

Short Cultural History of the Region

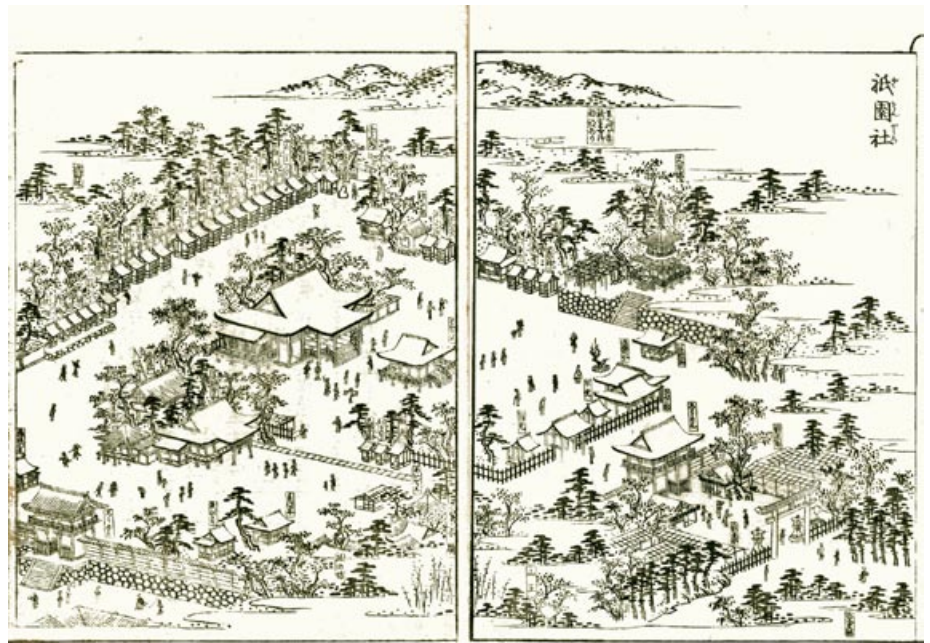
Of the mountains surrounding Kyoto on three sides, the ones which are closest to the present downtown area lie in the east. This fact gave the whole eastern region of Kyoto its name, Higashiyama, i. e. Eastern Mountains. Since ancient times this area has been rich in Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. These sacred precincts themselves and their lengthy linear accessways very much determined the original urban structure and its historic development also of the part which is now an ensemble preservation district.

Long before the actual founding of Heiankyō, the Capital of Peace and Tranquility or the Kyoto of today, a tribe called Yasaka no Miyatsuko had immigrated from the Korean empire of Kōrai and settled at these foothills. Their religious life centered around Hōkanji Temple, a Buddhist temple built around 589, but completely destroyed by fire since. Of the precinct, only the pagoda is left; however, the present five-storied pagoda was probably rebuilt in 1440. It is the most important vertical marker within the district today. It has been suggested that a public place-space be created underneath and around it, but this suggestion has so far not been realized.

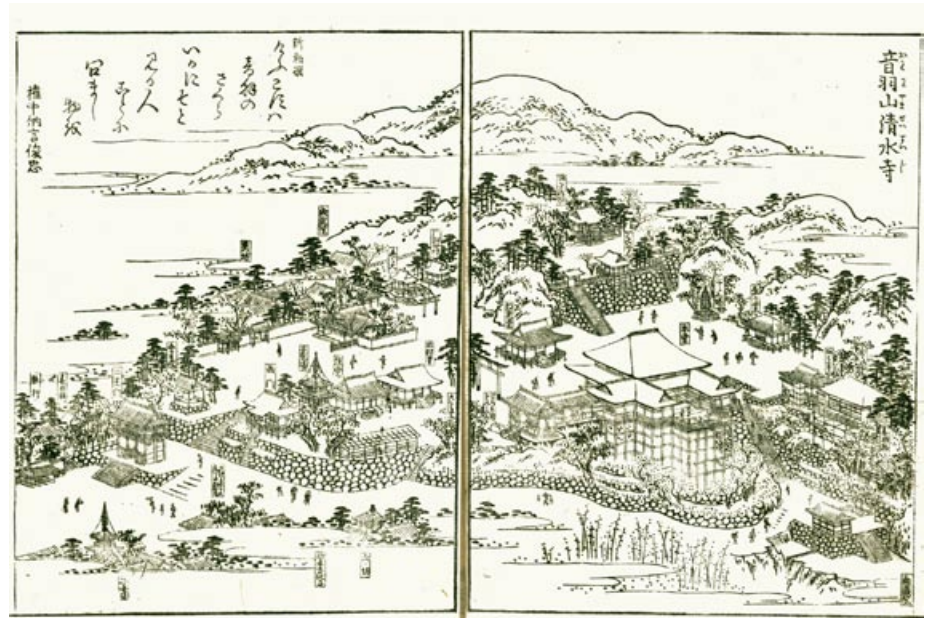
The rather narrow street west of the pagoda runs straight north to the southern entrance of the Gion Shrine, renamed Yasaka Shrine in 1868, the first year of Meiji. This was a result of the campaign “to reject Buddhism and repel Buddhist teaching” This might have very well been the spot revered by the above tribe as a sacred one. Shrine tradition has it that the shrine dates back to the reign of Empress Saimei (655-660 A.D.). The deities worshipped here are Susano no Mikoto, the younger rather tempestuous brother of Amaterasu Oho-Mikami, the sun-deity from which the Japanese imperial family traditionally derived its descend, his consort, Kushinada no Hime, and their eight offsprings.

