

Saijinzuka

Visitors to Ninnaji who step through the Gate of the Guardian Kings and walk toward the Central Gate are likely to notice a pine-covered mound on their right. This spot honors Saijin (954–1030), a Buddhist priest who wielded significant religious influence at court during a period of great cultural flourishing in Kyoto, and who was the teacher of Prince Shoshin (1005–1085), the second abbot of Ninnaji. Saijin was the son of Minamoto no Masazane (920–993), a high-ranking nobleman, and a priest of the esoteric Shingon school, one of the two schools of Buddhism favored by the court and the nobility at the time. He rose through the ranks of the priesthood, serving in several important positions at Toji, the oldest temple in Kyoto and Shingon headquarters at the time. Saijin was eventually appointed head of his order, and in 1020 was granted the right—unprecedented for a priest—to enter the inner section of the royal palace in a cart pulled by oxen, instead of having to leave his cart at the palace gate, as was generally required. Though the Saijinzuka resembles a burial mound, Saijin’s physical remains are not thought to be contained within it.