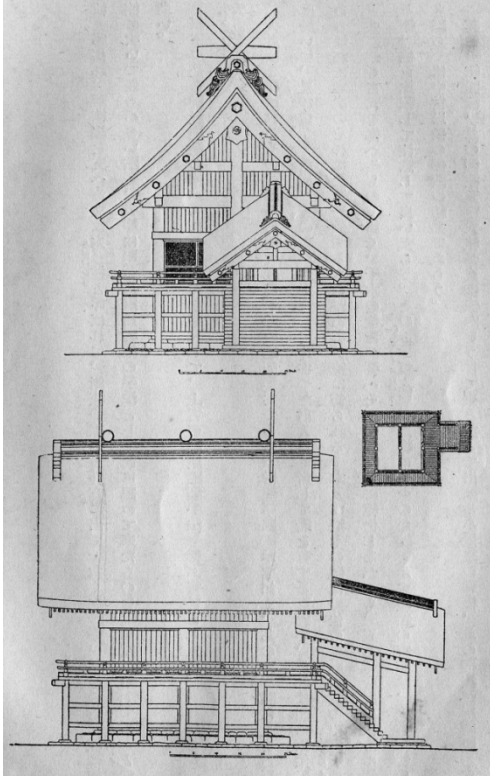


Figure 1: *Taisha-zukuri*

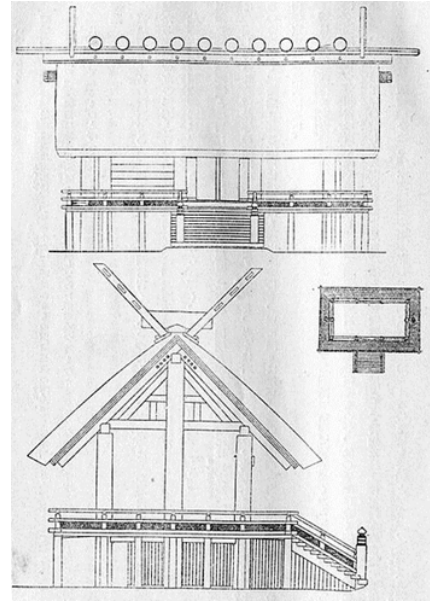


Figure 2: *Shinmei-zukuri*

Images courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

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