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. Far to the east, the imperial capital was moved from Asuka to Nara, then eventually to Heian (Kyoto) over several centuries, but Dazaifu persisted in its role as "capital of the West" (*nishi no miyako*).

Northern Kyushu's transition from a regional hub to a place of national importance began around 663, when Japan suffered a military defeat on the Korean Peninsula. Fearing an invasion would follow, the imperial court ordered the construction of a series of large-scale fortifications to guard Hakata Bay, the chief port for ships coming from the Asian mainland. No invasion came, but in the early eighth century the city of Dazaifu was constructed in the newly fortified mountain basin to the south. Its layout was modeled on the sophisticated grid system of the Tang-dynasty capital of Chang'an, in China. A Japanese envoy who had visited Chang'an returned to Japan and drew up a similar plan for the imperial capital at Nara. He then designed Dazaifu along the same pattern.

When the new city was founded, Hakata Bay had been the entry point for foreign culture and technology for centuries. During the Nara period (710–794), this exchange reached its peak, and Dazaifu became the gateway through which foreign dignitaries, goods, and cultural influence poured into Japan. Arriving diplomats were welcomed at a lavish guesthouse, just as they were in the imperial capital. Dazaifu also had imperial administrative offices, a school for training administrators, and Buddhist temples founded in honor of imperial family members. Dazaifu's extensive bureaucracy managed the taxes, economy, and security of most of Kyushu.

Former administration building sites, ancient temples, and other relics of the 1,300-year-old urban center can still be found throughout the present-day cities of Dazaifu, Chikushino, and Ōnojō, where the memory of this ancient western capital lives on.