CHAPTER 2

Imperial Models

THE IMPACT OF CHINA AND BUDDHISM ON JAPAN

The Asuka period (552–645) is distinguished by two major events, the beginning of the great passion for all things Chinese by the imperial court, and the formal introduction of ***Buddhism*** *from the Korean kingdom of Paekche. The period begins with the year 552—twelve years into the reign of the Emperor Kimmei (r. 540–71)—to mark the arrival of the Paekche diplomatic mission and their Buddhist gifts. The name Asuka itself refers to a valley of the Yamato heartland to the south of present-day Nara where the imperial court often resided between the reign of the Emperor Inkyō (r. 412–53) and that of Gemmyo (r. 708–15). The imperial court and government was of a semi-nomadic nature during this period. Shinto ritual stipulated that the death of an emperor made the palace unclean, and therefore with each accession a new palace on a new site had to be built. Furthermore, the emperors could also move their residence about in an effort to consolidate the allegiance of the different aristocratic clans under their authority. Wherever the emperor chose to make his palace—and therefore government—a temporary capital would spring into being.*

Centralization of Power

As the Asuka period opened, the imperial house in Yamato was technically the focus of all government, with each of the ancient clans of the warrior aristocracy, who had helped to establish the Yamato state in the early centuries C.E., holding hereditary positions within the court. Furthermore, the country was united in its belief in the imperial house's descent from the sun goddess Amaterasu, the supreme deity, in a belief system that came to be characterized as Shinto (Way of the Gods). Nevertheless, the provinces beyond Yamato were under the hereditary authority of these aristocratic clans, who ruled them more or less autonomously, keeping the gathered revenues largely for themselves. So, while the clans became rich, the imperial house, although holding the most privileged position in the country, was relatively powerless and poor.

It was to remedy this situation that the imperial government from the Asuka period in the sixth century through the end of the Nara period in the late eighth century took an overwhelming interest in both Chinese culture and, by connection, Buddhism. The Chinese imperial system of government did not have provinces administered as if they were feudal baronies. Instead, its structure was based on a well-organized bureaucracy of officials with the emperor at its center. Governors and other officials were appointed from this bureaucracy to administer the provinces, appointments which could be made and recalled according to the direction of the central imperial bureaucracy. In addition, revenues gathered in the provinces would pour back into the imperial coffers. In the Japanese adaptation of this new system, if the old aristocratic clans wished to continue to wield their power and privileges, they would be obliged to reside in close proximity to the imperial seat of power—waiting upon the emperor at court, instead of staying in their provincial strongholds. Only in this way could they hope to participate actively in the government of ministries staffed by officials. The imperial house would become, therefore, not simply the spiritual and figurative focus of the state. It would take on a more active and central role in its governance, and be the agency by which members of the aristocracy could hope to gain lucrative and influential government positions.

It took almost a century to bring about the first major stage in this massive restructuring, and two of the key reformers were Soga no Umako (d. 626) and Umayado no Ōji—more commonly known as Shōtoku, a prince of the imperial house (574–622). The Soga clan were relatively parvenu amongst

the aristocracy, said to have been descended from a noble of Korean Paekche of the fifth century. Ambitious as they were, the Soga had quickly gained high influence with the imperial family, Umako's sister even becoming one of Emperor Kimmei's consorts. However, they had no hereditary court position, such as the ancient warrior aristocracy held. Therefore, they, and other aristocrats like them, stood to gain a great deal by the abolishment of the old government structure in favor of a new one dominated by an appointed bureaucracy. In 587, Shōtoku and Soga, together with the imperial bodyguard, engaged in open battle against those opposed to the new introductions. They won, and in the succeeding decades set about slowly implementing the shift to the Chinese system of government. Their work was only complete after their deaths with the proclamation of the Taika Reforms in 645, which laid out the formal restructuring of both imperial and provincial government according to the Chinese template.

