

# Excavating the Nara Capital (3)

## Daily Life in the Nara Capital

By Tanaka Migaku

### 1. Daily Life of Prince Nagaya

The Nara Capital was the capital of Japan in the eighth century. It was approximately 24 square kilometers in area, and featured a grid-iron arrangement of north-south avenues and east-west streets. The estimated population of the Nara Capital was 100,000. The Nara Palace occupied an area of 1.3 square kilometers, and was situated in the north-central part of the Capital. The emperor resided in the Palace, where he oversaw political affairs and conducted ceremonies. Government officials also carried out administrative duties in the Palace. The entire Nara Imperial Palace site has now been designated as a Historic Site of Special Significance, and turned into an archaeological site park, in order that it may be preserved just as it is. In contrast, nearly all the Nara Capital outside the Palace was turned into agricultural fields after the Nara Capital ceased to be the capital of Japan in 784. Recently, these agricultural fields have become residential areas, and since archaeological rescue excavations take place prior to construction works, we have a much better understanding about the daily life of residents of the Nara Capital.

In 1986, a series of excavations started in a 40,000 square meter area adjacent to the southeastern corner of the Nara Imperial Palace, prior to the construction of a major department store. These excavations revealed a

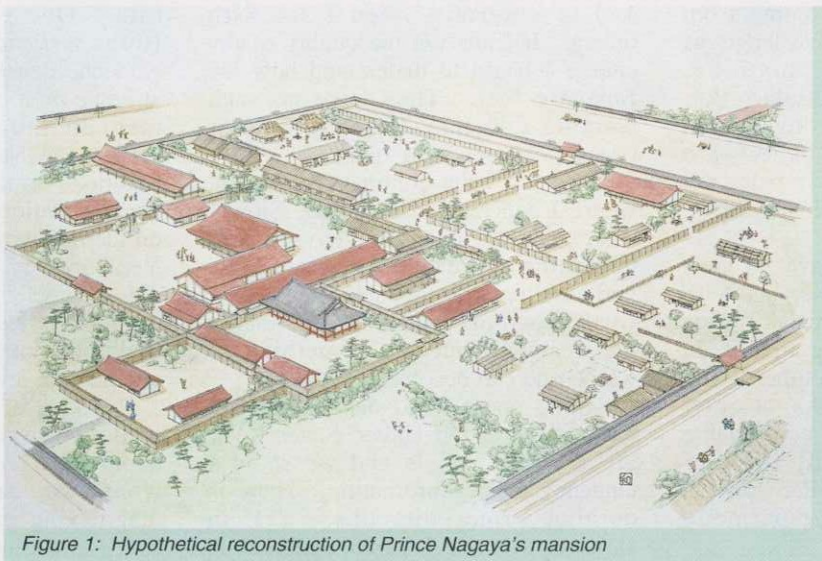


Figure 1: Hypothetical reconstruction of Prince Nagaya's mansion

mansion belonging to a historically well-known figure — Prince Nagaya. In the summer of 1988 when construction started alongside the ongoing archaeological excavations, a rectangular garbage pit lying in a north-south orientation was discovered near the eastern end of the construction area. In the garbage pit were numerous wooden tablets with inscriptions in ink. Several of the inscriptions mentioned Prince Nagaya's name. The department store is now built and running.

Prince Nagaya happens to be one of 116 residents of the Nara Capital whose addresses are known. A cousin of the father of Emperor Shomu (who reigned from 724-749), he occupied the highest rank among the imperial relatives, and was also the Minister of Left — the highest-ranking regularly held governmental post. When he was 44 years old, he and his wife tragically committed suicide in 729 by order of the emperor because of a charge (which turned out to be false) that he had plotted against the

government. He was in the midst of a power struggle with the very influential Fujiwara family who were gathering more political authority at that time. After this political upheaval, the Fujiwara family gained full control of politics, and their sway lasted until the twelfth century.

