

CHAPTER 4

THE NARA STATE

This chapter will be devoted to the remarkable century that began with the civil war of 672 (*jinshin no ran*) and ended with the removal of the capital from Nara in 784. In these years the occupants of the throne, while attempting to rule directly in the Chinese manner, gradually shifted their attention from military preparation to (1) the development of religious rites and institutions, both Shinto and Buddhist, that would enhance the sacral side of their authority; (2) the building of T'ang-style capitals that would sanctify and legitimize their rule over the emerging Japanese state; and (3) the establishment of a bureaucratic system (like the one in T'ang China) that would increase state control over all lands and peoples. The Ise Grand Shrine where the ancestral kami of the Imperial clan is worshiped, as well as the Tōdai-ji where the universal Buddha continues to be honored as the central object of worship, stand as lasting monuments to the religious activity of emperors and empresses who ruled first from Fujiwara and then Nara. The remains of political centers throughout the country have come down to us as concrete evidence of ambitious capital-building projects centered on Nara, thereby justifying the practice of referring to the years between 710 and 784 as the Nara period. Finally, what we know of the Taihō administrative code (modeled after Chinese codes) indicates that the formulation and implementation of law were basic to the rise of Nara's bureaucratic state, leading a number of scholars to characterize the period as the time of a "penal and administrative legal" (*ritsuryō*) order.

Although all these activities – military, religious, political, and legal – were carried out concurrently, historians detect three distinct waves of change. The first, beginning with Emperor Temmu's victory in the civil war of 672 and ending with the drafting of the Yōrō code in 718, saw the laying of the foundation for a strong and centralized imperium. The second, starting with the completion of the splendid Nara capital in 710 and ending with the dedication of the imposing statue of the Rushana Buddha in 752, was marked by the erection of

spectacular symbols of imperial authority. The third, dating roughly from the Fujiwara no Hirotsugu rebellion of 740 and continuing to the removal of the capital from Nara in 784, witnessed a continuing erosion of imperial control.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Before considering what Emperor Temmu (d. 686) and his successors did to increase the strength and unity of Japan's imperial state, let us look at contemporary political conditions.

The external and internal situation

Long before Temmu had reached the throne by winning the civil war of 672, he had become well aware of threatening developments abroad. In 663, when a Japanese naval force of some four hundred ships was roundly defeated in Korean waters by the combined might of T'ang and Silla, Temmu was thirty-three years old. As crown prince and younger brother of the reigning emperor, he would have been privy to reports received in 668 that the Korean state of Koguryō had been incorporated into the T'ang empire. Like other persons at court, he was undoubtedly disturbed by signs of T'ang's westward expansion and shocked to hear in 671, just before the outbreak of civil war, that a huge T'ang mission was on its way to Japan. He and other officials learned of this mission from a report dispatched by the governor of Tsukushi stating that

six hundred T'ang envoys headed by Kuo ts'ung and escorted by Minister of the Left Sen-teung of Paekche with fourteen hundred men – a mission of two thousand persons transported in forty-seven ships – have arrived at the island of Hichishima. The envoys are afraid that because the number of their men and ships is large, an unannounced arrival will alarm the Japanese guards and cause them to start fighting. Consequently, Dōku and [three] others are being sent to give advance notice that the mission intends to proceed to the imperial court.¹

Probably only six hundred members of the mission were Chinese (the other fourteen hundred were apparently Japanese prisoners captured in 663), but the approach of such a large mission at this particular time must have created consternation at the Ōmi court and at Temmu's

¹ *Nihon shoki* Tenji 10 (671) 11/10, Sakamoto Tarō, Ienaga Saburō, Inoue Mitsusada, and Ōno Susumu, eds., *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* (hereafter cited as NKBT) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1967), vol. 68, p. 379.

residence in the Yoshino Mountains. But apparently the mission's objective was merely to obtain Japanese assistance for the Chinese occupational base in Paekche, which was then facing rebellion in Paekche and aggressive action by the neighboring kingdom of Silla.²

In 672, while Temmu was winning decisive military victories within Japan and assuming the duties of emperor, an even more threatening situation emerged in Korea. After hearing earlier reports of the collapse of Paekche and Koguryō, Japanese leaders were confronted with an alliance between T'ang China and Silla. Then as Japan's civil war was coming to a close, word was received that Silla, Japan's old enemy, was breaking its ties with T'ang and moving to seize control of the entire Korean peninsula. The first sign of Silla's ambitions surfaced when its leaders sent troops to the support of Koguryō rebels. But in 673 the break became open and irreversible as Silla armies captured a Paekche fort and seized the surrounding territory. T'ang was, of course, angered by such action and made plans in 674 for retaliation, but war was avoided when the Silla king apologized. Nonetheless, the king and his generals appeared to be more determined than ever to make Silla the dominant state of Korea.

By 676 Silla had extended its control over so much of Korea that China was forced to move its occupation headquarters from P'yōng-yang to a safer place in Liao-tung and to recall its officials from Koguryō, thereby leaving Silla with hegemony over all territory south of the Taedong River. In 678 the Chinese talked again of invading Silla but did not because more urgent problems had arisen at other points along the empire's outer rim. Therefore, in the years of Temmu's reign, Japan was faced with a different but nevertheless serious threat: a powerful Silla – traditionally hostile to Japan – that had expanded its authority to all but the northern reaches of Korea by driving back the mighty T'ang.

This foreign threat made Temmu and his court painfully aware of internal divisions and disunity, arousing in him and his court a determination to unify and strengthen the state as quickly as possible. In planning new reforms and pressing for the implementation of old ones, they still followed Chinese models. But a study of the measures taken after 672 suggests that Japanese planners were also influenced

² Because the Chinese mission was still in Tsukushi at the time of Tenji's death, court messengers were sent there to report his death. The *Nihon shoki* states that the Chinese envoy sent a message of condolence to the court. We do not know the contents of the message. Because fairly large amounts of cloth were sent as gifts to the envoy, we can assume that material assistance had been requested; Temmu 1 (672) 3/18, 3/21, and 5/12, NKBT 68.384–5.

by the weaknesses of the two defeated Korean states (Paekche and Koguryō), as well as by the strengths of the victorious Silla.

When comparing Japan's organizational arrangements with those of the Korean states, Temmu and his ministers must have noted that Paekche and Koguryō had been plagued by disunity and dissension, which seemed to account for their subjugation by Chinese armies. And when looking at the state system of the victorious Silla, Japanese leaders undoubtedly saw that its kingly control was firmly rooted in a ministerial support reinforced by the principle of harmonious discussion (*wahaku*). Whereas the king of Paekche stood well above and apart from his ministers and the Koguryō king's position was largely nominal, the ruler of Silla headed a political order that seemed to be a product of ruling-class will. Therefore when Temmu began to build what has been called Japan's imperial system (*tennō-sei*), he and his advisers gave special attention to Silla's ritual mode of control as well as to Chinese conceptions of sovereignty.

Faced with foreign danger, internal disunity, and continental modes of rule, the Temmu court made three overlapping policy decisions: to build a military force in which all clans were under imperial control, to place the land and people of the country under the priestly rule of the emperor, and to fashion an administrative order along Chinese lines. The implementation of the first policy made Japan look something like a clan-based military state; the second gave it a theocratic character; and the third produced a Chinese-style political order.

Clan control

Temmu's plans for defense were broader and deeper than those of his predecessor Tenji, as he envisaged a unified military force. His early moves included the formation of imperial armies in outlying regions as well as in and around the capital. Then came efforts to convert every clan chieftain into a strong and loyal military commander. Local officials were assigned greater responsibility over military affairs, and highways were improved in order to increase troop mobility. Thus Hayakawa Shōhachi concluded that Temmu's imperial system had a strong military base.³ But the base was definitely shaped by clan power and clan interests.

Having recently ascended the throne with the support of clans that were discontented with the previous regime – clans that felt their tradi-

³ Hayakawa Shōhachi, *Ritsuryō kokka*, vol. 4 of *Nihon no rekishi* (Tokyo: Shogakkan, 1974), pp. 32–37.

tional interests and customs had been compromised⁴ – Temmu was determined to bring all these groups under his control, to force them to abandon their private possessions of land and people, and to award to clan chieftains positions and ranks commensurate with their loyal service to the imperial state.

Reforms before 672 had been carried out by powerful chieftains who served as minister of the left and minister of the right, but Emperor Temmu left these posts vacant and appointed a member of his own branch of the imperial clan to the new position of counselor (*nagon*). Although a counselor had ranked below a minister in the recently created bureaucratic order, under Temmu a counselor was more like a private secretary to the emperor.⁵ Other members of Temmu's branch of the imperial clan were given posts of great responsibility: Temmu's consort Princess Uno (later Empress Jitō) became a key adviser; her son Prince Kusakabe, after being named heir apparent in 681, assisted the emperor; and another imperial son, Prince Ōtsu, received important assignments in 683.⁶ Thus the most influential persons at the Temmu court were not chieftains of nonimperial clans but members of Temmu's branch of the imperial clan, leading scholars to think of the Temmu reign as one dominated by imperial relatives (see Figure 4.1).

Although the heads of strong clans were not prominent at court after the civil war of 672, they were by no means ignored. Indeed, care was taken to recognizing their status in the imperial system. A law of 682 stipulated that when considering the promotion of an official, special attention be given not only to his service record but also to the status of his clan. Then in 684 Temmu superimposed a new title (*kabane*) system on the old, establishing eight titles to be awarded to clan chieftains in accordance with their standing in the emerging imperial system. The top four titles were new. The first (*mahito*) was to be held only by members of the imperial clan; the second (*asomi*) by clan chieftains with blood ties to the imperial clan; and the third and fourth (*sukune* and *imiki*) by chieftains of loyal nonimperial clans. The remaining four (*michi no shi*, *omi*, *muraji*, and *inaki*) were old titles to be awarded only to chieftains of nonimperial clans.⁷

4 Yoshie Akio, *Rekishi no akebono kara dentō shakai no seijuku e: Genshi, kodai, chūsei*, vol. 1 of *Nihon tsūshi* (Tokyo: Yamakawa shuppansha, 1986), p. 123.

5 Hayakawa Shōhachi, "Ritsuryō daijōkan-sei no seiritsu," in Sakamoto Tarō hakushi koki kinenkai, ed., *Zoku Nihon kodaishi ronshū* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1972), vol. 1, pp. 552–60.

6 Prince Ōtsu's mother was Princess Ōta, a Tenji daughter who died in 667.

7 Richard J. Miller, *Ancient Japanese Nobility: The Kabane Ranking System* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 52–58.

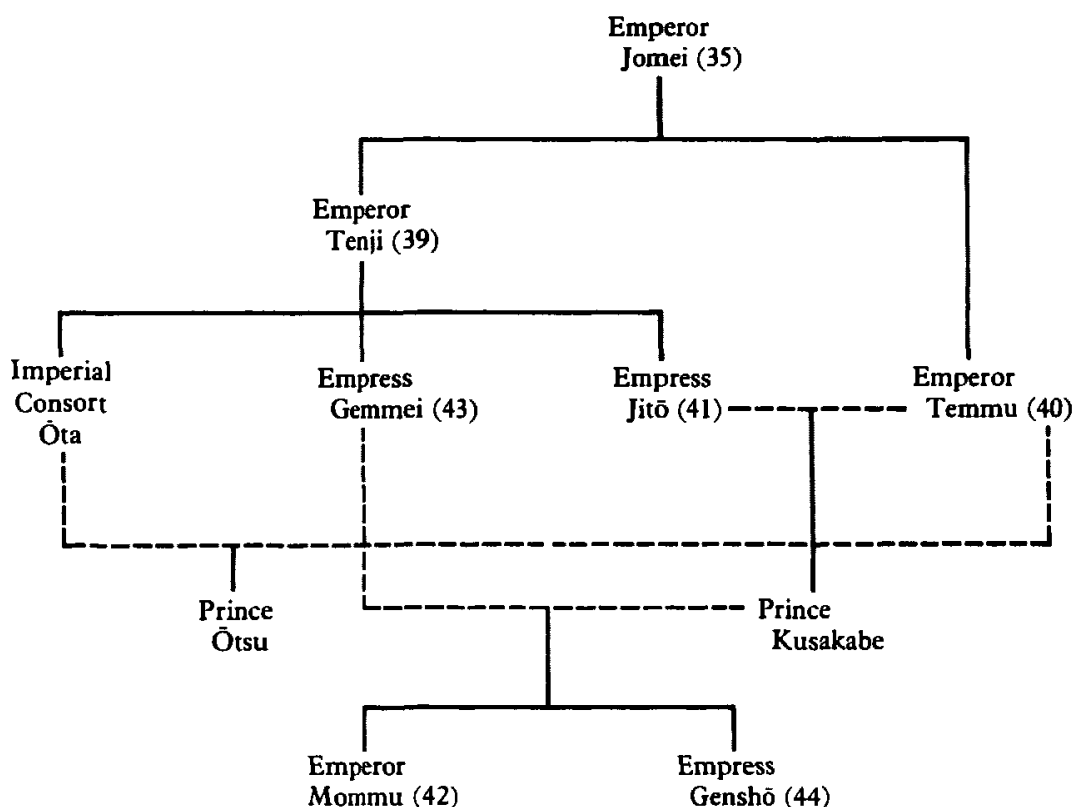


Figure 4.1. Government by imperial relatives. Dashed line indicates spousal relationship; solid line, offspring. (Reign numbers are in parentheses, as recorded in the *Gukanshō* chronology; see Brown and Ishida, trans., *The Future and the Past*, pp. 264–78.)

