World Cultural Heritage

NARA PALACE SITE

Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties
The Nara Capital

Built on the northern edge of the Nara basin, Nara was designated the seat of government in the year 710 AD. Empress Gemmei chose it as the center from which to rule in accordance with the Ritsuryō legal code, moving the capital from the old site of Fujiwara, near Asuka. The construction of a capital modeled after cities like the Tang Chinese capital Chang-an was also a significant expression of national prestige within the contemporary East Asian context. Emperor Shōmu later moved the capital repeatedly beginning in 740, but again made Nara the capital in 745. From then until the move to Nagaoka in 784, the Nara region flourished as the capital site. The span covered by these events is called the Nara period.

The main street of the Nara Capital was Suzaku Boulevard, approximately 75 meters wide and extending north in a straight line from the Rōjō Gate, the capital's southern entrance. Divided by Suzaku Boulevard, the western part of the city was called the Right Capital, and the eastern part the Left Capital. The Left Capital had an extension toward the east on its northern half. The capital was divided in regular fashion into residential blocks by large and small streets intersecting at right angles in the form of a checkerboard. The residents of the Nara Capital are numbered from between forty or fifty thousand to one hundred thousand, with the Emperor and members of the imperial and other aristocratic families being a small minority on the order of one hundred plus several tens of persons, and the vast majority made up of lower officials and commoners.

City street grid of the Nara Capital
**The Nara Palace**

At the northern end of Suzaku (Scarlet Phoenix) Boulevard rose the Suzaku Gate. Through it lay the Nara Palace, measuring approximately one by one kilometer. Encircling the palace grounds was a great earthen wall with twelve gates, including the Suzaku Gate.

The interior of the Nara Palace divided into a number of precincts. These include the Imperial Audience Hall and the State Halls Compound that served as loci for politics and national ceremonies, the Imperial Domicile where the Emperor resided, the quarters where the daily business of government was conducted, gardens where banquets were held, and so forth. Among these, the settings for politics and ceremonies underwent a great change from the earlier to the latter parts of the Nara period, divided by a brief span in which the capital moved elsewhere. The Imperial Audience Hall, which stood directly north from Suzaku Gate in the earlier part of the Nara period (generally referred to as the Former Imperial Audience Hall), was built anew in the precinct to the east in the latter part of the period (the Latter Imperial Audience Hall). By contrast, the Imperial Domicile was located at the same place throughout the Nara period.

These matters have been learned through more than fifty years of archaeological excavations. Among the results, the understanding that the palace precinct, formerly thought to have been nearly a perfect square, in fact had an extension along its eastern side, and the further discovery of a Nara period garden in one corner of this extension, can be counted as significant findings of archaeological investigation.
Artifacts tell the work of the residents

Construction of the Nara Palace

There were many buildings at the Nara palace, and its construction required vast amounts of materials. Many items used for construction, such as roof tiles, lumber, and stones, have been found through excavation. These unearthed items not only provide clues for inferring the shapes of the buildings, but also serve as data for examining the way in which such materials were obtained.

Daily lives of the people

For the Emperor, aristocrats, and lower officials to live at the capital, provisions needed for daily life had to be brought from the provinces in the form of taxes and so on. Among the unearthed artifacts are items like pottery, which can be recognized as originating from locations throughout the country. Mokkan (wooden tablets for writing) used as shipping tags are well suited as clues for learning what items were brought from which provinces to the capital.

Officials' duties

Many government offices from the Grand Council of Administration on down were established under the Ritsuryō legal code. Daily business was conducted at these offices much as in the present time, through processing documents. In addition to paper, wooden tablets (mokkan) were frequently used for making documents and keeping accounts, and many of these mokkan are recovered during excavations.

An official's work desk

In addition to ink, brush, grinding wave, and water holder, a knife (for shaving the surface of a mokkan to make corrections) and other items were used.

