CHAPTER EIGHT

COURT AND CAPITAL

The elegance of Ye and the Masters of Jian’an
Cao Cao: poems and an Apologia
Style of government

Early in 208 Cao Cao established his position as Imperial Chancellor and commenced a number of structural and administrative reforms, and though the defeat at the Red Cliffs was a significant—and eventually critical—setback, he swiftly recovered his authority. From the valley of the Huai to the frontier of the empire, his power was unchallenged across the North China plain. Sun Quan, Liu Bei and Liu Zhang retained their independence but presented no immediate threat, and the warlords of the upper Wei valley and Liang province were dealt with in 211.

The previous chapter has discussed the campaigns waged by Cao Cao during these years. This one considers his court, his personal poetry and proclamations, and aspects of his domestic policy as he sought to rebuild an effective central power among the ruins of the empire of Han.1

The elegance of Ye and the Masters of Jian’an

Soon after Cao Cao had captured Ye from the Yuan in 204, he adopted the city as his chief residence. The emperor and his puppet court remained at Xu, which continued to be recognised as the formal imperial capital, and Cao Cao was frequently on campaign to the north, south and west, but Ye city and the surrounding territory of Wei commandery became the heart of his power. In 213 he was enfeoffed as Duke of Wei, and it is from there that his dynasty, successor to Han, acquired its name.2

---

1 The civil chronology of these years is presented at the head of Chapter Nine.
2 According to SJZ 10:352 (24b–25a), imperial Wei recognised five capitals: Xu city, residence of the former Han emperor, renamed Xuchang by Cao Pi [note 12 to
During the Warring States period Ye had been a leading city of the pre-Qin state of Wei, and it became the capital of a kingdom under Former Han. During Later Han Wei was a middle-ranking commandery, and the headquarters of Ji province were in Changshan, so Ye city had no major importance. In 190, however, at the time of the rising against Dong Zhuo, the Governor Han Fu moved to Ye, and when Yuan Shao took over from him in the following year he kept his residence there.

The walled city of Ye measured seven li from east to west and five from north to south, approximately 2.3 by 1.6 kilometres, for an area of 3.7 square kilometres. There were seven gates, three on the south, two on the north, and one each on the east and west walls. We may note in comparison that the walls of the imperial capital at Luoyang contained just over ten square kilometres. The population of Luoyang, however, estimated at half a million, spread into suburbs well beyond the original walls, while the people of Ye under Han may not necessarily have filled the space.

At an early stage of occupation Cao Cao brought numbers of new settlers to develop the region, in the same fashion as the agricultural colonies which he had established at Xu city. Such conscripts provided the initial labour force for the embellishment of his new capital with buildings and towers, parks and water-works, while the families of his civilian staff, military commanders and their troops added to their numbers. One may also assume that many other people came voluntarily in hope of finding fortune at the new centre of power and prosperity.

Soon after his arrival Cao Cao began construction of the great Hall of Civil Splendour, which became the heart of a palace complex occupying much of the northern half of the city. While the surrounding district became residential quarters for kinfolk, high officials and other leaders of the state, the palace was provided with ceremonial gates

---

Chapter Four]; Luoyang, capital of Later Han, where Cao Cao died in 220; Chang’an, capital of Former Han; Qiao, the homeland of the Cao family; and Ye, which became known as the Northern Capital.

2 SJZ 10:351 (SJZS 23b–24b); on Luoyang, see Bielenstein, Lo-yang, 10–13 and 17–21.

4 Tian Chou, for example, following his accession to Cao Cao in 207, brought more than three hundred households of family and followers to take up residence at Ye: SGZ 11:343.