

# *Torii*

A ***torii*** ([Japanese](#): 鳥居, [to.ri.i]) is a traditional [Japanese](#) gate most commonly found at the entrance of or within a [Shinto shrine](#), where it symbolically marks the transition from the mundane to the sacred.



*The famous torii at [Itsukushima Shrine](#)*

The presence of a *torii* at the entrance is usually the simplest way to identify Shinto shrines, and a small *torii* icon represents them on Japanese road maps.

The first appearance of *torii* gates in Japan can be reliably pinpointed to at least the mid-[Heian period](#); they are mentioned in a text written in 922.<sup>[1]</sup> The oldest existing stone *torii* was built in the 12th century and belongs to a [Hachiman Shrine](#) in [Yamagata prefecture](#). The oldest existing wooden *torii* is a *ryōbu torii* (see description below) at Kubō Hachiman Shrine in [Yamanashi prefecture](#) built in 1535.<sup>[1]</sup>

Torii gates were traditionally made from wood or stone, but today they can be also made of reinforced concrete, copper, stainless steel or other materials. They are usually either unpainted or painted [vermilion](#) with a black upper [lintel](#). [Shrines of Inari](#), the *kami* of fertility and industry, typically have many *torii* because those who have been successful in business often donate *torii* in gratitude. [Fushimi Inari-taisha](#) in [Kyoto](#) has thousands of such *torii*, each bearing the donor's name.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Etymology

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A *torii* at the entrance of [Tatsuta Shrine](#), a Shinto shrine in [Sangō, Nara](#)

The *torii*, a gateway erected on the approach to every Shinto shrine, may be derived from [the Indian word \*torana\*](#). While the Indian term denotes a gateway, the Japanese characters can be translated as "bird perch".<sup>[3]</sup>

Ancient Indian *torana* sacred gateway architecture has influenced gateway architecture across Asia, especially where [Buddhism was transmitted from India](#); Chinese [paifang](#) gateways,<sup>[4][5]</sup> Japanese *torii* gateways,<sup>[4][6]</sup> Korean [Hongshalmun](#) gateways,<sup>[7]</sup> Vietnam [Tam quan](#) gateways and

Sao Ching Cha in Thailand<sup>[6]</sup> have been derived from the Indian *torana*. The functions of all are similar, but they generally differ based on their respective architectural styles.<sup>[8][9]</sup> According to several scholars, the vast evidence shows how the *torii*, both etymologically and architecturally, were originally derived from the *torana*, a free-standing sacred ceremonial gateway which marks the entrance of a sacred enclosure, such as Hindu-Buddhist temple or shrine, or city.<sup>[10][11][12][13][14][15][16]</sup> Bernhard Scheid wonders whether *torii* existed in Japan before Buddhism or arrived with it from India.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Uses

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The function of a *torii* is to mark the entrance to a sacred space. For this reason, the road leading to a Shinto shrine (*sandō*) is almost always straddled by one or more *torii*, which are therefore the easiest way to distinguish a shrine from a Buddhist temple. If the *sandō* passes under multiple *torii*, the outer of them is called *ichi no torii* (一の鳥居, first torii).<sup>[17]</sup> The following ones, closer to the shrine, are usually called, in order, *ni no torii* (二の鳥居, second torii) and *san no torii* (三の鳥居, third torii). Other *torii* can be found farther into the shrine to represent increasing levels of holiness as one nears the inner sanctuary (*honden*), core of the shrine.<sup>[17]</sup> Also, because of the strong relationship between Shinto shrines and the Japanese Imperial family, a *torii* stands also in front of the tomb of each Emperor.



Buddhist goddess *Benzaiten*, a torii visible on her head

In the past *torii* must have been used also at the entrance of Buddhist temples. Even today, as prominent a temple as [Osaka's Shitennō-ji](#), founded in 593 by [Shōtoku Taishi](#) and the oldest state-built Buddhist temple in the country (and world), has a *torii* straddling one of its entrances.<sup>[6]</sup> (The original wooden *torii* burned in 1294 and was then replaced by one in stone.) Many Buddhist temples include one or more Shinto shrines dedicated to their tutelary *kami* ("[Chinjusha](#)"), and in that case a *torii* marks the shrine's entrance. [Benzaiten](#) is a [syncretic](#) goddess derived from the Indian divinity [Sarasvati](#), who unites elements of both [Shinto](#) and [Buddhism](#). For this reason halls dedicated to her can be found at both temples and shrines, and in either case in front of the hall stands a *torii*. The goddess herself is sometimes portrayed with a *torii* on her head.<sup>[6]</sup> Finally, until the [Meiji period](#) (1868–1912) *torii* were routinely adorned with plaques carrying Buddhist [sutras](#).<sup>[18]</sup>

[Yamabushi](#), Japanese mountain ascetic hermits with a long tradition as mighty warriors endowed with supernatural powers, sometimes use as their symbol a *torii*.<sup>[6]</sup>

The *torii* is also sometimes used as a symbol of Japan in non-religious contexts. For example, it is the symbol of the [Marine Corps Security Force Regiment](#) and the [187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division](#) and of other US forces in Japan.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Origins

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The origins of the *torii* are unknown and there are several different theories on the subject, none of which has gained universal acceptance.<sup>[17]</sup> Because the use of symbolic gates is widespread in Asia—such structures can be found for example in [India](#), [China](#), [Thailand](#), [Korea](#), and within [Nicobarese](#) and [Shompen](#) villages—historians believe they may be an imported tradition.