It was in 974 when the plague struck the capital and a goryō-e, a ceremony to placate the god of the epidemic by the grace of Susano no Mikoto was celebrated and the plague subsided, that the Gion Shrine became the tutelary shrine of the downtown guilds, timber and cotton merchants and the center of the annual Gion Matsuri, one of the big three festivals of Japan. Whereas the Gion Festival draws ten of thousands of visitors into the area, its other important festival, the Okera Matsuri, is more of a local Kyoto event. A new sacred fire is kindled in the shrine at New Year and given to everyone coming up to early in the morning of New Year, coming for a First Shrine Visit. A woodcut from the end of the 18th century gives an impression of the religious and civic place space created by the Gion Shrine which has not very much changed up to now. The main shrine building facing north has repeatedly been burned down; its present form derives from a rebuilding in 1653. Together with the western two-storied gate and the stone Torii it has been designated as cultural asset.

Yasaka shrine

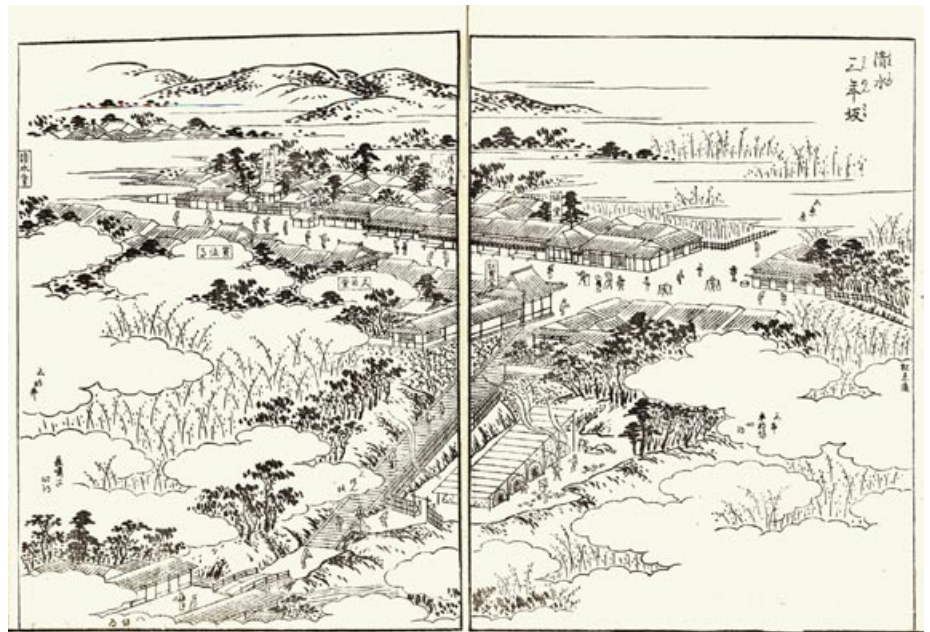


Kiyomizu dera



As the Shinto Gion Shrine is today truly the ‘unofficial’ entrance from the north to the Sanneizaka Preservation District, so is the Buddhist Kiyomizu Temple the ‘unofficial’ goal for the pilgrim as well as the casual tourist. This temple complex, whose history can be traced back to the 8th century, has burned down several times; its 17 major buildings date from the most recent reconstruction in 1631. Kiyomizu Dera with its many-branched access way system, similar to the Gion Shrine, is ultimately the reason why this district as a whole is referred to as monzen-machi”, a town in front of temple or shrine gates. The preservation area itself is only part of the complex system of approaches to these ancient sacred places. Kiyomizu Temple has also been included as the sixteenth station in the Saikoku Junrei, a pilgrimage of 33 Kannon temples in the Kansai area. At the southern edge of its site is situated the toribe-no, one of the two major ancient burning and burial grounds of Kyoto. It has served as such for Shimogyo, the southern city of Kyoto, as the rendai-no has for Kamigyo, the northern city, since the middle of the Heian era. Placewise, thus, toribe-no constitutes for the city as a whole the boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead.

Kodaiji



The fourth religious landmark, flanking approximately one fifth of the preservation precinct to the north-east, is Kodaiji Temple, built by Hideyoshi's legal wife-turned nun in 1606 after her husband's demise to pray for his afterlife; it nowadays is a place of attraction in spring because of its setting in lavish cherry-trees and in autumn because of various tea-houses surrounded by fire-red maple trees. Not far to the north of this precinct is situated Maruyama Koen, one of the major public parks of Kyoto.

Additionally, this area along the foot of the Eastern Mountains, known for its high-quality pottery clay and abundant water, became from the beginning of the Edo Period the home of the famous Kiyomizu and Awate Yaki pottery.

Last not least, for the literary minded visitor the area has an attraction because two of Japan's most renowned poets, Saigyō and Bashō, have reportedly visited and lived here for some time.

In summary, the Spirit of Place of Sanneizaka derives physically from its complex picturesque intersecting accessway system, which forms the infrastructure of the town in front of the gates of the Gion Shrine, Kodaiji, Hōkanji and Kiyomizu Temples, as well as various others outside the designated area as such. Since ancient times it has provided places to eat, lodging, and recreation, as well as shops in which to buy various utensils used for religious worship, on both sides of its winding and sloping paths. Second, it equally derives from the area's location close to an ancient burial ground, i.e. as a liminal or threshold place from this to the other world. From Edo times on it became famous as the origin of well-known types of pottery. Literary associations by old poet laureats, added also to the area's genius loci. Thus, the district has two dimensions: one related to rites of combined religious and pleasure trips, the other to rites of death passages.

With the establishment of over two hundred years of peace during the Edo period, more and more traditional Kyo-machiya were built here. Thus, the area became a coveted residential retreat, too.