

The Temple of Myōhōin

General Overview

Traditional explanations claim that the temple of Myōhōin was established in the ninth century by the monk Saichō (767–822), the founder of the esoteric sect of Tendai Buddhism. However, the temple first appears in historical sources of the late twelfth century, when retired emperor Goshirakawa (1127–1192) was constructing an extensive temple-palace complex, the Hōjūjidono, in the immediate vicinity. Since about that time, Myōhōin has enjoyed the special status of being a “*monzeki*” temple, which means its abbots were princes of imperial blood.

Myōhōin has been the recipient of strong patronage and consistent protection over the past seven centuries from military leaders as well as the imperial family. Most notable is the lavish attention paid to the site by the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) who, in the late sixteenth century, sponsored a number of major building projects and upgrades, including the Kuri and Ōshoin that remain standing today. The Kuri is designated a National Treasure while the Ōshoin is an Important Cultural Property.

In the late sixteenth century, Myōhōin was integrated into a larger complex for the second time when Hideyoshi made it a part of his temple complex that was centered on a new and massive Great Buddha Hall at the temple of Hōkōji, which also included Sanjūsangendō. Although that complex was short-lived, Myōhōin continues to be institutionally associated with Sanjūsangendō and Hōkōji right up to the present day.