

Fabricating Antiquity in Modern Nara*

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Introduction

The shaping of the ancient capital of Nara and the formation of the modern Emperor System were inseparable processes. The core of the emperor system, as it was invented in modern times, lay in the discourse of an “unbroken line of emperors” (*bansei ikkei*), and Nara was made to embody this concept both historically and culturally. For example, there exist mausolea for 120 generations of emperors, which both underwrote and rendered visible the “unbroken line of emperors”; 30 of these are scattered across Nara prefecture. The Imperial Household Agency to this day regards these sites not as cultural properties, but as “locations where the imperial spirits reside.” Along with the Kyoto palace, the Shugakuin detached palace, and Shosoin’s treasures, they are subject to the same sort of supervision in secret as prevailed before the war.

So, the ancient capital of Nara was new to the limelight, emerging as an ancestral site after the Meiji restoration. Nara rendered visible Jinmu’s act of state foundation, the guiding principle of the Restoration, as a fact of the mythical ancient past, featuring the trinity of Unebi mountain, Emperor Jinmu’s mausoleum and Kashihara Shrine. Another feature of the ancient capital Nara lay in its historical antiquity; from the 1880s onwards, it was reinvented with the West in mind as Japan’s “classical antiquity” on a par with Ancient Greece.

1. Mythical Antiquity

In the myths of the *Nihon Shoki* and the *Kojiki*, Emperor Jinmu led an army from Hyuga, through the inland sea of Seto, across Osaka Bay and Kumano and, guided by a golden kite, defeated his old enemy, Nagasunehiko, before pacifying the Yamato plain. And then, as the myths would have it, on New Year’s Day 660BC at the Kashihara palace in the Yamato region of Nara province, he was enthroned. This myth of the state founder, however, is an obvious

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fabrication as archeology tells us that the 7th century BC was the late Jomon period.

Mausolea for emperor Jinmu were constructed twice in Japanese history: once during the incipient Ritsuryo state, starting in 672AD, and again in 1863 during the Bakumatsu period. The centralization of power and the composition of foundation myths went hand-in-hand in the formative periods of both the ancient emperor system, and the modern emperor system.

The *Nihon shoki* (completed 720AD) tells that, at the time of the Jinshin conflict in the 7th month of 672AD, the army of Oamano Oji (later Tenmu Tenno) offered horses and weapons at Jinmu's mausoleum under the guidance of Kome, Governor of the district of Takechi, who had been possessed by a kami. It seems, therefore, that at a point in time not too distant from 672AD, a mausoleum had been built for Jinmu as Japan's founder. Hereafter, the *Nihon Shoki* and *Kojiki* myths, emphasizing the male blood line since Emperor Tenmu's court, were compiled, and Jinmu's mausoleum existed as the visible manifestation of those myths. Presently there is a debate over which of two possible sites, Misanzai (currently Jinmu's mausoleum) or Shiroyama (currently Suizei's mausoleum), was actually the 7th century location. In any event, with the enthronement of Konin Tenno in the latter half of the eighth century, the imperial line shifted from Tenmu Tenno's branch to that of Tenji Tenno; and, for the approximately nine-hundred year period from Heian to Edo, the mausoleum for Tenji Tenno in the town of Yamashina in Yamashiro-kuni became the mausoleum of the imperial line's founder. Even in the Buddhist rituals for the imperial ancestors held in the capital of Heian, it was Tenji, Kanmu and their descendants, who had lived in that city who were regarded as ancestors. The mortuary tablets in the Shingon Buddhist altars of the early modern Kyoto palace (preserved in the Okurodo chamber), were similarly those of Heian period Emperors from Tenji through Konin. With the 1871 (Meiji 4) separation of Buddhas and kami at the court, the Okurodo and its altars and tablets were removed to the Sennyuji temple.

Jinmu's mausoleum emerged again as that of the state founder during the mausoleum reconstruction project of the Bunkyu (1861–1864) years. But it is worth stressing that at no time in the medieval or early modern periods had the 7th century Jinmu mausoleum located at the foot of Mt. Unebi assumed the role of the state founder's mausoleum. It had, therefore, fallen into disrepair, its whereabouts unknown. In the Bakumatsu period, the Maruyama tumulous, adjacent to Horaburaku, was the leading candidate for the location of Jinmu's mausoleum, but the defiling presence of the nearby buraku was a problem. After some complications at court, it was settled by a decree of emperor Komei that Jinmu's mausoleum was indeed at Misanzai, the remains of the medieval temple (Kokugenji).

