

Myojoin Temple

According to local legend, the temple of Myojoin on the outskirts of what is now the town of Fukue on Fukue Island was originally a guest house for the Japanese envoys who traveled to Tang China via the Goto Islands between the eighth and ninth centuries. The temple's copper statue of Yakushi, the Buddha of medicine and healing, which one of the emissaries may have brought to the island as an amulet for protections on the dangerous journey across the sea, is thought to date to this time. Perhaps the most famous of the envoys, the Buddhist priest Kukai (774–835), is believed to have named the temple upon his return from China in 806. As the story goes, Kukai prayed that the knowledge he had acquired would benefit Japan and its people. A bright star appeared in the sky the next morning to signify that his wish would be granted, and Kukai named the site of his prayer Myojoin (“hermitage of the shining star”), which later became Myojoin.

From the fourteenth century onward, the Goto family that governed the islands prayed at Myojoin and made donations to the temple. The family funded the repainting of the interiors in the main hall in the seventeenth century, when an artist of the famous Kano school was commissioned to decorate the ceiling with 121 paintings of plants and birds. The ceiling's four corners bear images of *tennyo*, celestial beings that lead the dead to paradise. Depicted near the center of the room's outer section, directly above the place where the daimyo lord of Goto would sit in prayer, is a *ho-o*, a mythical bird that in East Asian mythology brings tidings of a king's birth and is considered a symbol of power.