As Richard Miller showed in his analysis of the title system, the highest new titles were set aside for clan chieftains who had supported Temmu during the civil war of 672. The Nakatomi clan, for example, received preferential treatment. Originally holding the old title of *muraji*, it was granted (after 672) the second-highest of the new titles (*asomi*). Other clans that had backed Temmu got no more than *sukune*. And clans that had not supported Temmu received no new title, being permitted merely to retain their old titles. By placing emperor-connected and emperor-supporting clans at the pinnacle of a clearly defined hierarchical order, Temmu had thus created what has been called “the new nobility.”⁸

Spiritual authority of the emperor

Modern historians tend to see major currents of political and social change, even those in ancient times, as arising mainly from shifts in

⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

military power and economic wealth (physical sources of power and authority), but the aristocratic leaders of ancient Japan apparently felt that major currents of change had arisen, and would continue to arise, principally from shifts in the power and will of supernatural forces and divine beings (spiritual sources of power and authority). Under the influence of ritually unified Silla, Temmu was clearly attempting to bolster his imperial position by means of the priestly authority traditionally enjoyed by clan chieftains. It is thus not surprising to find that the official chronicle of that day (the *Nihon shoki*) includes numerous references to what Temmu and his successors did to sanctify their positions by means of their association with, and patronage of, important religious practices and institutions.

Relatively calm relations with the outside world during the last two decades of the seventh century caused Japanese leaders to be less preoccupied with the possibility of military invasion from the continent and more interested in any and all nonmilitary ways of unifying and strengthening the imperial state. No Japanese mission was sent to the T'ang court in the last years of the seventh century, although one was dispatched not long after the promulgation of the Taihō code in 701 and six others went before the Nara period came to a close in 784. To be sure, diplomatic missions were periodically exchanged with the Korean state of Silla, where Chinese influence was strong, and with Parhae (P'o-hai), whose territory extended from the Liaotung peninsula into northeast Korea. But Japan had stopped sending military expeditions against Korean states. Moreover, Japanese envoys were then less interested in territorial and military matters than in such cultural activity as acquiring Buddhist and Confucian texts, gathering information on Chinese science and art, and becoming familiar with T'ang methods of political and social control. They seem to have been especially fascinated with Chinese techniques and ideas that would reinforce the foundations of a Nara state headed by an emperor whose authority was both secular and religious.

Although most modern scholars have concentrated on the introduction of Chinese bureaucratic forms and procedures during the Nara period, several recent studies are leading us to appreciate what Temmu and his court were doing to build an imperial order held together ritually, not just militarily and administratively. Particularly significant were the steps taken to place the emperor at the top of what might be described as a four-layered system of kami worship. At its apex was a hierarchy of kami in which the ancestral kami of the imperial clan (the Sun Goddess) stood above the ancestral kami of all other clans. At

the second layer was a hierarchy of priestly rulers in which the emperor outranked other clan chieftains. At the third was a ritual system in which the most important rites, and the most generous offerings, were by and for the emperor. Finally, there was a shrine system in which the Ise Grand Shrine for the worship of the imperial clan's ancestral kami was placed above all other shrines for the worship of ancestral kami.

Temmu also took special steps to sanctify his own imperial position by demonstrating, and nurturing belief in, his divinity as a direct descendant of the greatest kami of all: the Sun Goddess. He is thought to have initiated the practice of issuing imperial edicts that began with these words: "Hear ye the edict of an emperor of Japan who is a manifest kami (*akitsukami*)," a practice followed by imperial successors throughout the Nara period.⁹ And soon after winning the civil war of 672, Temmu reinstated the practice of having an imperial princess take up residence at the Ise Grand Shrine to worship the Sun Goddess on his behalf.¹⁰ By taking such action, he and his successors not only affirmed their divinity but also placed the Sun Goddess above all other kami of the land, a position that she still holds.

Temmu also had offerings and prayers made at other key shrines, and he used the Council of Kami Affairs (the Jingikan, which had no Chinese parallel) for making himself the chief priest of kami worship at shrines all over the country.¹¹ Finally, he issued an order, recorded in the preface to the *Kojiki* (see Chapter 10) that an imperial chronicle be compiled explaining that the ties between the kami line and the imperial line are the "warp and woof of the Japanese state and the foundations of imperial rule" and should therefore be clearly defined and recorded. Because the *Kojiki* focused on the direct descent of emperors from the Sun Goddess, we can assume that Temmu's purpose in having it compiled was to sanctify his authority in one more respected way.

Although Temmu and his immediate successors were intent on laying the ritual and institutional foundations for Japanese rulers as high priests of kami worship, they seem to have given as much or more attention to a second source of sacral authority: the worship of Buddha. Immediately after the Great Reforms of 645, the government moved to reinforce imperial authority with Buddhist rites, causing the leading

⁹ *Nihon shoki*, Temmu 12 (683) 1/18, NKBT 68.456–7.

¹⁰ *Nihon shoki*, Temmu 2 (673) 4/14, NKBT 68.412–13.

¹¹ *Nihon shoki* Temmu 5 (676) 9/21, NKBT 68.425–7.

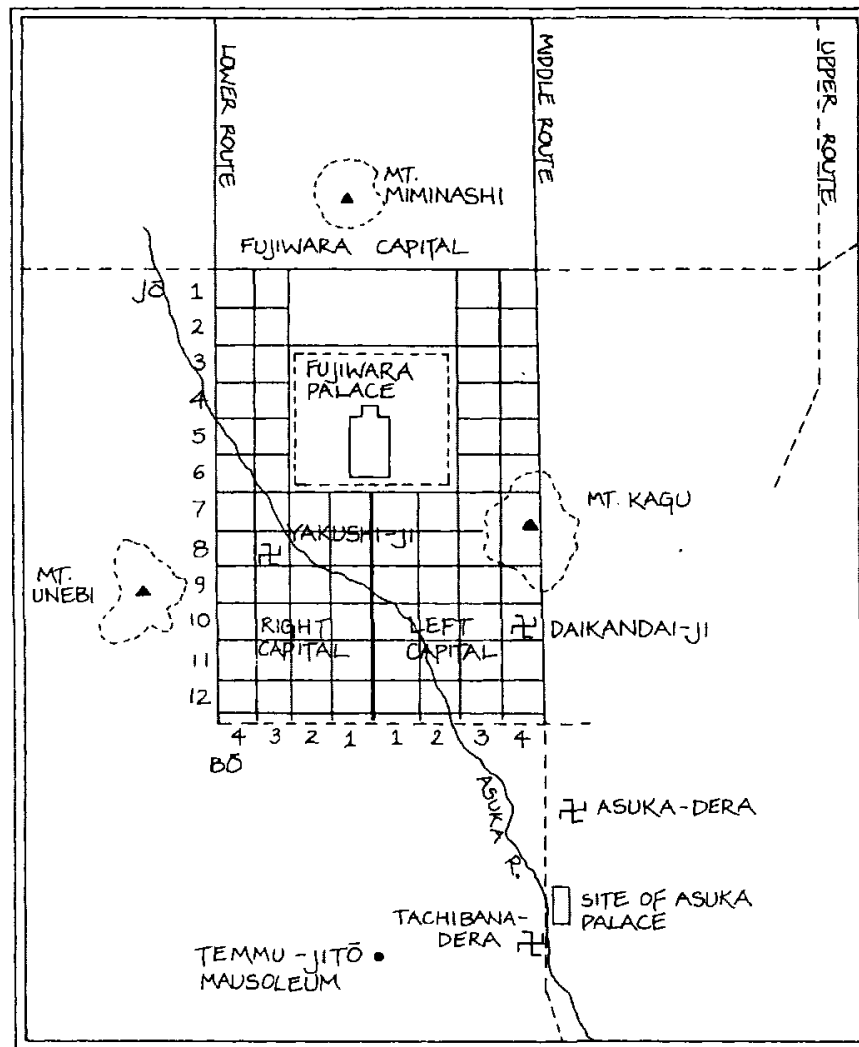
temples to lose their clan character and to become imperial institutions. After Temmu's military victories in 672, activity of this sort was accelerated and broadened. In 673, the year of Temmu's enthronement, the great Takechi no Ōdera temple was erected by imperial command, and in 680 the construction of the famous Yakushi-ji was begun. Before Temmu's reign came to a close in 686, the imperial court began to give financial support to important temples founded in earlier years (such as the Kawara-dera and the Asuka-dera) and to place Buddhist priests in the offices of high priest (*sōjō*) and vicar general (*sōzu*), who were ordered to offer up prayers for the prosperity of the state. Thenceforth, sutras expounding the doctrine that Buddhist worship could benefit the state were recited, upon orders handed down by the reigning emperor or empress, at temples within the capital and in the outlying provinces. But the full thrust of imperial patronage came in the second phase of the Nara period.

Building capitals to support imperial authority

The spiritual authority of the Japanese ruler was strengthened not only by kami worship at the most important shrines and by Buddha worship at the leading temples but also by the construction of Chinese-style capitals. Whereas shrines and temples reinforced the position of a sovereign as a divine mediatory with unseen powers, impressive foreign-style capital cities symbolized his position at the "sacred center" of Japan's this-worldly order. (See Map 4.1.)

Recent archaeological studies show that the imperial palace built at Naniwa sometime after 645 had a Chinese-style audience hall (*daigokuden*), and that certain buildings erected at Ōtsu (Tenji's capital) and Asuka no Kiyomihara (Temmu's capital) were also Chinese in appearance.¹² But a full-scale Chinese-style capital was apparently not built until the reign of Empress Jitō (686 to 697). The chronicles state that the empress selected a site for the new capital at Fujiwara, which was located on a plain north of the previous capital at Asuka no Kiyomihara. Fujiwara was to face south, with mountains on its three other sides (Kagu to the east, Miminashi to the north, and Unebi to the west). Construction was started in 694. Investigations of Fujiwara – begun in 1934, discontinued in 1945, resumed in 1966 – have revealed

¹² Temmu had constructed a capital around his Asuka no Kiyomihara palace, but the exact location is unknown. Probably he had planned a Chinese-style capital but died before it was completed.



Map 4.1 Fujiwara capital.

the location and size of the capital's buildings and streets. Fujiwara was probably modeled after Lo-yang, the capital of the Chinese kingdom of Northern Wei. The pillars of its principal buildings were placed on stone foundations in the Chinese manner; their roofs were covered with Chinese tiles; and the palace zone (including the imperial palace and governmental office buildings) was a square located on the north side of the capital, as in China. The palace zone (a square) occupied an area of 1.05 square kilometers within a capital that was 3.2 kilometers long, from north to south, and 2.1 kilometers wide. As the center of imperial rule during the reigns of Jitō and Mommu (686 to 707), it must have convinced everyone, even envoys arriving from Silla, that the Japanese emperor was indeed divine and mighty. But as we shall note, Fujiwara was much smaller and not nearly so splendid as the capital that was built later at Heijō, now Nara.

Legal supports for imperial authority

Japanese students who had spent several years in China before the beginning of the Great Reforms in 645 understood that law, and especially administrative law (*ryō*), was a powerful support for China's empire, a support that could be used to strengthen the state of Japan. They must have known, too, that Chinese administrative law, in addition to delineating the forms and functions of offices for accumulating revenue and services, had instituted arrangements for reinforcing an emperor's spiritual authority. The reforms adopted in Japan during and after 645 were therefore linked with the promulgation of laws that defined and justified both the secular and sacerdotal authority of an emperor.

Emperor Tenji, who reigned from 661 to 671, is said to have ordered the compilation of an administrative code in twenty-two volumes, but no copy of this Ōmi code has been preserved. Then in 681 Temmu reportedly instructed his ministers to "reform the law," suggesting that there really was an Ōmi code and that Temmu's order led to the compilation of what is known as the Asuka no Kiyomihara administrative code. The latter, also in twenty-two volumes, is thought to have been modeled on the Chinese Yung-hui code of 651 and to have been promulgated in 689, the third year of Jitō's reign.¹³ It, too, no longer exists.

Then came the Taihō penal and administrative code of 701. Because only fragments of it have been preserved, we have no detailed knowledge of its contents. But references made in contemporary accounts – together with what is written in later commentaries on administrative law (the *Ryō no gige* compiled in 833 and the *Ryō no shuge*, a few decades later) and the assumption that the Taihō code was similar to the later Yōrō penal and administrative code of 718 – lead us to reason that the following administrative arrangements were written into law between the beginning of Temmu's reign in 673 and the promulgation of the Taihō code in 702:

1. *Household registration.* A system for keeping track of households was instituted in 670 with the appearance of household registers (*koseki*). In 689 Empress Jitō ordered that registers be kept in accordance with articles of the Asuka no Kiyomihara code, an order said to

¹³ A few years ago it was commonly held that a penal code was compiled at this time, but now the opposite view prevails. See Ishio Yoshihisa, *Nihon kodaihō no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Hōritsu bunkasha, 1959); and Aoki Kazuo, "Ritsuryō ron," in *Nihon rekishi gakkai*, comp., *Nihon shi no mondaiten* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1968).

have been implemented the following year. Because these registrations were used for assessing taxes from the land and services from the people, they were important and frequently revised.

2. *Tribute collection.* Before 680, tribute (taxes) took the form of rice collected from a household according to the area of land that it cultivated. But after 680, tribute was collected from individuals rather than households.

3. *Administration of local areas.* Before the beginning of Temmu's reign in 673, most local affairs were administered by clan chieftains. But after the Asuka no Kiyōmihara and Taihō codes had been promulgated, nearly all local units – sixty provinces (*kuni*) divided into districts (*kōri*) containing villages (*sato*) of fifty households each – came under the jurisdiction of the imperial court.