The new system of government was a rigidly ordered and symmetrically apportioned division of responsibilities. The entire bureaucracy was divided into two departments: the Department of Worship, which oversaw Shinto affairs, and the Department of State, which was concerned with all aspects of secular government. The latter was further divided into eight ministries, four under the control of the Sadaijin (Minister of the Left) and four under the Udaijin (Minister of the Right). The country itself was organized in provinces, each with a governor. The provinces were subdivided into districts, each with its own administrator, and further subdivided into townships—each consisting of fifty households and governed by a headman responsible to the district administrator. The officials to serve this bureaucracy were to be drawn from the aristocratic clans and trained at a university known as the Daigakuryō, which taught a curriculum of the Chinese Confucian classics in the Chinese language. Before the establishment of the first capital, this university was sited near the palace and government buildings—wherever those happened to be. Since the establishment of Fujiwara as the first "permanent" capital, it has always been located within the precincts of the capital.

The Hakuhō period (645–710) begins with the proclamation of the Taika Reforms in 645. It rapidly became apparent that old ritual and political concerns would have to be set aside, and that a permanent home for this imperial bureaucracy would need to be established. And it was decided that a capital city along the lines of the Chinese Chang'an would be most suitable. The first attempt was made in 694 with the founding of Fujiwara-kyo in the Asuka Valley (see Fig. 44). However, Fujiwara was abandoned after only sixteen years, and a new permanent capital was established at Heijō-kyo, about 12 miles (20 km) to the north in 710. The period (710–94) that this inaugurated is known by Heijō's present name, Nara. Heijō was laid out on a similar Chinese imperial plan, and for eighty-four years thrived as Japan's first great metropolis, embracing one of the most culturally fertile periods in the nation's history. However, in 794 the capital was once again reestablished—this time at the city of Heian-kyo (present-day Kyoto). To the northwest of the Nara basin, Heian was founded and built along the same Chinese imperial plan as Fujiwara and Heijō, but unlike them it served as the imperial capital for more than a thousand years until the emperor's removal to Tokyo in 1868.

Beginnings of a Metropolitan Court Culture

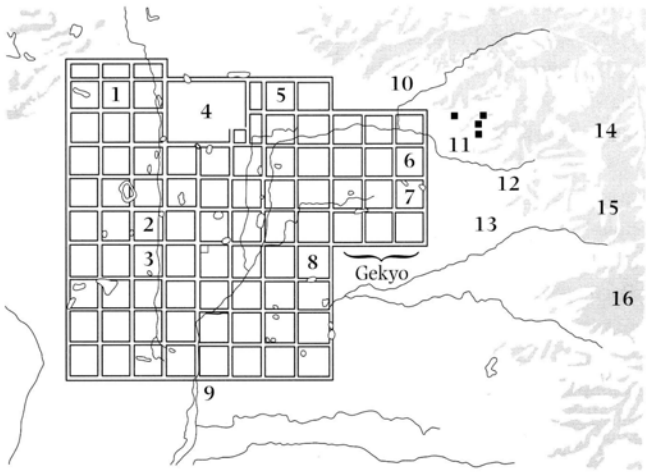
It would not be until after the removal of the capital to Heian in 794 and the beginning of the Heian period (794–1185) that the transformation of the way Japan was governed would be fully achieved. By this time, power had been transferred completely to the emperor and his appointed ministers, and the formerly semi-independent aristocracy had been transformed into a metropolitan elite concerned utterly with the person of the emperor and the intrigues, rituals, and pastimes of the imperial court.

An important feature of the transformation of the imperial court during the more than two centuries that this political changeover took was the head-long passion with which the court threw itself into adopting the cultural trappings of Chinese civilization. In 618, the Tang dynasty established itself in China and began an almost three-hundred-year reign in which Chinese culture is often considered to have achieved its greatest flowering. The Chinese capital of Chang'an was the hub of Asia, as Rome had once been of the Mediterranean. The many cultures that gathered in the Chinese capital produced a material culture that was certainly unrivalled elsewhere in the late first millennium C.E., and its magnificent achievements in all fields, from literature, painting, and sculpture to the decorative arts, have arguably never been repeated on such a scale in the country's history. It was certainly not only Japan that held Tang China up as its shining aspiration; neighboring Korea was equally under its influence. The artistic styles that came out of Tang China—often characterized by Indian and Central Asian influences of the Silk Roads, such as a new three-dimensionality and realism through modeled forms in the visual arts—became known as the Tang International Style.

