This is the first issue of *East Asian History* in the series previously entitled *Papers on Far Eastern history*. As before, the journal will be published twice a year.

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Subscription Enquiries The Business Manager, *East Asian History* at the above address
Annual Subscription Rates Australia A$20  Overseas US$20
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The planned capital city now known as Nara was the focus of church and state, culture and technology, for most of the eighth century in Japan. Nara was officially established in 710 AD as Heijo-kyo, the ‘capital city of peace’. Here the scale of urban planning and architectural construction undertaken by the Japanese state reached new and unprecedented proportions as it strove to emulate in its institutions and their physical setting the example of its illustrious contemporary, the T'ang dynasty, then at the height of its power and glory in China. Nara was the locus of imperial government based upon the T'ang-inspired penal and administrative codes (the Taibō ritsuryō codes), the centre of state religion and the matrix of a classical court culture. It was equally the cradle of new technologies, particularly in city planning and in the creation of monumental architecture, exemplified by the Daigokuden (Imperial Audience Hall) at the palace and the Daibutsuden (Great Buddha Hall) of Tōdai-ji, which, although later rebuilt on a more modest scale, is still reputed to be the largest timber-frame structure in the world.

Historiographically, Nara demonstrates the opportunities presented by urban and architectural sources for reconstructing the past. City plans and architecture may serve as a rich body of primary sources not only for urban and architectural history but also for research into the development of the human institutions housed within their physical environment. A generation ago, Oscar Handlin and John Burchard called for the integration of the study of the built environment with institutional and social history in the preface to their landmark work, The Historian and the City:

This is a part of a study entitled Architecture and authority in Japan, to be published by Routledge in the Nissan Institute Japanese Studies Series of the University of Oxford. I wish to thank Tsuboi Kiyotari, former Director-General of the Nara National Cultural Properties Research Institute (Nara Kokuritsu Bunkazai Kenkyūjo), together with Kamei Nobuo and Nishimura Yasushi of the Institute, for their assistance. Figures 2-8 are supplied courtesy of the Institute. Helpful suggestions have also been made by Inagaki Eizō, Professor Emeritus of the University of Tokyo, and Geremie Barmé and Kenneth Gardiner of the Australian National University.

1 The second character now means ‘castle’, but in the eighth century meant a ‘walled city’ in the Chinese usage from which it was adopted.
Archaeologists and historians have devoted time and effort to the reconstruction of urban forms and have given us a reasonably accurate description of the evolution of the physical layouts at various periods. But the reasons for the development of those forms and their relation to the life conducted within them have rarely been treated adequately.  

This issue may now have been addressed in the case of European cities, and Japanese cities such as Edo and Kanazawa,  but the problem has not been adequately addressed in the case of Nara.  

This is perhaps understandable because little of the original eighth-century city stands today above ground level. Scholarly attention has been concentrated on the painstaking archeological task of re-establishing the physical form of the city and of its architecture from beneath the mud of the paddy fields which spread over the ruins of once proud portals and halls of state after the capital was moved again in 784. Nara studies have been the province of the archeologist and of the historian specializing in interpreting the official history of the era, the Shoku Nihongi 統日本記, covering the years 697-792. Second only to the Nihon shoki日本書紀 in the Rikkokusbi 六国史 or “Six National Histories,” it is more reliable as an historical source because it largely dispenses with mythology and concentrates on contemporary events, recording decisions of the day and activities of the court.  

Considerable progress has been made in archeological endeavour and documentary analysis but the fruits of these endeavours have not been brought together in order to recreate the entirety of place and purpose advocated by Handlin and Burchard. It is particularly important that this approach be applied to Nara, for place and purpose were not related simply by coincidence; there was a deliberate and sustained government policy to link the two as an organic whole. Central to our historical understanding of the entire Nara period is the relationship between the principles and processes of government on the one hand, and the principles and processes of city building on the other. What, therefore, was the relationship between Nara as a place and Nara as a centre of imperial government? How did government policy and concepts of authority dictate the form of the city and its architecture of state?  

The Relationship between Place and Purpose at Nara  

The relationship between architecture and authority has special importance in the case of cities planned primarily as government capitals. Throughout history cities have expressed the power of ruling classes. The careful structuring of a built environment according to an overall conception of human relations has definitive psychological and behavioural effects on a community. This makes cities effective tools for social engineering, especially through class-determined zoning of the populace and by regula-
tion of architectural style according to status. Cities have also acted as unsurpassed symbols of authority, partly as a result of the opportunity they afford to give physical expression to an all-encompassing vision of the human order, partly because of their functional efficacy as organizational tools, and partly as a consequence of the symbolism of the architecture.

