

# Himeji Castle 1601-09

1333-46, then rebuilt 1601-09, with additional fortifications 1617-19



Himeji castle. Digital image courtesy of 123RF

## Key Facts:

- **In a nutshell:** practical defensive castle offering complex systems of defence in depth
- **Site:** Himeji, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan
- **Size:** 31.5m high, 140m long, 125m wide, on a 45m natural hill
- **Materials:** Primarily wood and stone as well as clay, sand and rice glue walls; tiled roof
- **UNESCO** World Cultural and Heritage Site

## 1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

The castle at Himeji is an iconic image of Japan and one of the finest examples of fortress architecture in the world. It stands at the centre of Himeji city, a strategic point along the route to the western provinces of Honshu (the main island of Japan). The castle was built atop a natural 45-metre hill called Himeyama, and its main donjon (tower) rises an additional 31 metres including a 15 metre stone foundation. It is a highly efficient and practical military machine offering complex systems of defence in depth.

Cruickshank writes “...as with so much essentially functional Japanese architecture, the hill-top fortress possesses a delicacy of detail, fineness of form, and picturesqueness of profile that, from a distance, makes it look more like a fairy-tale palace.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cruickshank, p.292

From afar, the graceful rooflines of its white towers resemble a flock of herons in flight, suggesting the castle's proper name—"Egret Castle" (Shirasagi).

The castle was first completed in 1346 but when the Shogun Tokugawa rose to power in 1600 following the battle of Sekigahara, he rewarded his son-in-law Ikeda Terumasa (1564-1613) with the fiefdom of Harima (modern-day Hyogo prefecture) and the castle was completely rebuilt and enlarged between 1601 and 1609. Himeji Castle played a crucial role in enabling Terumasa to assert his rule over the districts. With their tall donjons and urban locations, flatland castles were inherently more visible than their mountain predecessors. Accordingly, feudal lords spared little expense in making their castles as beautiful and liveable as possible. Himeji Castle was given lavish ornamentation and equipped with kitchen and toilette facilities in the main tower.

### **Layout**

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 them.

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, to confuse 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 storeys from a massive curving foundation
9. The 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.<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup>

## **2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS**

**"Warfare in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Japan was highly ritualised and dominated by tradition:**

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<sup>2</sup>Adapted from Cruickshank p.294

<sup>3</sup> Cruickshank p.295

- As in most other aspects of Japanese life, technical innovations, if not forbidden, were kept under strict control. Ideas and new weapons did appear in Japan from the outside world but were applied in a controlled manner
- This is particularly true of **gunpowder-based weapons**, which were kept subservient to traditional weapons within a code of battle dominated by the sword and the concept of honourable single combat
- Consequently weapons technology in Japan soon became fossilized, with early forms of firearms such as matchlocks still being used when long superseded in other parts of the world, and certain types of heavy artillery, such as large-calibre cannons, never coming into favour at all.

“Consequently Himeji Castle was created for a particular type of formalized warfare:

- **no thick walled casemates or fortified platforms** for the location of heavy artillery, so no defences against such powerful weapons
- **roofs could be merely tiled** as they did not have to withstand plunging shot
- **walls could be relatively slight** although the seemingly plaster-made white-painted walls of the upper buildings are in fact very thick and made of a tough composition of sand and clay bound with rice glue that is impenetrable to matchlock balls.”<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, Himeji Castle was built at a time when endemic warfare in Japan was nearing an end. After the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1600, Japan entered a period of protracted internal peace. But in 1601, when the castle was begun, there was no guarantee that war would not resume, so the fortress incorporated the most up-to-date military technology of the period:

- **the rise of flatland castle-towns.** The need to command resources quickly from heavily-populated areas encouraged the feudal lords to move out of mountain fortresses and into “flatland castles” out on the plains. This encouraged the development of better fortifications to keep attackers away from the central compounds where the lords resided.
- **protect from firearms**, which had been introduced to Japan by Portuguese explorers in 1543. The distinctively white exterior of Himeji Castle is due to the plaster that was used to make the walls more flame-retardant.
- **protect against musket balls** which had a fairly limited range but were devastating from close-range. The engineers built numerous switchback gates to prevent attackers from approaching the central compound. Unlike earlier castles, the walls and the gates incorporated a number of loopholes to allow the defenders to fire down at the attackers from a safe position.
- **The loopholes were different shapes** to allow different weapons to be used.<sup>5</sup> These loopholes, of different forms, possess an abstract beauty but their forms are determined by their function. Some were used by defenders armed with matchlock firearms, others by defenders armed with bows.<sup>6</sup>
- In East Asia, the castle as an architectural typology is unique to Japan. In neighbouring Korea and in China, the development of fortresses focused almost exclusively on walls and gates, with very little centralisation. At Himeji, as in most Japanese castles, the walls and fortifications are designed to prevent access to the central citadel. In Korea and China, walls