Prince Nagaya's mansion occupied a square-shaped area of over 60,000 square meters, with each side measuring about 250 meters. The

four sides of the mansion faced streets and avenues that were 37 to 20 meters wide (Figure 1). This large area was divided into five compounds by wooden fences. The south-central compound was 9,000 square meters in area, and comprised five large buildings. Similar large buildings stood in the 6,000 square meter compound to the west and the 3,000 square meter compound to the east. To the east and north of these three compounds were spaces for medium and small-sized buildings. These two compounds were the only ones with wells.

It is highly likely that Prince Nagaya resided in the south-central compound. Prince Nagaya's wives and his children probably lived in the compounds to the east and west of this one. Those who assisted the work and family life of Prince Nagaya probably worked in the compounds to the east and north of the three central compounds. They would have included a butler, housemaids, and the rearers of dogs, horses and cranes raised in the mansion. The number of



Figure 2: Model of a low-ranking official's residence

such supportive staff is estimated to be some two hundred.

All the buildings in the mansion were of the "post-hole type," that is to say, wooden pillars supporting the supra-structure directly planted into the ground by digging square-plan pits. The roofs were covered with tree bark or wooden boards; very few had roof tiles. This did not mean, however, that they were lower-quality than buildings roofed with tiles and standing on base stones. In the Nara Palace, the buildings where the emperor carried out his public/political activities stood on base stones and were roofed with tiles. But the buildings in the emperor's private residence, or *dairi*, were of the post-hole type, and roofed with tree bark and wooden boards. Prince Nagaya's mansion was exactly like these. In 724, an imperial decree was issued urging that houses be roofed with tiles, their pillars painted red, and their walls whitewashed with plaster. Archaeological excavations in the Nara Capital reveal, however, that most residential structures were of the post-hole type and very few were roofed with tiles. Buddhist temples were characterized by the adoption of roof tiles and base stones. Apparently, the decree did not have much effect.

According to the inscriptions on wooden tablets discovered in Prince Nagaya's mansion, rice, wheat, chestnuts, beans, and various vegetables were brought there from his territories. Products from taxes in

kind collected by the national government, such as rice, fish, shellfish, seaweed, and salt, were also provided for his family's meals. Dried meat, albeit in small amounts, was also a part of their menu, which was very unusual at that time. Milk was boiled to make

a product similar to cheese. Salt, soy sauce, *miso*, vinegar, and sesame oil were used as seasoning. Alcohol was also consumed. Ice was delivered in summer from the subterranean icehouse where ice had been stored in the previous winter. When this discovery was made, newspapers reported that Prince Nagaya "drank bourbon on the rocks." Charcoal was fired in his own charcoal kilns. Wooden tablet inscriptions also reveal that dogs and cranes raised in his mansion were fed with rice, the staple food for the general populace.

In the Nara Capital to the south of Prince Nagaya's mansion were residential areas much smaller than his mansion. The further south they were from the Nara Imperial Palace, the smaller their size. The lowest-ranking governmental officials' residences were 500 square meters. In their residences were two to three post-hole type buildings of 35 to 60 square meters in area, roofed with

wooden boards or grass. The empty land in their residences was probably used to raise vegetables for food (Figure 2). The life of these low-ranking officials was probably difficult, as evidenced by deeds for borrowing wages in advance which survive in the Shosoin Treasury.

## 2. Some Effects of Urban Life

Willows, mandarin orange trees, and locust trees were planted as roadside trees in the Nara Capital. Willow and mandarin orange trees are mentioned in the *Man'yōshū*, a collection of poems compiled in the eighth century. Locust trees, whose buds could be used both as a hemostatic agent and as a pigment, are mentioned in wooden tablet inscriptions, which record that governmental offices had children gather locust buds. Willows and locust trees were also roadside trees in Chang'an, the capital of Tang China, after which ancient Japanese capitals