The city of Nara exemplifies all these characteristics of the willfully-ordained built environment. Its creation was the culmination of the process of remodelling Japanese institutions of government and society on the T'ang model of a symmetrically-ordered, centralized bureaucratic state under a virtuous emperor reigning with the mandate of heaven. The Taibō ritsuryō codes of 701-02 were to form the basis for government administration while the city and architecture of Nara was to become the immediate physical matrix of the new order.

In the second month of 707, Emperor Mommu 文武 announced to the assembly of his highest ranking courtiers the intention to abandon Fujiwara-kyō 平城京 and move the capital to Nara.7 Fujiwara-kyō had proved inadequate to accommodate the ambitious scale of the new institutions of government and court envisaged by the Japanese élite. Within three years the new capital was officially operating, and within a decade had grown in size and sophistication to become a city of international standing in the Chinese sphere of influence. Construction and maintenance of the myriad palace buildings, from the most spectacular ceremonial structures to the most mundane latrines, was the responsibility of the Timber Construction Department (Mokkōryō 木工寮) within the Imperial Family Ministry (Kunai-shō 宮内省).8 The department was also charged with the daunting responsibility of obtaining the high quality lumber, particularly Japanese cypress (binoki 柏), needed for the official building work.9 Other government departments were responsible for the decoration of buildings and for special building projects as the need arose. The most significant was the Bureau for the Construction of Tōdai-ji (Zōtōdaijishi 造東大寺司), the construction of which preoccupied the Nara state for the middle part of the eighth century.10

By mid-century, also, the ever-present task of maintaining the vast array of palace buildings called for the establishment of a new department solely responsible for repairs. Elsewhere in the city, temple construction was proceeding apace under the auspices of the six major Buddhist sects, while the aristocracy and court officials busied themselves with creating mansions and gardens befitting the dignity of their status on sites granted to them by the government in accordance with their court rank. Not a few religious and residential structures were transported to Nara from their original locations at Fujiwara or elsewhere in the Asuka region and simply re-erected in the new city to save time and cost.

Nara now ranks in the history of civilization with other consciously planned cities of the ancient world such as Miletus in Greece, Ninerva in Mesopotamia, and the T'ang capital of Ch'ang-an which most immediately inspired its creation.

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7 Shoku Nibongi, 2nd month, 707, p.27.
9 By the 8th century, supplies of binoki were dwindling in the Nara region and fresh forests, close to rivers which were essential for transportation to Nara, had to be sought out in the provinces around Lake Biwa to the north.
and form. All three cities shared the use of an orthogonal grid-plan which, as an urban planning device, is singularly arbitrary and prescriptive, making it well-suited to the purpose of imposition of order by government. The Nara grid consisted of carefully standardized blocks (jōbō 一条坊), defined physically by a system of major avenues (jō 条) running east-west and north-south (bō 坊) (Figure 1). The city was 4.8 kilometres north-south and 5.7 kilometres east-west, making it some four times larger in area than its immediate predecessor, Fujiwara-kyō. The plan was characterized by a north-south axis highlighted by the grand Suzaku Avenue 朱雀大路, 74 metres in width, which ran from the towering south gatehouse of the city, the Rajo-mon 阪城門, to the Suzaku-mon 朱雀門, the two-storey gatehouse guarding the principal entrance to the imperial palace complex at the north and centre of the city.

Figure 1 Plan of the city of Nara (Heijo-kyō) in the eighth century (scale: 1:450,000)
The palace was a virtual city in its own right, some 100 metres north-south by 1200 metres east-west, enclosed by a wall three metres thick and guarded by gateways of imposing character. It included the offices of the eight government ministries and the two supreme government organs, the Council of State (Dajōkan 大政官) and the Department of Religion (Jingikan 神祇官), responsible for the Shintō rites and observances of the emperor and court. There were also ceremonial halls used for state occasions, of which the Daigokuden or 'Imperial Audience Hall' was the most important, while the Imperial Residence (Dairi 内裏) was in a separate precinct. Excavations have determined that there were two 'court building precincts', or Chōdōin 朝堂院, within the complex, each discrete within its own compound walls, rectangular in plan and oriented north-south (Figures 2 and 3). The western precinct was aligned with the Suzaku-mon, while the approach to the eastern precinct was via the Mibu-mon 壬生門.

There were significant changes in the disposition of buildings in the two Chōdōin during the course of the eighth century, particularly in the location of the Daigokuden. In the 720s, corresponding to the end of the reign of Empress Genshō 元正 and the early years of Emperor Shōmu 僖武 reign, the Daigokuden was situated within its own precinct walls to the immediate rear of the western Chōdōin (Figure 2). The second precinct, immediately to the east, contained twelve government office buildings and a large hall to the north. This was probably the site of the Dajōkan. To its rear and aligned axially with this precinct was the Imperial Residence and its service buildings. By the middle of the century, however, the Daigokuden had been rebuilt in the eastern precinct between the government offices and the imperial residence, for reasons which will be discussed below (Figure 3).

