CHAPTER 5

HAKATA: THE MAKING OF A MERCANTILE CENTRE

Iwai, the lord of Tsukushi who rose up against the Yamato state, built his power base in what is now the Yame area in the far south of Fukuoka Prefecture. The long line of burial mounds along a ridge and the unusual stone sculptures near his tomb recall a time in the sixth century when this was an important political centre. Now the area has a reputation for the stone lanterns that are produced by hand further up the Yaba valley. A fine example decorates an otherwise indistinctive patch of grass enclosed by a slip road as drivers leave the Yame interchange on the Kyushu Expressway. Yame today is best known for its highly-prized green tea. The most striking feature of the surrounding landscape is the series of uniform deep-green rows of tea plants, spread across the hills. This is not the only area in Kyushu, or Japan for that matter, which claims a proud tradition of producing high-quality green tea. It certainly boasts one of the oldest, however, as just across the Chikugo valley on the slopes of Mt Seburi to the north is the spot where tea is thought to have been first grown in Japan.

Mt Seburi is an imposing landmark overlooking the Saga plain and the Chikugo River, and faces the long valley that stretches northwards past the old Dazaifu Headquarters towards Hakata Bay. Here on the western slopes of the valley, not far from the one-time ‘distant court’, stand a number of ancient temples, evidence of a time when the area was actively developed by Buddhist priests. At the foot of nearby Mt Tenpai, for example, Buzōji is held to be one of the oldest temples in Kyushu and has a sprawling wisteria tree of great antiquity. It was in 1195 that a Japanese monk of the Tendai sect called Eisai stepped ashore in Kyushu, bringing with him some tea plants he had obtained
during his travels in China. Tea was not entirely unknown at the Heian court in Kyoto for, as a herbal medicine, it was among the sought-after luxury items brought from the continent for the use of a privileged few. Eisai, however, took this one step further as he set about cultivating his own tea plants in the garden of Ishigamibō on the slopes of Mt Seburi. It was a limited experiment at first, but in effect the success he had there would lead to popularizing the custom of tea-drinking among all social classes in Japan.¹

Eisai, otherwise known as Yōsai, is also credited with introducing the Linji school of Zen on his return from China, for it was he who succeeded in establishing the Japanese line of Rinzai Zen. Often viewed now as something quintessentially Japanese, Zen practice in these islands is certainly unique in its form and interpretation. Like many other Buddhist sects, however, it had continental origins. Eisai had encountered this teaching during his eight years of travel abroad when, like other itinerant priests, he visited Mingzhou (now Ningbo), a flourishing port situated to the south of Hangzhou Bay (on the other side from what is now Shanghai). Two of the five sacred ‘mountains’ (temples) in Zen Buddhism are located in this area.² Tea, Zen and meditation would come together in the form of tea ceremony, which also developed into a highly stylized and refined cultural pursuit. Again, the forms of tea ceremony observed in Japan, with ceramic bowls served in hushed tones kneeling on tatami mats, soon diverged from the traditional practice still to be seen sitting on chairs at lacquered tables in the tea-houses of Ningbo.³

Tucked away down a quiet side street in Hakata, now a bustling district in the heart of Fukuoka City, a gateway opens onto an unexpectedly spacious area, with a pathway leading to a group of temple buildings. Although imposing enough these are somehow out of keeping with the grand scale of the site, and were built after the original structure had been destroyed by fire. This is Shōfukuji, the first Zen temple ever built in Japan, which Eisai established here in 1195 shortly after his return from China. The town of Hakata that he knew was already an important port, with ships regularly arriving from the Korean peninsula and the Chinese coast.⁴

Hakata’s emergence as a thriving mercantile centre during the last centuries of Heian rule may appear at odds with the insularity that increasingly characterized life at court in Kyoto. The diplomatic links