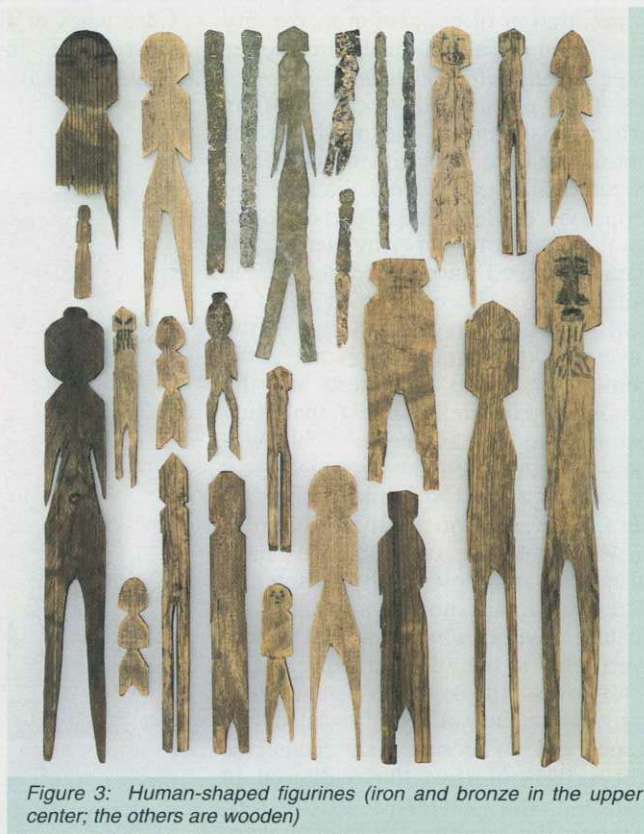


Figure 3: Human-shaped figurines (iron and bronze in the upper center; the others are wooden)

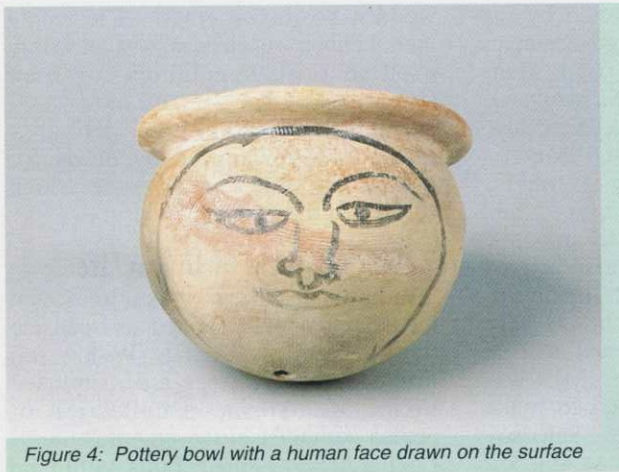


Figure 4: Pottery bowl with a human face drawn on the surface

were modeled.

Besides the roadside trees, other aspects of a city, including neat rows of houses, mansions, and Buddhist temples on streets as well as markets as gathering places for people, all appeared for the first time in Japanese history. At the same time, the concentration of population in the city also brought about problems never experienced before in Japan.

The excavations of another aristocrat's mansion unearthed a rather unusual feature. On either side of the streets and avenues were ditches, and from one of these led a narrow ditch to the mansion, carrying water. It then continued away and back to the side ditch. Microscopic analysis of soil collected in this narrow ditch revealed 5000 parasite eggs per cubic centimeter. The high ratio and the kinds of parasites suggest that they came from human feces. This was how we identified the archaeological feature as a toilet — a flush toilet, no less. In addition to this example, privies consisting of simple pits have also been archaeologically discovered. These toilets usually have as a set feature several wooden sticks, which were used in lieu of toilet paper.

Besides the eggs of parasites, analysis of the soil also revealed fish bones and undigested plant seeds, the chrysalises of flies that gathered in toilets, and varieties of pollen. Among the varieties of pollen were

*amaranthus* and *chenopod* genera. According to ancient medical textbooks, the ears of the flowers of these two genera were taken as medicine for stomach ache. These discoveries suggest that people in the Nara Capital suffered from stomach ache probably caused by the parasites, and that they took medicines for the ailment.

In 706, just before the capital of Japan moved from Fujiwara to Nara, the empress Gemmei ordered that the public morals of officials and men and women be under discipline and that measures be taken to prevent the “loathsome smell” in and around the Fujiwara Capital. Perhaps the flush toilets that were connected to the sideditches of the roads were a major source of this smell. Indeed, archaeological features of toilets have

been discovered in the Fujiwara Capital.