They may, for example, have originated in India from the [torana](#) gates in the monastery of [Sanchi](#) in central India.<sup>[1]</sup> According to this theory, the *torana* was adopted by [Shingon Buddhism](#) founder [Kūkai](#), who used it to demarcate the sacred space used for the [homa](#) ceremony.<sup>[20]</sup> The hypothesis arose in the 19th and 20th centuries due to similarities in structure and name between the two gates. Linguistic and historical objections have now emerged, but no conclusion has yet been reached.<sup>[6]</sup>

In [Bangkok](#), Thailand, a [Brahmin](#) structure called [Sao Ching Cha](#) strongly resembles a *torii*. Functionally, however, it is very different as it is used as a [swing](#).<sup>[6]</sup> During ceremonies Brahmins swing, trying to grab a bag of coins placed on one of the pillars.

Other theories claim *torii* may be related to the *pailou* of China. These structures however can assume a great variety of forms, only some of which actually somewhat resemble a *torii*.<sup>[6]</sup> The same goes for Korea's "hongsal-mun".<sup>[21][22]</sup> Unlike its Chinese counterpart, the hongsal-mun does not vary greatly in design and is always painted red, with "arrowsticks" located on the top of the structure (hence the name).

### Proposed relatives of the *torii*



An Indian *torana*



A Chinese *pailou*



A Korean *Hongsalmun*

Various tentative [etymologies](#) of the word *torii* exist. According to one of them, the name derives from the term *tōri-iru* (通り入る, pass through and enter).<sup>[17]</sup>

Another hypothesis takes the name literally: the gate would originally have been some kind of bird perch. This is based on the religious use of bird perches in Asia, such as the Korean [sotdae](#) (shotdae), which are poles with one or more wooden birds resting on their top. Commonly found in groups at the entrance of villages together with [totem poles](#) called [jangseung](#), they are [talismans](#) which ward off evil spirits and bring the villagers good luck. "Bird perches" similar in form and function to the *sotdae* exist also in other [shamanistic](#) cultures in China, [Mongolia](#) and [Siberia](#). Although they do not look like *torii* and serve a different function, these "bird perches" show how birds in several Asian cultures are believed to have magic or spiritual properties, and may therefore help explain the enigmatic literal meaning of the *torii*'s name ("bird perch").<sup>[6][note 1]</sup>

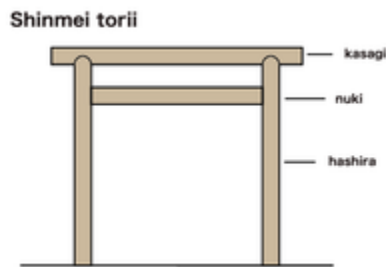
Poles believed to have supported wooden bird figures very similar to the *sotdae* have been found together with wooden birds, and are believed by some historians to have somehow evolved into today's *torii*.<sup>[23]</sup> Intriguingly, in both Korea and Japan single poles represent deities (*kami* in the case of Japan) and *hashira* (柱, pole) is the [counter](#) for *kami*.<sup>[18]</sup>

In Japan birds have also long had a connection with the dead, this may mean it was born in connection with some prehistorical funerary rite. Ancient Japanese texts like the [Kojiki](#) and the [Nihon Shoki](#) for example mention how [Yamato Takeru](#) after his death became a white bird and in that form chose a place for his own burial.<sup>[6]</sup> For this reason, his mausoleum was then called *shiratori misasagi* (白鳥陵, white bird grave). Many later texts also show some relationship between dead souls and white birds, a link common also in other cultures, shamanic like the



Japanese. Bird motifs from the [Yayoi](#) and [Kofun periods](#) associating birds with the dead have also been found in several archeological sites. This relationship between birds and death would also explain why, in spite of their name, no visible trace of birds remains in today's *torii*: birds were symbols of death, which in Shinto brings defilement ([kegare](#)).<sup>[6]</sup>

Finally, the possibility that *torii* are a Japanese invention cannot be discounted. The first *torii* could have evolved already with their present function through the following sequence of events:



