

Shotoku Taishi (Prince Shotoku) and Horyuji Temple

Shotoku Taishi (574–622) was the son of the 31st emperor, Yomei (518–587). He was highly educated and lectured and wrote widely on Buddhism, including a famous commentary on the Lotus Sutra. Shotoku at first lived near Asuka, then the governmental and cultural epicenter of Japan, where he worked to secure diplomatic links with China and to bring that country's civil codes and centralized bureaucracy to Japan. Credited with the "Constitution in Seventeen Articles," he exercised leadership of the early government that had a lasting impact on Japan's history. The constitution stresses the importance of harmonious relationships, devotion to Buddhism, the proper ethical conduct of officials, and loyalty of the people. It was influenced by both Confucian classics and Mahayana Buddhism. Devotion to Shotoku rose steadily after his death: he came to be regarded as a Buddhist saint and became the object of religious devotion.

Horyuji Temple was originally constructed because Shotoku's ailing father, Emperor Yomei, wished to enshrine a sculpture of the Buddha of medicine and healing, Yakushi Nyorai. The statue was installed in the Main Hall in the hope of aiding the Emperor's recovery. The emperor did not recover, however, and died after reigning for only two years. Twenty years later, around 607, following the wishes of the late emperor, Shotoku and his aunt, Empress Suiko, (592–628) finished the construction of Horyuji, which thus has a history of some 1400 years. The temple was at the vanguard of the new civilization of the time, and set amid an open rural setting, its splendid buildings must have filled visitors and devotees with wonder. Shotoku's legacy can be seen in a number of the structures within the complex. One example is the Hall of Dreams (Yumedono), which houses a life-sized Guze Kannon that is thought to be modeled in his image. The Guze Kannon is believed to have the power to save those in the world from suffering.

The original buildings of Horyuji are thought to have been lost to fire in 670, and the current structures then rebuilt with the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, as the main object of devotion. The temple exemplifies Asuka period architectural style, which was influenced by the styles of Chinese and the Korean architecture at the time.

In 1993, Horyuji became the one of the first sites in Japan to be registered as a World Heritage Site.