**Origins of Byodoin**

Byodoin Temple is one of the most important surviving examples of eleventh century Buddhist architecture. The highest level of craftsmanship of the time went into its construction, and its design and execution influenced Buddhist architecture for centuries after its construction.

The temple was built on the site of a former villa. Heian period (794–1184) aristocrats built many such retreats along the Uji River to escape the bustle of Kyoto, the capital at the time. Courtier Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1028) constructed the villa, which then passed on his death to his son Fujiwara no Yorimichi (992–1074). Yorimichi was a devotee of Pure Land (Jodo) Buddhism, and in 1052 he converted the villa into a temple complex dedicated to Amida Buddha (Sk. Amitabha), the central object of worship in Pure Land Buddhism. The following year, Yorimichi commissioned the temple’s centerpiece, the Phoenix Hall, originally called the Amida Hall.

Yorimichi created the hall as an earthly representation of Amida Buddha’s Pure Land. He believed that building a temple in the image of Amida Buddha’s celestial realm would help him achieve rebirth in that realm, the ultimate goal of Pure Land devotees.

At the time, Pure Land devotees feared that the age of Mappo (“the end of the Law”) was imminent and that the traditional teachings of Buddhism would go into decline. Believers such as Yorimichi hoped to be reborn in the Pure Land where they would be able to move toward enlightenment under the most favorable conditions, through the blessings of Amida Buddha. Yorimichi’s and other believers’ devotion to Buddhism helped Buddhist arts flourish during this period.

In 1897 the Phoenix Hall became a national treasure and the Byodoin complex was designated a World Heritage Site in 1994.