

Himeji Castle, Hyōgo



Location: Hyōgo Prefecture

Date: Original construction dates from 1333, but the current structure was built between 1580-1610

Patron: Toyotomi Hideyoshi and enlarged c 1610 by Ikeda Terumasa.

Scale: 140m (east-west axis) x 125m (north-south axis). 91m above sea level. Stone wall of the main keep 15m high; the main keep is 31.5m high. There are 27 towers, 11 wells and 21 gates.

Scope of work: WAR; Architecture beyond the European tradition.

Materials: primarily wood and stone

Style/Period: Renritsu/Azuchi–Momoyama



Introduction

Japan's most magnificent castle, a Unesco World Heritage Site and one of only a handful of original castles remaining. Nicknamed the 'White Egret Castle' for its spectacular white exterior and striking shape emerging from the plain. Himeji is a hill castle, that takes advantage of the surrounding geography to enhance its defensive qualities. There are three moats to obstruct the enemy and 15m sloping stone walls make approaching the base of the castle very difficult.



Formal elements

Viewed externally, there is a five-storey main tenshu (keep) and three smaller keeps, all surrounded by moats and defensive walls. These walls are punctuated with rectangular openings ('sama') for firing arrows and circular and triangular openings for guns. These 'sama' are at different heights to allow for the warrior to be standing, kneeling or lying down. The main keep's walls also feature narrow openings that allowed defenders to pour boiling water or oil on to anyone trying to scale the walls. The walls are made of a wooden framework on which blocks of clay are stacked and then finished with white plaster. The early Abura-kabe wall is made of a mix of mountain soil, pea gravel, rice-washing water and rice porridge. The castle has 21 gates in the style of the Azuchi-Momoyama period.

Thickly latticed windows prevent enemy intrusion and the entry of both arrows and bullets. The two small keeps on the west and northwest feature bell shaped Kato-mado windows decorated with black lacquer and gold foil. This type of window is more often associated with Buddhist temples. The decorative ornament installed on the gable peaks is known as a 'gegyo'.



Materials, techniques and processes

The castle has been restored using traditional methods. The walls and eaves of the entire building are covered with a 3cm thick layer of white plaster, made using a traditional method from slaked lime, shell ash, hemp fibre and seaweed. This protected the castle from fire, wind, rain and snow.



The towers are strengthened by two wood columns that run from the foundations to the roof.

Historical and social context

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The first castle on this site was built to protect Japan from the Mongols in 1333. More than 200 castle towns (jōkamachi) were developed across Japan in the years 1580-1610 during the final turbulent phase of the national reunification by Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and Ieyasu.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi entered the region to subdue the Mori clan in the neighbouring Chugoki region. In 1580, he conquered the Harima province and made Himeji Castle his base for his campaign. In the following years he built the three-storied keep

of the castle at the centre of the military garrison. Knowledge of European castles was gained through books and prints brought to Japan by 16th century Portuguese traders as well as the advent of firearms – also brought by the Portuguese.

In 1600 after the Battle of Sekigahara, Ikeda Terumasa becomes the new lord of the castle and begins construction of the current Himeji Castle. The 5 stories keep with 7 floors (one basement and an additional internal subdivision) is completed by 1609.

Patronage

Toyotomi (1537 –1598) was an important feudal lord, warrior, samurai and politician of the Sengoku period. He was seen as Japan's second great unifier. Hideyoshi Toyotomi also built other castles: Fushimi (destroyed in an earthquake, a replica shown below left), Jurakudai and Osaka (below right).





