

The Bronze Bell at the Temple of Hōkōji

The bronze bell at the temple of Hōkōji hangs unassumingly amid relatively simple surroundings. The simplicity of the scene might fail to convey the importance of this bell—one of the most significant historical objects of Japan's early modern period. It can be credited for fanning the flames of a political row that led to the demise of the Toyotomi house, the warrior family that dominated Japanese politics at the end of the sixteenth century.

In 1610, in the midst of a project to rebuild the grand Buddha and surrounding temple that his father had built, Toyotomi Hideyori started a campaign to finance the recreation of a great bronze bell for the temple. Casting was completed in 1614, but the dedication ceremony was abruptly cancelled by Tokugawa Ieyasu, who had effectively wrested control of the country from the young Hideyori and his supporters in 1603. Ieyasu was insulted by the inscription on the bell and used that as a pretext for vilifying the Toyotomi house. The characters for Ieyasu's name were included in an inscription on the bell in a way that divided them into separate sections. These characters are the second and fourth in the phrase *Kokka Anko*, "Security and Peace in the Nation." Ieyasu claimed that with this separation, his name had been "dismembered" —an insult that fueled a conflict that finally ended with the Toyotomi family being forced into obscurity. The Tokugawa continued to rule unchallenged for the following two and a half centuries.

The bronze bell that hangs at Hōkōji today is the original one that was cast in 1614. The inscription that reportedly enraged Ieyasu is still clearly visible. It hangs in a belfry that was built in the Meiji era (1868–1912). The ceiling panels of the beautifully preserved belfry are lavishly illustrated with images of *karyōbinga*, mystical beings in Buddhism with the head of a human and the body of a bird, and who are said to reside in the Western Pure Land. Although *karyōbinga* appear on the ceilings of several important temples in Kyoto, nowhere are the illustrations so easily accessible to the public.