CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE PERFECT SITE FOR A NEW CAPITAL CITY

As had been the case for the construction of the Nagaoka capital, thousands of workers were mobilised. Kanmu also issued numerous edicts to make sure the taxes and tribute essential to the realisation of his plans were sent to the construction site. He complained about defaults in the delivery of tax (mishin) and forbade the common people to change their names and thereby avoid payment of personal taxes (kaeki). The imperial princes, the princes, and the ministers were ordered to collect taxes-in-kind and labour tax from any vagrant (rōnin) temporarily taking up residence on their domains.

However, Kanmu was also well aware of the suffering caused by his project, for he issued a decree saying “when a capital is constructed in a realm, the toil and hardship on the whole nation is exceptionally severe. Again we exempt [the people] from this year’s rice-paddy taxes”. To decrease the burden on the farmers, Kanmu decided to lower the interest on the suika-loans from fifty to thirty percent, and the inhabitants of the districts of Otokuni, Kadono and Atago, the districts in the immediate vicinity of the Heian capital, were exempted from paying the rice-paddy taxes. He also encouraged the provinces to send labourers by remitting the rice-paddy taxes when they did so. To persuade people to take up residence in the new capital, Kanmu offered them favourable terms such as exemption from certain taxes.

1 In an entry dated Enryaku 16 (797) 3/17, the Nihon kōki mentions a total of twenty-four thousand workmen coming from various provinces. Other documents mention five thousand workmen in the fifth month of Enryaku 13 (794) and ten thousand people in the tenth month of Enryaku 19 (800).
2 RSK 8 Enryaku 16/4/16; EKS Enryaku 16/8/3; EKS Enryaku 14/7/27; RSK 17 Enryaku 17/2/8; and RSK 8 Enryaku 16/8/3.
3 RK 83 Enryaku 16/6/28.
4 RSK 14 Kōnin 1/9/23, quoting a decree dated Enryaku 14/int.7/1; NKō Enryaku 18/6/26; RK 83 Enryaku 18/6/26; RK 83 Enryaku 16/6/28; RK 159 Enryaku 19/11/26. However, it seems that some of them abused Kanmu’s offer and continued to live in the countryside despite being registered in the capital. Therefore he issued a decree that forbade outsiders to register their domicile in the capital and thus evade the taxes. For a discussion on Kanmu’s policy of inviting peasants to reside in the capital, see Kida, “Kanmuchō ni hajimaru chihōnin no Kyōto kanpu ni tsuite".
He was less generous to the more well-to-do inhabitants of the former Nagaoka capital. Ten years after the move from Nara, some of them had attained a luxurious lifestyle. This is evidenced by the fact that Minister of the Right Fujiwara no Tsugutada issued a proclamation in 792 condemning the lavish burial ceremonies of certain people. From then on, funerals were to proceed more modestly. This directive had to be displayed in every ward and on the major roads, indicating that the custom must have been widespread. The directive was clearly not aimed at the ordinary peasants but rather at the merchants, entrepreneurs, and low-ranking officials. They had accumulated great wealth by supplying the city with straw for roofs, reed for blinds, and various other construction materials and daily commodities. Some of the newly rich were construction workers who had earned good money by constructing the private residences of the various other inhabitants of the city. Still others had become rich through money-lending schemes using the house lots as collateral security, despite a ban on this practice in 783.

When the announcement of the transfer was made, these money-lenders saw their profits immediately disappear. The value of the house lots given as collateral decreased sharply; and rather than paying back their debts, people allowed their land to be confiscated, knowing they would be able to start over again in the new capital. Some inhabitants of the Nagaoka capital therefore petitioned the throne to have the value of the house lots reimbursed. Kanmu, however, refused and thus reduced the economic surplus gathered by certain people. So the decision to move to the Heian capital dealt a serious financial blow to the middle class, merchants, and commoners living in Nagaoka. Although the land in the new capital was distributed for free, these people were required to finance the construction of their homes themselves. Thus, by moving to a new capital, Kanmu temporarily weakened the financial power of influential families, and at the same time he strengthened his own imperial prestige and political power.

With the move to Uda village, Kanmu was convinced he had found the perfect site for an imperial capital. To assure the longevity of the Heian capital, he tried to obtain the benevolence and protection of various deities. According to the seventeenth-century Honchō tsugan,

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5 RSK 19 Enryaku 11/7/27.  
6 SN Enryaku 2/12/6.  
7 NKi Enryaku 12/12/18.