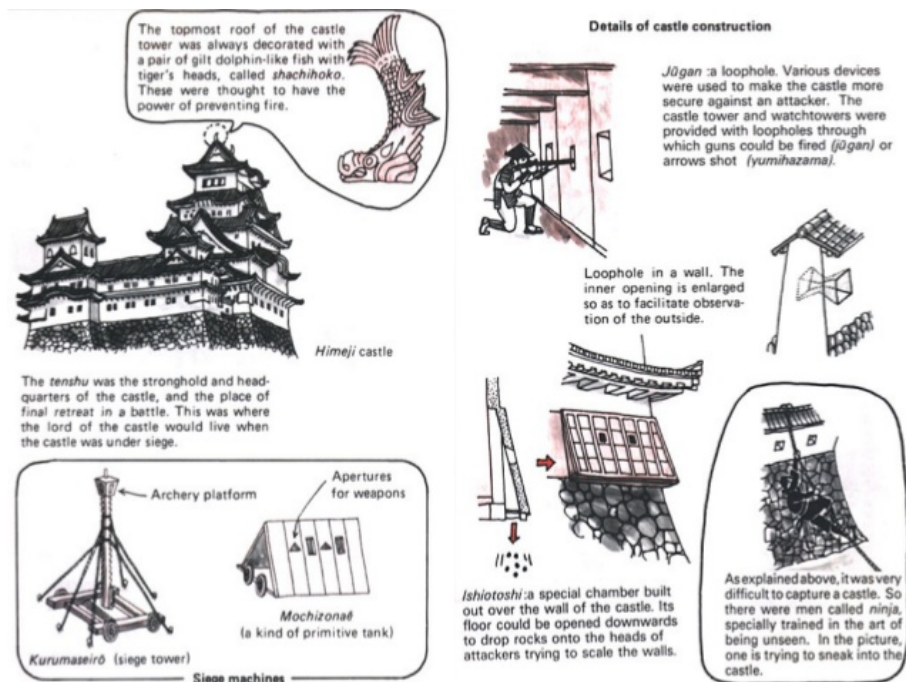
Azuchi Castle: the first of the castle type to have stone foundations, thick stone walls (without mortar), a high central keep and to be used as both a military fortress and grand residence. Constructed 1576-79 outside Kyoto.

Function

The castle is a multi-storeyed and multi-roofed keep that was originally a mighty fort system set within a complex system of defence that involved numerous curtain walls, courts and moats, as well as the city itself, which was also surrounded by walls and moat.

Like contemporary castles in other parts of the world, the secret of Himeji's strength is its concentric rings of defences, culminating in the tall, central keep. All is based on the system of defence in depth, with walls and ditches complementing and protecting each other so that the deeper an attacker penetrates the defences, the more intense and focused is the fire that can be brought to bear upon him. The defensive features are:

1. Outer moats protecting parts of the city and high-ranking homes
2. Strongly fortified gatehouse
3. Curtain walls form parapets with loopholes placed at regular distances
4. Outer court or bailey, very well defended, surrounded by moat
5. Twisting passageways, with parapets and towers, confused attackers
6. Paths narrow and lead to bottlenecks, making attackers easy prey for snipers above
7. Inner court, with gatehouses and doors which seem unfortified but have 'murder holes' through which boiling liquids or missiles could be used
8. The keep rises six stories from a massive curving foundation



9. Its plan is labyrinthine to confuse and disorient attackers, and in the four corners of each main floor are small strong points – miniature castles – in which a few warriors could lock themselves and fire into the interior of the castle through loopholes at attackers.

Himeji Castle was never actually attacked in a battle and thus has remained in its present shape for over three hundred years. “The castle is a sublime monument to the Japanese art of war, in which – as exemplified by the Japanese sword – utility and beauty work together with a thrilling harmony and perfection of purpose.”

The castle design evolved from earlier stockade building and these new modern fortresses were intended to protect strategic sites. In this era, they were also home to the feudal lord and therefore were important for prestige and comfort. The castle and surrounding area are the central, most elevated quarter of the city and were reserved for feudal lords and warriors. Unlike European medieval castle towns, those in Japan lacked fortified city walls but had moats and winding approaches to deter the enemy. The moats also served to separate the residential areas of the feudal lord and his immediate vassals from those of the craftsmen and merchants who supplied them. Tall towers and the elevated site provided excellent visibility while the stone foundation was a better deterrent against fire.

Questions to discuss:

1. Why was this location chosen for the construction of this castle?
2. Explain the design of this castle?
3. How do the materials used contribute to the function of this defensive structure?
4. What techniques and processes were used to build this castle?
5. How is this castle different to others of this region?
6. Explain the threats that lead to the construction of this castle?
7. Explain the reasons and requirements of the patron of this castle?
8. Explain why the building is significant today?



Further reading

This castle was used as the ninja training centre in the James Bond film ‘You only live twice’!

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/V3613/himeji/tpage.htm>