

Statue of Saito Sanemori

Saito Sanemori (1111–1183) was a legendary samurai and fearless military commander who served as governor of present-day northern Saitama. He founded Menuma Shodenzan Temple in 1179. A statue of Saito Sanemori in the grounds depicts him holding a mirror and an ink brush, poised to color his gray hair black in order to hide his age. Visitors can listen to a traditional children's song about his life by pushing a button on a music player next to the statue. The lyrics are etched on a metal plate next to the device.

Sanemori served as a retainer to the Genji family, distant members of the imperial family, but later switched his allegiance to the rival Heike family. The families battled for dominance over the imperial court and control of Japan during the twelfth century. According to historical accounts, when the Genji forces were defeated by the Heike in 1155, Sanemori was ordered to find and kill the Genji heir, Kiso Yoshinaka (1154–1184). Instead, he protected the young boy, who grew up and later became the leader of the Genji.

The animosity between the two families grew and led to the Genpei War (1180–1185), a civil war that engulfed the country. Sanemori was in his seventies when the war broke out. He fought on the side of the Heike and is said to have dyed his hair black before going into battle to appear more youthful. In the Battle of Shinohara (1183), he was killed by the commander of Yoshinaka's forces, who brought Sanemori's head back to Yoshinaka as a trophy. It was a common practice to collect the heads of enemies killed on the battlefield, then clean and label them to present to the daimyo lord. When the ink was washed out of Sanemori's hair, Yoshinaka was devastated when he realized that they had killed the man to whom he owed his life.

The Genji ultimately defeated the Heike and established the Kamakura shogunate, the first military government, which ruled Japan from 1185 to 1333.