4. *Administration of central affairs.* As early as Temmu's reign, a central administrative organ called the Office of Senior Controller (Daibenkan) existed, but it did not include a chancellor (*daijō daijin*), a minister of the left, or a minister of the right. The provisions of the Asuka no Kiyomihara code of 689 changed the name of this supervisory body to Council of State (Daijōkan) and added these three ministers, placing them over three high offices already in existence: those of the senior, middle, and junior counselors. Sometime after the Asuka no Kiyomihara code had made these alterations, two new offices were created: Central Affairs (Naka no Tsukasa) and Inner Court Affairs (Miya no Uchi no Tsukasa).¹⁴ These were in accord with earlier Chinese models, making us wonder why the Japanese were so late in adopting them. Both dealt with court affairs and therefore reflected the current urge to strengthen the sacral as well as the secular authority of the emperor.

5. *Administration of military affairs.* The Asuka no Kiyomihara code provided for provincial military units made up of one young male conscript from each household.¹⁵ More details of the arrangement were supplied in the Taihō code.

The government was run by a system of offices ranging from those closest to the emperor to others at more distant places and at lower levels. These offices had histories of their own, coming into existence at different times with different names and functions. Here we shall

¹⁴ Satō Sōjun, "Ritsuryō daijōkansei no tennō," in *Kodai*, vol. 1 of Hara Hidesaburō et al., eds., *Taiki Nihon kokkashi* (Tokyo: Tōkyō daigaku shuppansha, 1975), pp. 184–5. Denis Twitchett pointed out that these offices were not parts of a Chinese "outer court" but agencies for managing the imperial household and inner palace.

¹⁵ See Naoki Kōjirō, *Asuka Nara jidai no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Hanawa shobō, 1975), pp. 262–6.

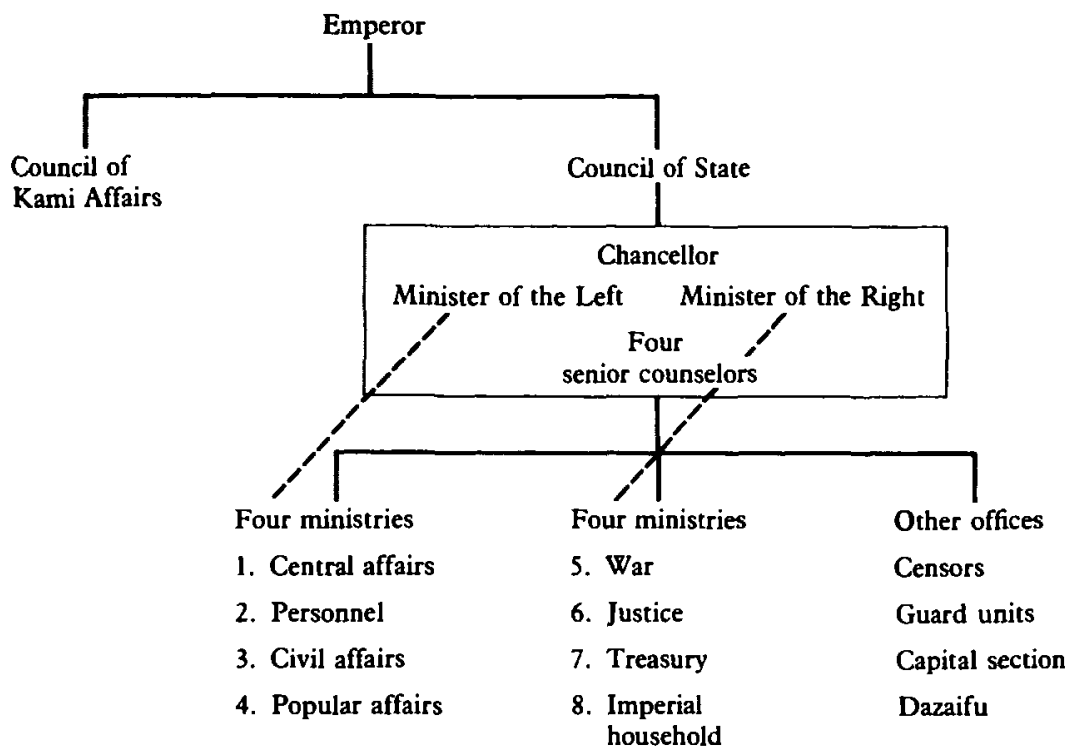


Figure 4.2. Nara bureaucratic order. (Based on information from Hayakawa Shōhachi, *Ritsuryō kokka*, p. 36.)

survey merely the ones that were probably named and defined in the Taihō administrative code of 701 and the Yōrō code of 718.

At the apex of the structure was the emperor, whose will was expressed in decrees (*mikotonori*) and edicts (*semmyō*). Important decisions, such as those pertaining to appointments and promotions of high-ranking officials, were recommended at meetings of the Council of State but were carried out only with imperial approval. The two codes placed no limitations on imperial authority, thus giving the emperor, legally at least, despotic control.

Under the emperor were two councils that had equal standing: the Council of State, generally overseeing secular affairs, and the Council of Kami Affairs, running affairs in the area of kami worship (see Figure 4.2). Although the two councils were organizationally at the same level, the Council of State's highest minister (the chancellor) held a higher rank than did the highest official of the Council of Kami Affairs. But the chancellor also had some responsibilities that lay outside the bounds of secular administration: He served as the emperor's guide and teacher and was given the task of harmonizing movements of the world with Chinese principles of yin and yang.

Below the chancellor, the minister of the left, and the minister of

the right were four senior counselors. In consultation with one another, counselors and ministers made important policy decisions and recommended appointments and promotions for high-ranking officials. Under these six men were the heads of three administrative offices, referred to as the Council of State's three departments: the Department of Junior Counselors (Shōnagonkan), the Department of the Controller of the Left (Sabenkan), and the Department of the Controller of the Right (Ubenkan). The first included three junior counselors authorized to serve as custodians of the imperial and Council of State seals, and the last two were responsible for transmitting imperial orders (*senji*), distributing orders issued by the Council of State (*kampu*), and handling communications between the council and its eight ministries.

The first four ministries were under the minister of the left, and the next four were under the minister of the right, as follows: (1) The Ministry of Central Affairs (the Nakatsukasa-shō) ranked above all other ministries and was the main link between the emperor and the Council of State. Its minister gave advice on numerous court matters, supervised the court chamberlains, and drafted imperial edicts. Under him were ten secretariats, including the Secretariat for the Empress's Household (Chūgūshiki). (2) The Ministry of Personnel (Shikibu-shō) supervised personnel affairs. Within it were two important bureaus: one for higher learning (Daigaku-ryō) and another for nobles who held a court rank but occupied no office (Sammi-ryō). (3) The Ministry of Civil Affairs (Jibu-shō) had two important bureaus: one for Buddhist priests and nuns and aliens (Gemba-ryō) and another for court music (Gagaku-ryō). (4) The Ministry of Popular Affairs (Mimbu-shō) was responsible for administering household registers, taxes, irrigation, paddy fields, and the budget. (5) The Ministry of War (Hyōbu-shō) took care of personnel matters pertaining to soldiers and other military affairs. (6) The Ministry of Justice (Gyōbu-shō) handled legal affairs. (7) The Ministry of the Treasury (Ōkura-shō) dealt with state property, weights and measures, prices, and related matters. (8) The Ministry of the Imperial Household (Kunai-shō) managed food, clothing, and personnel problems of the imperial household. Inside each ministry were several, often several tens of, administrative organs of three types: secretariats (*shiki*), bureaus (*ryō*), and offices (*tsukasa*).

Outside the ministerial structure were a number of important boards and administrative units, including, first, the Board of Censors (Danjōdai) that was engaged in exposing the illegal activities of officials and upholding standards of correct bureaucratic behavior. Also

there were the headquarters of the various guard units, beginning with the five that guarded the imperial palace: the gate guards (*emon-fu*), the left guards (*saeji-fu*), the right guards (*ueji-fu*), the left military guards (*sahyōe-fu*), and the right military guards (*uhyōe-fu*). The central government had, in addition, a right and left bureau of cavalry and a right and left bureau of armories. Other offices outside the eight ministries included two that were responsible for the left and right sectors of the capital.

Organs of government outside the capital included, first of all, the Dazai headquarters (Dazai-fu) located near the harbor of Na in Kyushu from which the nine provinces of Kyushu, as well as the islands of Iki and Tsushima, were administered. Each of the country's sixty or more provinces¹⁶ was headed by a governor who usually had under him ten or more districts headed by district supervisors. Each district contained between two and twenty villages (*sato*) made up of fifty households each. A governor was appointed for a six-year term, but the district supervisors, usually selected from the local gentry, had no fixed term of office. The Taihō administrative code contained no articles dealing with village heads, but it is assumed that they were influential farmers.¹⁷

The country was divided into the Kinai (made up of five provinces around the capital¹⁸) and seven regions: the Tōkai (provinces on the eastern seacoast), the Tōsan (eastern mountain provinces), the Hoku-riku (northwestern provinces), the Sanyō (Inland Sea provinces), the San'in (mountain provinces behind the San'yō), the Nankai (southern provinces), and the Saikai (provinces on the western seacoast). In principle, every province had one or more military corps of one thousand soldiers. The number of corps for a province was not specified in the Taihō code, but it is estimated that every three districts had at least one. Kyushu, facing the continent, had a special military organization

16 The *Nihon shoki* carries items indicating that provinces existed before the codes were compiled in the closing years of the seventh century. See Naoki Kōjirō, "Taihōryō-zen kansei ni tsuite no ni san no kōsatsu," in Inoue Mitsusada hakushi kanreki kinenkai, ed., *Kodaishi ronsō* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1978), vol. 2, pp. 17–20.

17 An excellent study of the Nara period administrative structure is Richard J. Miller's *Japan's First Bureaucracy: A Study of Eighth Century Government* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University East Asia Papers no. 19, 1978). Valuable information about the Council of Kami Affairs (Jingikan) was supplied by Felicia G. Bock in chap. 2 of *Engi-Shiki Procedures of the Engi Era [Books 1–5]* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1970), vol. 1, pp. 17–24. An important earlier study was made by George B. Sansom in "Early Japanese Law and Administration," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (hereafter cited as TASJ) 9 (1932): 67–109 and 11 (1934): 117–49.

18 Izumi was split off from Kawachi to make five provinces instead of the original four: Yamashiro, Yamato, Settsu, and Kawachi.

under its Dazai headquarters that was made up of conscripted troops (*tsuwamono*) and guards (*sakimori*).

Down through the administrative structure – from the heads of offices around the emperor to those in charge of local offices in distant regions – ran a hierarchy of office titles and ranks. Heads of the highest offices held the title of director (*kami*) who had assistants (*suke*), secretaries (*jō*), and clerks (*sakan*). (These four office titles were written with different characters but pronounced in the same way when held by officials serving in different ministries and agencies.) According to the Yōrō administrative code of 718, the number of officials in the two councils and eight ministries totaled 331. If lower-ranking officials are added, the total was 6,487.

Ranks provided a more precise indication of status than titles did, for officeholders with the same title had different ranks yielding different stipends and perquisites. The Taihō code set aside four imperial ranks (*hon*) for princes and near relatives of the emperor and thirty court ranks (*kurai*) for persons lower in the aristocratic order. The son or grandson of a nobleman holding the highest imperial rank was automatically awarded a junior fifth rank lower grade court rank when he reached the age of twenty-one. Special treatment for anyone with a fifth rank or above – apart from the rights that their sons had to a high rank when they turned twenty-one, irrespective of ability – is revealed by the generous stipends and retainers they received (see Table 4.1).

University students – almost exclusively young men of aristocratic birth – who passed the civil service examinations were usually appointed to positions with such titles as “lower-class officials” (*toneri*) or attendants to imperial princes (*chōnai*). But for years they often held no court rank at all. Even after thirty or more years of excellent service, they commonly rose no higher than junior sixth rank upper grade. And even a young man who passed the examinations with distinction seldom reached eighth rank upper grade.

Governmental positions were customarily filled by persons holding appropriately high ranks. In some cases a high-ranked aristocrat would discover that no position appropriate to his rank was available, causing him to be referred to as a person having rank but no office (*sammi*). But usually the eldest son or grandson of a high-level aristocrat did receive an appropriate office with stipends and retainers, as shown in Table 4.1, even if he did no work. Thus members of the same clans tended to dominate all the offices of Japan’s emerging administrative order, generation after generation. Probably that was precisely what the architects of the system had intended.

An aristocratic officeholder, whether stationed at court or in a distant province, received his stipends twice a year: once in spring and again in autumn. In addition to lands and households for his rank (*iden* and *ifu*), he was granted lands and households for his office (*shikiden* and *shikifu*). The households were the major source of his income. From each, whether for rank or for office, he received craft and labor levies (*chō* and *yō*) and half of the rice tribute (*so*). A minister of the left or minister of the right was entitled to two thousand households of about forty villages, approximately the number of households in a province the size of Suō or Nagato, and such income was tax exempt.

But an official at or below senior sixth rank upper grade did not fare so well. If he got no more than the official stipend listed for his rank, he probably did not have enough to support his family. Therefore an official at or below the level of provincial governor was forced to make ends meet by finding ways to supplement his income.