*The Shinmei torii*

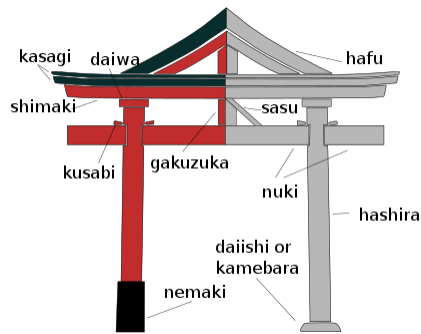
- Four posts were placed at the corners of a sacred area and connected with a rope, thus dividing sacred and mundane.
- Two taller posts were then placed at the center of the most auspicious direction, to let the priest in.
- A rope was tied from one post to the other to mark the border between the outside and the inside, the sacred and the mundane. This hypothetical stage corresponds to a type of *torii* in actual use, the so-called *shime-torii* (注連鳥居), an example of which [can be seen \(http://holoholo.air-nifty.com/nara/photo06/oomiwa.jpg\)](http://holoholo.air-nifty.com/nara/photo06/oomiwa.jpg) in front of Ōmiwa Shrine's *haiden* in Nara (see also the photo in the gallery).
- The rope was replaced by a lintel.
- Because the gate was structurally weak, it was reinforced with a tie-beam, and what is today called *shinmei torii* (神明鳥居) or *futabashira torii* (二柱鳥居, two pillar torii) (see illustration at right) was born.<sup>[1]</sup> This theory however does nothing to explain how the gates got their name.

The *shinmei torii*, whose structure agrees with the historians' reconstruction, consists of just four unbarked and unpainted logs: two vertical pillars (*hashira* (柱)) topped by a horizontal [lintel](#)

(*kasagi* (笠木)) and kept together by a tie-beam (*nuki* (貫)).<sup>[1]</sup> The pillars may have a slight inward inclination called *uchikorobi* (内転び) or just *korobi* (転び). Its parts are always straight.

## Parts and ornamentations

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*Torii parts and ornamentations*

- *Torii* may be unpainted or painted vermilion and black. The color black is limited to the *kasagi* and the *nemaki* (根巻, see illustration). Very rarely *torii* can be found also in other colors. [Kamakura's Kamakura-gū](#) for example has a white and red one.
- The *kasagi* may be reinforced underneath by a second horizontal lintel called *shimaki* or *shimagi* (島木).<sup>[24]</sup>
- *Kasagi* and the *shimaki* may have an upward curve called *sorimashi* (反り増し).<sup>[25]</sup>
- The *nuki* is often held in place by wedges (*kusabi* (楔)). The *kusabi* in many cases are purely ornamental.
- At the center of the *nuki* there may be a supporting strut called *gakuzuka* (額束), sometimes covered by a tablet carrying the name of the shrine (see photo in the gallery).
- The pillars often rest on a white stone ring called *kamebara* (亀腹, turtle belly) or *daiishi* (台石, base stone). The stone is sometimes replaced by a decorative black sleeve called *nemaki* (根巻, root sleeve).
- At the top of the pillars there may be a decorative ring called *daiwa* (台輪, architrave).<sup>[1]</sup>



- The gate has a purely symbolic function and therefore there usually are no doors or board fences, but exceptions exist, as for example in the case of [Ōmiwa Shrine](#)'s triple-arched *torii* (*miwa torii*, see below).<sup>[26]</sup>

## Styles

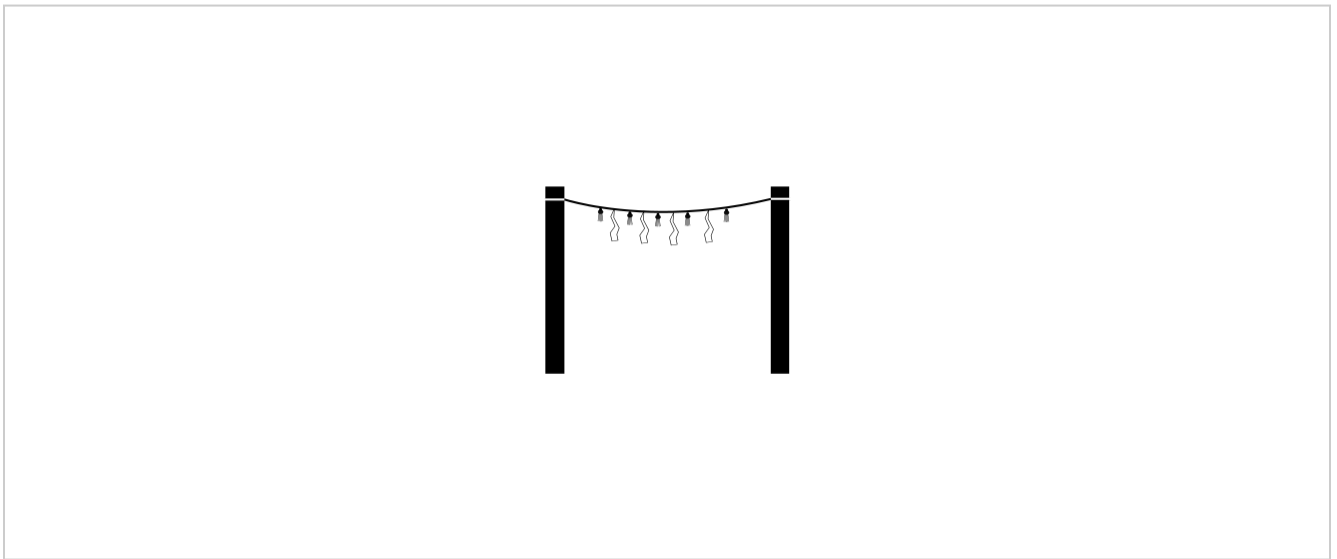
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Structurally, the simplest is the *shime torii* or *chūren torii* (注連鳥居) (see illustration below).<sup>[note 2]</sup> Probably one of the oldest types of *torii*, it consists of two posts with a sacred rope called *shimenawa* tied between them.<sup>[27]</sup>

