

A Shrine Dedicated to the Gods of the Sea

■ The four main sanctuaries of Sumiyoshi Taisha

Sumiyoshi Taisha, a revered shrine familiarly known as “Sumiyosan” features an ancient architectural style of Japanese shrine.

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Osaka, which has benefitted from Osaka bay, a large inland sea, is one of Japan’s most prominent commercial cities even today. The city has flourished as a result of maritime trade with other areas of Japan and abroad conducted mainly through the port of Osaka at the tip of the bay. Sumiyoshi Taisha Shrine was built in 211 AD according to the shrine’s literature and has been revered by people as the place dedicated to the deities that guard sea traffic. The shrine, approximately eight kilometers from the coast today, was originally constructed on the seaside, for the worship of the god of the sea. The Japanese envoy to the Sui dynasty of China in the

seventh century, the subsequent missions to the Tang dynasty that continued until the ninth century, and people engaged in the shipping business in the Edo period

(1603-1867) offered their prayers here for safety during travel on the seas.

A notable characteristic of Sumiyoshi Taisha is its four main sanctuaries, which are designated as national treasures. They are dedicated to the three deities of



■ A bird’s eye view of the four main sanctuaries showing their resemblance to a fleet of ships

creation that are believed to have appeared from the sea in Japanese mythology and to Empress Jingu who established the shrine. All four of the main shrine buildings, each dedicated to a god, were constructed to face Osaka bay. Three of the four main shrine buildings stand in line while the fourth stands alongside the third, creating a unique layout that looks like a fleet of ships navigating the sea, reflecting ancient ritual forms. The approximately 600 stone lanterns that line the coastline were donated chiefly by people engaged in shipping during the Edo period and reportedly their light was used as a landmark for navigation. The shrine, which has supported the people who have made Osaka prosperous as a city of merchants by bringing products and new culture from other areas of Japan and abroad, is still so revered that approximately two million people pay their respects during traditional new year's visits in the first three days of January in a normal year.

"In Osaka, people affectionately call the shrine Sumiyossan, and traditionally the new year begins with a visit to Sumiyossan. Sumiyoshi Taisha provides spiritual support to the local people in their daily lives as well as being a place for the rituals that mark the milestones of their lives," says Kawano Mitsuhiro, an employee of the General Affairs Division of Sumiyoshi Taisha.

Various facilities within the 10,000 m² premises of Sumiyoshi Taisha reflect the shrine's long history.

The four main shrine build-



■ One of the main sanctuaries, a national treasure constructed using the Sumiyoshi-zukuri style with kiritsuma-zukuri gabled roofs

ings are particularly noteworthy because they were constructed in an ancient architectural style using *Sumiyoshi-zukuri*, which is characterized by *kiritsuma-zukuri* gabled roofs using many layers of thinly peeled Japanese cypress bark. Unlike the Five-storied Pagoda of Mount Haguro (*Highlighting JAPAN* May 2020) and the Jizodo (Jizo Hall) at Shofuku-ji Temple (July 2020), whose four roof corners slope upwards, the sanctuaries have roofs featuring straight slopes that do not bend upward. The interior is divided into two rooms called Gejin (outer sanctum) and Naijin (inner sanctum). The pillars are painted with *ninuri*, a vermillion lacquer, and the walls are finished in white with a *gofunnuri* coating that uses a pigment made of ground seashells.

The main shrine buildings that are currently standing were built in 1810 and clearly reflect the ancient architectural styles that had been adopted long before then. They are extremely valuable in terms of the history of shrine architecture.

In December of last year (2020),

UNESCO approved Japan's application to inscribe the "Traditional skills, techniques and knowledge for the conservation and transmission of wooden architecture in Japan" on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The selected seventeen skills, techniques and knowledge for conservation include those relating to the repair of and materials for buildings with Hon-gawarabuki roofs and cypress bark roofs as well as for cypress bark peeling, which are key elements of Sumiyoshi Taisha. Significant progress may be made in the preservation of the shrine's historical value reflecting the history of Osaka. 🇯🇵



■ The golden door of the second main shrine building