

The Bureau and the Way: The Heian Court and the Social Construction of Onmyōdō

Introduction

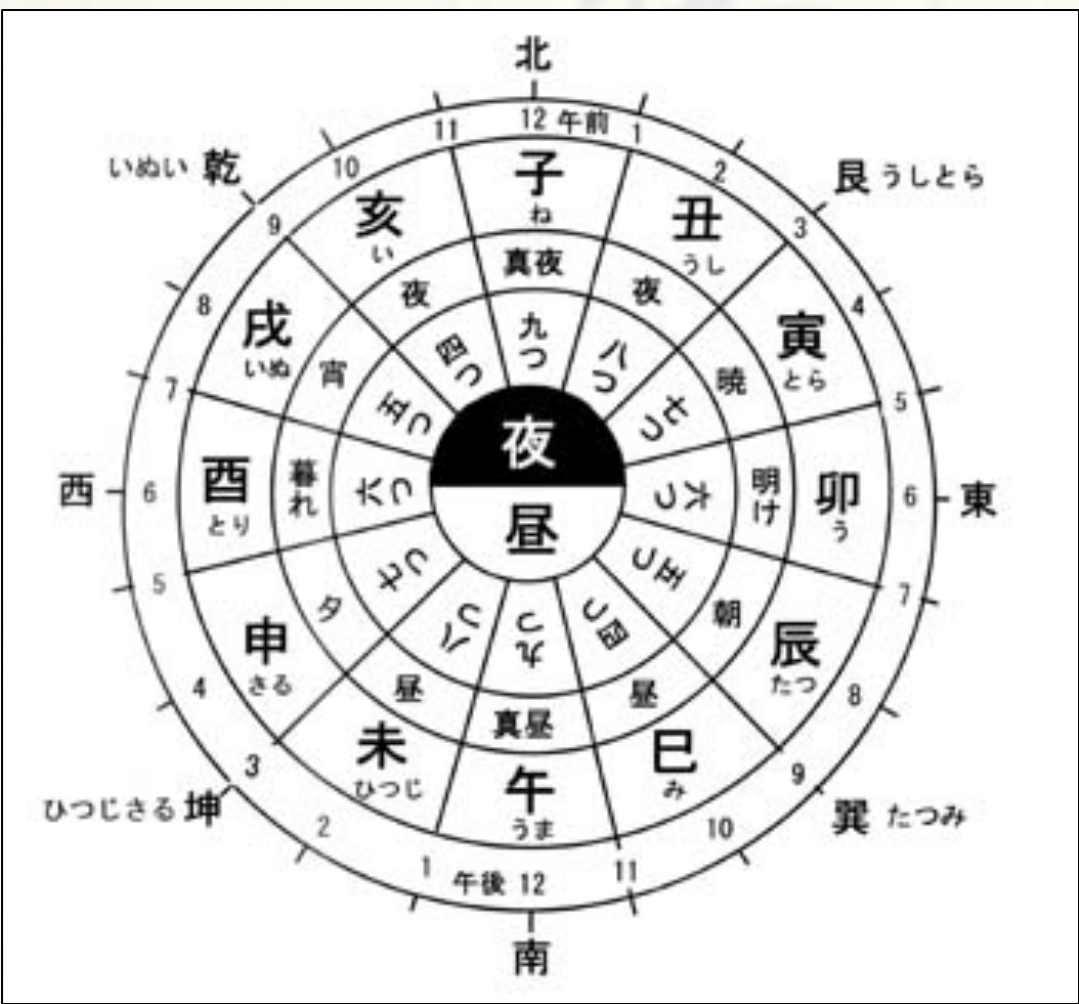
Onmyōdō 陰陽道 (literally “the way of yin and yang”) refers to a number of divination and ritual (often exorcism) practices that were popular in pre-1870s Japan. While the subject has attracted recent study, most of these studies have focused on the ritual aspects of Onmyōdō over the aspects related to divination (ex: Shigeta 2004). Yet Onmyōdō in Japan was as intimately tied to the fields of astronomy and mathematics as it was to cults dedicated to deities from China.

Onmyōdō matured as an identifiable school of practice during the Heian Period (794 – 1192 C.E.); however, during the late Heian Period (1070 – 1192), a number of new rituals and practices were added, in what has been called the “supersition-izing” (迷信化) of Onmyōdō (Murayama 1970). Day-selection (撰日) practices in particular became much more elaborate at this time. Examining the divinatory practices within Onmyōdō therefore provides a new way of looking at how beliefs develop and new beliefs spread and become popular.

