

## **Musashibō Benkei**

One of Japan's most legendary historical figures lived and trained at Engyōji during his youth. Musashibō Benkei (1155–1189), a warrior monk, was renowned for his superhuman strength and appears as a heroic figure in many works of literature and stage plays. Although he is often represented as a paragon of bravery and loyalty, Benkei is also known for his short temper and tendency toward violence. Benkei's dutiful attitude toward his studies also made him the subject of teasing by other young monks.

One particularly dramatic incident is said to have taken place at Engyōji. The story goes that as Benkei slept, a monk named Shinanobō Kaien used a lump of coal to write offensive verse on Benkei's face. When Benkei was awakened by a group of young monks laughing and jeering at him, he ran to a nearby pond to see his reflection in the water. Enraged by the slur, which compared his face to the bottom of an old sandal, Benkei began violently destroying the temple buildings. The incident is said to have caused a great fire that reduced Engyōji's most important structures to ash. True or not, the tale is memorialized by the pond Benkei used to see his reflection, which can be found along the path leading from the Maniden to the Kaisandō (Founder's Hall). The temple also holds a number of items associated with Benkei, including his study desk, on display on the second floor of the Jikidō (Refectory), and a pair of massive boulders that Benkei is said to have trained with.