By the advent of the Tang, Buddhism had been long established in China, and by the fifth century the Korean kingdoms of Koguryō and Paekche had officially adopted it, Silla ultimately also following suit. In the Tang, as in several preceding Chinese dynasties, Buddhism played an important role in the affairs of the nation. The Buddhist community was spread throughout the Chinese empire in a closely knit network of **temples** and monasteries that, not unimportantly, acknowledged the Tang emperor as being the supreme authority on earth. The Buddhist foundations across Tang China were wealthy and influential, and as such they were important patrons of the arts. Much of what we know of the Tang International Style is in fact in the form of surviving Buddhist sculpture and painting.

44 Plan of Fujiwarakyo (694–710). Nara Cultural Properties Research Institute.

As has already been mentioned, the model for Fujiwara was Chang'an, which was more than four times the size of the first Japanese capital. However, it has been estimated that Fujiwara supported a population of no more than thirty thousand, while Chang'an at its height had a population of over a million people. Given the ratio in size, it would appear that Fujiwara provided the luxury of considerably more space for each of its citizens than was the case in the crowded Chinese capital. But it is usually a burgeoning population that is cited as being the principal reason that the government persuaded the Emperor Mommu (r. 697–708) to remove the capital from Fujiwara in 710 and reestablish it on a completely new site about 13 miles (20 km) to the north. The result was the city of Heijō-kyo, which—built on a plan almost identical to that of Fujiwara—measured some 3 miles (4 km) from east to west and almost 4 miles (6 km) from north to south. It reputedly supported at its height a population of some sixty to seventy thousand people (Fig. 45).



1 Saidaiji
2 Tōshōdaiji
3 Yakushiji
4 Heijō Palace
5 Hokkeji
6 Kōfukuji
7 Gangōji
8 Daianji
9 Rashōmon
10 Shōmu's Grave
11 Tōdaiji
12 Kasuga Shrine
13 Shin Yakushiji
14 Mt. Mikasa
15 Mt. Kasuga
16 Mt. Takamado

45 Map of Heijō-kyo (Nara).

Neither the Paekche embassies of 552 nor of 584 were successful in introducing Buddhism to the Japanese imperial court. However, they did attract the interest of both Soga no Umako and Prince Shōtoku, who championed the Buddhist cause . When they managed to gain control of the government in 587, Buddhism gained its crucial foothold. A century later, Buddhism was well established within Yamato itself, with Emperor Tenmu (r. 673–86) and his successor, Empress Jitō (r. 686–97) openly advocating Buddhism as an instrument of the state. The power and wealth of the court were accordingly mobilized for the construction of large and elaborate Buddhist temples in the next century. In addition, all official residences were required by imperial edict to have a Buddhist altar with an image and appropriate **sutras**, and Buddhist institutions were to be established in each of the provinces. Already, however, these great "national" temples had been preceded by privately founded temples, in particular those established by Soga no Umako and Prince Shōtoku, and it is their patronage which ignited Japan's long and great tradition of Buddhist art. Although these first Buddhist images of the Asuka, Hakuhō, and Nara periods closely imitate the styles of the continent, they nevertheless feature the seeds of a Japanese idiom that in the succeeding Heian period would begin to flower, and would continue to do so through to the sixteenth century.

The Creation of an Imperial City

Although the concept of a permanent capital was set forth in the Taika reforms of 645, it was not, as mentioned above, until the reign of Emperor Tenmu (r. 673–86) that a site was selected and laid out with a formal design. This was the city of Fujiwara-kyo, in the Asuka Valley, which was actually built by Tenmu's successor, Empress Jitō, and occupied in 694. The site of the city was on land belonging to the Nakatomi clan, who had been hereditary heads of Shinto affairs, and who had fought against the Shōtoku/Soga alliance in 587 and their desire to promote the Chinese reforms and allow the propagation of Buddhism. Though they lost that battle, the Nakatomi proved to be a clan of great resilience and adaptability. By 645 and the proclamation of the Taika Reforms, they had turned the political tables on the Soga clan, eliminating its principal members and taking their place at the emperor's side. The Nakatomi clan held the Fujiwara region of the Asuka Valley in fief, and had been granted the name as their official surname by the end of the century. The Nakatomi/Fujiwara retained their traditional, hereditary role as the heads of Shinto affairs, or of the new Department of Religious Affairs, and as the hereditary priests of the imperial shrines. However, they also began a long and distinguished career providing many of the ministers who directed the Department of State, so that by the middle of the Heian period (794–1185) they would effectively control all government and the emperor, with whose family they had by this time become very intimately connected through many generations of intermarriage. This state of affairs would not change until the complete reorientation of political power away from the imperial court and into the hands of provincial warlords in the late twelfth century.