The methodology employed in the 19th century for determining the place of the imperial mausolea involved examination of literary sources such as *Kojiki*, *Nihon Shoki* and *Engishiki*, and the garnering of legends from actual locations. For example, for Jinmu's mausoleum *Kojiki* offered only the minor clue: "His mausoleum is north of Mt. Unebi, above Kashinoo." At Misanzai, Tanimori Toshiomi, the official in charge of maintaining the mountain graves

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recorded legends of a “spiritually powerful land” that had brought to an end an *eta* family of Hora village, who had cut down the pine and cherry trees (*Komei Tenno ki*. 2nd month, 2nd day, Bunkyu 3).

The formal declaration in the 12th month of 1867 that Imperial rule was restored made special reference to Jinmu, praising his act of state founding; it declared the modern state's intention to return to the ancient period of direct imperial rule passing over the early modern and medieval periods, tainted as they were with the influences of continental culture and the military government of the warrior class. Be that as it may, it was the introduction of the solar calendar, the chronology of Western civilized nations, on January 1st 1873 that prompted debates about mythical antiquity in the context of western civilization. Along with the solar calendar, from 1874, November 11th was determined as the *kigensetsu* feast day, celebrating Jinmu's enthronement, based on the ancient Chinese prophecy that an especially great revolution would occur every 1260 years. And after 1872, the feminine, aristocratic Emperor, wearing face powder and traditional court dress, metamorphosed into the image of a European sovereign in military attire. Just as the image of the real emperor was masculinized, so too was the wooden image of Emperor Jinmu venerated at Nara's Shiki-gun Osha transformed from the virtuous figure that was the object of the peoples' prayers for good harvests (fig. 1). Influenced by European historical paintings, the 1888 image re-cast Jinmu as the warrior who defeated Nagasunehiko under the guidance of the golden kite (fig. 2). In this image, Jinmu is



fig. 1 The image of Emperor Jinmu in Edo period (*Kashihira Jingu shi*)



fig. 2 The image of Emperor Jinmu in 1888 (*Kashihara Jingu shi*)

portrayed bearded like a European, and masculine like the gods of Greek myths.

Many of the Nara mausolea were on private land, and during the Edo period local villagers had access to them; shrines to local guardian gods were sometimes sited there too. These mausolea first drew the attention of the reconstruction project during the Bakumatsu period, and then in 1878 they came under the supervision of the Imperial Household Agency, and were thus separated from local society. Finally, in 1889, the year of the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution, Emperor Meiji confirmed the locations of mausolea for all 121 generations of emperors. Japan's first prime minister, Ito Hirobumi, argued that identifying all the mausolea of all the emperors demonstrated to Japan and to the world the glory of the Japanese polity; it would help Japan achieve the revision of the treaties and so enter the most elevated ranks of nations (*Meiji Tenno ki*. 6th month, 3rd day, 1889). The following year, in 1890, a shrine to venerate emperor Jinmu and his empress was erected at the south-east foot of Mt. Unebi. Originally part of Hatamoto domain, Mt. Unebi became an imperial property after being designated a place of scenic beauty. By this means, the three mountains of Yamato, Mt. Unebi, Mt. Miminashi, Mt. Amanokagu, were spared the poor deforested state of the early modern period when they were private property. As imperial property, evergreens were