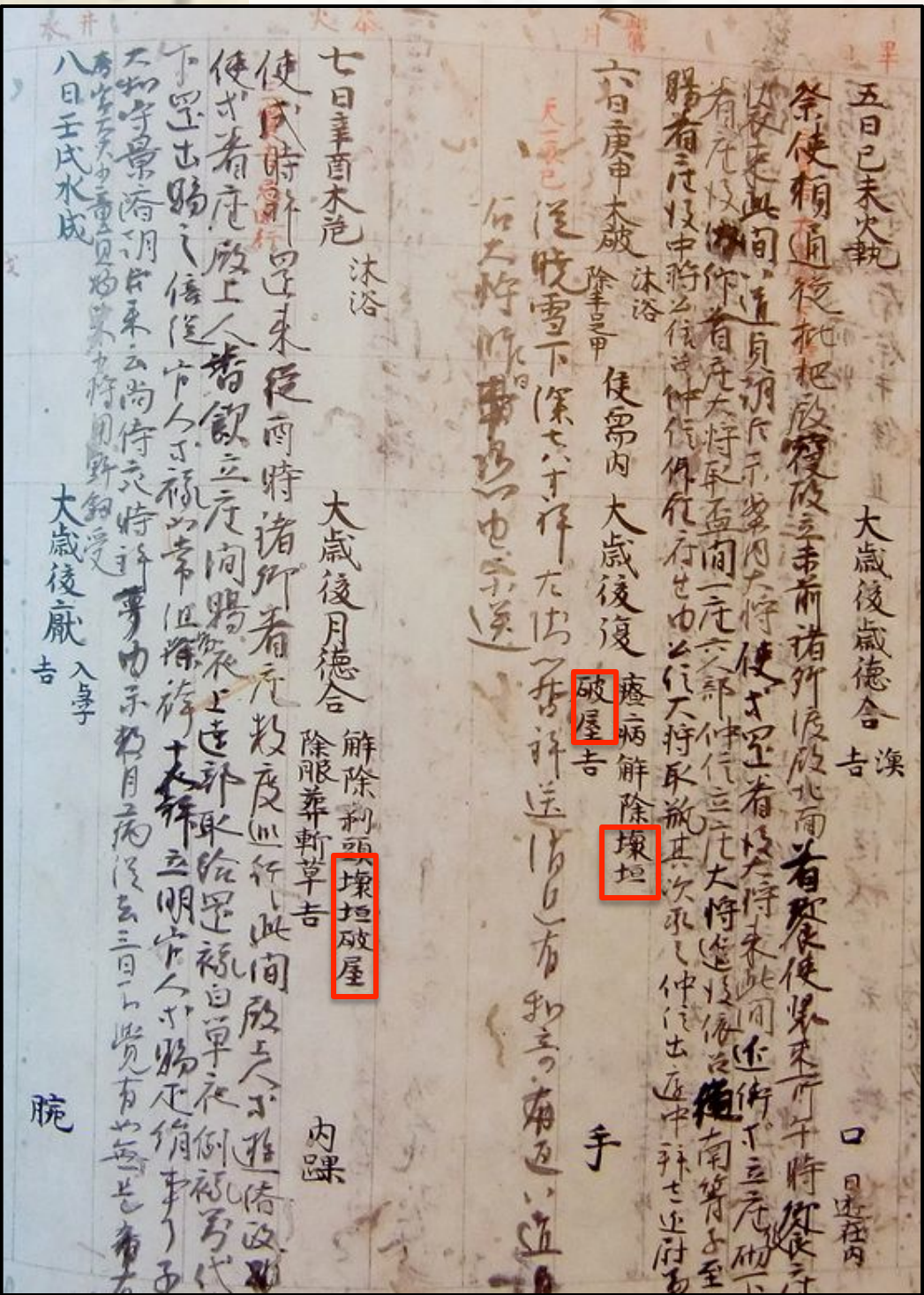
Temporal Orientation

The cosmological system employed in Onmyōdō facilitated orientation in both space and time.

Correct orientation promoted success while incorrect orientation might engender failure. For this reason, experts on calendars and astronomy were among the most desired practitioners of Onmyōdō, or *onmyōji* (陰陽師)



Day Selection



Notes (rekichū 暦注) pertaining to “lucky” days for construction from an almanac for 1004 (Midōkanpaku-ki 御堂関白記)