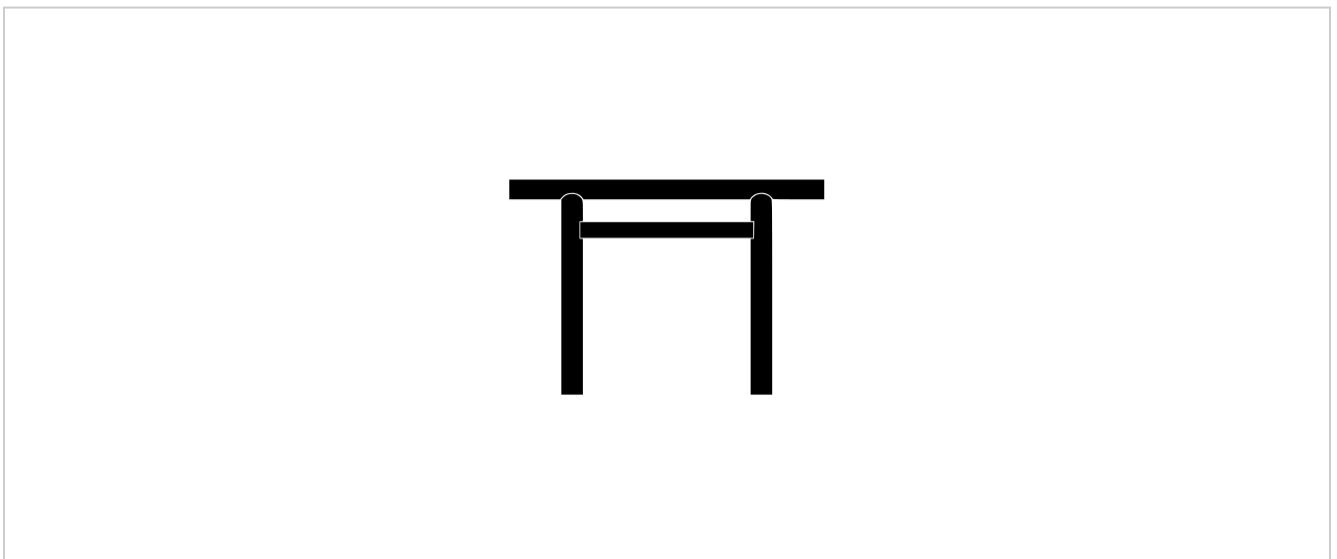
All other *torii* can be divided in two families, the *shinmei* family (神明系) and the *myōjin* family (明神系).<sup>[1][note 3]</sup> *Torii* of the first have only straight parts, the second have both straight and curved parts.<sup>[1]</sup>

### ***Shinmei* family**

The *shinmei torii* and its variants are characterized by straight upper lintels.



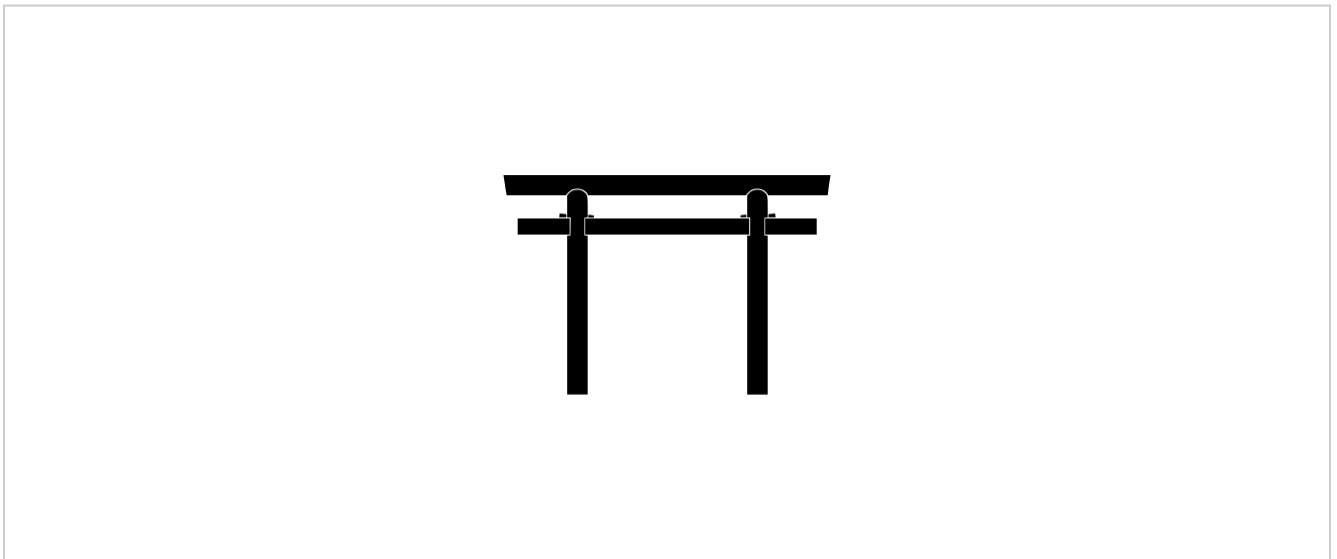
*Shime torii* – just two posts and a *shimenawa*.