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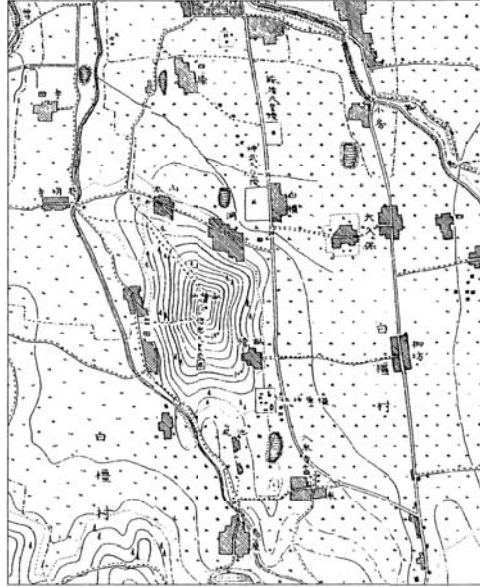


fig. 3 The map around Mt. Unebi in 1890

planted systematically creating the *Man'yo* vista of an island floating in the sea of the Nara basin. Especially in the 20th century, the imperial mausolea and the park at the Kashihara Jingu were invested with solemnity through systematic aforestation under the influence of Western forestry.

Among the changes around Mt. Unebi prompted by the Meiji Restoration might be cited the building of the round tumulus for Jinmu's mausoleum at Misanzai at the North-east foot of Unebi in the year 1863 at the staggering cost of 10,000 *ryo*. Again, in the south-east foot of Mt. Unebi, the ruins of Kashiharanomiya were surmised from evidence in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* and, in the year after the promulgation of the Constitution, Kashihara Jingu was constructed around the Shinkaden pavilion of the Kyoto palace, specially removed to that site (fig. 3). The sacred place comprising the mythical trinity of Unebi Mountain, the Jinmu Mausoleum, and Kashihara steadily took shape between 1889 and the 2600th anniversary of state founding in 1940; it served as a sort of shrine precinct at the foot of Mt. Unebi. The precinct of the inner shrine at Ise, where Amaterasu Omikami is venerated, had just been completed between 1886 and 1889; trees were planted the length of the main *sando* which crosses Isuzu bridge to the main sanctuary. This was the first such shrine precinct to be completed under government auspices. This shrine precinct served as a model for Mt. Unebi too and, with a mind to developing the Jinmu mausoleum, the first private residence was moved

away in 1890, and, in 1915, 10 more residences were relocated from the site. Subsequently, 208 homes and 1054 people from the Hora village were forcibly removed, as they were in a position that enabled them to overlook the mausoleum: “It is intolerable that these people should remain where they might be able to look down directly on the mausoleum of emperor Jinmu.”

With the 2600-year anniversary celebration in 1940 imminent, the work of preparing the sacred precinct and extending Kashihara Jingu began. From 1938, 240 houses occupied by Unebi, Kume and Okubo families, were displaced and, following the lead of the Meiji Jingu, an outer precinct of nearly 40,000 *tsubo* (1 *tsubo*=approximately 3.3 meters squared) was marked out. The outer precinct sports ground, Yamato Kokushikan, Yagai Kodo, Kashihara Bunko and other buildings, were now erected, and Unebiyamaguchi shrine, which had been sited atop Mt. Unebi since the medieval period, was removed to the mountain's western foot. The sacred garden at Kashihara Jingu was maintained with trees donated both from within Japan and from the colonies, and with the aid of volunteer labor, so that the ideal of Jinmu's state founding, proclaimed since the Restoration, now gave visible form to the concept of the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere.”

2. Historical Antiquity

Modern Nara assumed, however, an additional quality, one intended to make it comparable to ancient Greece. The cultural artifacts and art works of its ancient shrines and temples were the essential medium for this process. The situation that obtained immediately after the Meiji Restoration was completely different, however. Triggered by the edict separating the Buddhas and the kami in the spring of 1868, Ichijoin (now a court house) and Daijoin (now Nara Hotel)—both small temples in the grounds of Kofukuji—were abolished, and the five-storied pagoda was poised to be sold off. (From the 1880s, this area was reorganized as Nara park where the deer now roam). And the historic Uchiyama Eikyuji, the temple attached to the Isonokami shrine, which Matsuo Basho visited in the latter half of the 17th century, was abolished; only its lake survived. And the national treasure, the eleven headed Kannon, the sacred image at the Daigorinji Temple, affiliated to Miwa Shrine, was removed to Shorinji Temple in Sakurai. Many Buddhist statues and images drained away now from the Nara temples to venues both within Japan and abroad. The anti-Buddhist storm that accompanied the separation of Buddhas and kami coincided with strong anti-traditional currents in the Enlightenment and Civilization movement. Finally, the removal of the emperor and his capital to Tokyo in spring 1869 brought an end to the role of Kasuga festival as the Fujiwara rite of great heritage.