Garbage must have been another major source of the smell in the Nara Capital. Excavations of Prince Nagaya's mansion unearthed a long ditch 120 meters long and 2.5 meters wide on the south side of the 38 meter-wide Second Row Street marking the northern end of the mansion. In the ditch were not only roof tiles and pottery, but also organic artifacts such as fragments of wood including wooden tablets and tree branches — all in large quantities. This long ditch was probably a garbage pit. At various places in the Nara Capital, various sizes of this kind of garbage pit have been discovered.

The disposal of human feces and garbage is a serious issue in cities at present. This was already the case in ancient Japan.

It seems that epidemics were also an aspect of life in the Nara Capital, brought about by the concentration of people. This is evidenced by the discoveries of small human-shaped flat



Figure 5: Votive tablet in the shape of a horse



Figure 6: Horse-shaped clay figurines

wooden figurines (Figure 3). People at that time believed that their illness would be cured by transferring their illness to these wooden figurines which they then cast away in rivers or other places. While commoners and low-ranking officials used wood in the production of such figurines, high-ranking officials and aristocrats used iron and bronze figurines. Also discovered in the Capital were small bowls with pictures of human faces drawn on the surface (Figure 4). Sick people believed that they could recover from illness by breathing into these bowls, sealing them with paper and throwing them away. People depended upon all sorts of superstitions to cope with sickness. This suggests that the concentration of people also resulted in epidemics.

People also depended on assistance from the gods, as is evidenced by wooden votive tablets featuring horses (Figure 5). This kind of Japanese cypress votive tablet with an ink drawing of a galloping horse was discovered in the aforementioned garbage ditch on the north border of Prince Nagaya's mansion. This tablet was determined to have been cut from a tree some years after 728, owing to dendrochronology that identifies the year of cutting a tree based on

comparative analyses of the variations of width of individual tree rings. In Japan, we have a custom of making a votive offering of these painted tablets to Shinto shrines whenever we have a wish or a wish has been realized. At present, votive tablets of various pictorial subjects remain at Shinto shrines all over Japan, and the earliest type of votive tablets featured a horse. A horse was considered a vehicle of a god. When people prayed, wishing that the god would come down to the Earth, they donated horses to Shinto shrines. Horse-shaped clay figurines (Figure 6) and horse-shaped wooden tablets, often archaeologically discovered, are substitutes for living horses. These discoveries of horse-related artifacts suggest that people made numerous wishes to the gods, which also suggests that they had considerable suffering to contend with.

There must have been many sources of suffering. One of them was inflation. When *Wado Kaiho*, which has been considered the first currency in Japan, was issued at the beginning of the eighth century, one *mon*, or the legally defined value of one bronze coin, was worth approximately 700 yen (some five U.S. dollars) based on a comparison of the price of rice at

that time and at present. Around 760 when *Mannen Tsuho*, the second currency, was issued, the value of one *mon* decreased to become worth only 33 yen or 25 cents. For residents of the Nara Capital where the monetary economy was very much in vogue, this inflation was felt severely.

One of the causes for this economic failure was the highly expensive construction and maintenance of a large artificial city. There were other costly projects in the eighth century — the most prominent of which was the construction of the Todaiji Buddhist temple. The main Buddha image of Todaiji was a colossal gilt-bronze figure of Vairocana whose height exceeded 15 meters. The temple occupied more than 100,000 square meters. The temple was erected because Emperor Shomu hoped that Buddhism would serve as the ideological foundation of the state and wished that Buddha would protect the state. He also intended that Todaiji would display the strength of the imperial authority. An estimate has been published that the cost for the construction of Todaiji would have equaled the total annual budget of Japan at that time. Around the same time, Emperor Shomu moved to and stayed for four years in the Kuni Palace in southern Kyoto, which had to be newly constructed. It also must have cost a considerable amount of money to quell a rebellion in 764 that shook the foundation of the central government. These all contributed to the economic failure of the eighth century.

It will be seen that many issues faced by urban centers and society in general today had already started in the Nara Capital in the eighth century, including pollution, disease, and difficulty in making a living. JTI

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