PART THREE

THE LAYOUT OF THE NAGAOCA CAPITAL

As we have seen, two construction periods took place at Nagaoka. The insight that frenzied construction activity occurred throughout most of the Nagaoka capital’s existence inevitably raises questions about the extent to which the plans for the capital were realised. A brief discussion of the compositional elements of a Chinese-style capital will be useful in casting light on the question of how far the arrangement of the Nagaoka palace and city areas complied with the stipulated paradigm. Focusing first on the palace enclosure and then on the urban centre, we consider whether the Nagaoka capital was merely a copy of previous capital cities or whether its design reflected any major innovations, and, if there were changes, whether and how these were adopted in the later Heian capital.
CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BASIC PLAN OF A CHINESE-STYLE CAPITAL CITY

In the century between 694 and 794, six capitals based on Chinese models were constructed on the Japanese archipelago: Fujiwara, Nara, Kuni, Naniwa, Nagaoka, and Heian. Their basic form was that of a huge rectangle composed of two main components: a large palace enclosure (kyūjō) and an urban centre (tojō) (figure 7.1). By combining the initial characters of kyūjō and tojō, Kishi Toshio coined the term ‘kyūto宮都’, capital city, to designate these six ancient Japanese capitals.1 Kyūto, therefore, were the imperial, political, economic, social, and cultural centres of the ritsuryō state.

The palace enclosure, during the Heian period also known as the greater imperial palace (daidairi), was located in the northern central portion of the capital city.2 It not only housed the imperial audience hall and the residential buildings of the emperor but also served as the ritsuryō state’s main administrative precinct containing the majority of the governmental offices.

1 Kishi, NHK Daigaku kōza: Nihon no kodai kyūto.
2 Based on the latest excavation results, the Fujiwara capital seems to have been an exception to this paradigm. Fujiwara is now believed to have been a square, measuring 5.3 km east to west and north to south, with a square palace enclosure located in the centre. Its layout may therefore have closely resembled that of the Chinese Zhou capital at Luoyi in the late second millennium B.C., as it is described in the Kaogong ji, a document preserved in the Zhou Li: “Les constructeurs tracent l’emplacement de la capitale. Elle forme un carré ayant neuf li de côté. Chaque côté a trois portes. Dans l’intérieur de la capitale, il y a neuf rues directes, et neuf rues transversales”. Translation by Biot, Le Tcheou-li ou Rites de Tcheou, 2: 555–56. For further information on the Fujiwara capital, see Nakamura, “Fujiwarakyō to ‘Shurai’ ōjō puran”; Nakamura, “Fujiwarakyō no jōbōseǐ”; and Yamashita, “Fujiwarakyō—Nihonhatsu no tojō keikaku”.

It also should be noted that only the study of the palace area at the Later Naniwa and Kuni capitals is advanced; details about their urban structure remain vague. For discussions on the reconstruction of the grid plan at Naniwa, see Naoki (ed.), Naniwakyō to kodai no Osaka, 206–18; Nakao, Naniwakyō, 106–20; Ueki and Nagayama, “Kōki Naniwa no miya to Naniwakyō”; Furuchi, “Toshishi kara mita Naniwa no miya Naniwakyō kenkyū no tenbō”, 10; and Sekiyama, “Asukajidai no Naniwakyō o megutte”, 13–5.

Ashikaga Kenryō suggested a reconstruction of the layout of the Kuni capital in the 1970s. According to this plan, the Left and Right Capitals at Kuni were physically separated by Mt. Kase, and the palace area was centrally located in the north portion of the Left Capital. However, until now there is no definite archaeological evidence to support this assumption. Ashikaga, “Kuni kyōiki no fukugen”.

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Figure 7.1 The Basic Plan of a Chinese-style Capital City.

Numbers on the left indicate row numbers.
Numbers at the bottom indicate column numbers.
Outside the walls of the palace enclosure lay a fully planned urban centre resembling a chessboard. This urban centre was a mainly residential area for members of the imperial family, the aristocracy, court officials, and commoners. However, it also contained some imperial detached palaces, small-scale government offices, official marketplaces, army posts, shrines and temples, and the like.

The urban configuration comprised north-south and east-west roads crossing at right angles, creating a symmetrical grid pattern (じょうぼう). The central axis of the city area was Scarlet Phoenix Avenue (Suzaku おじゅ), which ran south from the palace enclosure and divided the city into two sectors: the Left Capital (左京) was located east of Scarlet Phoenix Avenue, and the Right Capital (右京) extended to its west.³

East-west avenues (おじ)⁴ divided the two city sectors in lateral rows (じょ). Each row was numbered in an ordinal fashion, beginning in the north. The avenues running from north to south created longitudinal columns (ぼう), which were numbered one through four beginning closest to Scarlet Phoenix Avenue. To distinguish between the similarly numbered columns east and west of Scarlet Phoenix Avenue, the column name had to be preceded by the prefix ‘east’ or ‘west’.

