

The Glory of the Sho Dynasty

The Tamaudun Royal Mausoleum is a great monument to the Second Sho Dynasty of the Ryukyu Kingdom, which lasted for over 400 years from 1470 to 1879. The history of this dynasty, like that of Okinawa itself, is a tumultuous one, with periods of prosperity and decline as Ryukyuan rulers struggled to accommodate the kingdom to the influence of the larger powers that surrounded it: China, Japan, and Korea. At the same time, the arc of history within Ryukyu itself was one of gradual consolidation of power. It transitioned from many warring independent lords through much of its early history, to a tripartite division of the country in the fifteenth century called the Sanzan (“Three Mountains”) period, to a unified kingdom in 1429 under the First Sho Dynasty, centered at Shuri Castle.

The last king of the First Sho Dynasty, Sho Toku, was killed in a coup d’état in 1469. He left no heir, so the royal court elected Sho En as king, thereby establishing the Second Sho Dynasty. Sho En had begun life as a peasant named Kanamaru and had risen in influence through his own skills and abilities. Though his reign was brief, he instituted an important institutional shift in the royal government. While individual charisma and leadership skills had been considered the most essential factors in successful government, Sho En transformed the royal court into an efficient bureaucracy, using the diverse knowledge and abilities of the ruling elite and sharing decision-making. This set the stage for the great political and economic strides made by his son, Sho Shin, who built the Tamaudun Royal Mausoleum in honor of his father.

Sho Shin, whose long rule lasted from 1477 to 1526, came to power through the abdication of his uncle, Sho Sen’i, who had initially succeeded Sho En but held the throne for only six months. The high priestess (*kikoe-ōgimi*) of the court, who was the daughter of Sho En, announced that she had received a message from the gods that Sho Shin should be made king. That the entire court complied is an indication of the tremendous power and influence of female spiritual leaders in the kingdom.

Sho Shin’s reign has been described as “the Great Days of Chuzan,” that is, of the Ryukyu Kingdom. Under his stewardship the kingdom enjoyed a long period of peace and prosperity. He continued the administrative and economic reorganization begun by his father and further centralized power, strengthening the importance of Shuri as a cultural and economic center. He oversaw and encouraged the building of many monuments, temples, grand villas, gardens, and bridges, as well as the expansion and beautification of Shuri Castle in the Chinese style. He improved the port infrastructure of Naha, and greatly expanded the kingdom’s

international trade. The literary arts blossomed.

Recognizing the political importance of the *noro* priestesses, Sho Shin instituted a system in which the local village priestesses were appointed by the king and the high priestess (*kikoe-ōgimi*) so that they acted as extensions of the king's authority.

Sho Shin died in 1526, having ruled for fifty years. His successors continued to preside over the Second Sho Dynasty for almost four centuries afterward, until 1879, but none were able to achieve the same degree of peace, prosperity, and cultural achievement. The Ryukyu Kingdom was conquered by the Satsuma domain of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1609, but the kings continued to possess genuine authority despite their dependence on both Japan and China. Sho Ten, the son of the Ryukyu Kingdoms last king, Sho Tai, was the most recent royal descendant buried at Tamaudun, in 1920, but the family line continues to this day.