The architectural form of the Daigokuden of the western precinct has been reconstructed following recent archeological excavations (Figures 4-8). Referred to in the archeological reports as the 'first Daigokuden', it was a long, narrow, two-storey building set on a high stone podium and oriented east-west across the main axis of the palace site. The structure consisted of nine bays east-west and four bays north-south, with an impressive...
12 'Dai-ichiji Daigokuden'. The date of construction of this 'first Daigokuden' is not clear. There is some evidence of an earlier structure beneath its foundations, possibly the Daigokuden of the Fujiwara palace which was dismantled and brought to Nara.

13 "The Emperor held Court in the Daigokuden; the officials and Koma (Korean) ambassadors did homage. . . . His Majesty went to the Kō-mon and gave a banquet in the Chōdōin to those above the fifth rank, the foreign ambassadors and the officials (1st day, 1st month, 763)." "The Emperor went to the Jōkaku-mon (Kō-mon) and was graciously pleased to witness shooting on horseback (5th month, 777)." Shoku Nihongi, transl. Richard A. Ponsonby-Fane in his Imperial cities: the capitals of Japan from the oldest times until 1229 (original MS c. 1930; reprint edition, Washington DC: University Publications of America, 1979), pp. 66-7, 70.

14 For the rebuilding of the palace see Miyamoto and Hozumi, Heijō-kyō, pp. 88-91; for court ceremonies see ibid., pp. 56-7.

15 "The Emperor went to the Kō-mon of the Daigoku-den and witnessed the dancing and singing of the Hayato (6th month, 729)." Shoku Nihongi, transl. by Ponsonby-Fane in Imperial cities, p. 66.

Figure 4
Daigokuden (Imperial Audience Hall) of the Heijō Palace. Front elevation of the main hall and flanking towers as seen from the south behind its Kō-mon and enclosing cloisters (archaeological reconstruction)

The span of slightly over 5 metres between the pillars, its total width being 51.48 metres, and depth, 21.20 metres. The first floor of the building above the podium was open to provide a good view into and from the interior, and was entered via three formal stone staircases.

The Shoku Nihongi establishes the function played in imperial ritual and court activities by the Daigokuden and its Chōdōin. This area of the palace was the focus for New Year ceremonies, horse races and mounted archery contests, as well as for the official reception of ambassadors and their retinues from the Korean kingdoms. Imperial accession ceremonies (sokui-no-shiikiten 即位式典) were also performed at the Daigokuden.

On the most important state occasions the entire court would assemble, with the emperor seated on the imperial throne (takami-kura 高御座) placed above the central stairs of the Daigokuden, facing south. The emperor and his immediate retinue were separated from the rest of the court by the southern wall of the Daigokuden compound. Ministers would pay obeisance to the emperor by approaching the entrance to the Kō-mon, the gateway separating the southerly compound from the Daigokuden compound (Figure 4). On the occasion of accession ceremonies marking the enthronement of a new emperor or empress, the highest-ranking courtiers and officials were allowed to enter the courtyard directly in front of the Daigokuden. When Emperor Shōmu ascended the throne in 724, seven temporary flag poles were erected transversely across the Daigokuden courtyard and the senior courtiers and ministers paid obeisance ranked in lines behind. Later in the Nara period, the reduced scale of the Daigokuden compound indicates that such proximity to the emperor was eschewed. At other times the emperor or empress advanced to the Kō-mon 門門 to view activities in the Chōdōin such as musical performances.

The Daigokuden was similar in architectural form and ceremonial function to the lecture halls of the great Buddhist monasteries of the same era, such as the Daitokōdō 大講堂 of Hōryū-ji 法隆寺, added to the main western precinct of that Buddhist foundation in the ninth century and still surviving today (Figures
9-10). Although the Daigokuden was a two-storey structure while the Kōdō (Lecture Hall) of Hōryū-ji was only a single storey in height, both buildings were long and narrow in plan, oriented east-west across the main north-south axis of their respective sites, and structurally mounted on a high, stone-faced podium. At Hōryū-ji the chief abbot stood at the top of the central steps to address the monks assembled in the forecourt, in much the same way as the courtiers would have gathered in the forecourt to the Daigokuden and in the adjacent administrative precinct on great state occasions. The extant Hōryū-ji building reveals the way in which the Nara palace hall would have framed the focal figure in ceremonies, providing a dramatic setting to enhance his authority. From archeological evidence it is also clear that the Daigokuden was a building of enormous size, approaching the dimensions of the Daibutsuden of Tōdai-ji in width and height, although considerably narrower. It would have been a commanding presence in the palace compound, befitting its role as the formal focus of imperial authority and court ritual.
Figures 7 & 8
Daigokuden (Imperial Audience Hall) of the Heijo Palace
Side elevation (top) and transverse section (bottom) of the main hall (archaeological reconstruction)

From this evidence of urban planning and palace architecture at Nara it is clear that the built environment was more than just an incidental setting for the conduct of government affairs. It was part of the very nature of government, inherent and indispensable to the definition of authority and the exercise of power.