An aristocratic official also received preferential treatment when violating the law, for punishments varied with the criminal's status. Such favoritism was particularly clear when an official of high rank committed one of the eight serious crimes (*hachigyaku*) against society and the state, such as conspiracy or disloyal behavior. Five types of punishment with increasing degrees of severity were prescribed: whipping, beating, penal servitude, exile, and execution. But if an official held the third rank or above, he would not be punished, even if he had committed one of these serious crimes. If he were both the chief administrator and the chief judge, he was in a position to judge whether he himself had committed a crime and, if so, what his punishment would be. In any case, only the Council of State could inflict the death penalty. A provincial governor, the heads of the left and right administrative offices at the capital, and the minister of justice could do no more than exile an offender, and district supervisors and low-ranking officials at the capital could inflict punishments no more severe than whipping or beating.

The highest officials of the state made up a select group from Yamato and Kawachi that included the emperor, members of his household, and leaders of such old and powerful clans as the Fujiwara, Ōtomo, Isonokami (formerly Mononobe), and Abe (a Fuse branch). The total number of individuals in this elite group (fifth rank or higher) probably came to no more than 125. Provisions of the Taihō code, as noted, protected the exclusiveness of this group by allowing their high ranks and offices to be passed on to their sons and grandsons.

The authority of the emperor at the top of this select group was

TABLE 4.1
Allowances according to the Taihō code (I)

Court rank	Paddy fields (<i>chō</i>)	Sust. Hsehlds. (<i>kō</i>)	Stipends				Seasonal stipend				Personal retainers accorded (number)		
			Pongee (<i>hiki</i>)	Silk (<i>ton</i>)	Hemp (<i>tan</i>)	excise Cloth (<i>yō</i>)	Pongee (<i>hiki</i>)	Silk (<i>ton</i>)	Hemp Cloth (<i>tan</i>)	Hoes (<i>kō</i>)			
1st <i>hon</i>	80	800					30	100		30	100	140	100
2nd <i>hon</i>	60	600					20	60		20	60	100	80
3rd <i>hon</i>	50	400					14	42		14	42	80	60
4th <i>hon</i>	40	300					8	22		8	22	30	40
Sr. 1st	80	300					30	100		30	100	140	00
Jr. 1st	74	260					30	100		30	100	140	100
Sr. 2nd	60	200					20	60		20	60	100	80
Jr. 2nd	54	170					20	60		20	60	100	80
Sr. 3rd	40	130					14	42		14	42	80	60
Jr. 3rd	34	100					12	36		12	36	60	60
Sr. 4th	24				10	360	8	22	10	8	22	30	40
Jr. 4th	20			43	300		7	18	43	7	18	30	35
Sr. 5th	12			36	240		5	12	36	5	12	20	25
Jr. 5th	8			29	180		4	12	29	4	12	20	20
Sr. 6th							3	5		3	5	15	
Jr. 6th							3	4		3	4	15	
Sr. 7th							2	4		2	4	15	
Jr. 7th							2	4		2	4	15	
Sr. 8th							1	3		1	3	15	
Jr. 8th							1	3		1	3	10	
<i>Daijō</i>							1	3		1	3	10	
<i>Shōsho</i>							1	3		1	3	5	

Allowances according to the Taihō code (II)

Government post	Paddy fields (<i>chō</i>)	Sustenance households (<i>kō</i>)	Personal retainers (number)
Minister of state	40	3,000	300
Ministers of left and right Counselors (<i>dainagon</i>)	30	2,000	200
Middle counselors (<i>chinagon</i>)	20	800	100
Advisers (<i>sangi</i>)		200	30
		80	

Note: *Chūnagon* by the regulation of 705; *sangi* by that of 730.

great but not unlimited. He could issue an edict ordering the appointment of a crown prince or minister, but his edict had to be countersigned by the chancellor, minister of the left, or minister of the right. On the other hand, the following matters could not be acted on by the Council of State until its recommendations had been reported to the emperor and approved by him: (1) scheduling important state ceremonies like the Great Feast of the Enthronement (*Daijōsai*), (2) increasing or decreasing the government's operating costs, (3) altering the number of officials, (4) inflicting punishments by death or exile, and (5) forming or abolishing districts. The emperor could approve or disapprove a recommendation but could not make amendments. Usually he approved. In principle, then, the emperor had dictatorial power, but in practice, his power was limited by the consultative authority of the Council of State.¹⁹

How did relationships between the emperor and the Council of State differ from those of a T'ang emperor served by three state organs: the Secretariat (*Chung-shu sheng*), the Chancellery (*Men-hsia sheng*), and the Department of State Affairs (*Shang-shu sheng*)? The heads of these Chinese bodies were the state's highest administrators, but they were no more than instruments of inquiry and did not have complete authority over their own departments. The Secretariat's highest officer would draft imperial edicts after receiving instructions from the emperor, and officials of the Chancellery would examine the draft and make revisions. Other departmental heads could see memorials and report their views to the throne. The Secretariat, which administered the six boards, would see that an edict was implemented after it had been examined and revised by the Chancellery. But the Chancellery did little more than look for textual deficiencies and usually did not consider the edict's contents. China's highest state officials, therefore, did not have nearly as much authority as did their counterparts in Japan.

Heads of Chinese aristocratic clans were also relatively weak, as we can see when comparing the ranks given to the sons and grandsons of high-ranking officeholders with those received by their Japanese counterparts. Chinese law stated that the heirs of first-rank officers were entitled to senior seventh rank lower grade, whereas in Japan they would receive fifth rank lower grade. A study of the ranks bestowed on the sons of officials at lower levels of the aristocracy also shows that the Japanese were treated better.

19 Seki Akira, "Ritsuryō kizoku ron," *Kodai*, vol. 3 of Asao Naohiro, Ishii Susumu, Inoue Mitsusada, Ōishi Kaichirō et al., eds., *Iwanami kōza: Nihon rekishi* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1976), pp. 38–63.

But what made the Japanese bureaucratic structure quite different from that of China was the Council of Kami Affairs, which was placed under the emperor at a position equal to that of the Council of State. The compilers of the Taihō code, though giving close attention to Chinese law, were obviously intent on preserving and using traditional sources of sacral authority. Because the Japanese law provided crucial support for the emperor's spiritual and secular authority, historians commonly think of these years as the high point of the "administrative and penal law (*ritsuryō*)" order.

NARA AND TŌDAI-JI

The death of Emperor Mommu (Temmu's grandson) in 707 at the age of twenty-five came at the beginning of the Nara period's second phase, when a grand Chinese-style capital and a statewide system of Buddhist temples (centered at the Tōdai-ji) were built. Mommu's death was followed by an upheaval at court from which emerged two powerful and influential leaders: Fujiwara no Fuhito (659–720) and Emperor Shōmu (701–56). Both became deeply involved in activities that helped to make this a time of remarkable cultural achievement.

The upheaval of the court

Whenever an emperor or empress became ill, it was customary for prominent shrines and temples to offer up prayers for a speedy recovery. The *Shoku Nihongi*'s lack of such references during the five months that preceded Mommu's death thus suggests that he may have been murdered. The chronicle supplies considerable information about a succession issue that divided the court and that probably was linked with Mommu's untimely death. The major question was whether the next emperor should be Prince Obito (the future Emperor Shōmu, whose mother was Fuhito's daughter) or a Mommu son with a non-Fujiwara mother (see Figure 4.3). Because Mommu had no brothers, three living sons of Temmu were also eligible candidates for enthronement. But none of these princes was selected. Instead, Mommu's mother ascended the throne as Empress Gemmei. This was considered to be a partial victory for those who favored Obito's candidacy, as Gemmei stated that she wanted Obito to succeed her. The enthronement of Gemmei therefore led Fujiwara no Fuhito to feel that he would soon have the power and prestige customarily held by a maternal grand-

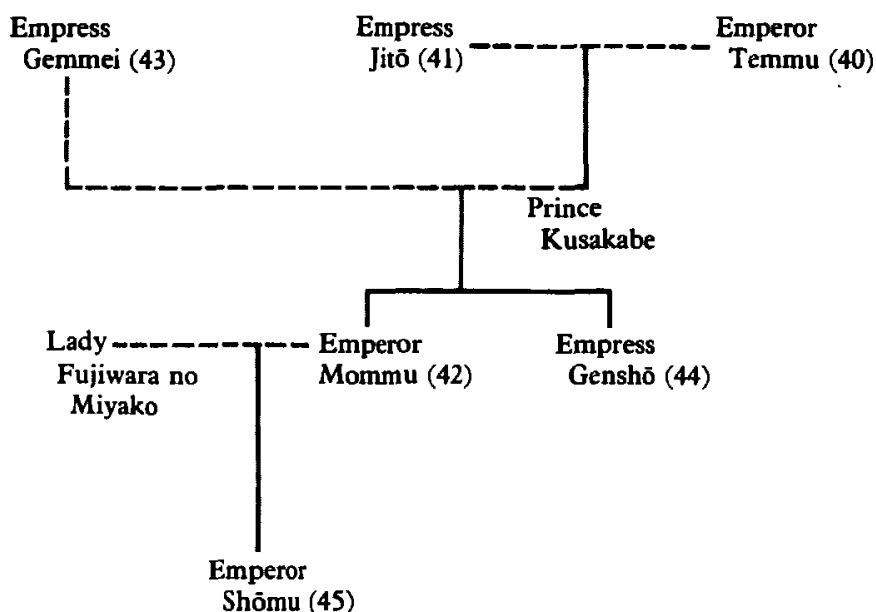


Figure 4.3. Mommu's successors. Dashed line indicates spousal relationship; solid line, offspring. (Reign numbers are in parentheses, as recorded in the *Gunkashō* chronology; see Brown and Ishida, trans., *The Future and the Past*, pp. 264–78.)

father of a reigning emperor, and he moved closer to that coveted goal in 714 when Prince Obito was appointed crown prince. But Fuhito died four years before the prince was enthroned as Emperor Shōmu in 724.

The details of Fuhito's rise to power are not known, but as the son of Fujiwara no Kamatari (614–669), one of the three principal architects of the 645 rebellion and the subsequent Great Reforms (see Chapter 3), he was obviously born on a very high rung of the aristocratic ladder. Although not yet forty at the time of Mommu's death in 707 and only at junior second rank, Fuhito is thought to have been the most influential man at court, strong enough to affect the course of events leading to the enthronement of a woman who wished to be succeeded by his grandson.

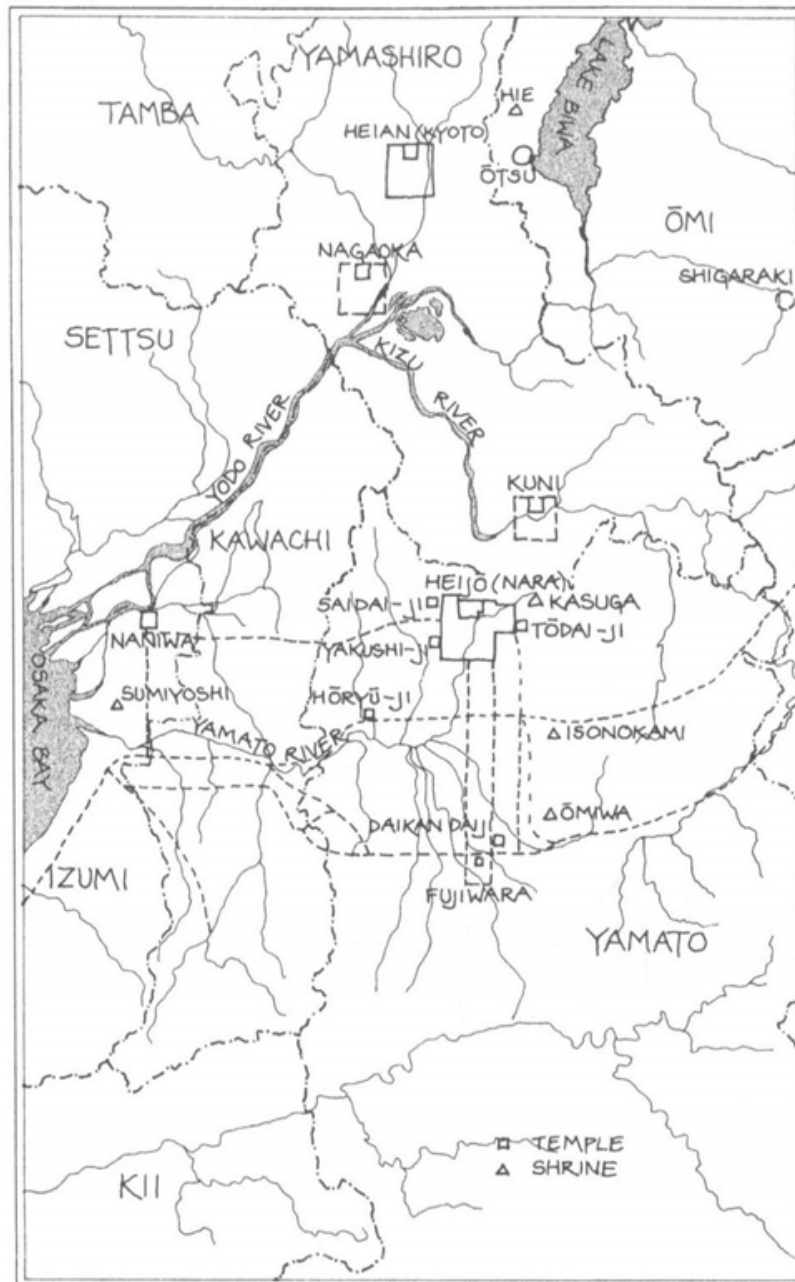
Two events of historical importance occurred in the year after Mommu's death: the discovery of copper in the province of Musashi and an edict by Empress Gemmei announcing that the capital was being moved to Heijō (hereafter referred to as Nara), which was north of Fujiwara on the northern rim of the Nara plain. The first event was considered sufficiently important for the court to decide that 708 was to be the first year of the Wadō (Japan copper) era and for historians to link the discovery of copper with the rise of a more highly developed exchange economy and a sudden increase in the number of bronze statues.

