Shinto shrines, or, more precisely, the ancient shrine groves of Japan, do not consist of a single place of worship. People generally come to worship at the honden (main shrine), but the precinct may contain other buildings, the sessha and massha (subsidiary shrines), together with sacred natural features such as trees, ponds, or iwakura (rock formations considered to be the abode of a deity), and sacred spaces such as himorogi. Focusing on these points, this study will examine the structure of sites of worship, or sacred sites, in the ancient shrine groves of Japan.

In conducting case studies of ancient shrine groves as sacred places of Japan, I have adopted the periodization which assigns the beliefs they represent, according to the type of deity enshrined, to the Tenson, Izumo, and indigenous peoples, in other words, to the people of the Kofun (250–538 AD), Yayoi (300 BC – 250 AD), and Jōmon (14000–300 BC) periods, respectively.

As case studies, I examine the supreme shrines of the four old provinces of Eastern Kanto. This region corresponds to the coastal areas of present-day Chiba and Ibaraki Prefectures; the four provinces, from south to north, were Awa, Kazusa, Shimousa, and Hitachi.

The four supreme shrines are: for Awa Province, Awa Shrine in Awa-gun (Tateyama City, Chiba Pref.); for Kazusa Province, Tamasaki Shrine in Hanyū-gun (Chōsei-gun, Chiba Pref.); for Shimousa Province, Katori Shrine in Katori-gun (Sawara City, Chiba Pref.); and for Hitachi Province, Kashima Shrine in Kashima-gun (Kashima-gun, Ibaraki Pref.). The study also included two shrines that were not supreme shrines, Ōarai Isozaki Shrine in Kashima-gun, Hitachi Province (Higashi-Ibaraki-gun, Ibaraki Pref.) and Sakatsura Isozaki Shrine in Naka-gun, Hitachi Province (Hitachinaka City, Ibaraki Pref.), bringing the total of shrine groves to six.

The study covered the deities enshrined in the main and subsidiary shrine buildings, together with sacred natural features (himorogi and related spaces, trees, woods, wells,
bodies of water), sacred landforms (*iwakura* and related forms, rocks, mountains), and other sacred objects.