

The Temple of Hōkōji Overview and History

The temple of Hōkōji was the site of one of the most impressive buildings ever constructed in Japan and the flashpoint of a political standoff that rocked the country at the dawn of the seventeenth century.

By about 1580, a century of war was coming to an end through the military genius and skilled diplomacy of Japan's second great unifier, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598).

Once Hideyoshi gained control over the imperial capital, he set into motion a sweeping plan to rebuild the city according to his own design. He built a wall around the center of the city, refurbished the imperial palace, and created Kyoto's first permanent stone bridges across the Kamo River. However, Hideyoshi's most ambitious construction project by far was the construction of a Great Buddha Hall and a temple to house it on Kyoto's eastern outskirts.

Hideyoshi began a vigorous fundraising campaign and a program of nationwide disarmament, seizing swords from the lower classes throughout the country. He vowed to use the weapons he seized for casting the great Buddha, which was originally to be a bronze statue. This program had the dual benefit of disarming the populace and at the same time earning karmic merit for Hideyoshi. There was a clear political aim as well. By constructing a massive Buddhist icon and hall, Hideyoshi was openly following the example of Emperor Shōmu (701–756) who, in the eighth century, dramatically advanced national unification through the construction of the Great Buddha in Nara.

When the Buddha Hall at Hōkōji was dedicated in 1589, it was the largest building ever completed in Japan, standing 90 meters wide and 50 meters deep. The structure was built upon a raised earthen platform held in place by a wall of immense blocks of cut stone that were donated by daimyo lords. Large sections of the wall remain around the site today. Some bear the marks of craftsmen who chiseled rows of large holes, presumably with the intention of later cleaving the rocks. Depictions of the hall that appear in birds-eye illustrations of Kyoto produced at the time (particularly the Funaki version of the *Rakuchu-rakugai-zu* folding screens) show a massive edifice that dominated Kyoto's eastern flank. Alas, the original structure was destroyed by an earthquake in 1596. Reconstruction began soon thereafter but was stalled when Hideyoshi died in 1598. Thus began a protracted political struggle between the forces behind Hideyoshi's young heir, Toyotomi Hideyori (1593–1615), based in the western part of the country, and the warlord Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), based in the east. Reconstruction of Hōkōji, the powerful symbol built by Hideyoshi, became emblematic of sustained support for the Toyotomi house, which Ieyasu was determined to destroy.

Part of Hideyori's reconstruction efforts included recreating Hōkōji's great bronze bell. Fundraising began in 1610 and casting was completed in 1614, but the dedication ceremony was abruptly cancelled when Ieyasu expressed an objection to the inscription. In what appears in hindsight to be an example of rank political opportunism, he claimed to take offence to a phrase which separated the two characters used to write "Ieyasu," saying that it was insulting. The dedication never went ahead and tensions between the Tokugawa and Toyotomi houses only worsened until the latter was ultimately rendered powerless by about mid-way through the seventeenth century. The bronze bell that

hangs at Hōkōji today is the one cast in 1614. Housed in a beautifully preserved belfry built in the Meiji era (1868–1912), the inscription that so outraged Ieyasu is still clearly visible.

Due to the combined effects of Tokugawa opposition to the project and several major earthquakes, Hōkōji was never restored to its original glory. Nevertheless, the temple that stands at the site today retains many treasures from the founding period, including the bell, several statues, and the massive stone wall.