The site of the city of Fujiwara, chosen within their fief, is near the village of Kashihara, and from the 1930s excavations began there to uncover this first capital city, becoming a permanent, ongoing project in 1969. What has so far been uncovered is a city site measuring one mile by one mile (2 x 2 km), and organized on a grid plan of nine large avenues cross cut by thirteen smaller ones (Fig. 44). However, excavations have now revealed that the extent of the city was perhaps even larger than this. This grid neatly divided the city into large blocks, which were further subdivided by a pair of crossed lanes into four units known as *cho*. Each *cho* formed the basic residential unit, and the city's buildings covered areas ranging from a portion of a single *cho* to the 64 *cho* covered by the imperial palace. The palace grounds at the heart of the city measured about half a mile (1 km) on each of its four sides, and was accessed by the principal avenue, which was over 98 feet (30 m) in width and ran from the southern city's entrance. The other eight avenues flanking it varied from 33 to 79 feet (10–24 m) in width, and were roughly spaced about 870 feet (265 m) apart. The Asukagawa River ran diagonally across the city, and the foothills of one of the neighboring Yamato mountains intruded into the city's western flank, which by disrupting the grid plan must have softened the otherwise rigid aesthetic of the urban design.

The palace precinct was surrounded by an earthen wall some 17 feet (5 m) in height and capped with a tiled roof, and similar earthworks surrounded the city. It is doubtful that either were intended primarily to be defensive, but were instead more of a ceremonial division of space—the city from the country, and the emperor and government from the commonalty. The imperial precinct's principal southern gate opened onto a great courtyard, at the opposite end of which was the Great Audience Hall (Daigokuden). The government offices of the Ministries of the Right and Left were ranged on either side of the courtyard, while to the north of the Great Audience Hall appeared the imperial residence. The Great Audience Hall was some 148 feet (45 m) in width and almost 66 feet (20 m) deep, it sat upon an earthen foundation with stone bases for each of the building's wooden pillars, and was—as were the government buildings—roofed with tiles. The imperial residence was made up of numerous buildings that were on a more intimate scale, which appear to have been roofed with the more homely materials of planks or cedar-bark shingling.

In addition to the imperial palace, Fujiwara encompassed several Buddhist temples that had been founded long before the city itself was thought of, including Asukadera, which was the very first great Buddhist foundation and had been completed in 588, followed by the Kawaradera in 667, Daikandaiji in 673, and Yakushiji in 680. Built on a large scale to impress, they each covered several *cho*. So too did many of the mansions of the great courtiers.

(300–710 C.E.), Japanese-made objects bearing inscriptions in Chinese. However, with the reorientation of the imperial court towards a Chinese model, writing and the art of its production —or calligraphy—has a sudden and spectacular flowering. By the Nara (710–94) and Heian (794–1185) periods, knowledge of writing, and even more importantly, accomplishment at calligraphy, would be the most important factors within aristocratic and court circles in determining a person's character and breeding. Furthermore, as in the rest of East Asia, it would be from calligraphic style and technique that painting as a fine art would evolve.