The Adoption of T'ang City Planning and Architectural Principles

The relationship between foreign ideas and technology and indigenous institutions and culture is a mainstream issue in Japanese history. The striking scale and sophistication of the city and palace of Nara is evidence of a deliberate and concerted attempt to apply Chinese planning principles and architectural practice to the needs of the Japanese state. How effective was the Nara government in implementing the Chinese ideal of a planned city with monumental architecture? What was the result of the deliberate adoption of foreign models of state and civilization for indigenous traditions of government, building and belief?

City Planning

The Nara plan conformed with general principles of Chinese planning as understood at the Nara court in the eighth century. This was based on an ideal conception, but the T'ang dynastic capital of Ch'ang-an exerted a powerful influence as a tangible model of this ideal. Chinese city planning was, however, inconsistent in practice, as K.C. Chang and Ōshima Riichi have shown in their analysis of cities of the Eastern Chou, and T'ang Ch'ang-an lost its symmetrical perfection with the Ta-ming palace 大明宫 growing as
a trapezoidal accretion at the northeast corner of the urban grid (Figure 11). Whatever the realities of dealing with unanticipated growth with an inflexible planning device like the grid, Chinese cities were based on belief in correspondence between the terrestrial and the celestial orders. The belief permeates the classical Confucian texts formulated in Chou, particularly the Shu-ching [Book of Documents] and the Li-chi [Book of Rites].

These ideas had a decisive influence on eighth-century Japan. At Nara they translated into a north-south grid plan governed by axial symmetry and a spatial hierarchy coinciding with the hierarchy of status at the court, the same formula as used at Ch'ang-an. The seat of government and the residence of the emperor was at the north and centre and building sites within the city were allocated according to rank. The privilege of constructing impressive gateways along the main avenues was restricted to those in highest office.

The plan also satisfied geomantic criteria for siting which permeated Chinese civilization and were reflected in the Confucian classics. Specifically, this meant having high ground to the north and east of the area of human habitation, to protect against the flow of the malevolent forces in the universe—and the cold northerly winds, and low ground and water to the south of the site, coinciding with the direction of the benevolent forces and the sun. The confluence of ancient geomancy with formally articulated Confucian philosophy thus interposed the palace of the ruler between the malevolent forces of the north and the people over whom benevolent rule was exercised in the south. The geomantic doctrine of the Four Deities was also applied in part to Nara, although the discovery of the Takamatsuzuka tomb in the Asuka region, richly decorated with paintings of the Red Bird, Black Warrior, White Tiger, and Green Dragon on its four walls, establishes that the doctrine was already understood in the seventh century. However, of the Four Deities, only the Red Bird is in evidence at Nara. This mighty mythological creature protects the main north-south avenue of the city and the Suzaku-mon at the entrance to the Heijō Palace complex. The first comprehensive application of the Four Deities doctrine to city planning was not until the building of Kyoto at the end of the eighth century.
Understanding the extent of Nara's specific indebtedness to T'ang Ch'ang-
an is hampered by limitations in our understanding of Ch'ang-an itself. As
Cunrui Xiong-an notes, “recent archaeological research has greatly enhanced
our knowledge of Sui-T'ang Chang'an, which is among the very few medieval
cities that have been subjected to systematic excavation in China. But little effort
has been made to combine archaeological findings with documentary
evidence.”

The Official Architectural Style

The architectural form of the first Daigokuden also conforms in general
style and specific system of mensuration with Ch'ang-an palace architecture,
particularly the Han-yuan tien. This was the main hall used for state
ceremonies in the T'a-ming Palace of Ch'ang-an. Xiong notes, on the basis
of a study of the 1959-60 excavation reports, that the hall would have been
“an imposing edifice in red and white with golden ornaments. Two towers
on east and west [were] linked with the main hall by a corridor.”

Comparison of the plan of the Han-yuan tien with that of the first
Daigokuden, both accurately redrawn from archeological work, establishes that the Nara building was four bays shorter and
two bays narrower (or 15.85 metres by 8.00 metres smaller) than the Ch'ang-an building, though pillar placement and
intercolumnar span conformed precisely. The two plans can
be transposed over each other.

