

The Environs of the Kyoto National Museum

The Shichijo area between the Kamo River and the eastern hills of Higashiyama flourished during the late Heian period when Retired Emperor Goshirakawa (1127–1192) built his extensive Hojuji temple-palace complex there. This area was also the location of numerous residences of the Taira clan, who ruled the country for a brief period in the late twelfth century before they were destroyed and replaced by the rival Minamoto clan, who built their own headquarters at nearby Rokuhara. Retired Emperor Goshirakawa and warlord Taira no Kiyomori (1118–1181) also built a network of temples in the area, including Myohoin and Rengeoin. The latter was an extension of his Hojuji complex. Sanjusangendo, located across the street from the museum to the south, was the main hall of Rengeoin and is the only building remaining from the many structures once located in that complex. The museum is still surrounded on three sides by major Buddhist temples and shrines: Myohoin and Chishakuin to the east, Toyokuni Jinja Shrine (dedicated to Toyotomi Hideyoshi) to the north, and Myohoin's Sanjusangendo hall to the south.

From the late sixteenth century, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) and his heir Hideyori (1593–1615) commissioned the magnificent Hokoji Temple to be built on land that had once been a portion of Goshirakawa's palace complex. The highlight of Hokoji was an enormous Great Buddha, standing over nineteen meters high—larger than the Great Buddha statues in Nara and Kamakura. Traces of Hokoji's Great Buddha Hall, which was once a major landmark in the capital, have all but vanished, though the temple itself still stands. In fact, the Heisei Chishinkan Wing stands on the site of Hokoji's former Great South Gate. The massive stone walls that once marked the western and southern borders of Hokoji are found just north of the museum's south gate (formerly its main gate). They are reminders of the past grandeur of the temple and the power of the leader responsible for them.