The Nara capital

When Empress Gemmei issued her edict of 708 stating that the capital was to be moved to a new site, she said that sacred signs indicated that Heijō (Nara) – surrounded by three mountains to the east, north, and west – was a propitious location²⁰ (see Map 4.2). She undoubtedly was influenced by other considerations, such as the ancient custom of moving the capital at the beginning of a new regime and the desire to have a successor rule from a new and more impressive palace. But the increasingly influential Fujiwara no Fuhito probably had his own reasons for favoring the move. More concerned with strategic and economic questions than with geomancy and divination, he probably understood quite well that although Fujiwara had had ready access, by overland roads, to the Inland Sea harbor of Naniwa, Nara was close to rivers by which goods could be transported to and from Naniwa by boat. He and his colleagues at court must have appreciated that Nara was no more than six kilometers south of the Kizu River (navigable all the way to Naniwa) and that Nara was closer than Fujiwara was to the Saho River (flowing into the Yamato River that emptied into the Inland Sea at Naniwa). Thus Nara probably had, in addition to the propitiousness of mountains on three sides, economic and strategic advantages superior to those of any other place in the entire Yamato Province.

Recent archaeological investigations have disclosed special geographical ties between Nara and Fujiwara. Moving north from the avenue that ran along the western side of the old capital, one entered the Great Suzaku Avenue that passed through the middle of the new capital. And proceeding north from the street that ran along the eastern side of Fujiwara, one entered Nara's East Capital Avenue. (Only the latter's West Capital Avenue was not a straight-line extension of a Fujiwara avenue.) Nara was therefore not only laid out in the square fashion of a Chinese capital but also had avenues that ran in precisely the same direction as – or were exactly parallel to – those of Fujiwara to the south. Why were the builders so careful to establish such a precise geographical relationship between the two capitals? As far as we know, the question was neither raised nor alluded to in contemporary sources, but we seem to see here a concrete expression of the belief that a sovereign reigning at Nara was to be honored as a direct lineal descendant of predecessors who had reigned at Fujiwara.

²⁰ *Shoku Nihongi*, Wadō 1 (708) 2/15, in Kuroita Katsumi and Kokushi Taikai henshūkai, eds., *Shintei zōho: Kokushi taikai* (hereafter cited as KT) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1982), vol. 1, p. 34.



Map 4.2 Ancient capitals, shrines, and temples. (Based on Hayakawa Shōhachi, *Ritsuryō kokka*, 1974, inside backcover.)

As grand as Nara was, it covered no more than one-fourth of the area of China's capital at Ch'ang-an (which had an estimated population of 1.2 million) and it was not surrounded by high walls as in China. Still, Nara with a population of around 200,000 was about three times as large as Fujiwara, indicating that it had become a political, economic, and religious center of a powerful imperium.

But the spiritual authority of the emperor was enhanced not only by the building of an impressive Chinese-style capital but also by the

erection of beautiful, massive Buddhist temples. Soon after Empress Gemmei moved her palace to Nara, temples originally built in Fujiwara or elsewhere in the Asuka area (especially the Asuka-dera, Yakushi-ji, Daian-ji, and Kōfuku-ji) were rebuilt at the new capital. Moreover, additional temples were constructed in provinces all over the country for an emerging Buddhist system.

The Fuhito regime (708 to 720)

Even though Fuhito was the most powerful official at the time of Emperor Mommu's unexplained death in 707, seven years passed before his grandson Obito was named crown prince, and ten more years before Obito was enthroned as Emperor Shōmu. Fuhito was unable to realize his ambitions for Obito sooner because influential aristocrats favored the enthronement of an imperial son with an imperial mother: either Prince Hironari or Prince Hiroyo, who were sons of Ishikawa no Toji. Only when Fuhito and his supporters succeeded in having Ishikawa no Toji expelled from the court in 713 were they able to arrange the appointment of Obito as crown prince. But even that did not end the struggle, for Obito was not enthroned after Empress Gemmei decided to abdicate in 715. The empress elected (or was forced) to pass the throne to her own daughter, who reigned as Empress Genshō (680–748).

Why did Obito – the future Emperor Shōmu – fail to reach the throne in 715? One view is that he was then too young (only fifteen) to assume the responsibilities of an emperor. But Obito's father Mommu was placed on the throne at about that same age. A more convincing theory is that Obito's candidacy met with disfavor because his mother was a Fujiwara and thus not a member of the imperial clan. For nearly a century the fathers and mothers of all occupants of the throne had been members of the imperial clan, and this old tradition could not be easily broken, even by Fuhito²¹ (see Figure 4.3).

Although Fuhito did not live to see his grandson's enthronement, his influence at court was nonetheless considerable. He was appointed minister of the right in 715 at the beginning of Genshō's reign and continued to hold that high office until his death in 720. Only two other officials outranked him: the chancellor and the minister of the

²¹ The mother of Prince Ōtomo was not a member of the imperial clan, which may be why the *Nihon shoki* does not admit that Ōtomo ever occupied the throne. If he did become emperor, an exception was made to the long tradition that both the mother and father of an emperor should be members of the imperial clan.

left. Prince Hozumi had been named chancellor in 705 but died before the beginning of Genshō's reign in 715, and no new chancellor was appointed while Fuhito was alive. Isonokami no Maro was minister of the left but died in 717. His post, too, was left vacant. In this way the dominance of court affairs by an emperor's relatives – a practice established in the previous century – was abolished by Fuhito and his Fujiwara relatives.

After the discovery of copper in 708, the Fuhito regime moved to stimulate trade by minting coins (see Chapter 8) and three years later, to facilitate the transport of goods by setting up post stations (*eki*) around the capital, to lighten the indebtedness of commoners by reducing interest charges on private rice loans (*shi-suiko*) to 50 percent, and to help farmers by preventing nobles and local aristocrats from occupying public lands.²² Even though the economy of Nara and its environs was stimulated by such measures during the twelve years of the Fuhito regime, numerous construction projects became a heavy drain on the state's resources. As early as 711, the empress issued an edict in which she stated: "We hear that of late many laborers brought to the capital from the various provinces for construction work have been deserting. Although desertion has been prohibited, it continues."²³ And another edict handed down five years later noted the misery and discontent among people engaged in supplying and transporting goods.²⁴

Attempts were made to improve the administration of local affairs, thereby increasing the government's control over natural and human resources. For example, in 712, after the Ezo people of northern Japan had been subjugated, the northern province of Dewa was created. The provincial governors were also ordered to attend more carefully to the collection of revenues and the prevention of tax evasion. Household registers were revised, and eleven governors were assigned a new supervisory role. But the most famous administrative measure of the Fuhito years was the compilation of the Yōrō administrative code, probably started in 717. Although a draft of the revision was not completed until after Fuhito's death and was not promulgated until 757, legal work of this type is thought to have strengthened a bureaucracy that was endeavoring to increase state income and state control.

22 State loans (*kō-suiko*) were a Nara period form of taxation, a source of income yielding as much as 100% interest per annum. See Chapter 8 of this volume.

23 *Shoku Nihongi*, Wadō 4 (711), 7, KT 1.45.

24 *Shoku Nihongi*, Reiki 2 (716) 4/20, KT 1.64–65.

Prince Nagaya's regime (721 to 729)

After Fuhito's death in 720, the highest position in the Council of State was occupied by Prince Nagaya (684–729), a senior counselor of senior third rank. One day after Fuhito's death, Prince Toneri was appointed acting chancellor, a post that had been left vacant for five years. At the same time, Prince Niitabe was placed in charge of the five imperial guards and of the crown prince's guards. And in the first month of 721 Prince Nagaya was promoted to minister of the right (Fuhito's old position) and advanced to junior second rank. This meant that key positions were now held by imperial princes: Toneri and Niitabe were sons of Temmu, and Nagaya was his grandson. Thus the Fujiwara men who had been at the center of the political stage while Fuhito was alive became outsiders who held only minor posts.

But the Fujiwara influence was not insignificant. Fuhito's widow Agata Inukai no Michiyo could still alter the course of events at court. She had served near, and had been trusted by, both Empress Gemmei and Empress Genshō, and it was probably because of her influence that Fusasaki was appointed to the newly created post of minister of the center (*naishin*) in the tenth month of 721. Although this new position did not permit Fusasaki to participate in council deliberations, it did give him the responsibility of consulting with the empress and assisting her in the expression of imperial will. Michiyo's influence may have been due in part, however, to her marriage connections with the imperial clan, as she had been the wife of an imperial prince before marrying Fuhito.

An even clearer sign that the Fujiwara still had considerable influence on court affairs emerges from events after the abdication of Empress Genshō in 724, when Fuhito's grandson was finally enthroned as Emperor Shōmu. We do not have enough reliable evidence to know precisely why Shōmu was selected. Possibly it was because Prince Nagaya had decided that the turbulent political situation could be stabilized only by recognizing the legitimacy of Obito's position as crown prince. But it seems that Shōmu's enthronement came at the beginning of a resurgence of Fujiwara control.

Economic difficulties may have been another factor. In 722, not long after the rise of Prince Nagaya's regime, the government announced an ambitious plan to place 1 million more *chō* of land (over 2.5 million acres) under cultivation. Then in the following year a law was issued allowing a farmer to leave newly cultivated land to his

heirs, but if the new rice land were supplied with water from ponds and ditches already in existence, the developer would enjoy tenure only during his lifetime. Even though a ten-day ration of food was offered every year to a farmer engaged in reclamation work, the program's results were disappointing. Probably the government had grossly overestimated the amount of arable land by as much as 300,000 *chō*, and it is thought that officials may have been unduly sanguine about the amount of such land in northeastern Japan.

Although economic strain may have contributed to Prince Nagaya's difficulties in retaining control over court affairs, political opposition headed by men and women of the Fujiwara clan was probably the major cause. The first clear indication that Nagaya was losing control came in the ninth month of 927 when Lady Asukabe – Shōmu's empress and Fuhito's daughter who later became Principal Empress Kōmyō – gave birth to Prince Motoi, a child who was appointed crown prince before he reached the age of one. This was a great coup for members of the Fujiwara clan, who could now look forward to Shōmu's being succeeded by a prince born of a Fujiwara mother.

Young Prince Motoi died, however, before he reached the age of two. Emperor Shōmu soon acquired another son, named Prince Asaka, but his mother was not a Fujiwara. Meanwhile, Lady Asukabe had given birth to Princess Abe (the future Empress Kōken) but Prince Asaka was Shōmu's only son, making it likely that this child would eventually become the next emperor: a truly gloomy prospect for Fujiwara leaders. Then, amidst the intense rivalry over the question of who would follow Shōmu to the throne, Prince Nagaya was accused of plotting a rebellion, whereupon a force of military guards under Fujiwara no Umakai (694–737) surrounded Nagaya's residence. Although Prince Toneri and Prince Niitabe objected to the use of force, they could do nothing to prevent either the suicide of Prince Nagaya or the exile of seven high officials accused of taking part in the plot. An item in the *Shoku Nihongi* for the seventh month of 738 states that the charges against Nagaya were false, leaving the impression that the prince and his supporters had been victimized by Fujiwara schemes to bring about the collapse of the Nagaya regime and the reemergence of Fujiwara men to preeminent positions at court.

The Fujiwara-four's regime (729 to 737)

Immediately after Prince Nagaya's suicide, Lady Asukabe – the daughter of Fuhito and the sister of Umakai – was advanced to the position of

empress (*kōgō*) and named Kōmyō. This title qualified her by law²⁵ to become a reigning empress upon the death of her imperial spouse. But according to the requirements of that same law, the title could be held only by a woman of the imperial clan. Fujiwara no Fusasaki (Fuhito's son who had been appointed minister of the center) and Lady Fujiwara no Miyako (Emperor Shōmu's mother and Fuhito's daughter) figured prominently in the maneuver by which an exception was made in Empress Kōmyō's case. Five days after she was promoted, the era name was changed to Tempyō (Heavenly Peace), an action that was undoubtedly meant to sanctify and celebrate the occasion.

Once Empress Kōmyō became Shōmu's most likely successor, the council was reconstituted. Prince Toneri was given the honorary post of acting chancellor and two of Fuhito's sons were promoted: Fujiwara no Muchimaro (680–737) to senior counselor and Fujiwara no Fusasaki (681–737) to consultant. Two years later, two more sons – Fujiwara no Umakai (684–737) and Fujiwara no Maro (695–737) – were added to the council.²⁶ Of the ten men who held positions in Council of State posts in 731, four were therefore sons of the deceased Fuhito, causing people to refer to the new government as “the regime of the four Fujiwara sons.” Ironically, they came to power by contravening laws in a system devised largely by their grandfather Kamatari and their father Fuhito. Henceforth, such violations made it increasingly difficult for officials to preserve the state's legally defined bureaucratic structure.

After about 730, Emperor Shōmu, with at least the tacit approval of the Fujiwara-dominated council, became more active in increasing the throne's spiritual authority by patronizing the Buddhist faith. He continued to associate himself with kami rites at ancestral shrines around the country and to value Nara as a symbol of imperial authority, but he soon revealed a special interest in Buddhism by initiating the reconstruction of the Daian-ji (which was eventually to become one of “the seven great temples of Nara”), the establishment of a sutra-copying department within the principal empress's household, and the ordination of an increasingly large number of Buddhist priests.²⁷

25 There were four consorts: principal empress (*kōgō*), imperial consort (*kisaki*), imperial spouse (*fujin*), and imperial concubine (*hin*). All held imperial ranks (*hon*) as stipulated in the Yōrō code and probably in the Taihō code as well. Three earlier principal empresses had occupied the throne: Suiko (593–628), Kōgyoku (642–5), and Jitō (686–97).