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<sup>4</sup> Cruickshank, p.293-4

<sup>5</sup> <http://orientalarchitecture.com/sid/182/japan/himeji/himeji-castle>

<sup>6</sup> Cruickshank, p.294

were built to enclose regions of space such as cities, but there is no central command post that catches the eye quite like the Japanese castle does.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

#### Ceramic Tile Roofs<sup>8</sup>

- In the typical image of a **traditional** Japanese building, the roof is covered with ceramic tile. Ceramic tile was introduced from China through the Chinese and Korean carpenters who built the first Buddhist shrines.
- The roofs are tall and large and with long overhanging eaves that have a gentle upward curve, a strong symbol of shelter and **social status** of wealth and power.
- The curves help the **aesthetic** sense of floating and upward lift rather than heaviness.
- Its heaviness and durability made it very popular for many different building types. Initially tile was too **expensive** for commoners to use.
- **Roofs could be merely tiled** as they did not have to withstand plunging shot.

#### Plaster Walls

- **“Walls could be relatively slight** although the seemingly plaster-made white-painted walls of the upper buildings are in fact very thick and made of a tough composition of sand and clay bound with rice glue that is impenetrable to matchlock balls.”<sup>9</sup>

#### Stone Foundations<sup>10</sup>

- The construction was of such magnitude that the supply of good quality stones grew scarce, and the engineers were forced to loot gravestones and even coffins to gather the necessary materials.<sup>11</sup>
- **Visually** the size of the podium helps to balance the perceived weight of the roof, creating a pleasantly proportioned building.
- The podium adds to the **monumentality** and feeling of power, as castle-builders used it in an exaggerated way that greatly increases the height and enhances the sense of centrality of power of the castle complex.
- Since the castles were built by the feudal lords in more peaceful times as a display of **power and wealth** as much as – or sometimes even more than – for defensive purposes, the high foundations played an important role both in physically elevating the buildings and in adding to the overall perceived sense of height.
- **There is a slight curve to the steep sides**, which creates a beautiful transition from the ground to the building itself. Although constructed from many different sizes and shapes of stones, the stones are fitted together very tightly, and the sides of the castle foundations are effectively impossible to climb.
- Invading troops therefore had to follow the narrow twisting set paths, allowing defenders to anticipate their movements and easily defend the castle.

#### Water Moats<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <http://orientalarchitecture.com/sid/182/japan/himeji/himeji-castle>

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Locher, p.93-94

<sup>9</sup> Cruickshank, p.293-4

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from Locher, p.100-101.

<sup>11</sup> <http://orientalarchitecture.com/sid/182/japan/himeji/himeji-castle>

- The three moats – inner, middle, and outer – serve as three lines of defence.
- The moats were always full of water and prevented the enemy from completing an attack or siege in a short period of time.
- The rationale behind the moats was that the enemy would be forced to unload materials and supplies and then to transport them across the water in a slow and inefficient manner. By the time the enemy had got past the third moat, their strength and reserves were considerably lessened.

### **Harmony of Humans and Nature**

Himeji Castle stands as the best preserved example of medieval castle architecture in all of Japan. It stands as a monument not only to the skill of the builders but also to the Japanese concept of harmony between humans and nature. In fact it derives its name White Egret Castle partly from the fact that it appears as a bird ready for flight. The skilled artisans, particularly those under Terumasa's reign, were able to transform the basic elements of nature – stone, wood, and water – into a refined and elegant structure. The incorporation of a residence and a military compound into a structure of enduring physical beauty suggests that not only is the integration of humans and nature advantageous, but it can also be a better way of life.<sup>13</sup> The large ornamental tiles used at the end of the roof ridges mimic natural shapes and are called *shachi-gawara* (grampus dolphin-shaped roof tiles).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/V3613/himeji/tpage.htm](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/V3613/himeji/tpage.htm)

<sup>13</sup> [www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/V3613/himeji/tpage.htm](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/V3613/himeji/tpage.htm)

<sup>14</sup> Locher, p.87

## Plan of Himeji Castle



Plan of the Castle, drawn by Timothy M. Ciccone. Digital image courtesy of [www.orientalarchitecture.com](http://www.orientalarchitecture.com)

### FURTHER READING AND LINKS

[www.orientalarchitecture.com](http://www.orientalarchitecture.com)

[www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/V3613/himeji/tpage.htm](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/V3613/himeji/tpage.htm)

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