



Nara Japan, 758-763: A Translation From Shoku Nihongi

By Ross Bender

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Japan in the 8th century experienced sudden and intense economic and cultural growth. At the eastern terminus of the Silk Road, the islands participated in a cosmopolitan East Asian sphere, receiving new innovations in art, architecture, law, and religion from both Tang China and the Korean peninsula. The disruption was so extreme that some have compared this period to the modern Meiji era, when Japan opened itself to the West and rapidly transformed itself into a modern nation. Nara was the capital for most of the century; it was an urban center with a population of about 100,000. The years 758-63 saw the abdication of Empress Koken and the accession to the throne of Emperor Junnin. Although Junnin was the titular ruler until 764, historians regard him as the puppet of the powerful noble Fujiwara no Nakamaro. Empress Koken continued to exert a degree of power as Retired Sovereign. This is a translation of the Shoku Nihongi for the years 758-763. Shoku Nihongi is the official court chronicle of eighth-century Japan, presented to the court of Emperor Kanmu in 797. The language of the narrative is classical Chinese, but it also includes 62 imperial edicts inscribed in Old Japanese. It is an invaluable source the history of Japan's Nara period, providing both great detail about court life, the texts of imperial edicts, and narratives of events such as the dedication of the Great Buddha (Daibutsu), the death of Emperor Shomu, the Tachibana Naramaro conspiracy, the reign and exile of Junnin, the Fujiwara Nakamaro rebellion, the Hachiman cult, and the Dokyo incident.

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