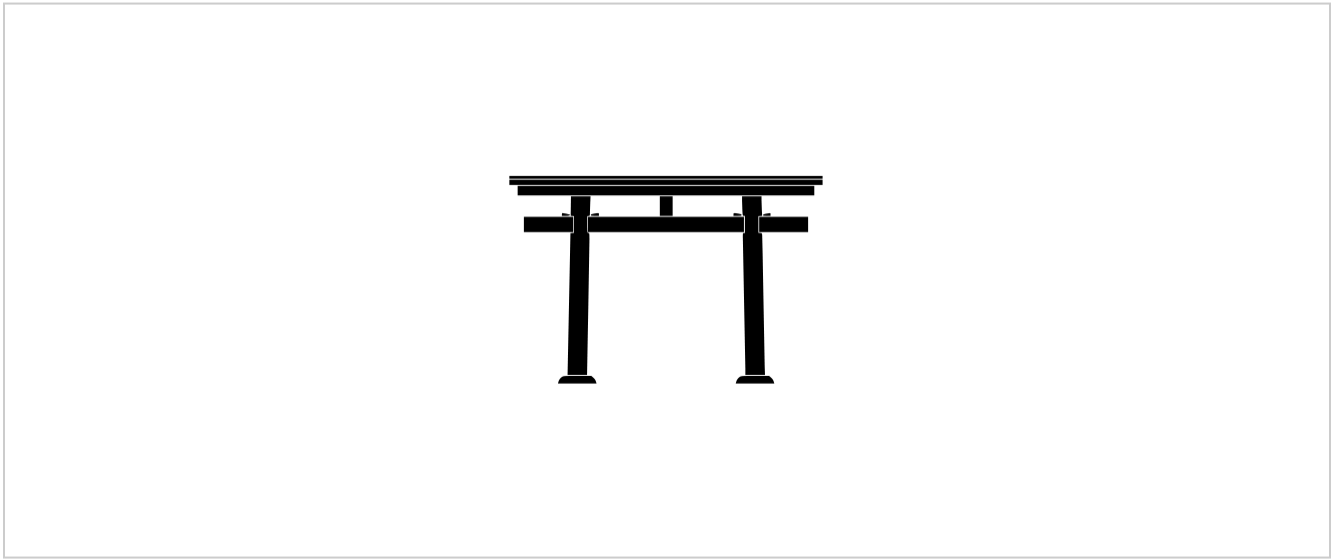
*Shinmei torii*.



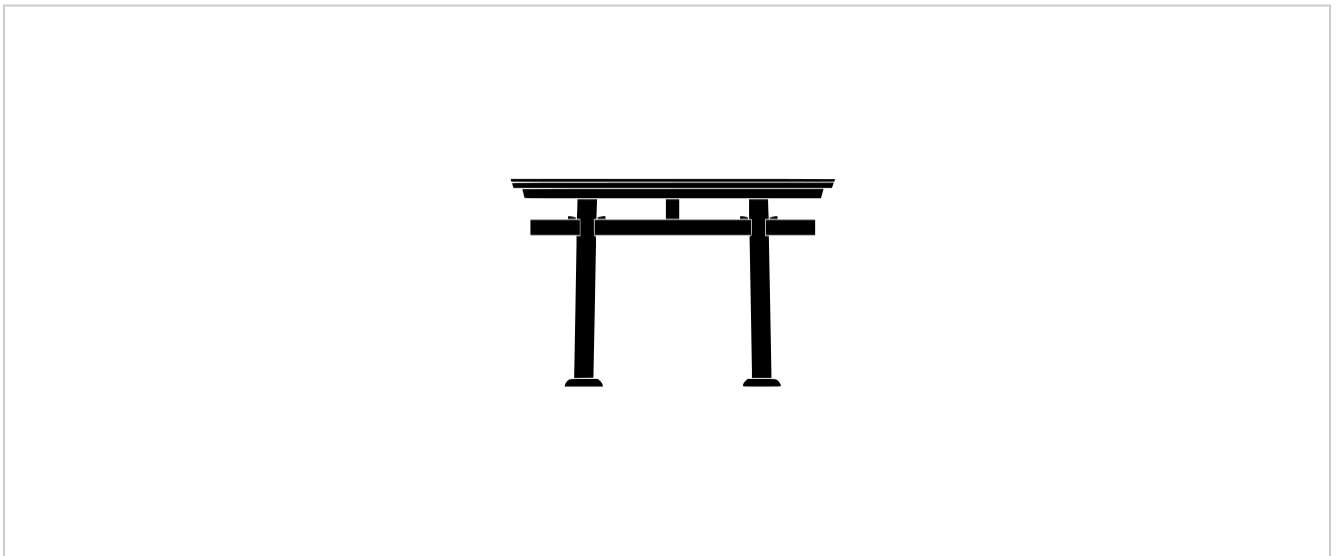
*Ise torii – a shinmei torii with a kasagi pentagonal in section, a shimaki and kusabi.*



