

## Kunikyō Ruins, A Former Imperial Capital

The Mikanohara basin, which is surrounded by small hills, used to be home to Kunikyō, a former imperial palace that stood here between 740 and 744 CE. For three years, the imperial capital was here. Today Mikanohara is a vast, idyllic field with wildflowers located directly north of the nearby Kizu River. A careful eye, however, will easily notice the appearance of stone slabs along with the landscape. These are the remains of the Kunikyō palace. Today, this area has become a public space where the locals can come and enjoy the outdoors. The ruins of Kunikyō are still very much an important part of local culture and heritage.

### History

In 740, plagued by war and disease, Japan grew increasingly unstable. Emperor Shōmu (701–756) declared the relocation of the capital in an attempt to ward off the spread of disease. The move is also thought to be strongly indicative of a power struggle between two influential court noble families, the Fujiwara clan and the Tachibana clan. The Fujiwaras held power in the existing capital, Heijōkyō. The Tachibanas' power base was Minami Yamashiro, and this relocation could have implied a shift in the balance of authority in favor of the Tachibana clan. Unfortunately, the next year, when the emperor came to Kunikyō to welcome the New Year in a formal ceremony, the imperial palace had yet to be completed. The next year as well, the city was still under construction and uninhabitable, so the New Year's ceremony had to be held in a makeshift building. In 744, the Emperor relocated the capital again, this time to Naniwanomiyā, thus ending Kunikyō's short stint as capital after only three years. The city remained unfinished, and that same year the remaining structures of Kunikyō were incorporated into Yamashiro Kokubunji Temple.

All that remains of the imperial palace today are its foundation stones. Not far away are the cornerstones of what used to be a temple's seven-storied pagoda. In a 1973 excavation, the foundations of even more buildings were unearthed.