

CHAPTER ONE

Introducing the Shrine and Dazaifu

I like the shrine best in the early morning, before the crowds press in, even before the priests present themselves at the altar to offer breakfast to the deity. The rising sun is hidden behind the steep height that hems the compound on the right. The light is dim, soft and cool. The only visitors are a few townsfolk who come singly through the towering gate to bow, clap twice, and murmur their prayers. The pigeons go over the ground hunting something they might have overlooked yesterday. Their cooing overlays the silence.

When sunshine spills into the courtyard I move near to the main hall, look in to the closed altar. An altar in some form has stood here since 902. The imposing building that now rises around it is four hundred years old, but it has been well cared for. The gold of its pillars could not have glowed more brightly when it was first applied, the black lacquer glistens, the accents of color are vivid. I pay my respects, whisper my own prayer.

Along the back streets of the old town, I walk along the dike above the polluted stream that tumbles out of the mountains to drain this finger of the valley. In the times I am thinking about, long ago, was this brook clean, I wonder. I like to think it was, but the Japanese have always used their rivers to carry away their refuse. Despite the muck, a pair of white herons make this water their home. They must be hardy. Or short-lived.

I take country roads to avoid the highway and its traffic, pass sign after sign pointing to historic remains, emerge at the site of an institution older than the shrine. But for it the shrine would not have come into being.

A few steps up and away from the thoroughfare is a wide expanse between ridges that embrace it like protective arms. Beyond gently sloping fields rise to the backdrop of a green mountain. On this broad stage once rose the headquarters of a major arm of the government, the only one of its kind, the “distant capital”: Dazaifu.

Dazaifu was here in northern Kyushu because this region was critical. Here, far from the capital, the Japanese islands are closest to the heart of the Asian continent. Northern Kyushu and southern Korea face each other across the Korea Strait, the main route for traffic between the continent and the islands. Northern Kyushu was the gateway to Japan.

Ranged before me are what remains of Dazaifu: almost five hundred boulders set solidly in the earth, hewn to support the pillars of the structures that rose here. The patterns of the stones and the roof tiles that came to light in excavations tell scholars what the buildings looked like.

I stand on the broad stone steps and try to imagine myself here thirteen hundred years ago. The main gate rises two stories above me. I am uneasy, eyed by distrustful sentries at flanking guardhouses, hands on the hilts of their swords, menacing pikes ranged behind them.

I grant myself sufficient status to pass, and face the second gate. Winged out from it are covered corridors that enclose the compound. Through that gate I step into a vast courtyard paved with white sand dazzling in the sunlight (magic in moonlight). The brightness dances off the crimson pillars, the gilded fretwork, the silvery black of the massive tile roofs. This place was calculated to impress: it is fifty yards wide between the pillared pavilions, two on each side, and a hundred yards straight ahead, on a walkway of stones polished smooth in river beds, up more broad steps, to the fifth and greatest hall. From it emerged Dazaifu's Governor General, representative of the emperor, symbol of power and authority, to greet a foreign delegation or the officials from all Kyushu, assembled in this space on state occasions.

Dazaifu had a double responsibility. It was established to keep an eye on foreign lands, which in Japan's world then meant China and Korea: to monitor their activities and their intentions, to receive their envoys when they appeared, to send off Japanese embassies to visit them. The Chinese had been coming, off and on, since at least as early as the first century A.D.: Chinese histories record a return visit to the Chinese court by a Japanese emissary in the year 57; he did not represent the ruler of Japan, which the Chinese called Wa, for there was no such ruler; he came from Na (the Chinese called it Nu), one of the hundred or so belligerent little kingdoms that the Chinese counted in Wa.

The Chinese emperor graciously bestowed on that Japanese visitor of 57 a golden seal signifying his king's right to rule, for the Chinese viewed eastern Asia as their world and the barbarian peoples on its fringes as their dependencies. In 1784 a farmer in the old territory of Na dug a gold seal out of one of his fields. Its ancient characters are taken to read "Vassal King of the Wa country of Na."

There are later records of Chinese embassies to Wa, and of Japanese embassies to China. The Japanese were more than once exposed to the grandeur of the Chinese court and the elaborate ceremonies when that court received the

tribute-bearing representatives of its vassals. The Japanese bridled at that status, but they continued to come, and when time and circumstances made it possible and necessary, they built Dazaifu in Chinese style and on a scale calculated to impress even the Chinese, not to mention the Koreans. Dazaifu was a declaration that Japan too had culture.

Dazaifu's other responsibility was to administer the island of Kyushu. To the Japanese court, far away in the region of Nara, Kyushu was a headache, its people often obstreperous and even rebellious. The problem was handed to Dazaifu, with extraordinary latitude to deal with it. Here taxes were collected in kind and in coin, the Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples were supervised, and law and order was maintained--usually.

Some time around five centuries ago Dazaifu ceased to exist; its buildings rotted and crumbled. Some of its foundation stones were filched; they were ready-made building materials. They have been replaced by plastic reproductions that fool my eyes but ring hollow when I stomp on them. Sometimes, stomping, I search them out.

Even the stones that are genuine do not represent the beginning of Dazaifu. They date from a reconstruction a thousand years ago, after a member of the nobility who turned renegade and pirate sacked Dazaifu for its treasure and left its headquarters and its prosperous city in flames. The charred evidence is in a layer of blackened earth two or three feet down, where lie the foundation stones of the buildings he burned. They were rebuilt according to the original design.

Even deeper are the remains of the first structures on this site. No foundation stones--apparently there was no time for substantial construction. What is left are the bases of cedar poles that were stuck into the earth to support a few randomly placed wooden buildings. (I am amazed at how long wood lasts in earth sealed off from air.) It is supposed that those first buildings were construction headquarters for the major fortifications being built: there was a great fear of invasion from the continent.

That emergency grew out of events long before. . . .