26 The following four Fuhito sons founded four famous branches of the Fujiwara clan: Muchimaro, the southern branch; Fusasaki, the northern; Umakai, the ceremonial; and Maro, the capital. All four sons died of smallpox in 737.

27 See Joan R. Piggott's “*Todaiji and the Nara Imperium*” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1987), pp. 95–97.

The greater demand for priests probably lay behind the 731 decision by the government to abandon its order of two decades' standing that the popular Buddhist priest Gyōki (668–749) stop propagating his beliefs among the common people. Despite the ban, Gyōki continued to preach, expounding on Buddhist teachings of causality (*inga*) and retribution (*ōhō*). What seems to have irritated government officials was that poor farmers – who were relied on to pay tribute and supply labor – were being drawn into religious groups that became involved in digging irrigation ponds and ditches and in constructing roads and bridges, projects that benefited rich farmers and district supervisors more than they helped the state.²⁸ But after hearing in 730 that tens of thousands of Gyōki's disciples had gathered, for days on end, at places around the capital where he was preaching,²⁹ the authorities took a different tack, deciding that all male disciples over the age of sixty-one and all female disciples over fifty-five, could become certified priests or nuns if they really respected Buddhist teachings.³⁰ A few years later, after the terrible smallpox epidemic of 735–7, Gyōki and his followers were even invited to participate in the government's program of building temples and making Buddhist statues for an emerging system of state-supported temples.

During the years when the Council of State was controlled by the four Fujiwara brothers, measures were adopted for increasing the amount of cultivated rice land that could be allocated and from which tribute could be collected. The government also took steps to decrease the state's financial burden (abolishing conscription in 730), to lighten the tax burden (halving taxes in 731), to improve the living conditions of the common people (establishing charitable institutions and infirmaries), and, in 732, to reinforce its control over outlying regions (replacing the keepers of the peace around the capital with military peace officers). Such activities suggest that the Fujiwara regime continued to worry about signs of discontent among the people and instability at court.

Then in 735 Japan was hit by a smallpox epidemic that was rumored to have been introduced by a ship from Silla. As the horrible disease spread in the direction of the capital, Emperor Shōmu asked the priests at leading shrines and temples around the country to pray for relief. But the epidemic continued to spread. By the eighth month of

²⁸ Most of what we know of Gyōki's activities can be found in the *Gyōki nempu* in Ichishima Kenkichi, comp., *Zoku Gunsho ruijū* (Tokyo: Kokushōkai, 1907), vol. 3.

²⁹ *Shoku Nihongi*, Tempyō 2 (730) 9/29, KT 1.123.

³⁰ *Shoku Nihongi*, Tempyō 3 (731) 8/7, KT 1.126.

737, ten officials of fourth rank or higher were dead, including all four of the Fujiwara brothers (Muchimaro, Fusasaki, Umakai, and Maro) who had dominated the council for the past eight years. Some scholars have estimated that approximately one-third of the entire population perished during those two years. Not only did the four Fujiwara brothers die and the economic and social life of the people sustain serious damage, but Shōmu and his new regime were driven, more strongly than ever, to build a statewide system of Buddha worship in order to enhance the emperor's spiritual authority and to direct the power of Buddha to the protection of the state and its people.

Tachibana no Moroe's regime (737–749)

The demise of the four Fujiwara brothers was accompanied by a shift of power toward nobles closely related to the emperor and away from aristocrats belonging to such great nonimperial clans as the Fujiwara, even though Emperor Shōmu (who had a Fujiwara mother and a Fujiwara empress) continued to reign. The shift was most clearly seen in two council appointments made in 737 and 738. First, Prince Suzuka (a ranking imperial son and a younger brother of Prince Nagaya) was appointed as acting chancellor. Second, Tachibana no Moroe (684–757) was advanced to minister of the right, the very position that had been held by Fujiwara no Muchimaro before his death a few months earlier. The princely stature of Suzuka was unmistakable, but Tachibana no Moroe's court connections were also impressive. Descended from Emperor Bidatsu and a half-brother of Empress Kōmyō, Moroe was once considered a member of the imperial clan and called Prince Kazuragi. But in 736 he was removed from the imperial clan and named Tachibana no Moroe.

After being promoted to minister of the right and advanced to senior third rank, Moroe was not seriously challenged by members of the great Fujiwara clan. Indeed, the only Fujiwara on the council at the time was Fujiwara no Toyonari (704–65), Muchimaro's eldest son, who had the relatively low rank of junior fourth rank lower grade. Furthermore, all those clans that had opposed the four Fujiwara brothers – such as the Ōtomo, Saeki, and Agata-Inukai – were Moroe backers. This group, referred to as the “princely clique,” wished to strengthen its anti-Fujiwara stance by having Prince Asaka (whose mother was not a Fujiwara) ascend the throne as Shōmu's successor. But as powerful as the “princely clique” had become, it was not able to keep Shōmu and his influential Empress Kōmyō from disregarding

the candidacy of Prince Asaka and selecting their own daughter, Princess Abe (later enthroned first as Empress Kōken and then as Empress Shōtoku) for the position of crown princess, the first woman to be selected by a reigning emperor as his successor. Although the Fujiwara influence was waning within the council, the emperor and his principal empress were still able to maneuver their daughter (whose mother was both a Fujiwara and an empress) into being named as heir to the throne.

Tension and rivalry between imperial and nonimperial clans continued throughout the Moroe period, breaking into open warfare when Fujiwara no Hirotsugu (d. 740), the eldest son of Umakai, became upset over his transfer (in 738) to a low-ranking post in distant Dazai-fu. He complained that two China specialists (Kibi no Makibi and the priest Gembō) were the principal cause of the current difficulties at the capital, and so he requested their dismissal. At the same time he used his official position at Dazai-fu to mobilize troops for a rebellion. But the government dispatched an expeditionary force of seventeen thousand that soon defeated the rebels and executed Hirotsugu. As soon as Emperor Shōmu received word of the military victory, he made a tour of the eastern provinces, apparently realizing that the execution of Hirotsugu would not end the old conflict between the imperial princes and Fujiwara clansmen and hoping that his royal presence might prevent the outbreak of rebellion in other parts of the country.

Although Shōmu and the Moroe regime faced no more military uprisings, the intense rivalry continued, accounting probably for subsequent decisions to move the capital to first one site and then another. Upon completing his eastern tour, Shōmu did not return to Nara but instead proceeded to the detached palace at Kuni in the province of Yamashiro and announced a few months later that Kuni was to be the new capital. Indeed, between 741 and 745 Japan had three new capitals: first at Kuni in Yamashiro, then at Shigaraki in Ōmi, and finally at Naniwa in Settsu. Although the reasons for so many moves within a period of four years are not known, we assume that each was based on altered conditions in the continuing struggle between the Moroe regime and the Fujiwara clan. Because Tachibana no Moroe's power was centered in the southern part of Yamashiro where Kuni was located, that was undoubtedly the site preferred by him and his princely supporters. Shigaraki in the province of Ōmi, on the other hand, was in a region where the Fujiwara were strong, suggesting that the choice of Shigaraki came at a time of Fujiwara ascendancy. Finally, the move to

Naniwa was probably made because it was a site that all the groups in and around the court could accept.³¹

One aspect of the growing struggle between Moroe's supporters and the Fujiwara clansmen was a court confrontation between two factions headed by powerful women: Retired Empress Genshō who was allied with Moroe and Empress Kōmyō who was backed by the Fujiwara. Significantly, the move in 745 of the capital to Shigaraki (the Fujiwara base) came after the appointment in 743 of Fujiwara no Nakamaro (706–64) as consultant and the death in 744 of Prince Asaka, whose candidacy for enthronement (favored by the Moroe group) had been disregarded by Shōmu and Empress Kōmyō. Understandably, suspicions soon arose that Prince Asaka's death was due to foul play by members of the Fujiwara faction.

The Moroe administration adopted a number of measures meant to alleviate the human miseries caused first by the dreadful smallpox epidemic of 735–7 and then by demands for massive amounts of material and labor to build and operate such huge Buddhist temples as Daian-ji and Yakushi-ji. A few months after gaining control of the Council of State, Moroe and his backers abolished the practice of conscripting military guards for duty in the Kyushu area (*sakimori*). This practice had also been banned early in the regime of the four Fujiwara brothers but was subsequently revived. Then in 738 the government rescinded the law that an able-bodied person from each household (a *kondei*) must be conscripted for military service, and in 739 the number of officials assigned to a district office was reduced. In fact, military forces were eliminated except for units in such strategically important provinces as Mutsu and Nagato and provinces under the jurisdiction of Dazai-fu. Private lending (*shi-suiko*) was also prohibited in 737. This measure reduced interest rates for farmers but benefited local officials who could henceforth increase their income from public loans (*kō-suiko*). Finally, in 740, local government was simplified by abolishing villages (*sato*) – systematized during the earlier Fuhito period – and creating towns (*gō*) made up of two or three villages.

Probably the most spectacular economic measure was that enacted in 743, permitting a farmer who opened up virgin land for the cultivation of rice to gain title to that land in perpetuity (see Chapter 8). This decision violated the basic *ritsuryō* principle that all land (as well as all people) belonged to the state. The new policy may have increased the

³¹ See Naoki Kōjiro, *Asuka Nara jidai no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Hanawa shobō, 1975).

amount of cultivated land and added to the state's revenue, but because only local officials and rich farmers could afford to undertake reclamation projects, it is thought that this measure accelerated the accumulation of privately owned land, making the rich even richer and gradually undermining the *ritsuryō* system.

The council's attempts to reduce the miseries of the people did not, however, halt the gradual deterioration of Tachibana no Moroe's influence in the council. After Shōmu returned to Nara – where the capital was again located after 745 – he became seriously ill. He never again enjoyed good health, and his illness fueled the old dispute over who should succeed him. Prince Suzuka, the only serious Moroe rival on the council, died during that same year. When no one was appointed to replace him as acting chancellor, the tension between the princely and the Fujiwara factions increased. At the same time, Fujiwara no Fujimaro (706–64) was rising to higher positions in the Council of State, advancing even faster after the death of Retired Empress Genshō in 748. Shōmu abdicated the following year, and his daughter Princess Abe (who had a Fujiwara mother) occupied the throne as Empress Kōken, thereby bringing the years of Moroe control to a close.

The statewide Tōdai-ji system

Another spectacular development in the mid-Nara period was the erection of an extensive Buddhist system. Historians have long appreciated the cultural significance of the Tōdai-ji compound and its huge statue of Rushana Buddha (Vairocana), and economic specialists have ferreted out evidence of the great expense incurred in building and operating this huge system. But only recently have we begun to understand why Japan's aristocrats (both imperial and nonimperial) were willing to use, over such a long period of time, a large share of their material and human resources for the support of Buddhist ceremonies and institutions (see Chapter 7).

The imperial clan had actively supported Buddhism ever since the beginning of the Asuka enlightenment at the end of the sixth century, and especially after the Great Reforms of 645. But Emperor Shōmu pressed the building of the temple system toward completion during his twenty-five year reign. His endeavors seem to have been supported by all the important individuals at court and by all three regimes that had dominated affairs while he was on the throne: the regimes of Prince Nagaya (721 to 729), the Fujiwara Four (729 and 737), and Tachibana no Moroe (737 and 749).

The post-645 reform leaders had centered their attention on building a Chinese-style empire in Japan (see Chapter 3), apparently assuming – as did the Sui emperors and Empress Wu of the T'ang dynasty – that their authority would be materially enhanced by the construction of an impressive new capital. Even before moving to erect a grand Chinese-style capital at Nara, Japanese officials had placed Buddhist worship and Buddhist temples under imperial control. Quite early, one particularly large and spectacular temple was linked to the emperor and placed above all others; imperially appointed priests were charged with administering temple affairs; and laws were issued that brought most Buddhist functions (including the certification of priests) under the jurisdiction of the imperial court.

When considering the temple system that was nearing completion in the middle years of the Nara period, one readily notices the provincial temples (*kokubun-ji*), the great Tōdai-ji compound, and finally the Tōdai-ji's great central object of worship, the fifty-three foot statue of Rushana Buddha (*Vairocana*). All of these were erected at the peak of an emperor-oriented Buddhist development that had started nearly a century before.

State-supported Buddhist temples had existed in China as far back as the fifth century, and Shōmu's grandfather Temmu had ordered – nearly fifty years before the edict of 741 – the construction of Buddhist chapels (*dōjō*) in every province of the land. As early as 694, Empress Jitō had distributed copies of the Golden Light (*Konkō-myō*) Sutra and ordered that they be read early in the first month of every year. But in 741, before the country had recovered from the terrible smallpox epidemic of 735–7 and soon after the Hirotsugu rebellion of 740, Shōmu issued an edict requiring every province to build both a monastery and a nunnery where Buddhist ceremonies were to be conducted on a regular basis by certified priests and nuns and where Buddhist statues and sutras were to be kept and honored. His purpose, according to the edict, was to “protect the country against all calamity, prevent sorrow and pestilence, and cause the hearts of believers to be filled with joy.”³² The discovery of engraved tiles at provincial temple sites all over the country suggests that by the end of the Nara period every province had its own official temple, the local base of the state's emerging Buddhist system.³³

Shōmu's edict of 743 concerning the construction of a huge gilded

³² *Shoku Nihongi*, Tempyō 13 (741) 3/24, KT 1.163–4.

