

Harunotsuji Site

Harunotsuji was the capital of the kingdom of Iki from around 200 BCE to 350 CE. The settlement flourished as a mercantile hub where the people of Iki traded goods and information with traders and travelers from the Korean Peninsula, China, and mainland Japan.

Harunotsuji was built on the largest plain on the island, an inhospitable place battered by strong winds throughout the winter. A large wharf on the Hatahoko River functioned as the gateway to the settlement and was accessible only by small boats that had to travel upstream to their destination from the nearest bay, where larger vessels anchored. These features suggest that the site of the capital was chosen for strategic purposes, and its population of traders and farmers is thought to have been brought in for political reasons.

Visitors approaching Harunotsuji from the wharf would first pass over two—in some places three—moats that encircled the town. They would proceed past dwellings built in shallow pits, elevated storehouses, and watchtowers on their way uphill toward the center of the settlement. The highest point was occupied by a temple complex, where shamans conferred with the deities of the sky to predict the future. The gates to the temple, marking the border between the sacred and secular worlds, were decorated with figurines of birds (*tori*), considered messengers of the gods. Some theorize that this type of gateway is the origin of the Shinto torii gate.

The significance of Harunotsuji is thought to have declined in the mid-fourth century, perhaps as a result of changes in trade routes and the kingdom of Iki being absorbed by forces from mainland Japan. The foundations of some 300 structures have been discovered at the site, and 17 buildings from the first to third centuries have been reconstructed. Artifacts unearthed from the site, including Korean pottery, Chinese coins, a copper weight used in trading, and a stone carved into the shape of a human face, are on display at the adjacent Ikikoku Museum.