The Chinese system of ideographic writing took its present shape early in the first millennium B.C.E., and was adopted largely throughout the Korean peninsula by the end of the second century B.C.E. In Japan, with its close cultural links from the Yayoi period onward with continental culture, it seems unlikely that the ready-made Chinese system of writing would not have been utilized early on within Na and the early Yamato state—if for no other reason than for the ruler's household records and accounts. Certainly by the mid-Kofun period, imperial administration must have been sufficiently complex to require some form of written record. Nevertheless, the first such records are from the Nara period. However, the large numbers of thin wooden strips inscribed in ink with characters created by clear and confident hands that have been found at the Heijō palace site certainly did not appear overnight. In addition, it is known that, by the time of Prince Shōtoku in the late sixth/early seventh century, the more forward-looking members of the court eagerly sought out texts of the Chinese Confucian classics and dynastic histories such as the *Hanshu* and *Weizhi*, as well as texts on Daoist philosophy, geomancy, and poetry. In addition, Buddhism, based as it is on the word of the Buddha embodied by the sutras, requires a level of literacy amongst its clergy and practitioners. The Japanese were certainly not importing Indian **Sanskrit** texts; all of their Buddhist transmissions—whether from Korea or China—were of texts written with Chinese characters.

The beauty of the Chinese writing system is that it is ideographic. That is to say, because a specific character represents an idea or an object rather than a word for an object, many different and mutually unintelligible languages can share it, applying to the ideographic character for a particular object or concept their own spoken word for that object/concept. Thus, one of the first ways Chinese characters were used was for their basic ideographic value, each character being equated with the appropriate Japanese word. However, by the Asuka period it had become clear that a way must be found to adapt the Chinese writing system to the particular inflections of Japanese grammar and the Japanese tendency towards polysyllabic words. Thus a system called ***manyōgana*** emerged in the seventh and eighth centuries. Certain Chinese characters were chosen for their phonetic pronunciation within the Chinese language and used as a primitive phonetic syllabary with which words and phrases in the Japanese language could—as it were—be spelled out.

The name *manyōgana* is derived from the first-known Japanese literary work, the compilation of poems known as the *Manyōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*). Although it was not actually compiled until after 759, the vast majority of the poems in this anthology of over four thousand date from the second quarter of the seventh century to the mid-eighth century, the heyday of the *manyōgana* experiment. Written for the most part by imperial courtiers, they range in sentiment from verses composed to commemorate official events to more personal lyrics; from short, thirty-one syllable love poems to longer pieces lamenting the absence of a loved one, the pains of old age and of poverty. An excellent example of their sophistication is the following from a series of poems characterized as "personal exchanges":

> Like the hidden stream
> trickling beneath the trees
> down the mountainside
> so does my love increase
> —more than yours, my lord.
>
> Ian Hideo Levy, *Ten Thousand Leaves*, Princeton, 1981, vol. 2, 92.

The poem is by one Princess Kagami at the court of Emperor Tenji (r. 662–72), and is a response to a poem sent by the emperor himself to the princess. She uses the imagery of nature to convey her passion and also wryly express her feeling that it is not quite returned. *Manyōgana*, however, was also used to compose the first great histories of Japan, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* (or *Nihongi*), which were both commissioned by the imperial court and written in the early decades after the removal of the capital to Heijō.

Actual survivals of calligraphy from this early epoch are rare, but there are a certain number dating from the eighth century, many of them attributed to imperial hands. While poetry formed one of the main pastimes and accomplishments of the imperial courtier, and the primary stage on which mastery of calligraphy (not to mention poetics) could be displayed, there were many other occasions on which it might also be shown to its advantage. One instance is a fragment of an imperial decree by the Emperor Shōmu (r. 724–49) to be circulated amongst twelve temples of the Kansai region (Fig. 48), and dated 749, the year of his abdication in favor of his daughter Kōken. Shōmu is perhaps the most famous of all the emperors of the eighth century. He was a vigorous ruler, and a great supporter of Chinese learning and Buddhism, launching the Nara period's greatest project—the national Buddhist temple of Tōdaiji and its monumental Buddha image. Unfortunately, the first part of the message is missing, so it is uncertain which of the twelve temples this particular version of the decree was meant for. The decree accompanied offerings of linen, cotton, and grants of land to each of the temples, and requested them to pray for peace and happiness throughout the land, as well as the further promulgation of Buddhism. As with Chinese and Korean texts, the decree itself is meant to be read from right to left.

46 View of Nibo no Miya, a restored garden of an aristocratic palace of Heijō-kyo. Nara Cultural Properties Research Institute, Nara Municipal Board of Education.