*Kashima torii – a shinmei torii with kusabi and a nuki protruding from the sides.*



*Kasuga torii* – a *myōjin torii* with straight top lintels cut at a square angle.



*Hachiman torii* – a *kasuga torii*, but the two lintels have a downwards slant.



*Mihashira torii – a triple shinmei torii.*

## Photo gallery



Torii or traditional Japanese gate. Heian-jingū. Sakyō-ku, Kyoto.



Beachside torii on the island of [Naoshima](#).



*Ise torii*, first type. Note the presence of *kasagi*.



*Ise torii*, second type. Note the *shimaki*.





*Hachiman torii.*



*Mihashira torii.*



*A shiroki torii.*



Torii in the [Hida Minzoku Mura Folk Village](#).

### ***Shinmei torii***

The *shinmei torii* (神明鳥居), which gives the name to the family, is constituted solely by a [lintel](#) (*kasagi*) and two pillars (*hashira*) united by a tie beam (*nuki*).<sup>[28]</sup> In its simplest form, all four elements are rounded and the pillars have no inclination. When the *nuki* is rectangular in section, it is called *Yasukuni torii*, from Tokyo's [Yasukuni Jinja](#).<sup>[29]</sup> It is believed to be the oldest *torii* style.<sup>[1]</sup>

### ***Ise torii***

伊勢鳥居 (*Ise torii*) (see illustration above) are gates found only at the Inner Shrine and Outer Shrine at [Ise Shrine](#) in [Mie Prefecture](#). For this reason, they are also called *Jingū torii*, from Jingū, Ise Grand Shrine's official Japanese name.<sup>[27]</sup>

There are two variants. The most common is extremely similar to a *shinmei torii*, its pillars however have a slight inward inclination and its *nuki* is kept in place by wedges (*kusabi*). The *kasagi* is pentagonal in section (see illustration in the gallery below). The ends of the *kasagi* are slightly thicker, giving the impression of an upward slant. All these *torii* were built after the 14th century.

The second type is similar to the first, but has also a secondary, rectangular lintel (*shimaki*) under the pentagonal *kasagi*.<sup>[30]</sup>

This and the *shinmei torii* style started becoming more popular during the early 20th century at the time of [State Shinto](#) because they were considered the oldest and most prestigious.<sup>[6]</sup>

### ***Kasuga torii***

The *Kasuga torii* (春日鳥居) is a *myōjin torii* (see illustration above) with straight top lintels. The style takes its name from [Kasuga-taisha](#)'s *ichi-no-torii* (一の鳥居), or main *torii*.

The pillars have an inclination and are slightly tapered. The *nuki* protrudes and is held in place by *kusabi* driven in on both sides.<sup>[31]</sup>

This *torii* was the first to be painted vermilion and to adopt a *shimaki* at [Kasuga Taisha](#), the shrine from which it takes its name.<sup>[27]</sup>

### ***Hachiman torii***

Almost identical to a *kasuga torii* (see illustration above), but with the two upper lintels at a slant, the *Hachiman torii* (八幡鳥居) first appeared during the [Heian period](#).<sup>[27]</sup> The name comes from the fact that this type of *torii* is often used at Hachiman shrines.

### ***Kashima torii***

The *kashima torii* (鹿島鳥居) (see illustration above) is a *shinmei torii* without *korobi*, with *kusabi* and a protruding *nuki*. It takes its name from [Kashima Shrine](#) in [Ibaraki Prefecture](#).

### ***Kuroki torii***

The *kuroki torii* (黒木鳥居) is a *shinmei torii* built with unbarked wood. Because this type of *torii* requires replacement at three years intervals, it is becoming rare. The most notorious example is [Nonomiya Shrine](#) in Kyoto. The shrine now however uses a *torii* made of synthetic material which simulates the look of wood.