³³ Hayakawa, *Ritsuryō kokka*, pp. 271–2.

bronze statue of Buddha, though nothing new in either China or Japan, was – like the edict of 741 regarding the building of a Buddhist monastery and nunnery in every province – a prayer for the peace and prosperity of the state. But the two edicts were based on the teachings of different Buddhist sutras. Whereas the edict of 741 highlighted the Golden Light Sutra (each provincial monastery and nunnery was even given a name that included the words for that sutra), the later edict referred to the teachings of the Kegon Sutra (the statue itself was a representation of Rushana, the central Kegon Buddha). The question of why there was this shift from the Golden Light to Kegon teachings within the short span of two years is discussed in Chapter 7. Here we shall merely note that the edict of 743 invited everyone, high or low, to help meet the cost of making the statue, even if his or her contribution were no more than “one blade of grass or one clod of earth.”

The casting of the statue, begun at Shigaraki in 743 but stopped and restarted at Nara two years later, was not completed until 749. Its completion was delayed by seven casting failures and the need, it is said, to obtain 338 tons of copper and 16 tons of gold.³⁴ Two extraordinary events in 749 have also been associated with the final stages of work on the Great Buddha: the fortuitous discovery of gold in the northern province of Mutsu just eight months before the casting was completed,³⁵ and a revealed message from Hachiman, a kami worshiped at the Usa Hachiman Shrine in northeastern Kyushu, stating that it wanted to be worshiped at the capital so that it could join all other “heavenly and earthly kami” in supporting the great statue-making enterprise. The first development, the discovery of gold, so delighted Shōmu that he reported the good news to major shrines around the capital and then went before the Great Buddha, attended by some five thousand priests, to read an edict in which he referred to himself “as a servant of the Three Treasures” of Buddhism and declared that the newfound gold was a “blessing bestowed on us by Rushana Buddha.”³⁶ The oracular message from Hachiman was followed by a decision to have a portion of Hachiman’s kami body (*shintai*) brought to Nara, amidst much pomp and ceremony, and enshrined near Tōdai-ji, where a Hachiman shrine still exists.³⁷

34 These conclusions were reached by Joan R. Piggott on the basis of research in documents preserved in the Tōdai-ji storehouse (the famous eighth-century Shōsō-in), “Tōdaiji and the Nara Imperium,” p. 128.

35 See Hayakawa, *Ritsuryō kokka*, 4.274–5.

36 *Shoku Nihongi*, Tempyō Shōhō 2 (749) 4/1, KT 1.197.

37 See Ross Bender, “The Political Meaning of the Hachiman Cult in Ancient and Early Medieval Japan” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1980).

When the work of casting the Rushana statue was moved from Shigaraki to Nara in 745, the place selected was on the grounds of the existing Yamato provincial temple,³⁸ which eventually became the Tōdai-ji. As early as 748, before the statue was finished, a plan was drawn up for an audience hall (*daigokuden*) in which to house the Great Buddha. According to research by Joan Piggott, this was a building measuring 300 feet from east to west, 166 feet from north to south, and 150 feet high. A compound of about four square miles is said to have included six other halls, two pagodas, and numerous residences for priests. By the time the huge statue was dedicated in 752, the Tōdai-ji had been granted five thousand households in thirty-eight provinces to cover the construction and operating costs, providing an annual income (according to calculations by Takeuchi Rizō) equal to 146,700 bushels of unhulled rice.³⁹

The dedication of the Great Buddha in 752 was an even more spectacular manifestation of the importance assigned to the new Buddhist system. Although Shōmu had become a retired emperor by this time, he was present and accompanied by his famous empress Kōmyō, his daughter Empress Kōken, seven thousand courtiers, and about ten thousand monks for what was probably the most impressive ceremony ever staged by a Japanese sovereign.⁴⁰ For the thousands of high-ranking officials in attendance, the symbolic meaning of the Tōdai-ji and the Great Buddha was underscored not only by their size and grandeur but also by their exoticism. Hayakawa surmises that the gilded statue and its great hall – with lacquered pillars, white walls, blue tiles, and brightly colored banners – had a foreign appeal as strong as that seen in the colored pictures painted, more than a century before, on the walls of the Takamatsu burial mound.⁴¹

Although the statewide Buddhist system continued to grow and prosper during the remainder of the Nara period, political disturbances were beginning to alter the course of Japanese history, moving it toward a break in the imperial line (no more emperors or empresses descended from Emperor Temmu) and toward the removal of the capital from Nara.

AUTHORITY CRISES

When the thirty-two-year-old daughter of Emperor Shōmu and Empress Kōmyō ascended the throne in 749 as Empress Kōken, she issued

38 See Hayakawa, *Ritsuryō kokka*, 4.272–3.

39 Piggott, "Todaiji and the Nara Imperium," p. 132.

40 Ibid., pp. 133–95. Also see Chapter 8. 41 Hayakawa, *Ritsuryō kokka*, 4.278–9.

an edict proclaiming the start of a new era called Tempyō Shōhō, “Heavenly Peace and Victorious Buddhism.” The following two decades did seem to be a time of victorious Buddhism: The Great Buddha statue was dedicated in 752; the distinguished Chinese priest Ganjin (688–763) arrived in 754 and soon performed ordination rites for the empress and her imperial father; a new temple (the Saidai-ji), meant to be as grand as the Tōdai-ji, was founded in 765; Buddhist temples were treated liberally in a 765 revision of the land-development law; and in 766 and 767 the priest Dōkyō received higher titles and offices than had ever been bestowed on a commoner.

But these years were not peaceful. The authority of the empress (on the throne for a second term as Shōtoku) was challenged in 764 by opponents who resorted to the use of armies. And five years later, her authority was challenged by a kami oracle that stated the country would be better off if the next occupant of the throne were the Buddhist priest Dōkyō. Finally, Shōtoku was replaced in 770 by a prince born into a different branch of the imperial line, and then in 784 the capital was removed from Nara, bringing the fabulous Nara period to a close.

Although the more than twenty years of the Shōmu reign outlined in the previous section were noted for two impressive building complexes (the capital city of Nara and the Tōdai-ji-centered Buddhist system), the following two decades obtained their character from activities surrounding three individuals deeply involved in a series of authority crises: (1) Shōmu’s daughter (718–70), who reigned from 749 to 758 as Kōken, dominated Emperor Junnin from 758 to 764 as retired empress and then occupied the throne a second time, as Shōtoku, between 764 and her death in 770; (2) Fujiwara no Nakamaro (706–64) who ordered armies to attack imperial forces in 764; and (3) Dōkyō (d. 772) who, closely allied with Shōtoku, was the Buddhist priest selected by a Japanese kami to succeed her as Japan’s next emperor.

A succession of powerful empresses

Although the Nara period emperors were stronger than those of any other period in Japanese history and Shōmu apparently dominated both sacral and secular affairs during his long reign, a close reading of the available evidence shows that the Nara period was a time of strong influence by four successive empresses (see Figure 4.4). First, Gemmei (661–721) was strong enough to block the enthronement of

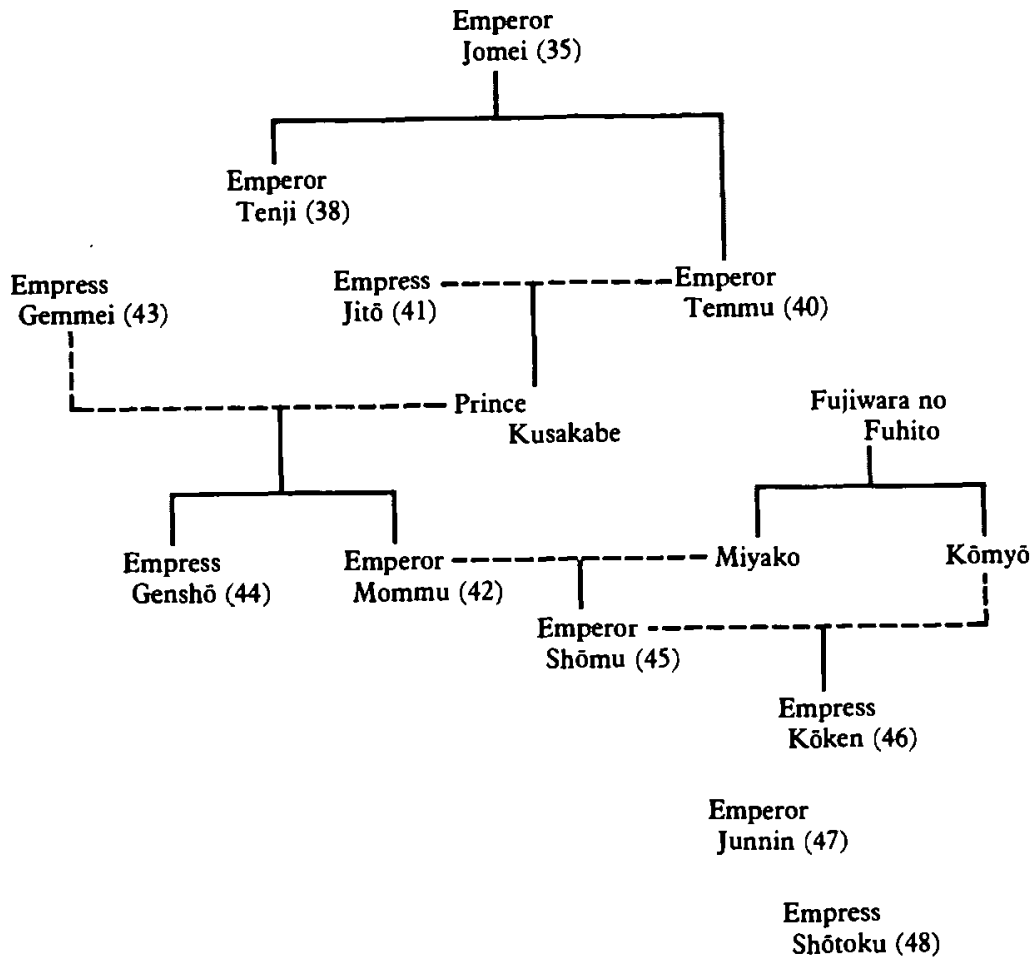


Figure 4.4. Temmu’s line and Fuhito’s daughters. Note: Junnin was a grandson of Temmu (no Fujiwara linkage); Kōken and Shōtoku are the same person. Dashed line indicates spousal relationship; solid line, offspring. (Reign numbers are in parentheses, as recorded in the *Gukanshō* chronology; see Brown and Ishida, *The Future and the Past*, pp. 264–78.)

Shōmu in 715, although Shōmu had been appointed crown prince in 713. She favored instead the enthronement of her own daughter Empress Genshō and apparently made it impossible for Shōmu to reach the throne until 724, three years after her death. Second, Genshō (680–748), like her mother Gemmei, consistently used her authority to have princes appointed to high positions in the council, apparently preferring a regime like the one of Tachibana no Moroe. Third, Kōmyō (701–60), as one of Fuhito’s daughters, used her position to make certain that Fujiwara men received key appointments and rapid promotions. She was surely behind the arrangements that resulted in the formation of the “regime of the four Fujiwara brothers” in 729, the year she was appointed empress. But as long as Genshō was alive,

imperial princes continued to be appointed to high-level positions, especially after the smallpox epidemic of 735–7. Only after Genshō's death in 748 did Empress Kōmyō and Emperor Shōmu succeed in getting their daughter (Kōken) enthroned as Shōmu's successor, and only then did Fujiwara aristocrats begin to rise rapidly on the bureaucratic ladder.

The fourth and most famous Nara period empress was Kōken (r. 749–58) who later reigned as Shōtoku (r. 764–70). She was – like her mother Kōmyō – an independent and strong-willed woman who apparently identified herself with the autocratic Empress Wu (r. 691–705) of China. By selecting a four-character era name at the beginning of her first reign, she seems to have been consciously modeling her rule after that of Empress Wu, as a four-character era name had appeared in China only during the Wu reign.⁴² And yet we see no particularly new political currents or policies during the nine years of Kōken's first reign except for an accumulation of power by Fujiwara no Nakamaro. Possibly she did not show much independence of mind during these years because she was still in her thirties. But a more significant factor was the continuing influence of her mother, Principal Empress Kōmyō, for it was Kōmyō after all, not Kōken, who was Nakamaro's principal supporter. When Kōken stepped down from the throne in 758, she may well have thought that she could now obtain, at long last, the political leverage of a retired empress. But Kōken does not seem to have played a decisive role in public affairs until after Kōmyō's death in 760. Only then did she, as Empress Shōtoku, tangle with and destroy Fujiwara no Nakamaro, oppose and exile Emperor Junnin, and promote the Buddhist priest Dōkyō to the highest position ever held by a commoner.

