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NARA IMPERIAL PALACE

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEYS CARRIED OUT
IN 1959 — 1961**

ENGLISH SUMMARY

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NARA IMPERIAL PALACE

The site of Nara Imperial Palace, which existed from 710 to 784 A.D., is situated at Sakicho, Nara City, and is designated as a Special Historical Monument. The palace was built in the middle of the northern border of the capital, which was established after the continental model, measuring five kilometers from north to south and six kilometers from east to west. The precinct of the palace is about one kilometer square and in it the imperial domicile, halls of state and other government office buildings once stood. At present, about 10 per cent of the whole precinct is well preserved in turfed ground, but the remaining 90 per cent is mostly cultivated as paddy-field, dotted with the ruins of ground platforms and earthen walls.

The Nara National Research Institute of Cultural Properties has undertaken the investigation work of this palace site since the summer of 1955, and the present publication deals with the summarized result of the 2nd (1959), 4th and 5th (both 1960) and 6th (1961) surveys, conducted in an area of about 0.8 hectare.

The excavated area is tentatively termed "Area 6ABO" and is the northern end of the central part of the palace precinct. The spade-work disclosed twenty-five structures, four gutters, six fences and earthen walls, some pits and several wells, one of which is exceedingly large. The lower ends of the pillars of all structures were inserted into the ground, unlike the pillars of more important structures, which were erected on base stones. A minute survey of the excavated area shows that the ground was reclaimed and levelled three times consecutively. This enables us to divide the structural remains discovered therein into three successive periods. The superimposed condition of the pillar-holes in the middle layer further enables us to subdivide them into three shorter periods. Hence all the structures fall into five chronological sequence dates, as shown in Table I. Moreover, uniformity prevails in the design and technique of the structures, and also in the layout of each sequential period, and this fact seems to indicate that the structures unearthed were the buildings of governmental offices.

The artifacts discovered from the area are roof-tiles, earthenwares, copper coins, various metal and wooden objects, fragments of lacquered

caps, hemp cloth etc., but the most striking discovery was of forty-one pieces of long, narrow tablets of wood used as writing surfaces, recovered from Pit SK219. These wooden tablets can be classified into five groups according to their shapes, with the exception of the damaged and decayed ones whose size and shape are unknown. The first is a plain slip (Type 601). The second has a notch on each side near the upper and lower ends (Type 603). The third has notches near the upper end only (Type 604). The fourth has its lower end pointed (Type 605). The fifth is twice as long as the others and has a hole in the center and three holes near each end, from which it may be presumed that they were bound together by cords drawn through the holes (Type 606). Of especial interest are the chips from used tablets, which suggest that the tablets were reused after being erased by chipping. The difference in shape seems to have had something to do with their functions. Tablets of Type 603 were used, as their inscriptions indicate, as labels attached to packages of local foodstuffs collected as taxes in kind from people of distant provinces. Tablets of Type 604 and 605 were used also as labels attached to or pushed into packages of foodstuffs, supposedly stored in a kitchen or warehouse. The plain tablets were probably used as message slips or official records, and some of them have inscriptions requesting various foodstuffs. There are plain tablets that have names of officials only, while others have prose or verse written in "Manyō-gana" characters.

There are two tablets that have dated inscriptions, one for 761 and the other 762 A.D. Another two tablets are datable by the contents of their inscriptions, to either 763 or 764 A.D. Except for a few instances, the inscriptions on these tablets are related to foodstuffs, such as rice, beans, walnuts, sea-weeds, sea-urchins, vegetables, salt, soy, vinegar and bean paste.

Paper was used in clerical work of government offices in the Nara Period, as is evidenced by the archives of the Shōsōin Repository, but the present discovery revealed the hitherto unknown fact that wooden tablets were also used in less important business in the offices. In China wooden tablets were used as writing surfaces in the ancient Han and Chin Dynasties. This usage spread gradually into the surrounding regions and the finds in Turfan in the west and the present discovery in the east testify to its survival even in the eighth and ninth centuries. The date of these tablets provides reliable criteria for assigning to the structures of Period II-2 a date of shortly after 763-764 A.D., and furnishes an admirable starting point for establishing a chronological se-

quence for both the groups of structures and for the earthenwares discovered with them. The inscriptions vividly illustrate the diet of the people of the Nara Period and seem to prove beyond a doubt that the excavated area was originally occupied by the Imperial Household offices in charge of cuisine.

Table I Chronological Sequence of Structures and Other Remains

In the Western Half of Area 6ABO				Chronological Sequence	In the Eastern Half of Area 6ABO			
G149		B176 B167	D141 D126-A	I	D141 D126-A	B205 B269* B317*		
G180 E168-A		B170	D130 D106-A D126-B	II-1	D130 D106-A D126-B D244	B212 B200	K217 K220	E311-A* E272-A*
E168-A	K107 K134	B112 B177-A B131 B186-A B143 B194-A B145	A105 D106-B	II-2		B209 B206 B213 B201	B293* B299*	E311-A* E272-A*
		B113 B177-B B166 B186-B B194-B		II-2'				
E168-A		B146 B182 B135 B191 B116	A109 A110	II-3		B211 B327* B285* B314* B273* B321* B268*		E311-A* E272-A*
	K137 K140		A109 A110 A120 A121	III	A233 A304*	B236 B246	K234 K238 K335	E311-B* E272-B*

“A”-Fence and Wall. “B”-Structure. “D”-Gutter. “E”-Well. “G”-Pond.
“K”-Pit.

*Remains discovered in a later survey but not treated in the present publication.