

Kanimanji Temple

Kanimanji Temple gained its fame from being mentioned in *Konjaku Monogatari* (“Tales of Times Now Past”), a famous collection of tales from India, China, and Japan compiled during the late Heian period (794–1185). In one tale, a young girl devoted to Kannon, the Buddhist avatar of mercy, saves a crab from being tormented by another villager. Later on, Kannon takes the shape of a crab to save the girl from a terrible fate. The girl and her father, in honor and gratitude, build a temple to enshrine the crab. Kanimanji celebrates its connections to this tale with its crab emblem. Also, its annual crab-releasing festival on April 18 is another way to continue passing down the story. Its principal deity, a massive 2.2-ton gilt bronze Shaka Nyorai statue, is also a National Treasure of Japan.

History

The historical origins of Kanimanji Temple are unclear. The current temple is a modest one, with only one main hall, but recent excavations revealed the remains of a temple much grander in scale that used to stand here over 1,300 years ago. It is believed that this prior structure is the original temple, and judging from its size, the temple was probably established by either national edict or a powerful local clan. As seen in many older texts, the original name of the temple was “Kabata-tera,” and several theories exist regarding the etymology of its current name. Some say it is because the patron clan was skilled at textile production, especially of *kabata*, a type of silk fabric. Others say the name was a reference to cloth offered to the gods at the temple, also called *kabata*. Although it is believed that Kanimanji Temple was once very prosperous and influential, fires and periods of disuse throughout the years caused the temple to decrease in size.

After Kabata-tera had fallen into decline, there was a rise in the popular worship of Kannon Bodhisattva in Japan. A parable concerning the repayment of kindness, common in Buddhist teachings, originated in this area. The story involves a crab and was included in the *Konjaku Monogatari* (“Tales of Times Now Past”), a collection of Buddhist parables from India, China, and Japan compiled during the late Heian period (794–1185). Kabata-tera became associated with this crab fable, and its name was changed to Kanimanji Temple, which can be literally translated as “Temple Full of Crabs.”

This tale from *Konjaku Monogatari* relates that there once was a family in this area who was fully devoted to the merciful Kannon. One day, the daughter saw a crab about to be eaten by another villager and offered her food to spare the crab’s life. On another day, her father happened upon a snake about to eat a frog. He offered up his daughter to be the snake’s wife, to which the snake agreed and thus set the frog free. That night, the snake came to the family’s home to collect on his end of the bargain but, unwilling to let his daughter go, the family prayed for Kannon’s help all night

until daybreak. When they peeked outside, they saw the carcasses of a swarm of crabs and the large snake. The family was convinced that Kannon had taken the form of these crabs and saved the daughter to repay her for saving the life of the crab. And so they buried the crabs and the snake and built a temple to Kannon on top of their graves. Thanks to the swarm of crabs that saved the family from a tragic fate, the temple was called “Kanimanji.”

Treasures and Artifacts

Kanimanji Temple is dedicated to the Shaka Nyorai, also known as the historical Buddha or Prince Siddhartha, the founder of Buddhism. The gilt bronze consecrated Buddha statue of Shaka Nyorai enshrined at this temple is massive, weighing in at around 2.2 tons, with a height of 240 cm. It is believed to have been made over 1,300 years ago and has been designated a National Treasure of Japan.