Government reflections on this anti-Buddhist iconoclasm prompted the first survey into national treasures as early as 1872, although the primary purpose of this survey was to

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investigate the treasures and cultural properties at ancient shrines and temples of symbolic value like Todaiji and Horyuji; a second purpose was to create an inventory of the personal treasures of the court as preserved by the Shosoin.

The attempt to identify treasures with the imperial seal in the 1872 survey revealed that, apart from things like emperors' letters held by some temples, the Imperial family had no private treasures. As evidenced by the mere 30,000 *koku* of land controlled by early modern emperors, the court was extremely poor. Consequently, the government now appropriated the Shosoin treasures, which had been donated by empress Komei to Todaiji in the 8th century to commemorate emperor Shomu. These Shosoin treasures were displayed in the Nara Exhibition, held in the hall of the Great Buddha of Todaiji in 1875. At this stage, the crowds who thronged the Great Buddha hall were able to touch these treasures, as they had yet to acquire a "mystical" sacred quality. Here, the Shosoin treasures were subordinated to the promotion of industry, and served to promote the export of fine art objects. In early modern Japan, the term *gyobutsu*—meaning amongst other things the tea utensils of daimyo families—was current, but the term only acquired its contemporary meaning of the "Emperor's private treasures," in the second decade of the Meiji era. "Gyobutsu" were defined by the Commission for the Investigation of Gyobutsu in 1930 as "objects of proven court vintage, objects that serve as historical evidence, and objects worthy of artistic appreciation," such as the books, paintings and calligraphy belonging to the imperial family. In the early Showa years, the Imperial Household Agency interpreted this definition as beginning in 1878 when the Horyuji gifted the 322 of its treasures to the court in return for an imperial benefaction of 10,000 yen. After all, the majority of "Gyobutsu" were in like fashion accumulated through donations and purchases from outside the imperial family.

During the 1880s as the Constitution began to take shape, movements toward the preservation of history and tradition were under way; these were of course quite contrary to the anti-Buddhist and the anti-traditional currents of the Civilization and Enlightenment period. Quite simply, Japan had learned that the elite countries of the world in the latter half of the 19th century not only had universal national systems, such as Constitutions, Parliaments, armies and education; they also had historical sites, court ceremonies, myths, ancient shrines and temples, and festivals which constituted unique "histories" and "traditions." The international society in which nation states like England, France, Germany, Austria, Russia competed over history and tradition was the site of contestation. For example, Iwakura Tomomi referred in his "Personal opinions on the preservation of the Kyoto Palace," (January of 1883), to the twin capitals of Russia and how the role of the traditional capital Moscow, where coronation ceremonies were held, contrasted with the political capital of the Romanovs, which was open to western influence. In the same way, the old capital of Kyoto was assigned the role of ritual center where enthronements and the Daijosai would be conducted, in contrast to the political capital that was Tokyo. At the same time, the cultural "traditions" of the

ancient capital of Nara, too, were positioned in a national culture strategy, as is manifest in various preservation projects: the revitalization of the Kasuga festival (1884), that court-determined rite of Kasuga shrine with ancient links to the Fujiwara family, the preservation of the Kofukuji temple (1882) and the Tanzan shrine devoted to Fujiwara Kamatari. In the case of Kofukuji, it was the descendents of ancient Fujiwara families like the Kujo, Sanjo, and the Konoe, who expended efforts in the preservation of what had been the Fujiwara ancestral temple. The intent here was the empowerment of the “court nobility” who formed the House of Peers, in the aristocracy as it was determined in 1884. So it was that the Kofukuji, the main temple of the Hosso sect, was resurrected at the entrance to Nara Park, quite separate from Kasuga shrine.

The first to compare Nara to ancient Greece was Fenollosa, who said “the reason for the spread eastward of civilization was that Alexander of Greece led his troops eastward spreading the seed of civilization to India from where it was transmitted through China and Korea and so to Japan.” (Akiko Murakata. “E.F. Fenollosa ‘Toyo Bijutsu shiso’” *Kokubungaku Kaishaku to kansho* 5, 1995). In the 19th century West, as plainly shown by the Venus de Milos at the Louvre and the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum, England, France, and Germany placed the origin of their national culture in ancient Greece and competed to be that culture’s legitimate inheritor.

