

Roads to the Ancient Capitals

Overview

In the seventh and eighth centuries, the early Japanese government was focused on the centralization of power and the creation of extensive infrastructure that would connect outlying regions to the capital. In the case of Wakasa Province, roads were built and maintained to efficiently transport salt and seafood from the coast, and government offices were established to handle local administration in the region. A number of temples and shrines were also founded along the new roads.

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Roads and Post Stations

One of the six major roads that helped connect the ancient capitals (first those in present-day Nara Prefecture and later Kyoto) to remote regions was the Hokurikudo. Wakasa was the first province along the route that provided access to the ports on the Sea of Japan. People traveling the Hokurikudo road past Lake Biwa could branch off to Wakasa or continue north toward Tsuruga and along the coastline as far as present-day Niigata Prefecture.

The roads enabled efficient communication between the provinces and the capital. Messengers carried orders from the central government, reports from provincial rulers, and emergency documents. Horses for official use were kept at post stations located approximately every 16 kilometers along the route. Wooden shipping tags for taxes and tributes excavated in Nara bear the names of four such stations, while the *Engishiki*, a tenth-century compilation of customs and official procedures, mentions three.

Government Offices

Wakasa Province was officially established in 701 under a new administrative system that divided the country into provinces, districts, and villages (later townships). Several offices were built to manage affairs at different administrative levels. The provincial office was run by governors dispatched from the capital, and district offices were managed by people appointed from prominent local families. Artifacts discovered at the sites of former government offices range from foundation stones and roof tiles to everyday items such as pottery, coins, and inkstones.

Temples

Buddhism was introduced to Japan from mainland Asia in the sixth century, and the construction of Buddhist temples began soon after. The first temples in Wakasa were built sometime in the late seventh century. For example, analysis of roof tiles excavated at the former site of Kodoji Temple suggests that it was originally constructed around that time.

Wakasa Jinguji Temple was founded in 714 as a religious site where Shinto and Buddhism were practiced in a syncretic fusion. Wakasa Jinguji is known for the Omizu Okuri (“water-sending”) ritual held to symbolically send sacred water to Todaiji Temple in Nara, which holds the famous Omizutori (“water-drawing”) ritual ten days later. The connection to Nara was further highlighted when excavations of the Wakasa Jinguji grounds revealed ancient roof tiles in a style matching those of Heijo Palace, the imperial residence in the eighth century.

In 741, Emperor Shomu (701–756) decreed that each province should establish a *kokubunji* (a state-sponsored temple) to spread Buddhism and pray for the safety of the country. Wakasa Kokubunji Temple was built in 807 to fulfill this role in Wakasa Province. Though the earliest structures were lost, the remains of the original temple are a designated National Historic Site.

Exhibition Items

The artifacts and documents on display reflect the important role of the roads that led from Wakasa to the former capitals and other regions. Roof tile fragments were excavated from locations such as Wakasa Kokubunji Temple and the ruins of Kodoji Temple. Everyday objects, including pottery, coins, and bells, were found at sites of former villages, post stations, and government offices. An Edo-period (1603–1867) reprint of the *Engishiki* is opened to the section discussing the status of Wakasa Province within the administrative system, and a document from Todaiji Temple includes details about the Omizutori water ritual that takes place after the Omizu Okuri ritual held by Wakasa Jinguji Temple.