

Asuka palace remains (Oka/Asuka, Asuka village, Takaichi district)

The Asuka palace remains are the sites of imperial palaces located at Oka and Asuka in the village of Asuka. While from the past these remains have been regarded as the traditional location of the Asuka Itabuki palace, archaeological investigation began in 1959, and with the Archaeological Institute of Kashihara as principal investigator approximately 180 excavations have been conducted up to the 2016 fiscal year. While it has been confirmed that the remains of several succeeding palaces overlap at this location, because it was difficult to identify these precisely at the start of the investigations, and as it was supposed that it was part of a larger capital district, for the sake of convenience it was called the “Asuka capital remains,” which has continued to be the name used for the excavations. As a particular site name, since this area as a whole has traditionally been held as the location of the Asuka Itabuki palace it has been variously called “the traditional site of the Asuka Itabuki palace” or the “place related to be the Asuka Itabuki palace,” but for the purposes of conducting excavations and reporting the results, and as the name used in its designation as a Historic Site, it is referred to as the “Asuka palace remains.”

The features that have been confirmed divide into Phases I–III in the order of their construction, and from the contents of recovered wooden documents and chronological assessments of the pottery, Phase I is regarded as corresponding with the Asuka Okamoto palace of Emperor Jomei, Phase II as Empress Kōgyoku’s Asuka Itabuki palace, and Phase III as Empress Saimei’s Later Asuka Okamoto palace and the Asuka Kiyomihara palace of Emperor Tenmu and Empress Jitō. All of the buildings were structures with pillars embedded in the ground, and none were roofed with tiles.

The Phase I features are a group sharing an axis of orientation veering about 20° west of north. In order to preserve the features lying above these, only a small extent of this group has been investigated, and the overall outlines are completely unknown. As the holes left by removing the posts of fences have charcoal and scorched earth mixed in, these features are seen as having met with a conflagration. The features of Phase II have a north–south orientation, and were built atop fill covering the Phase I features as preparatory groundwork for construction. The overall outlines are unclear, but partitioning fences surmised as enclosing the core precinct have been detected.

The features of Phase III are the uppermost layer of palace remains, and consist of the three precincts of an inner palace core precinct, the Ebinoko precinct to its southeast, plus what is being called an outer precinct enclosing both of these, with the Ebinoko and outer precincts being built after the inner palace core. That core precinct is a rectangular district approximately 197 m north–south by 152–158 m east–west, divided by an east–west fence into a northern sector as a private area and a southern sector as public space. In the northern sector stand two large-scale buildings (main halls) lined up north and south, each of which has smaller buildings attached with corridors to its east and west. The Ebinoko precinct was enclosed with a pillared fence, on the western side of which was a gate on the same scale as the south gate of the palace core precinct. Through this gate, directly in front stood the largest main hall at the Asuka palace remains. The inner precinct is thus considered by most to contain the Imperial Domicile as premises for the emperor’s daily life, whereas the Ebinoko precinct was the Great Audience Hall built in the reign of Emperor Tenmu.