

Origins of Engyōji Temple

Engyōji's founding abbot, Shōkū (910–1007), began his spiritual journey at the age of 10, when he started studying the Lotus Sutra. At 36, he became a monk and ventured to Kyushu, where he spent the next 20 years in study. In 966, a mysterious cloud drew Shōkū to Mt. Shosha, where he witnessed a heavenly maiden dancing around a cherry tree and reciting holy poetry about the Bodhisattva Nyoirin Kannon. Inspired by the vision, Shōkū carved the tree into a statue of Nyoirin Kannon that became the principal image of the temple's Maniden Hall.

Born into the aristocratic Tachibana family, Shōkū gained patronage from the noble Fujiwara family and Retired Emperor Kazan (968–1008). The former sovereign visited Mt. Shosha on two occasions during the late tenth century, and it was he who gave the temple the name "Engyōji." He also declared it an imperially sponsored temple (*chokuganji*), an honor that came with special privileges and financial benefits. Engyōji soon accrued an active community of monks, and it continued to thrive even after Shōkū's death.

In 1177, Engyōji had the special privilege of hosting Retired Emperor Goshirakawa (1127–1192), who at the time still held authority over the region. During his seven-day stay at the temple, Goshirakawa demanded to see the statue of Nyoirin Kannon that had been shut in its tabernacle for the two centuries since it had been carved. It was from Goshirakawa that Maniden Hall received its name, which signifies the jewel (Sanskrit: *mani*) at the heart of Buddhist teachings. Another imperial visit occurred in 1333, when Emperor Godaigo (1288–1339) stayed in the Daikōdō (Great Lecture Hall) on his way back to the capital after a period of exile on the Oki Islands.

Engyōji went through a period of decline during Japan's long Warring States period (1467–1568). In 1578, the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598; then known as Hashiba Hideyoshi) invaded the mountain and converted the temple grounds into a mountain fortress, where he quartered a massive army of some 20,000 troops. During those two years of occupation, the monks and temple buildings suffered catastrophic damage at the hands of the bored and rowdy soldiers.

Engyōji's fortunes improved after the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603. Honda Tadamasa (1575–1631), the lord of Himeji Castle, began a fundraising campaign

in 1620 to restore the temple. Further patronage came from successive warrior families that governed the region, including the Matsudaira and Sakakibara families.

During the Edo period (1603–1867), laypeople began flocking to Mt. Shosha as pilgrimages became more and more popular. Engyōji belongs to the “Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan” (Saikoku Sanjūsansho), a route that spans 1,000 kilometers and seven prefectures. Those who visit all 33 sites are said to receive the blessing of each of Kannon’s 33 forms. The popularity of this belief continues to draw visitors to Engyōji, sustaining its rich history and traditions that date back over a millennium.