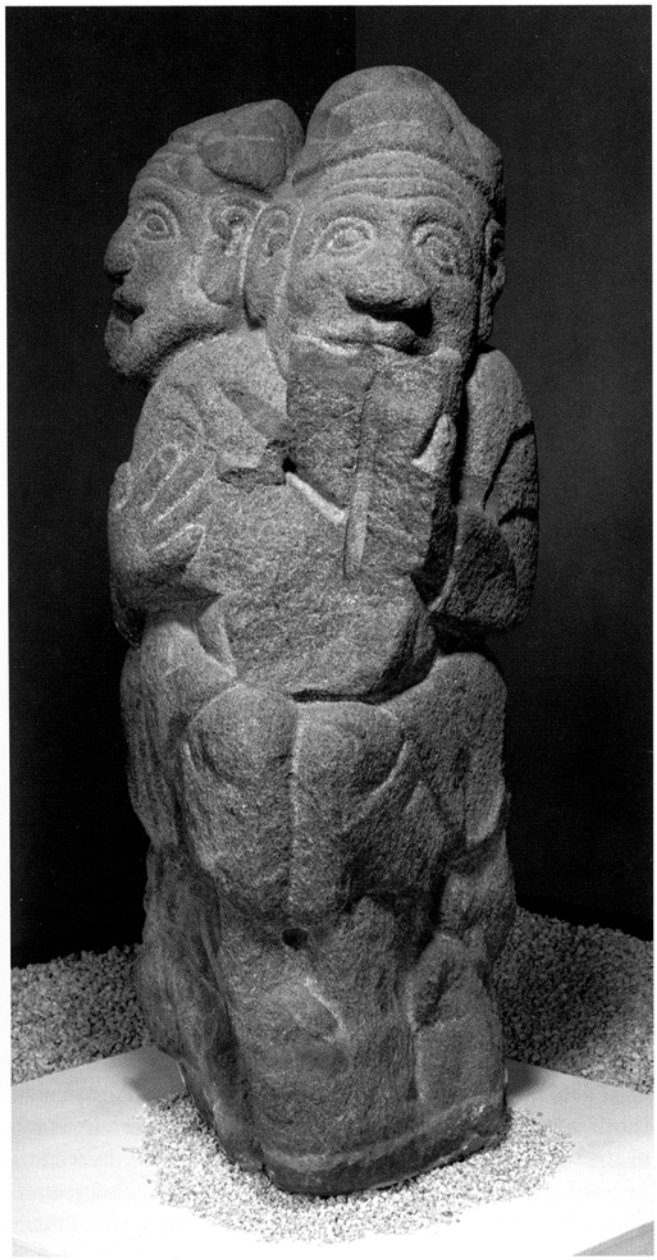
The new city also sat within a plain, and was flanked by mountains on three sides, although these were ranged to the north instead of to the south and west, as they were at Fujiwara. The city grid was laid out with ten lateral avenues and nine longitudinal ones. However, the parallel avenues were twice the distance from each other as their equivalents in Fujiwara, and the large blocks that they delineated could be broken down into sixteen *cho* by bisecting lanes. The large central avenue leading to the new imperial palace, the Suzaku Oji, was over 229 feet (70 m) in width, while the subsidiary avenues were 69–118 feet (21–36 m) in width. The Heijō palace enclosure was only about ten percent larger than its Fujiwara predecessor, but instead of being in the heart of the city it rested at the centre of the northern perimeter, as did the imperial palace at Chang'an. The buildings within the palace precinct remained roughly the same as those at Fujiwara, but excavations have shown that they seem to have been repositioned several times within the enclosure during the seventy-odd years that the palace was in use.

The great upheaval engendered by removing the population of Fujiwara to Heijō can only be guessed at. In the end, however, it was achieved, and the Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples of Fujiwara were reestablished in the new capital. Indeed, a suburb known as the Gekyō, or Outer Capital, was created in the foothills of the eastern mountain, especially to accommodate the rebuilt Asukadera (renamed at this point with the more Chinese style of name, Gangōji) as well as a private Buddhist foundation of the Fujiwara clan, the Kōfukuji. The old shrines and temples of Fujiwara were relegated to a subsidiary role by their departed occupants, and many were destroyed in 711 by the great conflagration that swept through the abandoned city.

