

Diorama of Eighth-century Dazaifu

This diorama depicts how the compact yet powerful city of Dazaifu was laid out in the eighth century. Dazaifu literally translates as “Great Government Administrative Headquarters,” and the city was a vital foreign trade hub, military stronghold, and government administrative center. However, Dazaifu was not devoted solely to politics. It also played an important role in Japanese culture and religion.

At the far right of the diorama you will find Kanzeonji Temple as it used to look when it was an immense complex and the leading Buddhist temple in Kyushu. A handsome five-story pagoda once stood on the grounds, but this was destroyed along with numerous other buildings by natural disasters, and only a few structures (none of them original) remain today.

A school adjacent to the temple educated boys from northern Kyushu, and these young scholars went on to become government officials stationed on the island. To this day, Dazaifu is considered a center of scholarship. Millions of high school students make pilgrimages to Dazaifu Tenmangu every year to pray to Tenjin—the spirit of scholar and politician Sugawara Michizane (845–903) who was enshrined there and regarded as the deity of learning. Students pray for his blessing and for success in their exams.

The government offices were located at the foot of Mt. Shioji and benefitted from the natural protection of the mountain and Mizuki, the defensive wall and moat. This administrative center was a palatial complex with grand vermilion-painted structures and was modeled on Heijo-kyo, the imperial court and palace located in modern-day Nara. This diorama gives an idea of the scale of Dazaifu in the eighth century, but ongoing excavations are revealing more about the scale and history of this ancient city.