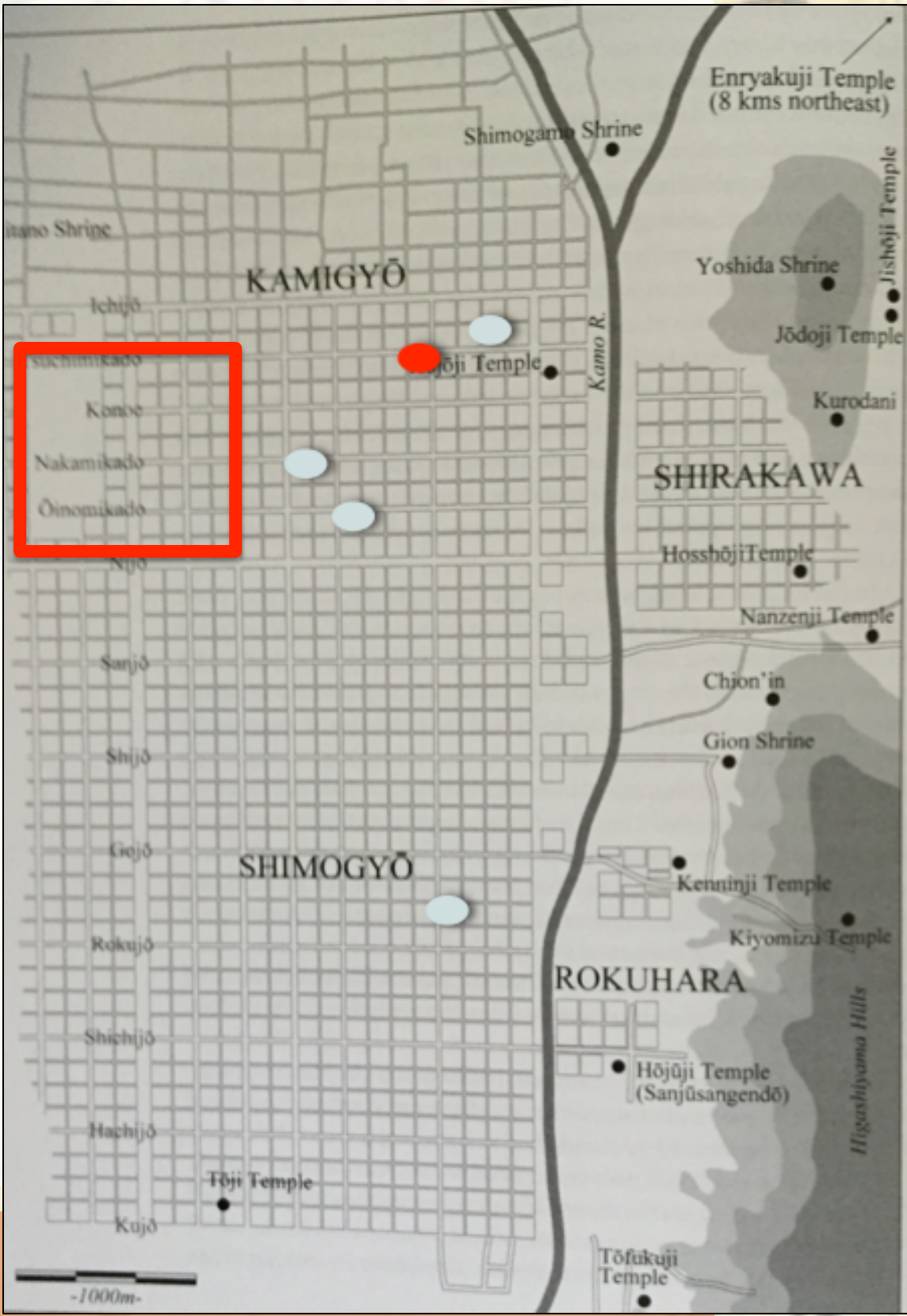
The official astronomical almanac of the Japanese court (*guchūreki* 具注暦) was designed to allow officers and subjects of the state to schedule acts for the appropriate days, encouraging their successful completion.

By 982, however, major court ceremonies came to be scheduled by *onmyōji*, who submitted day-and-time selection reports (*nichiji kanmon* 日時勘文) to patrons and superiors.

Manuals that allowed elite individuals to select their own lucky or unlucky days began to appear in the late 11th century.

Time and Construction

Of the approximately 370 day-and-time selection reports that survive from 1068 through 1333, most are concerned with the construction of religious or official buildings. A shift in urban construction in the capital from the late 11th century onward was one of the factors that drove innovations in and debates about appropriate official day-selection.



Old palace (square) and new palaces in use from 1107 – 1123 (ovals) marked on a map of the Japanese capital (modern Kyōto) for the 12th century.

Methods of Day-Selection

Future research on day-selection reports (surviving examples from 1068 to 1870) will attempt to identify the mathematical and astronomical principles behind what days were selected. Unlike as in the case of almanacs, the methods used to select lucky days in such reports remain unknown (cf. Ozaka 1992). A combination of contextual reading (how reports accommodated practical concerns or the desires of patrons) and computer-aided analysis may reveal the system underlying this practice.

Bibliography

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