

Kitchen Bureaucracy: The Preparation of Banquets for Medieval Japanese Royalty

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Abstract : Despite the growing body of research on Japanese food history, little has been written about the attitudes and perspectives premodern Japanese people held about their food, even on special celebratory days. In fact, the overall image that arises from the literature is one of ambivalence: that the medieval nobility of the Heian and Kamakura periods (795-1333) did not much care about what they ate and for that reason, food seems relatively scarce in certain historical records. This study challenges this perspective by analyzing the manuals written to guide palace management and feast preparation for royals, introducing two of the sources into English for the first time. This research is primarily based on three manuals that address different aspects of royal food culture and preparation. The Chujiruiki, or Record of the Palace Kitchens (1295), is a fragmentary manual written by a bureaucrat in charge of the main palace kitchen office. This document collection details the utensils, furnishing, and courses that officials organized for the royals' two daily meals in the morning (asagarei gozen) and in the afternoon (hiru gozen) when they enjoyed seven courses, each one carefully cooked and plated. The orchestration of daily meals and frequent banquets would have been complicated affairs for those preparing the tableware and food, thus requiring texts like the Chujiruiki, as well as another manual, the Nichûgyôji (11th c.), or The Daily Functions. Because of the complex coordination between various kitchen-related bureaucratic offices, kitchen officials endeavored to standardize the menus and place settings depending on the time of year, religious abstinence days, and available ingredients flowing into the capital as taxes. For the most important annual banquets and rites celebrating deities and the royal family, kitchen officials would likely refer to the Engi Shiki (927), or Protocols of the Engi Era, for details on offerings, servant payments, and menus. This study proposes that many of the great feast events, and indeed even daily meals at the palace, were so standardized and carefully planned for repetition that there would have been little need for the contents of such feasts to be detailed in diaries or novels—places where historians have noted a lack of the mention of food descriptions. These descriptions were not included for lack of interest on the part of the nobility, but rather because knowledge of what would be served at banquets and feasts would be considered a matter-of-course in the same way that a modern American would likely not need to state the menu of a traditional Thanksgiving meal to an American audience. Where food was concerned, novelty more so than tradition prompted a response in personal records, like diaries.

Keywords : banquets, bureaucracy, Engi shiki, Japanese food

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