PART FOUR

WHY ABANDON THE NAGAOKA CAPITAL?

As Kanmu’s reign matured, power gradually shifted from traditional court families to a select group of imperial and nonimperial relatives, including some people of foreign descent. A similar evolution can be seen in the composition of Kanmu’s Hinder Palace, as a sovereign typically took female relatives of influential, high-ranking court officials as his consorts or concubines to further strengthen his bonds with their families. In addition to strong personal power and political support, Kanmu must also have had a good motive to warrant the expense of constructing a new capital. In this respect, the aftermath of the murder of Fujiwara no Tanetsugu (the supposed withdrawal of Hata support and the vengeful ghost of Sawara) immediately comes to mind. Yet was this event really so influential, or was there a more important practical reason behind the abandonment of Nagaoka? We close with a review of the measures taken to enable the construction of the new Heian capital and to ensure its longevity, concluding with Kanmu’s demise and burial as protector of his construction projects.
What follows is a rendering of events as they are recorded in the historical records. Over the course of twenty-two months following the selection of the new construction site, the transfer of the capital from Nagaoka to Uda was thoroughly prepared. Government officials were asked to contribute actively to the construction process, deities and ancestors were notified, and local farmers received compensation. Also, the records indicate that Kanmu was closely monitoring the progress of construction and that Chinese philosophical thought again seems to have influenced the timing of the transfer.

Early in 793, Fujiwara no Oguromaro and Ki no Kosami were sent to Uda village to see about moving the capital there.¹ No further information appears in the official histories on any other members of the survey team. However, according to some Buddhist sources, the monk Kenkyō was also part of the inspection group, for he was said to “lay at the foundation of the great enterprise” of transferring the capital to Heian.² In addition, we can surmise that a representative of the Divination Bureau was also involved when Uda village was approved as the site for the new capital. Officials attached to this bureau had been consulted when previous capitals were constructed, and although dating from the thirteenth century, the Heike monogatari refers to the site at Uda possessing the ‘four proper geographic features’.³ Kanmu certainly attached great importance to the natural surroundings of the site, as is evident from the following edict he issued a few weeks after moving to the new Heian capital:

…Enclosed collar-and-sash by mountains and streams, the province here makes a natural citadel. Because of that configuration, we devise a new designation for it: let this Postmontane [Yamashiro 山背] province

¹ NKi Enryaku 12/1/15.
³ Heike monogatari, jō, 334. A translation into English can be found in Kitagawa and Tsuchida, The Tale of Heike, 292. For the interpretation of the proper geographic features, see chapter 3.