Allow me to introduce here an example of the way in which the Greece-Europe linkage served as an analogy of the relationship between Japan and Chinese civilization in the formation of the Japanese nation-state.

Okakura Tenshin discussed the definition of the Kagenkei (fig. 4), a Buddhist object preserved at Kofukuji, as a *Japanese* national treasure in his *History of Japanese Art* (1891), and argued: “The West takes its civilization from Greece and Rome, but then claims it as its own. Thus, when we mimic the cultural items of Sui and Tang and blend our art with these Chinese models, we are perfectly at liberty to say that the art is our own.” Just as the great powers like England and France place the origins of their civilizations in Greece and Rome, Okakura insisted there was no reason why Japan may not argue Chinese civilization as Japan’s, given that it has already merged into something Japanese. A lot of works of art were produced by “Japanese” from the medieval period onward, but what was left of “Japanese culture” in the Asuka period, if one were to exclude the national treasures brought over from the continent or made by the hands of those who came over to Japan? This was nothing other than a cultural strategy on the part of the Japanese nation state, whose borders were only drawn in the modern period, as it developed into an empire, seeking to reconstruct the East Asian historical past.

In 1889 it was decided to locate three Imperial museums in Tokyo, Kyoto and Nara along the models of the museums in Austria, Germany, England and France. The Tokyo Fine Arts School was established in 1887 with the young twenty-something Okakura Tenshin as its



fig. 4 The Kagenkei at Kofukuji

first principle. The systematization of ‘art’, aided by Fenellosa’s import of art theory, went full steam ahead after the promulgation of the Imperial Constitution. Kuki Ryuichi, the first director of the Imperial museum, and Okakura Tenshin were the leading lights. (Sato Doshin. *‘Nihon Bijutsu’ Tanjo*, Kodansha, 1996). With the Special nation-wide investigation of treasures of 1888–97, the fundamental categories of contemporary “art history” analysis, namely genre, class, era, and artist, came into being.

The ancient to modern periodization still used today emerged in art history, namely in the field of exhibitions and diplomacy, where there was a need to make a visual appeal, before it ever did in conventional historical studies. It was Okakura Tenshin who, in his lecture on “Japanese Art history” at the Tokyo Bijutsu Gakko, first proposed the periodization: Suiko (Asuka culture) to Tenji (Hakuho culture) to Tenpyo to Heian to Kamakura (*Okakura Tenshin Zenshu*, Hara Yasutami Hikki, vol 4, 1891). With regard to Nara, he proposed an historical

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understanding that matched that of the periodization employed in the investigations of treasures: the Suiko period as represented by the three statues of Shakyamuni at Horyuji influenced by the culture of the Six dynasties period in China; the Tenji period with the Indian, and Greek style art seen in the murals of the Golden hall at Horyuji; and the Tenpyo period, with the influence of T'ang culture and its rich international coloring, such as the statue of the four guardian kings at Todaiji's precept platform, the statue of Shukongojin at Sangatsudo, and the glass work at Shosoin. Nor were Okakura Tenshin's interests limited to the past. Insisting "we are in the process of producing the art of the future," he nurtured the modern artists Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso, and cultivated the genre of Japanese paintings that both opposed and complemented Western paintings.

Nara, compared with the antiquity of Greece by Watsuji Tetsuro in his *Koji Junrei* (1919), became the spring of the culture of intellectuals in the Taisho period. In the pre-war Showa period, with day excursions and school trips, ancient Nara became familiar to the general public, and the image of the "beautiful country of Yamato" was propagated through the discovery of Man'yo scenery and the erection of monuments inscribed with poems (Kuroiwa Yasuhiro. "Umashi-kuni Nara' no keisei to man'yo tiri kenkyu" *Jinbun Gakuho* 89, 2003). Mythical antiquity ended in the defeat of Japan in 1945. In contrast, the culture of the historical antiquities of Asuka, Hakuho and Tenpyo became established and popularized in post-war society, through tourism and school education.