Chapter Two

Why Establish a New Capital?

Over the years, scholars have advanced historical, geographical, economic, political and religious reasons for Kanmu’s decision to relocate the capital from Nara in Yamato province to Nagaoka in Yamashiro province. This chapter discusses the validity of the most commonly cited theories and provides further evidence in support of the importance of the Tenmu-Tenji shift discussed in the previous chapter.

Although by the end of the eighth century the Nara capital seems to have been faced with some serious practical problems, such as difficulties in supplying drinking water to the ever-increasing population,¹ the state’s financial situation was such that there were actually no funds available to undertake the enormous expense of constructing a new capital in Nagaoka. Surely the suggestion that Kanmu tried to escape from the spiteful ghosts of deposed Consort-empress Inoue and her son Osabe is insufficient to justify the great expense.² On other occasions, the transfer of the capital to Nagaoka has been justified with reference to political confusion resulting from power struggles between and within high-ranking court families, the Fujiwara in particular,³ as well as due to social unrest.⁴ Kishi Toshio, on the other hand, saw the construction of the Nagaoka capital as the expression of a policy of retrenchment that abolished the dual capital system.⁵ However, as will be shown in Part II, some sort of dual capital system continued to exist during the early years of the Nagaoka capital’s existence.

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² Takahashi, Dōkyō to Nihon no kyūto, 15.
⁴ Tsuboi and Tanaka, The Historic City of Nara, 132.
⁵ Kishi, Nihon kodai kyūto no kenkyū, 103.
Another reason often given for the abandonment of the Nara capital is the fact that its palace structures were defiled by the death of Kōnin. In accordance with the idea of defilement, the death of a previous ruler brought about pollution to the palace buildings which then required ritual purification. As a general rule, the new emperor succeeded his predecessor at the old capital and did not move for a year or more. This can be explained by the fact that defilement was held to continue during the period of mourning or until after the completion of the funerary rites. However, although defilement can be seen as a sufficient reason for the erection of a new palace (sengū), it seems unlikely that it was sufficient for the transfer of a whole capital (sento). Even during the Asuka period (538–710), several palaces and ‘capitals’ were already constructed at a short distance from the previous one, effectively constituting sengū and not sento.

Instead of defilement, the frequent change of ‘capital’ in ancient Japan can be easily explained by the necessity to rebuild owing to decay of the palace compound. The old palaces serving as the sovereign’s residence were Japanese-style structures, which deteriorated quickly. Supporting pillars were set directly into the soil (hottatebashira) and framing timbers were secured with straw rope. It was therefore absolutely necessary to rebuild those structures on a regular basis, a process that received a religious meaning in Shintō. However, with the introduction of the continental building styles, involving the use of foundation stones (soseki) and roof tiles, and their application in the large Chinese-style capitals, structures became more permanent but also much more expensive and time-consuming to erect. Furthermore, the custom of having a permanent capital from where subsequent rulers governed the country was already firmly established by the time the

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6 Although the theory of defilement justifying a transfer of capitals was already refuted by Kita Sadakichi in the early twentieth century, it still appears occasionally. Kita, Teito, 8–10; Yagi, Kodai Nihon no miyako, 202; and Satō, “Nagaokakyō kara Heiankyō e”, 53. Defilement is also mentioned by Robert Reischauer, Ronald Toby (who refutes the theory), and William Farris. Reischauer, Early Japanese History, part A, 217; Toby, “Why Leave Nara?”, 337; and Farris, Sacred Texts and Buried Treasures, 177.

7 Ponsonby-Fane, “Ancient Capitals and Palaces of Japan”, 108.

8 Sansom, Japan, A Short Cultural History, 188. Shortly after his coronation, Heizei, Kanmu’s successor, also referred to the fact that the construction of a new palace, not a new capital, upon the accession of a new emperor was a time-honoured custom [NKo Daidō 1/7/13].