

Saidai-mon, the Great Western Gate

The Saidai-mon is the western gate that houses the two guardian kings and marks the entrance into Shimo-Daigo, the main temple complex. The current gate, which has been designated an Important Cultural Property, dates to 1605 and counts to the reconstruction ordered by Toyotomi Hideyori (1593–1615), the heir to Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

The gate is flanked on each side by the pair of Guardian Kings or Niō, popular protectors of the entrance to Buddhist temples in East Asia. These statues are dated to 1134, showing some characteristics of Heian period style, as they are represented in a gentler manner than later examples. Just for reference, a fiercely clinched fist and exaggerated muscle display are typical stylistic features of guardian figures from the Kamakura period onwards.

An interesting feature is the symbolic movement of the mouths, as one king is shown with his mouth open and the other with his mouth closed. This iconographic feature represents the syllables 'a' and 'hūṃ', which originate from the ancient Indian culture and have been adopted in the Japanese Shingon tradition as a symbol for the beginning and the end of the universe, the first and the last element and the entirety in between. It bears a strong resemblance to the adoption of the Greek letters alpha and omega to designate the comprehensiveness of God in Christianity.

The statues were moved from the Great South Gate (Nandai-mon), which no longer exists.