The first Daigokuden at Nara was, therefore, modelled
directly on the Han-yuan tien. Flanking towers were even added
to the Daigokuden in the 720s to complete the imitation of
the architectural form of the Ch'ang-an palace (Figure 4).

Precise numerical correspondence between the two build-
ings highlights the far-reaching attempt by the Nara govern-
ment to standardize Japanese measurements on the basis of
T'ang mensuration. As with ancient Rome and medieval
Europe, early Japanese measurements were subject to consid-
erable variation in customary workshop traditions, a diversity
which presented problems to a government intent on extending
control over the nation, conducting overseas trade and build-
ing a new capital city. Close coordination was essential for the
veritable army of surveyors and builders co-opted from many
different regional traditions, including the famed master-
carpenters of Hida province, into government construction
service.

Figure 11
Reconstructed city plan of Ch'ang-an

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20 Cunrui Xiong, “Sui-Tang Chang'an (582–904),” (PhD diss., Australian National Uni-
21 Xiong, ibid., pp.84-5.
22 “Daigokuden Archeological Excavation
Report,” p.228.
23 ibid., fig.109.

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The *Taihō ritsuryō* codes officially adopted the long-established Chinese system of a 'short foot' (*shōjaku* 小尺) and 'long foot' (*taijaku* 大尺) as part of the comprehensive attempt to remodel the Japanese governmental structure along the lines of the T'ang administrative and legal system. The larger measure was approximately 1.2 times greater than the smaller unit and is generally thought by mensuration specialists to have been the same length as the *komajaku* 高麗尺. This 'Korean foot' was 35.45 centimetres and had been in widespread use in Japan for building the funeral mounds from the 4th to 6th centuries when influence from the Korean kingdoms was strong.\(^{24}\) It was ultimately based upon Chinese practice because of general Chinese influence in the Korean kingdoms, especially as a result of the presence of Han commanderies in the north.

The increased tempo of capital construction, first at Fujiwara-kyō and then at Nara, necessitated immediate modification. In 702 the government announced that the long foot would be used exclusively for land surveys and the short foot for all other purposes.\(^{25}\) This important modification to the T'ang-inspired standard took place under Emperor Mommu and was, presumably, a response to the specific circumstances encountered in building at Fujiwara-kyō, the short-lived predecessor to Nara established in 694.

In 713, shortly after the capital was moved to Nara, further initiatives were taken to standardize measurements. The government was again deeply preoccupied with the enormous practical responsibilities of constructing the new city. Clarification of government building standards was essential to the orderly coordination of work being carried out simultaneously at construction sites throughout the city. Accordingly an edict was issued stating that henceforth “each and every government ministry shall use the short foot for all purposes.”\(^{26}\) This abolished the system of two different foot measures which had been adopted in Japan from T'ang mensuration little over a decade earlier and established a unit of approximately 29.5 centimetres (given the 1:1.2 relationship between the short and long foot under the Taihō code) as the official standard. This is an interesting instance of the niceties of principle giving way to the practical demands of large-scale construction.

From the archeological excavations carried out in the 1970s at the site of the western Chōdōin precinct at Nara it is clear that the system of two different foot measures was still in operation when the palace was built, presumably before the change in 713. The *taibō* 大 宝 long foot was used for surveying the dimensions of the precinct and for positioning the buildings within it. These measurements are all rounded long-foot units, which made surveying simpler.\(^{27}\) By contrast, the Daigokuden is laid out with a foot measure of precisely 29.45 centimetres.\(^{28}\) It may be assumed that this was the official length of the short-foot measure.\(^{29}\) Like the land survey long foot, it was used as a rounded unit for simplicity and speed, particularly important as customary building practice seldom used detailed working drawings.


\(^{26}\) *Shoku Nihongi*, 2nd month, 713, p.51; Mochizuki, *Monosashi*, p.166.

\(^{27}\) “Daigokuden Archeological Excavation Report,” p.220. The excavated foundations of the building are 51.48 x 21.20 metres, as noted above. These dimensions may be subdivided into exactly 153 x 70 *shaku*, each being 29.45 centimetres.

\(^{28}\) ibid.

\(^{29}\) Mochizuki, *Monosashi*, p.166.
For the first decade of its rule, therefore, the Nara court was effective in bringing order to building measurements consistent with its overall policy of adopting T'ang practices.

