

## **Dazaifu: The Western Capital**

Some 1,300 years ago, the city of Dazaifu in northern Kyushu was an administrative and cultural center second only to the imperial capital. Its proximity to the Asian continent made it the entry point for immigrants, merchants, clerics, and foreign dignitaries arriving from the Korean Peninsula and China. The culture they brought with them—including new political systems, technologies, and art—transformed Dazaifu from a small provincial settlement into a cosmopolitan city of between 20,000 and 30,000 residents. Arriving diplomats were welcomed at a lavish guesthouse, just as they were in the capital. Dazaifu also had imperial administrative offices, an elite academy, and a Buddhist temple that held the country's first ceremony to inaugurate Buddhist priests. The city's extensive bureaucracy managed the taxes, economy, and security for all of Kyushu. While the imperial capital changed locations several times between the eighth and late twelfth centuries, Dazaifu maintained its distinction as Japan's "Western Capital" (*nishi no miyako*).

### *Early Cultural Exchange*

In the fifth and sixth centuries, Japan saw a great influx of culture and technology. China was the dominant cultural and political force in East Asia at the time, and several kingdoms in the Korean Peninsula were comparatively advanced. The island of Kyushu experienced a constant exchange of people, ideas, and technology with these continental neighbors. This was especially true in the Fukuoka region centered around Hakata Bay, the chief port for ships arriving from East Asia. Excavations of several ancient sites in the Dazaifu area, such as the Zen'ichida Burial Mounds and the Ushikubi Sue Ware Kiln Ruins, have unearthed iron implements, weapons, and pottery that either originated in the Korean Peninsula or closely imitates continental styles. Both ironworking techniques and the know-how to create Sue ware (extremely hard, blue-gray pottery) were imported and used to develop flourishing local industries.

### *Political Tensions and Fortification*

Japan's involvement with the continent came at a cost when the country was drawn into the political struggles of its neighbors. Japan was on good political terms with Baekje (? CE–660 CE), one of the Korean kingdoms, and in 663 their united forces suffered a devastating military defeat by Tang China (618–907) and Silla (? CE–935 CE), another Korean kingdom. This loss spurred members of the imperial court, who feared a subsequent invasion, to order the construction of large-scale fortifications around the

Dazaifu region. In 664, an enormous embankment called the Mizuki Fortress was built to block enemy access to Kyushu's interior, and in 665 two mountain fortresses were constructed on summits surrounding the narrow plain the Mizuki Fortress enclosed.

#### *Establishment of the Western Capital*

China never invaded, and fear of war gradually subsided. Diplomatic missions were dispatched to the Tang-dynasty capital to study its art, religion, and political structures, which were the international standard of the eighth century. When these envoys returned, they brought new sutras and forms of Buddhist thought, a complex bureaucratic system of government, and grid-based city planning that was quickly implemented to build the city of Dazaifu.

Construction of a new, grid-based city began in the early eighth century, around the time the new imperial capital at Nara (Heijō-kyō) was built along the same design. Dazaifu was finished shortly after the capital's completion in 710, and it occupied the middle of the present-day city of Dazaifu. It had an orderly layout with a wide central avenue and military stations, Buddhist temples, an academy for educating officials, and residences. The central avenue ran from north to south, starting at the main administration complex and connecting to roads that led to the city's southern entrance, Rajōmon Gate.

#### *Administration and Culture*

Dazaifu's political administration exerted considerable influence over the surrounding areas of Kyushu and fulfilled a number of administrative roles. Taxes and tribute to the emperor were gathered and tallied in Dazaifu before being sent east to the capital. The government offices had facilities and officials responsible for making paper, dyeing cloth, caring for the sick, and repairing weapons, armor, and ships. They also oversaw food production, maintained fortresses and border security, and more. Dazaifu's school for civil officials enrolled around 200 students from across Kyushu, who came to study administration, mathematics, or medicine before returning home with their newly acquired expertise.

The city also was a focal point for international relations. Dazaifu's officials prepared elaborate welcomes for foreign diplomats to smooth the way in politics and trade. Delegations that arrived in Hakata Bay followed a road that led to the Mizuki Fortress's west gate—the official entrance to the city for foreign visitors. From there they entered the city and were housed at a guesthouse called the Kyakukan, where they were

entertained with fine cuisine, tea, and musical performances. Dazaifu also attracted leading Buddhist priests and intellectuals from abroad. Art and culture flourished in Dazaifu as a result of their exchanges, and Chinese customs such as plum-blossom viewing and poetry composition gained prestige. The oldest extant collection of Japanese poetry, the eighth-century *Man'yōshū*, features numerous verses written in or about sites near Dazaifu. One of Dazaifu's provisional governors-general, Ōtomo no Tabito (665–731), held a plum-blossom party that produced the poem from which the current Japanese era name—Reiwa—is drawn.

### *A Lasting Legacy*

Dazaifu's prominence continued until the end of the twelfth century. Around that time, ports grew in importance, and soon afterward the center of power shifted north toward Hakata Bay and what is now the city of Fukuoka. But even today, Dazaifu remains a site of cultural and religious significance. This is, in part, due to Dazaifu Tenmangū Shrine. Today, the shrine is head of some 10,000 shrines across Japan dedicated to Tenjin, the Shinto deity of learning, culture, and the arts. The festivals held at Dazaifu Tenmangū perpetuate many of the cultural activities and ceremonies once seen in Dazaifu and the ancient imperial court. The shrine also supports contemporary international art programs, thereby continuing Dazaifu's legacy of artistic refinement and cross-cultural exchange.