The crisscrossing of the rows and columns resulted in large squares or rectangles, which were called city wards (ぼう). Three roads ran east to west and north to south through the city wards, creating a ward grid with sixteen subdivisions known as blocks (つubo in Nara; ちょう in Nagaoka and Heian). Except for the inter-ward roads abutting the palace gates, these inter-ward thoroughfares had the scale of streets (かいじ). Depending on their final use, certain blocks could be further subdivided into thirty-two rectangular lots (へ), arranged in four columns and eight rows (しぎょうはちもん).

³ From the mid-ninth century onward, East Capital and West Capital were also used to designate the Left and Right Capitals.
⁴ I have chosen not to follow the convention proposed by the Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Nara city (奈良市文化財研究所, formerly known as 奈良國立文化財研究所 and often abbreviated to Nabunken) where north-south おじ and かいじ are translated as ‘Avenue’ and east-west おじ and かいじ as ‘Street’. In indiscriminately translating all east-west arteries as ‘street’ and all north-south arteries as ‘avenue’, neither the size of the roads nor their importance is taken into consideration. おじ were considerably wider than かいじ and—except in the areas east and west of the palace enclosure—were continuous throughout the whole city, whereas in most cases かいじ existed only within the ward compound walls. Nabunken, Furuwarakō mokkan II: kaisetsu, xiii; and Nabunken, Heijōkyō mokkan III: kaisetsu, xxiii.
To identify any block on the grid, it was necessary to specify the capital sector, the row- and column-coordinates of the city ward in which the block was situated, and, finally, the block number. The numbering of the sixteen blocks began in the northern corner nearest the palace enclosure; that is, the northeast corner for blocks in the Right Capital and the northwest corner for those in the Left Capital. The remaining blocks were assigned numbers from two to sixteen in a boustrophedon manner (a movement like plowing oxen, in which the blocks are counted alternately from top to bottom, and then from bottom to top).

Although the planning of the Japanese capital cities is generally believed to have been based on Sui and Tang Chang’an, both the palace enclosure and the urban centre of the kyōto displayed major differences with their Chinese counterpart.

In Tang Chang’an, the palace enclosure comprised two clearly distinct walled precincts. The precinct located against the northern edge of the city was the ‘palace city’ (Chin. gongcheng, Jap. kyūjō), with the residential and private halls of the emperor and his immediate relatives. The government offices were grouped in a segregated enclave, the ‘state administrative complex’ or, more literally, the ‘imperial city’ (Chin. huangcheng, Jap. kōjō), immediately to the south of the palace city. No such division was ever made in Japan, as evidenced by the fact that Suzaku Gate (Suzaku-mon), the south central gate of the palace enclosure, seems to have been synonymous for Kōjō Gate (Kōjō-mon). Only at pre-Sui Chinese capitals one can find the buildings that became palace city and imperial city within a single enclosure. Therefore, the layout of Luoyang, the capital of the Chinese Northern Wei dynasty, or Jiangkang, the capital of the Southern Dynasties, may also have influenced the basic plan of the Japanese capital cities, although Luoyang and Jiangkang were long destroyed by the time the Fujiwara capital was built in 694.  

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5 For a comparative study in English focusing on the palace enclosure, see Cao, “A Study of the Origins of Ancient Japan’s Palace System: Focusing on the Original Court Style”. For a study on the names of the various sectors of ancient Chinese capitals, see Toyoda, “Chūgoku tojōsei ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu: ‘kyū’, ‘jō’, ‘kaku’ to iu kotoba o chūshin ni”.

6 SN Wado 3/1/1.

7 Kishi, “Nihon tojōsei sōron”, 39; and Cao, “A Study of the Origins of Ancient Japan’s Palace System”, 43. For a study on sixth-century Luoyang, see Ho, “Lo-yang,
As for the urban centre, there are two important differences between the Japanese capital cities and their supposed Chinese predecessor at Chang’an. First of all, the Japanese capital cities were unwalled, while the Chang’an capital was surrounded by a wall several metres high. Second, at Sui-Tang Chang’an and Luoyang, the wards were rectangular in shape and of varied dimensions, whereas the majority of wards in the Japanese capital cities and those at the earlier Northern Wei Luoyang were square and generally uniform in size. However, the Japanese capital cities also display differences from Northern Wei Luoyang, where only two streets, instead of six, subdivided a ward.

Needless to say, the Nagaoka capital shares the above-mentioned characteristics with the other kyūto. However, as we shall see, both the layout of Nagaoka’s palace enclosure and that of its urban centre displayed some unique and innovative characteristics.