### ***Shiromaruta torii***

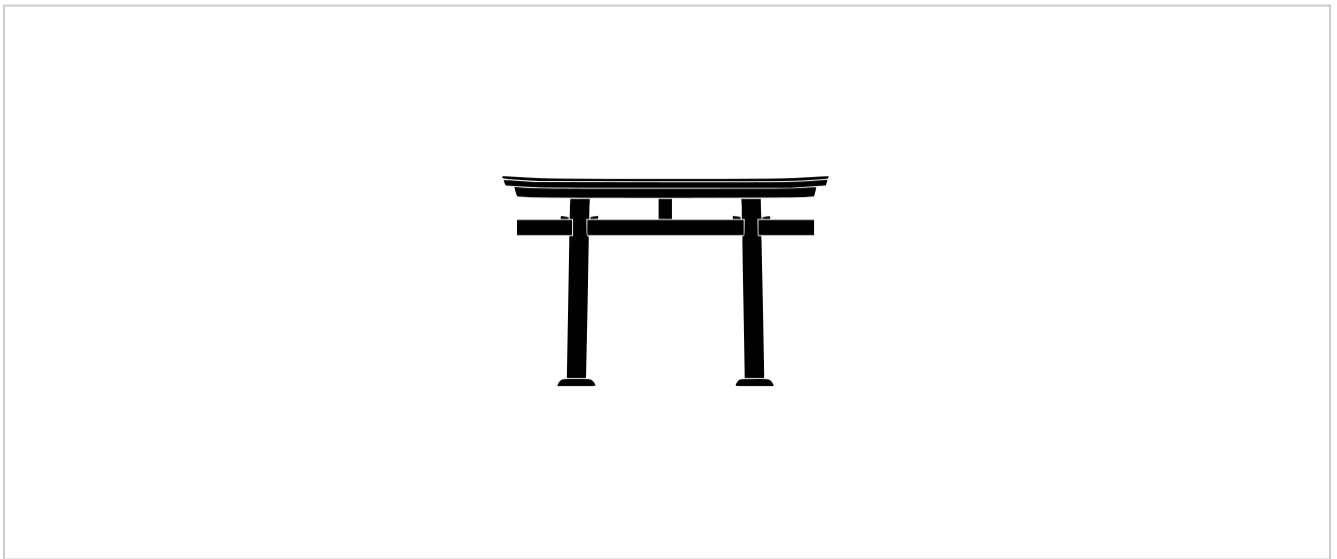
The *shiromaruta torii* (白丸太鳥居) or *shiroki torii* (白木鳥居) is a *shinmei torii* made with logs from which bark has been removed. This type of *torii* is present at the tombs of all Emperors of Japan.

### ***Mihashira torii***

The [mihashira torii](#) or **Mitsubashira Torii** (三柱鳥居, *Three-pillar Torii*, also 三角鳥居 *sankaku torii*) (see illustration above) is a type of *torii* which appears to be formed from three individual *torii* (see gallery). It is thought by some to have been built by early Japanese [Christians](#) to represent the [Holy Trinity](#).<sup>[32]</sup>

### ***Myōjin family***

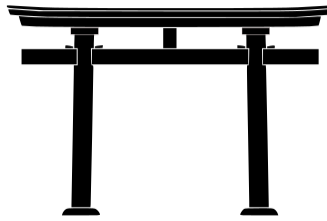
The *Myōjin torii* and its variants are characterized by curved lintels.



*Myōjin torii* – *kasagi* and *shimaki* are curved upwards.



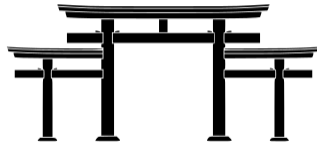
*Nakayama torii* – a *myōjin torii*, but the *nuki* does not protrude from the pillars.



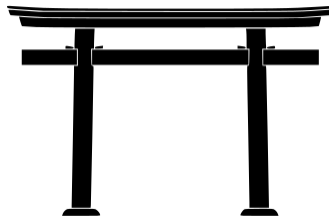
*Daiwa or Inari torii – A myōjin torii with rings at the top of the pillars.*



*Ryōbu torii – a daiwa torii with pillars supported on both sides.*

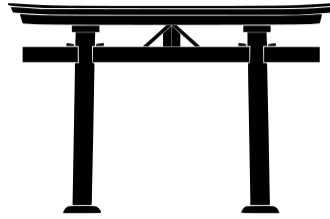


*Miwa torii – a triple myōjin torii.*

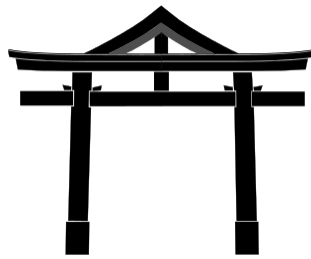


*Usa torii – a myōjin torii with no gakuzuka.*





*Nune torii* – a *daiwa torii* with a small gable above the *gakuzuka*.



*Sannō torii* – a *myōjin torii* with a gable above the *kasagi*.



*Hizen torii* – an unusual style with a rounded *kasagi* and thick, flared pillars. [\[note 4\]](#)

## Photo gallery



*Myōjin torii.*



*Sannō torii.*



*Daiwa torii*. Note the *nemaki*.