The rise of Fujiwara no Nakamaro

In 743, when the capital was moved from Kuni near the Tachibana power base to Shigaraki close to important Fujiwara holdings, Nakamaro was appointed to the Council of State, largely because he was backed by his powerful Fujiwara aunt, Empress Kōmyō. Later promotions and appointments made him the leading rival of Tachibana no Moroe, supported by Retired Empress Genshō. Although Genshō died

42 Empress Wu Tse-t'ien (622–705) was Kao-tsung's consort. After the latter's death in 683, she controlled the empire as dowager empress while two of her sons occupied the throne. In 690 she had herself enthroned as sovereign empress and declared the beginning of a new dynasty. In 695 and again in 696, she adopted era names written with four Chinese characters.

in 748 and Kōken was enthroned the following year, Tachibana no Moroe continued on as minister of the left until 756, just a year before Kōken's abdication. Nevertheless, Nakamaro and his group were becoming stronger, mainly because of the power that Nakamaro held as head of the office (the *Shibi chūdai*) that handled the principal empress's (Kōmyō's) affairs. This office, standing outside the bureaucratic structure defined in the *Taihō* administrative code, was staffed with high-ranking officials who performed increasingly important functions. Its name, similar to that of a Chinese office administering the affairs of state under Empress Wu at the turn of the eighth century, suggests that Kōmyō – who supported, and was being supported by, her ambitious nephew Nakamaro – was planning to rule Japan in the Empress Wu manner. Because Nakamaro, as head of this office, was taking responsibility for matters previously handled by the council and the council itself now included an increasingly large number of officials from the Fujiwara clan, Tachibana no Moroe's influence was in decline.

During the year 755, rivalry between the two groups – one formerly headed by Retired Empress Genshō supporting Moroe and the other by Empress Kōmyō backing Nakamaro – came to the breaking point when Moroe reportedly became bold enough at a drinking party to criticize Empress Kōken openly. Nakamaro and his party used the incident as an excuse to press for Moroe's resignation. The situation was made even riper for intrigue and conspiracy when after Shōmu's death in 756, an edict was issued elevating to crown prince a person not favored by the Fujiwara faction. Within a few days the Fujiwara leaders retaliated. Two prominent heads of the anti-Fujiwara group were arrested and placed in confinement on the charge that they had been disrespectful to the reigning empress. In the following year, Tachibana no Moroe died; a new crown prince (the future Emperor Junnin and a Nakamaro relative) was appointed; and Nakamaro was given another important extralegal ministerial position, that of *shibi naishō*.

But Nakamaro's control was not yet firm, as Tachibana no Moroe's eldest son Naramaro was assembling support for a coup. Fujiwara no Nakamaro soon got wind of the activity and hastened to stamp out Tachibana's opposition force. He had the former Crown Prince Funado executed and sent his own elder brother Toyonari (who had been minister of the right) into exile at Dazai-fu. In an apparent attempt to head off the popular discontent that had been aroused by his ruthless elimination of opponents, Nakamaro decreased from sixty to thirty the number of days a farmer had to work for the government, halved the rice assessments, and reduced other forms of tribute. In

that same year, the Yōrō codes (incomplete at the time of Fuhito's death in 720) were promulgated, and the distinguished service of Fujiwara no Kamatari (prominent at the time of the 645 reforms) was posthumously recognized. In 758 Nakamaro moved to colonize the territory of the Ezo people to the north by building frontier posts in Mutsu and Dewa and, at about that time, to work out a plan for conquering the kingdom of Silla, even issuing an order that five hundred ships be built for an overseas expeditionary force. The events of 757 and 758 indicated to people in and around the court that the Nakamaro regime had become remarkably strong. But two unforeseen developments hastened the regime's decline and fall: the death of Empress Kōmyō in 760, and Retired Empress Kōken's decision in 762 to handle personally the really important affairs of state.

Kōken against Nakamaro

Although modern historians may have difficulty comprehending the authority that Nakamaro obtained from the support of Empress Kōmyō (Fuhito's daughter, Shōmu's empress, and Kōken's mother), the Nara aristocrats probably had no such difficulty: They undoubtedly understood the political implications of Kōmyō's death in 760. Nakamaro surely hoped or assumed that Kōken would replace her mother as his principal supporter, but by the time Kōken had yielded the throne to Junnin in 758, she had set her heart on becoming not merely the source of imperial authority (as retired empress) but also the person to exercise it. By then she had already placed under her own wing the imperial guards (*chūe-fu*) who had been under Nakamaro since 756.⁴³ But it was not until 762, after Junnin had occupied the throne for four years, that relations between Kōken and Nakamaro reached the breaking point.

Just how and when the rift came about is not known, but scholars generally agree that it coincided with the development of intimate relations between Kōken and Dōkyō (d. 772), a Buddhist priest who, in the fourth month of 762, used his mysterious healing powers to cure the empress of some illness. At that time the empress was forty-five years old and Dōkyō was around sixty. The nature of the intimacy is not known, but according to the *Nihon ryōiki* written at the beginning of the ninth century, "the priest Dōkyō and the retired empress shared the same pillow." In the sixth month of 762, Kōken became so irri-

43 See Sasayama Haruo, "Chūe-fu no kenkyū – sono seijishi teki igi ni kansuru," *Kodaigaku* 6 (1957): 274–302; and Naoki Kōjirō, *Asuka nara jidai no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Hanawa shobō, 1975), pp. 221–6.

tated with Emperor Junnin that she suddenly left the detached palace at Hora and took up residence at a Buddhist temple in Nara, where she immediately issued an edict (as retired empress) stating that “henceforth the emperor will conduct minor affairs of state, but important matters of state, including the dispensation of swords and punishments, will be handled by me.”⁴⁴ Clearly, she had decided to exercise the authority that had been previously enjoyed by her mother, Empress Kōmyō.

Because Nakamaro, who had joined Kōmyō in endorsing Junnin’s enthronement, was threatened by Kōken’s decision, he immediately took steps to strengthen his own control: He named two of his sons (Kuzumaro and Asakari) to the council and gave two other sons military appointments, one in the capital and the other in the provinces of Echizen and Mino. But the opposition now gathering about Kōken was taking countermeasures: Fujiwara no Masaki, a Fujiwara clansman who was critical of Namakaro’s policies, was appointed middle counselor, and Kibi no Makibi, an anti-Fujiwara specialist on China who had been exiled to Kyushu, was brought back to the capital and appointed supervisor of construction at Tōdai-ji. Although the sudden and sharp decline in Nakamaro’s fortunes was due above all to his strained relations with Kōken and her beloved Dōkyō, Nakamaro had also alienated fellow clansmen, who were now drifting to the support of the retired empress.

By 764 Nakamaro was planning a coup d’état that would restore in a single stroke his power and prestige. Using the authority of his ministerial office, he seized control of military affairs in the provinces near the capital, dispatched additional soldiers to regions under his control, and increased the size of the provincial militia. But his plans were leaked, and Kōken and her group immediately took possession of the imperial seals and the post station bells (*ekirei*) needed to mobilize the troops. Then her commander’s forces clashed with Nakamaro’s guards and, within seven days, seized and executed Nakamaro. Thus the rebellion was quashed, leaving Retired Empress Kōken in full charge of state affairs.

Kōken and Priest Dōkyō

As soon as the 764 rebellion had been put down, Kōken saw to it that Dōkyō was advanced from junior Fifth to junior third Rank and ap-

⁴⁴ *Shoku Nihongi*, Tempyō Hōji 6 (762) 6/3, KT 2.287.

pointed minister prelate (*daijin zenshi*). She had Nakamaro's elder brother Toyonari – who had been exiled because he had opposed Nakamaro – brought back to the capital and reappointed as minister of the right. Then she had Emperor Junnin removed from the throne and exiled to the island of Awaji. In the edict issued at this time, she stated that she had received from her father Emperor Shōmu the authority to select and depose successors to the throne and added that Shōmu had also observed that only persons obedient to his daughter should succeed her. In this way Kōken was not only justifying the deposition of Junnin and her occupation of the throne for a second reign as Empress Shōtoku but also suggesting that someone like Dōkyō, who had been very obedient, was an appropriate successor.

Empress Shōtoku immediately added troops to her imperial bodyguards and placed them under the command of her chief military officer, Fujiwara no Kurajimaro. She also increased the number of officials in the council by adding to it clansmen who had supported her in the struggle against Nakamaro and imperial princes, Buddhist priests, and aristocrats from the provinces.⁴⁵ In 765 her administration restricted the amount of land that aristocrats and non-Buddhist institutions could develop and privately own, but the restrictions were not applied to Buddhist temples. Tacit approval was thus given for a further increase in the amount of rice land privately owned by these religious institutions (see Chapter 8).

Favoring temples in this way was only one manifestation of the administration's pro-Buddhist policy. Another can be detected in the changes made in Dōkyō's position after Nakamaro's death: In 765 he was appointed prime minister prelate (*daijōdaijin zenshi*); in 766 he was named Buddhist king (*Hō-ō*); and in 767 his authority was increased by the creation of an Imperial Office for the Buddhist King (*Hō-ō Kyūshiki*). The only other person in Japanese history to hold such high titles and offices was the famous Prince Shōtoku who, as prince regent, was designated more than a century earlier as Divine Virtue Buddhist Prince (*Shōtoku Hō-ō*) and Great Buddhist Prince (*Hō-ō Dai-ō*). We should point out, however, that Dōkyō did not gain distinction for learning or religiosity in the practice of Buddhism at an official temple. Instead, his reputation was based mainly on occult powers supposedly gained from esoteric rites performed at secluded mountain retreats. His rapid and remarkable rise to a position very near the top of the imperial government was due almost entirely to

⁴⁵ Piggott, "Todaiji and the Nara Imperium," pp. 72–81.

favors received from Empress Shōtoku, not to any broad-based support of the Buddhist priesthood.⁴⁶ As high as Dōkyō's positions were, they appear not to have given him responsibilities outside the field of religion. Even his high appointments as prime minister priest and Buddhist king suggest that he was thought of mainly as a Buddhist priest, not as an official with responsibility for secular affairs. At times he was active in programs involving the worship of both kami and Buddha, such as in the construction of temples at shrines (*jingūji*) and in the holding of Buddhist rites that were Shinto in character, but his responsibilities were consistently within the spiritual realm.

Usa Hachiman and Dōkyō

In 769, the head of the Kami Affairs Department at Dazai-fu reported that Hachiman, the famous kami worshiped at the Usa Hachiman Shrine in northeastern Kyushu, had made the following oracular statement: "If Dōkyō is made emperor, the country will become tranquil." The *Shoku Nihongi* tells us that Dōkyō was delighted to hear this but that the empress asked Wake no Kiyomaro (733–99) to find out what Hachiman had really said. The oracle message that Kiyomaro received was quite different: "No person should ascend the throne who has not been born in the imperial line."⁴⁷

The chief priest of the Usa Hachiman Shrine may have been trying to ingratiate himself with Shōtoku and Dōkyō by passing along the first version, and Fujiwara no Nagate (714–71) and other members of the Fujiwara clan seem to have arranged for Kiyomaro to bring back the second. We do not know what really happened except that efforts to make Dōkyō the emperor were blocked. And yet Dōkyō was not punished, indicating that Shōtoku did not think that he himself had initiated, or been involved in, the plot.

In the eighth month of 770 Shōtoku suddenly died at the age of fifty-three, without having selected a successor. A succession dispute ensued. Eventually Fujiwara no Momokawa (732–79) succeeded in engineering the selection of Prince Shirakabe (grandson of Tenji) as heir to the throne. Momokawa and other Fujiwara leaders had arranged the forgery of an edict by Shōtoku that proclaimed that Shōtoku had wanted Prince Shirakabe to be her successor. But she certainly would have opposed this nomination, for only Temmu's de-

⁴⁶ Piggott concluded that the priests at the various temples in the capital were actually opposed to Dōkyō's "despotic oversight." See her "Todaiji and the Nara Imperium," p. 118.

⁴⁷ *Shoku Nihongi*, Jingo Keiun 3 (769) 9/25, KT 2.369.

scendants had occupied the throne since his death in 686. Other developments point to a new power alignment: Dōkyō was removed from his high offices shortly after Shotoku's death and was exiled to the province of Shimotsuke; Prince Shirakabe was enthroned at the age of sixty-two as Emperor Kōnin; Fujiwara no Yoshitsugu (716–77) was named minister of the center; and Fujiwara no Momokawa (732–79) was promoted to consultant.

During Kōnin's reign, lasting until 781, the government devoted much effort to increasing the state's income because financial conditions had been deteriorating rapidly ever since 749, when Kōken had first occupied the throne. Unnecessary offices not listed in the administrative code were abolished, resulting in the dismissal of numerous provincial and central government officials; and all loans other than those authorized by provincial governors were banned, probably benefiting officials more than commoners. The new regime eliminated the conscription of farmers and was more severe than earlier regimes had been in attempting to control vagrancy. It also enacted some military reform, shifting the burden of military service from poor to rich farmers.

The Fujiwara leaders were also determined to upset the tradition that Temmu's descendants alone should occupy the throne, for they were convinced that any Temmu emperor or empress would continue to favor direct imperial rule and oppose control by a nonimperial clan, particularly the Fujiwara. Shortly after the beginning of Kōnin's reign, the empress (a daughter of Shōmu named Princess Igami) gave birth to Prince Osabe. The young son was soon appointed crown prince, and his mother was named empress consort. This displeased the Fujiwara. Charging the empress consort with having put a curse on the emperor, they had her demoted and Prince Osabe exiled. The details of just what transpired are not clear, but apparently Momokawa was making certain that no prince of the Temmu line would occupy the throne.

The imperial son, Prince Yamabe, that was finally selected as Kōnin's successor was definitely a descendant of Tenji, and he was enthroned as Emperor Kammu when Kōnin abdicated in 781. Although Kammu was the second Tenji-descended emperor, the struggle between the two lines' supporters continued. Not long after the death of Kōnin in 782, a plot was exposed, and a great grandson of Temmu (Kawatsugu) was charged with complicity and sentenced to death. The determination of the new leaders to keep Temmu's descendants from occupying the throne was linked with their desire to have the

capital moved from Nara, where three strong empresses and two emperors of the Temmu line had reigned. Thus the move of Emperor Kammu (a Tenji descendant) to Nagaoka in 784 marks the close of Japan's amazing Nara period.