

Chuguji Temple

After the death in 621 of Prince Shotoku's mother, Empress Anahobe no Hashihito, her son converted her palace residence into this nunnery. Originally located 500 meters east of here, the temple fell into decline during the Heian period (794–1192) when the capital was transferred from Nara to Kyoto. The temple's treasures were moved next door to Horyuji Temple for safekeeping. Among them was the prized mandala, commissioned by Prince Shotoku's widow and depicting the prince in a heavenly realm after his death in 622. The Tenjukoku Shucho Mandala, the oldest known piece of embroidery in Japan and a major Buddhist work of art, was returned to the temple and restored during the Kamakura period (1185–1333). The version you see today in the temple main hall is a replica; the original is stored in the Nara National Museum.

Since the Tenmon era (1532–55), the Chuguji Temple has had a strong connection with Japan's imperial family, which traditionally sent its daughters to train here along with other aristocratic women. Many of its head priestesses have been imperial princesses. In the 1960's, the renowned architect Isoya Yoshida (working on a commission from Princess Takamatsu (1911–2004)) redesigned the hall to make it more resistant to fire and seismic shocks from earthquakes. A 1,400-year-old bodhisattva statue dominates the hall. This statue, a National Treasure, is considered to be a masterpiece and is still beautifully preserved despite centuries of exposure to incense and smoke.