A document preserved in the Shoku Nihongi corroborates this architectural and archeological evidence of initial conformity with T'ang practice. A request to Emperor Shōmu made from the Dajōkan shortly after his official accession to the throne in 724 reveals the existence of an official architectural vocabulary based on T'ang usage. Although couched in the language of supplication to the emperor, this document, emanating from the highest level of government, amounted to a statement of official policy:30

... the capital is where the emperor lives and every province comes to court but it does not possess the magnificence needed to express virtue (toku 長). Its wooden shingled roofs and thatched dwellings are relics of the past. They are difficult to build and easily destroyed, and thus exhaust the people’s resources. It is requested that an order be issued that those courtiers of the 5th rank and above, and those commoners able to do so, should build tiled-roof houses and paint them red and white.31

The equation this document makes between government by virtue, a fundamental Confucian tenet, and appropriate physical form, is unmistakable. It is the same type of equation we accept between democratic governments and Greek classical architecture. Tiled roofs and polychrome decoration were thus made the official architectural vocabulary of the Nara political order at the inauguration of the reign of Emperor Shōmu, the emperor most influential in establishing the direction of rule in the eighth century.

It is evident from the Daigokuden excavations that the official architectural vocabulary was used for the most important ceremonial building of the palace well the year of promulgation of the Dajōkan document. The excavations of the site revealed monumental stone foundations, traces of brightly painted timber-framing and triple-glazed terracotta tiled roofs.

The most tangible evidence of architectural form within the Heijō Palace is not the Daigokuden, however, but the Higashi Chōshūden 東朝集殿, or ‘Eastern Waiting Hall’, of the eastern Chōdōin precinct (Figure 12 : top). This building is the only extant building from the Heijō palace, one of a pair originally erected on either side of the north-south axis of the eastern precinct of the palace site after its rebuilding in 747. These two buildings, located in a small courtyard to the immediate south of the administrative precinct and approached via the main south gate of the Chōdōin compound, served as the place where courtiers and officials awaited their appointments in the eastern Chōdōin.

The survival of the Higashi Chōshūden is fortuitous for the historical record, but it also highlights the need for caution in the use of extant buildings as primary source materials for history. The building now serves as the Kōdō of Tōshōdai-ji 唐招提寺, the temple founded by the Chinese monk Ganjin
Ganjin had reached Japan in 754 after five unsuccessful attempts to travel from China and was accorded by the Nara court the high honour of being the only priest allowed to conduct ordination rites. In 759 he was granted a site by imperial decree on which to found the Tōshōdai-ji. Eighth- and ninth-century temple records state that one of the Chōshūden buildings from the palace was also donated to the new foundation.

Archeological excavation of the site of the Higashi Chōshūden at the palace and an architectural examination of the Kōdō of Tōshōdai-ji have confirmed that they are in fact the same building. The base dimensions are identical and the pillars, beams and truss of the Kōdō still carry the identifying numbers and letters (bansuke) inscribed on them to permit the structure to be dismantled at the palace and reassembled at its new home.

At the time of the donation of the Higashi Chōshūden to the Tōshōdai-ji, extensive rebuilding was being carried out at the Heijō palace, so extensive that, according to the Shoku Nihongi, no New Year ceremonies were held for the year 761. This particular structure may have become redundant as a result, and the foundation of a new temple provided a perfect opportunity to demonstrate imperial largesse and dispose of a surplus structure.

The Kōdō of Tōshōdai-ji is a single-storey structure nine bays wide and four bays deep surmounted by a hip-gable terracotta-tiled roof. Some 27 metres long and 12 metres wide, it is similar in its proportions to the Daigokuden, although significantly smaller. Like the Daigokuden, it was originally equipped with three sets of stone steps and the front façade was open to provide ready access to the interior. The truss which supports the roof has gracefully curved pairs of tie-beams in the High T'ang style. Analysis of the roof framing established that it was originally a simple gable roof, a style used in less important buildings at the Heijō palace but unsuited to its more exalted role at the new temple. A lattice ceiling was suspended from the roof when the building was re-erected at the Tōshōdai-ji, altering the general effect of the interior, and straight penetrating tie-beams were added as late as the Kamakura period to strengthen the structure. The original red paint of the pillars and beams has now disappeared, leaving the timber exposed in its natural state. Excavations have revealed that the roof was originally covered with exotic triple-glazed green, white and brown tiles in the T'ang mode favoured for prominent

Figure 12
Reconstruction of Higashi Chōshūden of Heijō Palace (top). Extant Kōdō of Tōshōdai-ji (bottom). Mid-eighth-century with subsequent alterations
buildings at the palace, lending the building an elegance and decorative brilliance far removed from the present sombre hue of its grey tiles. Something of its original impact is evident from the description of the building after its removal to the Tōshōdai-ji:

It was magnificent with gold, silver, vermilion and jewels, and, so to speak, like a heavenly palace, but with the passing of years it became dilapidated.\(^{35}\)

This building as it survives today and from the evidence of its original form furnished by archeology and written records, illustrates well the official Nara architectural vocabulary based on T’ang usage of stone bases, red-painted timber frames, elegantly curved truss-beams and glazed tiled roofs.