Heijō would not long escape a similar fate. From the reign of Emperor Konin (r. 770–82) it was felt that a new capital was needed and a site was found some 25 miles (40 km) to the northwest. One of the reasons often cited for the government's desire to move was to put some distance between the imperial seat and the principal Buddhist temples that had come to dominate the city. With the exception of these Buddhist foundations and some Shinto shrines, Heijō was as quickly abandoned as Fujiwara, and its former palaces, mansions, markets, and neighborhoods turned over to farmland. This farmland, however, has largely preserved the grid layout of the lost city's neighborhoods, greatly facilitating archaeological study of this second capital. The great Buddhist compounds established in the Nara period for the most part endure to this day, and to serve them the city of Nara was slowly formed to the east of the site of Heijō. It is with this city that the ancient capital has

come to be identified in the popular imagination. Both Fujiwara and Heijō are important not only as the first planned cities of Japan, but because they provided models for smaller cities which were to be built in each of the provinces as administrative centers. The basic grid plan established by these cities was also adopted for the new capital of Heian, and would be the Japanese urban template used for many centuries to come.

Sadly, the excavated sites of neither the Fujiwara nor Heijō palaces can give a complete idea of what these compounds might have looked like. Comparing them with images of the palace subsequently established at Heian (see Figs 126 and 127), and with some of the Nara-period Buddhist temples (see Figs 66, 69, 75, 80, 82, and 83), gives a very rough and perhaps not entirely reliable idea. However, from their layouts, both the public buildings and private mansions seem to have been heavily influenced by palace-type architecture to be found on the continent. Basically wooden structures of a post-and-beam construction, roofed with either tiling or a kind of wood or bark shingle. The buildings would have formed enclosures around courtyards, but it is obvious that they would also have framed ornamental gardens, sometimes of great size (Fig. 46). The excavated and recreated garden of Nibo no Miya once sat in the compound of an aristocratic mansion of ancient Heijō and was the focus of poetry-writing parties and other such pastimes of the imperial aristocracy. There are many descriptions of similar gardens in Nara- and Heian-period literature, featuring an artificial pond representing the sea or a stream representing a river, bordered by rocks and plants molded and cultivated to reproduce in miniature a natural landscape. Ultimately this type of garden has a continental inspiration, but by the Nara period it is evident that gardens had long been an important feature of both aristocratic mansions and imperial palaces.



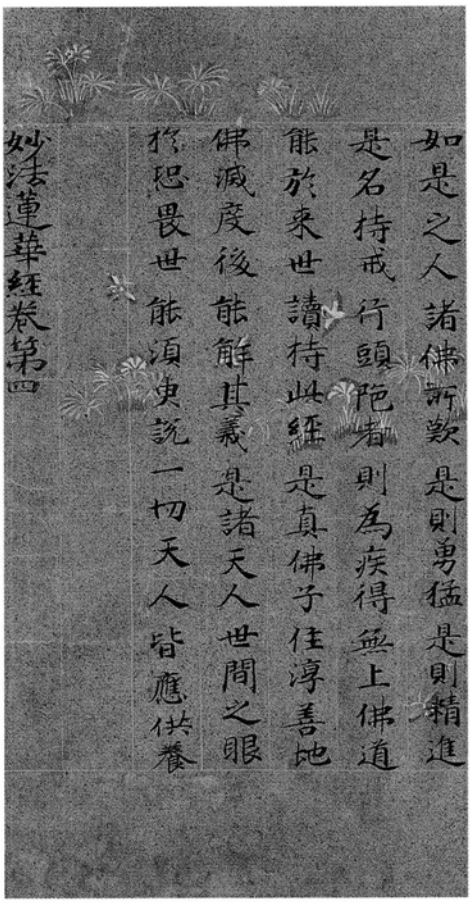
47 *Male–Female Fountain Sculpture*, excavated at Asuka mura, Ishigami. Asuka period, 7th century. Stone; height 67 in. (170 cm). Asuka Historical Museum.