The *Sumiyoshi torii* has pillars with a square cross-section.



*Nakayama torii.*



*Ryōbu torii.*



*Miwa Torii.*



The *hizen torii* (肥前鳥居) has a rounded *kasagi* and thick flared pillars.



Fujisan Hongū Sengen Taisha.



Senbon torii at Fushimi Inari-taisha.

### ***Myōjin torii***

The *myōjin torii* (明神鳥居), by far the most common *torii* style, are characterized by curved upper lintels (*kasagi* and *shimaki*). Both curve slightly upwards. Kusabi are present. A *myōjin torii* can be made of wood, stone, concrete or other materials and be vermilion or unpainted.

### ***Nakayama torii***

The Nakayama *torii* (中山鳥居) style, which takes its name from Nakayama Jinja in [Okayama Prefecture](#), is basically a *myōjin torii*, but the *nuki* does not protrude from the pillars and the curve



made by the two top lintels is more accentuated than usual. The *torii* at Nakayama Shrine that gives the style its name is 9 m tall and was erected in 1791.<sup>[27]</sup>

### ***Daiwa / Inari torii***

The *daiwa* or *Inari torii* (大輪鳥居・稲荷鳥居) (see illustration above) is a *myōjin torii* with two rings called *daiwa* at the top of the two pillars. The name "Inari torii" comes from the fact that vermilion *daiwa torii* tend to be common at [Inari shrines](#), but even at the famous [Fushimi Inari Shrine](#) not all *torii* are in this style. This style first appeared during the late Heian period.

### ***Sannō torii***

The *sannō torii* (山王鳥居) (see photo below) is *myōjin torii* with a gable over the two top lintels. The best example of this style is found at [Hiyoshi Shrine](#) near Lake Biwa.<sup>[27]</sup>

### ***Miwa torii***

Also called *sankō torii* (三光鳥居, *three light torii*), *mitsutorii* (三鳥居, *triple torii*) or *komochi torii* (子持ち鳥居, *torii with children*) (see illustration above), the *miwa torii* (三輪鳥居) is composed of three *myōjin torii* without inclination of the pillars. It can be found with or without doors. The most famous one is at Ōmiwa Shrine, in Nara, from which it takes its name.<sup>[27]</sup>

### ***Ryōbu torii***

Also called *yotsuashi torii* (四脚鳥居, *four-legged torii*), *gongen torii* (権現鳥居) or *chigobashira torii* (稚児柱鳥居), the *ryōbu torii* (両部鳥居) is a *daiwa torii* whose pillars are reinforced on both sides by square posts (see illustration above).<sup>[33]</sup> The name derives from its long association with Ryōbu Shintō, a current of thought within [Shingon Buddhism](#). The famous *torii* rising from the water at Itsukushima is a *ryōbu torii*, and the shrine used to be also a Shingon [Buddhist temple](#), so much so that it still has a [pagoda](#).<sup>[34]</sup>

### ***Hizen torii***

The *hizen torii* (肥前鳥居) is an unusual type of *torii* with a rounded *kasagi* and pillars that flare downwards. They are found only in [Saga prefecture](#) and the neighboring areas.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Gallery

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A tablet on a *torii* at [Nikkō Tōshō-gū](#) covers the *gakuzuka*.



The typical pentagonal profile of a *torii's kasagi*. Note the black *nemaki*.



A row of *torii*.



One-legged torii, [Sannō Shrine](#), Nagasaki, Japan. The other half was toppled in the explosion of the nuclear bomb.



An unusual white and red *Nakayama torii*.



A *shime torii*.



Rows of tiny votive *torii* donated by the faithful. [\[note 5\]](#)



An unusual *kaku-torii* (角鳥居, lit. square torii) at Sumiyoshi Taisha: the *nuki* does not protrude and all members are square in section.



A temporary Torii for new year celebration in a shopping street decorated with Christmas lights.



An example of a Hizen style gate.

## See also

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- [Hongsalmun](#), in Korean architecture with both religious and other usage
- [Iljumun](#), portal in Korean temple architecture
- [Mon \(architecture\)](#)
- [Paifang](#), in Chinese temple architecture
- [Tam quan](#), in Vietnamese temple architecture
- [Toran](#), ceremonial Indian door decoration

- [Torana](#), in Hindu-Buddhist Indian-origin also found in Southeast Asia and East Asia

## Notes

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1. *Torii* used to be also called *uefukazu-no-mikado* or *uefukazu-no-gomon* (於上不葺御門, roofless gate). The presence of the honorific *Mi-* or *Go-* makes it likely that by then their use was already associated with shrines.
2. The two names are simply different readings of the same characters.
3. Other ways of classifying *torii* exist, based for example on the presence or absence of the *shimaki*. See for example the site [Jinja Chishiki](http://www.genbu.net/tisiki/) (<http://www.genbu.net/tisiki/>) .
4. This example is the main *torii* of Kashii Shrine, [Saga prefecture](#)
5. At Kamakura's [Zeniarai Benten Shrine](#)

## References

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