Eating and kitchen utensils

In addition to chopsticks and spoons, cutting vessels such as bowls and plates, storage vessels such as jars and vases, and cooking equipment such as ladles are recovered.

Shipping tag for bonito brought from the province of Honshu

Various mokkan

Shipping tag for abalone taken to the mansion of Prince Nagaoka

Summoned to a worker issued by the Office of Rice Wines and Vinegars

Illustrated by Hayakawa Kazuko
Progress in investigation and conservation

After the capital moved to Nagaoka, despite an attempt at one point to return to Nara with the passage of time, the remains of the capital were slowly buried beneath the soil. Research aimed at determining its original shape was conducted at the end of the Edo period by Kitamura Sadamasa, and as a result of superb scholarship by Sekino Tadashi, Kita Sadakichi, and others in the late Meiji, the outlines of the Nara period capital gradually came to be understood.

In addition, through the cooperation of local residents, beginning with Taneda Kajirō and Miyake Bunshiro in the Meiji and Taishō periods and continuing to the present, and moreover with the support of a nationwide popular movement in the postwar period, the Nara Palace Site has been preserved. Now designated a National Historic Site, the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties conducts research and investigation of the site for over half a century.

Reconstruction and presentation to the public

A variety of means are employed at the Nara Palace Site in preparing it for presentation to the public in ways which will make the results of excavation more readily understandable. At the Excavation Site Exhibition Hall, for example, the actual structural remains are visible just as they were discovered through excavation.

Further, when such remains are reburied to ensure their preservation, above them full-scale replicas of the remains themselves are sometimes displayed, or the size of buildings and the positions of their posts are shown with mound earth and planted shrub, or reconstructions are made of the building foundations and a portion of the walls. In addition, at the Former Imperial Audience Hall, Shitte Gate, and East Palace Garden, reconstructions have been made of the buildings and gardens in their original forms. Further preparations are presently underway for a public use in accordance with the master plan of the “National Historic Park of the Nara Palace Site”.

Research and preservation of artifacts

In order to understand the proper significance of excavated artifacts, it is necessary to make accurate records of these items through scale drawings, photographs, etc. In addition, the materials used for making the artifacts themselves are investigated through scientific means, and from observing the tree-ring widths of unearthed wooden materials, research capable of determining the year in which the tree was felled is being advanced.

Also, as artifacts made of wood and metal in particular are fragile, they are treated chemically and in other ways to ensure their long-term preservation. In this manner, efforts are being made to clarify Nara period history through the study of recovered artifacts, while at the same time to preserve these materials for the future.
The Nara Palace Site Museum
Explanations of the Nara Palace are made readily understandable through displays of various artifacts recovered from the excavations, along with models of reconstructed palace buildings.

Excavation Site Exhibition Hall
In addition to the structural features of the site being visible just as they were found through excavations, models of reconstructions of the Inner Imperial Audience Hall roof and the Imperial Doghouse are on display.

Guide to the Nara Palace Site

Nara Palace Site Museum
Ten minutes walk from Yamato Saidaiji station of Kintetsu Railway.
Take a bus to Kintetsu Yamato Saidaiji station from Nara station of JR or Kintetsu, or a bus to JR Nara station from Kintetsu Yamato Saidaiji station, and get off at Heijo-kyo Bus stop.

Excavation Site Exhibition Hall
Ten minutes walk from Heijo-kyo Bus stop.
Twenty minutes walk from Yamato Saidaiji station of Kintetsu Railway.
Or, twenty minutes walk from Heijo-kyo Bus stop.
Or, take a bus from JR Nara station and Kintetsu Nara station and get off at Nijo-ji Minami-Nichome Bus stop, and walk for three minutes.

East Palace Garden
Suzaku Gate

Admissions/Hours (all facilities above)
Free Admission
Open daily 09:00-16:30 (last admission 16:00)
Closed on Monday (except for National Holidays on Monday, in which case the museum is open on the holiday and closed the following Tuesday instead) and year-end holidays.

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