In fact, at the last imperial palace before the removal to Fujiwara, there have also been found remains of a palace garden, although regretfully not in such a state that they could be recreated, as at Nibo no miya. The palace of Kiyomihara no miya within the city limits of present-day Asuka served as the last of the principal imperial residences not to be encased in a Chinese-style capital city. It was from here that the city of Fujiwara was planned and its construction overseen. At one corner of the site has been found the remains of a vast garden, and, most interestingly, pieces of stone sculpture that once ornamented it. One of the more unusual of these is a stone carving of an entwined man and woman which served as a fountain, water spouting from the two mouths (Fig. 47). When compared to the Buddhist sculptures of the same period (see Figs 84 to 89) and earlier, this is an ungraceful and crude piece. However, there is a sense as well that this roughness is deliberate, and the image's comic quality is certainly eloquently communicated. Another cone-shaped stone sculpture of Mount Sumeru, which in the Buddhist conception rests at the centre of the universe, points to a Chinese influence in not only the fashion for garden sculpture, but also in its subject matter. It is not clear, however, to what extent these sculptures represent a Chinese sculptural idiom and to what extent an emerging Japanese sculptural style.

The Introduction of Writing

The Japanese elite had long before the Asuka period (552–645) been exposed to written language. There have been rare finds at Yayoi-period (400 B.C.E.–300C.E.) burials of Korean or Chinese mirrors bearing inscriptions in Chinese characters, and even more unusual finds of Kofun-period

48 (above) *Message by Emperor Shōmu* (r. 724–49). Nara period, dated 749. Hand scroll, ink on paper; 11 ½ x 37 ¾ in. (29.2 cm x 95.8 cm). Heiden-ji temple, Shizuoka.



49 (right) Fragment of the Izumo Edition of *Daihoshakkyo* (*Dabaojijing*) *Sutra*, attributed to Empress Komyo, consort of Emperor Shōmu (r. 724–49). Ink on paper; 10 ⅝ x 5 ¾ in. (27 cm x 14.6 cm). Kyoto National Museum.

The only part of the message written by the emperor is the large character for *choku* (imperial decree) at the end of the fragment. To the left below this character are the signatures of various government ministers. This single character is written with a particular flourish, demonstrating a strong, virile, and educated hand. At this early period, the standard form of calligraphy is the very readable, measured strokes with which government officials wrote decrees such as this one. Yet, even in such a government document, one can note a variation in the width of the strokes which lifts the characters off the paper. With the appearance of having been executed with elegant ease, this calligraphy—though only by a government clerk—is still the product of a mature and well-practiced hand, and would have been perceived as such by whomever saw this decree. The repeated pattern of imperial seals in red behind the text and signatures decoratively proclaim the decree as being imperial.

Another calligraphic occupation of the Nara-period elite was the copying of Buddhist sutras. Throughout the Buddhist world to copy a sutra, or to have one copied, was to help spread the word of the Buddha; thereby one accrued a great deal of merit and proceeded some little bit towards Enlightenment, or at the very least rebirth into a Buddhist paradise. While in China many examples of this practice are executed with a calligraphy of less than mediocre quality, in eighth-century Japan, where the imperial court formed the core of the Buddhist community, such exercises often resulted in works of great calligraphic beauty. One survival from this period has been attributed to Shōmu's consort, Kōmyo (Fig. 49). A fragment of a much longer scroll, the sutra is part of a collection of forty-nine sutras known collectively as the *Daihōshakkyō* (CH. *Dabaojijing, Sutra Treasury of the Buddhist Law*). Of particular note is the beautifully colored paper which the empress has chosen with its border of chrysanthemums at top. Also interesting is the nature of her calligraphy. An even more formal rendition of the clerical script than in the imperial decree, it has thicker, less various lines. The particular grace of the curves, however, suggest an accomplished, feminine hand.

Silk Roads to Japan

The period of the Japanese court's great fascination with Tang China coincided with the golden age of the Silk Roads connecting East Asia with India, Western Asia, and ultimately the Mediterranean. Although there is no evidence that any Japanese ever traveled beyond the Silk Roads' eastern terminus of Dunhuang, the exotic and luxury goods that were traded along it and which helped to create the dynamic and cosmopolitan Tang International Style were as avidly sought after by the Japanese court and aristocracy as by their Tang Chinese and Korean counterparts.