

## **Naramachi, the Neighborhood Built on Gangōji's Grounds**

The Naramachi neighborhood that surrounds Gangōji Temple is Nara's "Old Town," an area with narrow streets and traditional architecture that evoke a much earlier era. Despite this antiquated atmosphere, the residences and businesses are not as old as one might think. Though the city of Nara has existed for over 1,200 years, the Naramachi area was considered part of Gangōji until as recently as the late sixteenth century.

Though only a few temple buildings remain today, Gangōji once had a sprawling complex of 33 hectares (0.33 square kilometers), with many halls, dormitories, and pagodas. The vast grounds and the buildings that once occupied them were lost over a period of many centuries that began in the late 700s. The imperial capital was moved from Nara to Kyoto, and the imperial court gradually stopped funding the temples of Nara—including Gangōji. The temple had to surrender plots of farmland to the north and south, and buildings such as the Lecture Hall and central Kondō Hall fell into disrepair.

Gangōji was reduced to a shadow of its former self, but the temple's core structures remained standing. Gangōji was able to survive, supported mainly by the growing belief in Pure Land Buddhism. In 1244, the **Gokurakudō** and **Zenshitsu** were built to cater to Pure Land believers who came to see **Chikō's Mandala**.

The next major blow to Gangōji came in autumn of 1451, when a devastating fire leveled nearly the entire temple complex. The fire was started by angry peasant farmers who stormed into Nara to demand debt relief. The peasants set fire to houses during their rioting, and the flames spread to the temple. The central structures of Gangōji were lost, and only a handful of the major buildings remained, including the Zenshitsu and Gokurakudō. Even after this, the temple was able to support itself by holding performances of *sarugaku* (the precursor to modern *kyōgen* and Noh theater).

Around this time, Gangōji split into three temples. The majority of the original temple compound had been lost to fire, leaving three separate sections in the west, east, and southeast. Each of these sections operated independently, supported by visitors who came to see its Buddhist images. The section in the east, with the Zenshitsu and Gokurakudō, had Chikō's Mandala and noteworthy Buddhist statuary, such as the **Wooden Statues of Prince Shōtoku**. The Nishi Shōtōin ("West Pagoda Hall") enshrined Buddhist relics, and the Kannon Hall in the southeast had a statue of the eleven-headed form of the bodhisattva Kannon, as well as an impressive five-story pagoda. The great five-story pagoda and Nishi Shōtōin were later lost to fire, but their associated temples still exist as subsidiary temples of Tōdaiji and Saidaiji.

Ultimately, it was not financial hardships or peasant revolts but political upheaval that permanently shrank Gangōji's grounds and opened the door for urbanization. In the latter years of the Warring States period (1467–1568), as the Ashikaga shogunate was toppled by warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), Gangōji was stripped of the imperially granted rights to the land that surrounded it. Soon afterward, development of residences and storefronts on that land began to accelerate. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the creation of Naramachi was fully underway.

The neighborhood's history would likely have been lost if not for a barber-surgeon and local historian named Murai Kodō (1681–1749), who took an interest in the area around Gangōji. Through investigation, he was able to determine that many of the “new” neighborhoods in the area had been built sometime between 1573 and 1592. Kodō's theory was later confirmed by excavation. Archaeological surveys of the area around Gangōji's surviving structures have uncovered numerous remains of wells, trash pits, and the stone foundations of temple buildings that date to the 1550s. The same surveys also discovered evidence of how Gangōji's buildings were laid to rest: the foundation stones of the buildings destroyed in the 1451 fire had been buried so that new homes and shops could be built on top of them. In many ways, the burying of the foundation stones marked the true end of Gangōji as it had existed since the seventh century.

Although the former temple grounds are now occupied by the bustling neighborhood of Naramachi, the connection to the temple lives on in the names of its different districts: areas such as Imamikado-chō, Shimomikado-chō, and Wakido-chō carry the names of the temple gates that once stood there, and Tsuijinouchi-chō (literally, “the town inside the wall”) is located near what was once the outer wall of the temple complex. Many of the original buildings of Gangōji Temple are lost to time, but its history lives on.