

Gagoze, Gangōji's Demon of Legend

While walking the temple grounds, keen-eyed visitors may spot small statues of grinning demons lurking under the bushes or sitting on boulders. There are five of these impish figures in all, and they hint at Gangōji's history as the site of a legendary demon attack. The legend became known throughout the land after its inclusion in the *Nihon ryōiki* (Record of Miraculous Events of Japan), published in the early ninth century.

The account is centered on a monk named Dōjō, who was said to have been a gift from the god of thunder. Even as a young boy, Dōjō possessed herculean strength, and he was able to beat an imperial strongman in a boulder-tossing contest. Later, the boy became an acolyte at Gangōji. When rumors arose of a demon that attacked the young boys who tended the temple's bell tower, Dōjō volunteered to deal with it. When the demon appeared in the middle of the night, Dōjō sprang into action. The two fought until dawn. Dōjō seized the demon by its long hair, but the demon broke free, tearing out its hair in the process. The creature fled into the night, never to return. (The demon's hair was kept by the temple for some time afterward, but it has since been lost.)

As the story spread, the temple's name (which at the time was pronounced more like "Gagoji") merged with existing folk beliefs about a demon named "Gango" or "Gagoze." Over the centuries, the demon Gagoze has been recast as a benevolent protector and a symbol of Gangōji Temple.