

Gyōki's Legacy

Kikōji Temple was founded by Gyōki (668–749), a Buddhist priest who is known for helping the common people and for establishing many public institutions. Gyōki chose to spend his final days at Kikōji, an indication of how closely the temple is tied to his legacy.

Gyōki is thought to have begun his priestly studies at age 15 under an influential Buddhist leader named Dōshō (629–700). After Dōshō's death, Gyōki traveled widely, preaching Buddhism and organizing public works projects such as bridges, irrigation systems, and infirmaries. The country had been gripped by famine and plague, and Gyōki was a great help to people in an era of unrest.

Despite Gyōki's public image as a provider, he was a controversial figure. Gyōki operated outside the official state regulations for Buddhist priests, which forbade them from preaching to the public. In 717, Empress Genshō

(680–748) issued an edict admonishing Gyōki and his followers and stating that priests must reside within temples. Gyōki nonetheless continued his philanthropic work and attracted a significant following. In 721, he founded Kikōji Temple.

Genshō's successor, Emperor Shōmu (701–756), recognized Gyōki's ability to attract followers and raise funding for various projects. He formally requested Gyōki's assistance with fundraising for the Great Buddha statue and hall at Tōdaiji Temple. It is thought that Kikōji's original main hall was

Gyōki's "prototype" of the Great Buddha Hall. In 745, at age 77, Gyōki was the first person to be given the rank of *daisōjō*, the highest rank in the Buddhist priesthood. He died four years later, on the grounds of Kikōji, surrounded by his disciples.

The temple pays tribute to Gyōki in several ways, including a statue of Gyōki created in 1998 to mark the 1,250th year of his death. In 2014, a hall was also built to house the statue. The temple's annual festival

commemorates the anniversary of Gyōki's death on March 2.