

## **The Hall of the Great Buddha at the Temple of Hōkōji**

In 1585, Toyotomi Hideyoshi was granted the lofty title of imperial regent (*taikō*) as a reward for restoring peace in the realm. Like many of the political and military leaders who preceded him, Hideyoshi's entrée into the highest echelon of Kyoto society coincided with his sponsorship of several large building projects. 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 project by far was the construction of the Great Buddha Hall at the newly-created temple of Hōkōji on Kyoto's eastern outskirts.

Hideyoshi was intent upon building a Buddha hall larger than the one at the temple of Todaiji in Nara, first commissioned by Emperor Shōmu (701–756) in the eighth century. He also planned to do it in record time. The project symbolically sanctified Hideyoshi's rule and, like Shōmu, sent a message that his aim was nothing less than national unification. The first, most pressing issue was raising funds to pay for material and human resources. To this end, Hideyoshi made use of a nation-wide disarmament campaign. Guns and swords were collected from throughout the country to be used in casting the great Buddha as well as a massive temple bell. However, difficulties arose, and this first great Buddha of Hōkōji was not a bronze image, but a wooden one. A diary from the period provides a sense for how Hideyoshi rewarded laborers: "The people of the capital's upper and lower sections packed stones and earth to build the foundation for the Great Buddha. They were then served food and drink and induced to dance" (*Tanmon'in nikki*).

Upon completion in 1589, the Buddha Hall dominated Kyoto's eastern edge. At 90 meters wide and 50 meters deep, it was the largest building ever completed in Japan to date. Looking at the remains of the stone wall that still surrounds the site today conveys a sense for the scale of the hall. Depictions appearing 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 made from timber painted bright crimson and topped by a weighty yet elegant tile roof.

The original structure was destroyed by an earthquake in 1596. Reconstruction began soon thereafter, but was stalled when Hideyoshi died in 1598. Due to Tokugawa opposition to the project and damage from 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.