**Divergence from the T’ang Model**

Much of the city plan and many of the official buildings of Nara may have been modelled on, or at least consistent with, Chinese planning and architectural principles evident at Ch’ang-an, but there were also significant differences. The plan of the first Heijō palace buildings did not observe the strict axial alignment of the Ch’ang-an palaces, although some rebuilding in the middle of the eighth century brought them closer in organization to the Chinese pattern. Nara also lacked impressive city walls like those of Ch’ang-an and other important Chinese cities, although the palace complex was set apart from the rest of the city by tile-roofed walls in the Chinese manner. There is much speculation as to why the Japanese never developed a tradition of walled cities. It may have been a result of the absence of any outside threat coupled with the need to impress those living within the city with the authority emanating from the palace.

More important than these differences of detail was a mid-century crisis of confidence in the Chinese ideal of a monumental and enduring capital—the rationale for the founding of Nara—precipitated by factional struggles at the Nara court. This resulted in a brief revival of the indigenous Japanese notion of a capital as impermanent.

There had been seventeen movements of palace and capital in Japan from the time of the Empress Suiko 松代, who ascended the throne in 592,\(^{36}\) until the establishment of Nara in 710. This practice had its basis in both religious belief and political pragmatism. It was carried out to satisfy Shintō requirements for ritual purification of a site following defilement caused by death. It also addressed the pragmatic needs of court politics by allowing a new ruler to be housed in a fresh architectural setting, disassociated from the visible accomplishments of the preceding ruler, and more often than not, at a site deep in the heartland of his or her own local power.

In sharp contrast to this tradition, the underlying principle behind the founding of Nara was the creation of a city which would impress and endure, to borrow J. J. Coulton’s definition of the monumental. Tension between the

\(^{35}\) Cited in Ponsonby-Fane, *Imperial cities*, p.76.

Chinese notions of a permanent capital and the Japanese custom of establishing a new palace and government headquarters on the death of each emperor culminated in a remarkable interregnum when Nara was completely abandoned as the capital. At the end of 740, a mere thirty years after its official foundation and the Herculean tasks of its construction, the capital was moved to Kuni. That great edifice, the Daigokuden, together with its flanking cloisters, was dismantled and transported to Kuni for re-erection at the site of the new capital. The Shoku Nihongi notes that it took four years to complete the rebuilding of the Daigokuden and its corridors. Three years later Kuni was abandoned in favour of Naniwa. By the end of the same year, 744, large-scale construction work had begun on a temple at Shigaraki, thirty-five kilometres to the north-east of Nara. The idea of moving the capital to Shigaraki seems to have taken root, for the New Year Ceremonies were held there for the year 745. At the very time the possibility of moving the capital to Shigaraki was being considered, however, an inauspicious earthquake devastated the region. The ministers of the Daij6kan voted unanimously to "move back to Heij6." After some vacillation by Emperor Sh6mu the capital was re-established at Nara. The versatile Daigokuden, however, was left behind at Kuni; the court had learnt from painful experience that it was easier to build a new one than move the old.

This reversion to what can only be described as the peripatetic palace syndrome was precipitated by the powerful Tachibana clan employing the ancient expedient of trying to break the power of a rival, in this case the Fujiwara, by disrupting their power base through moving the entire capital. The movement of the capital to Naniwa and eventually back to Nara itself was a successful strategy devised by the Fujiwara to reassert their authority.

There were inconsistencies not only in the application of Chinese city-planning to Japanese circumstances. There were similar tensions between the foreign and the indigenous evident also in the architectural style of the buildings constructed in Nara. There was, for example, an important difference in the style and materials used in the construction of the most important gatehouses which protected the entrances to the palace compounds in the two cities. Excavations of the Ch'eng-t'ien men, at the main palace entrance of Ch'ang-an, revealed that the lower storey was of brick and masonry construction with three arched entrances, similar to the monumental barbicans of later Peking and Nanking but very different from the more modestly proportioned timber-frame Suzaku-mon of Nara. This gatehouse may have observed the official architectural style as prescribed in the 724 proclamation, but it would have been strikingly different in appearance to the Ch'eng-t'ien men of Ch'ang-an.

Further evidence of divergence from T'ang principles may be gained by studying the mensuration of palace buildings established on the eastern Chōdōin site in the middle of the eighth century. The breakdown in standardization is confirmed by twenty-six shaku rulers, with no fewer than...

thirteen different lengths, preserved in the Shōsō-in. These were some of the personal treasures of Emperor Shōmu, collected at the Shōsō-in after his death in 756. It would seem that official control over builders' workshops had declined once the frantic rush to establish the new city was over.

The most dramatic evidence of inconsistency between official policy and architectural practice is to be found in the Heijō Palace itself. The official vocabulary of architectural authority at Nara was based on the canon of T'ang imperial style, as revealed in the Dajōkan document of 724 discussed above. It should be recalled that this document also ordered that the outmoded and wasteful building forms of the past should be abandoned. This was a reference to the indigenous practice of erecting buildings with unpainted pillars set directly in the ground and the practice of covering roofs with thatch of straw or reed, or wooden shingles.

Despite the official pronouncements and the enthusiastic application of T'ang principles in some of the formal buildings of the palace like the Daigokuden, the vehement official rejection of indigenous building forms is contradicted by the architectural and archeological record. The chemical composition of the paddy fields which later covered the Nara palace site preserved the lower part of most of the pillars of its buildings. Excavations show conclusively that most of the buildings of the palace complex had pillars set directly into the ground in conformity with indigenous custom. Further, the Imperial Residence itself was an elegant version of the raised-floor timber dwellings of the earlier era criticized in the 724 document, not the kind of polychrome and tiled-roof structure set on stone foundations sanctioned in the official document (Figure 13). Although rebuilt at least three times during the Nara period, archeologists have found no evidence of the use of terracotta tiles, the most durable of all building materials, at the Imperial Residence site. The excavated pillars were unpainted and were set directly into the earth in the long-established indigenous manner.

Thus, the emperor continued to live in a building of the very style that the government was proscribing as unsuited to the dignity of the imperial capital. It may have been deemed necessary to adopt foreign forms of building for the most visible ceremonial buildings of the palace but, when it came to satisfying the conditions of daily life, the authority of indigenous custom remained pre-eminent, even for the emperor.44

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**Figure 13**

*Seiden (Main Hall) of Dairi (Imperial Residence) of Heijō Palace. Front elevation (archaeological reconstruction)*
The imperial residence is not an isolated example of the continuation of the indigenous preference for cypress shingles in aristocratic architecture at Nara. It was quieter in taste than terracotta tiling, and quieter than tile to sleep under in the heavy rains of the wet season and typhoons.

A structure built by the Tachibana 橘 family in the early 730s survives in rebuilt form as the Dempōdō of the eastern precinct of Hōryū-ji (Figure 14). Analysis of the timber-frame structure by Asano Kiyoshi established that it originally had a cypress shingle roof which was replaced by tiles when the building was moved to the temple, the heavier tiling requiring strengthening of the roof truss. Another aristocratic residence for which details are now known, the country villa built for Fujiwara no Toyonari 藤原豊成 at Shigaraki in 743-44, also had a wooden shingle roof. Toyonari was the most powerful member of the Fujiwara family during the struggle for dominance with the Tachibana in the 740s, rising to the office of Minister of the Right 右大臣 under Tachibana no Moroe 橘同志 in 749. Reconstruction of the appearance of his residence by Sekino Tadashi revealed the untroubled persistence of indigenous building modes at the site which was then being considered for a new capital. In addition to a shingled roof, the pillars were sunk into the ground, not resting on the stone foundations required of official architecture, and it had a raised timber floor in the manner of the hanwai 桃輪 house models of the pre-Buddhist period. This was a building far-removed ideologically from the kind of architecture officially sanctioned in the Dajōkan promulgation of less than twenty years earlier.

Conclusion

There was a special relationship between place and purpose at Nara, and much can be learned about the character and operation of the Nara state by comparing the evidence of urban and architectural form with the official history of the period. Together these point to the concerted application of certain Chinese planning and architectural principles at the time of the foundation of Nara rule. Nara as both a place and the centre of national government was based on an architectonic vision of the human order embracing a symbiotic relationship between imperial authority and the built
environment. The emperor may have been garbed with the mantle of the mandate of heaven borrowed from Chinese concepts of imperial authority, and the organization of Nara government may have aspired to the balanced and symmetrical order of the T'ang dynasty governmental model but, equally important as both the symbol and the substance of authority, emperor and government were accommodated in a monumental city and palace where ritual and ceremony provided tangible evidence of the ideological assertion of that authority.

The urban and architectural record also gives special insight into the uncertainties of direction experienced mid-way through the radical process of the adoption of foreign models, a situation as understandable as it is familiar to us today. The adoption and adaptation, as well as the rejection, of some of these foreign forms of city planning and architecture parallels a similar accommodation of the adopted ritsuryō system to Japanese circumstances, as seen, notably, in the insertion of the Jingikan on equal standing with the Dajōkan at the top of the structure of government. This was all part of a growing self-confidence in Japanese high culture, also to be found in literature, painting and religion, which makes the Nara period the foundation for later Japanese civilization.