

Power, Prestige, and Protection: Himeji-jō, the White Heron Castle

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Throughout the shōgunate era of Japanese history, encampments and fortifications were built across Japan as a means of strategic military control. Many fortifications evolved into castles which then became the primary symbol of political power for the battling *daimyō*, or warlords. First erected in 1333 and completed in its final and present form in 1618 after three major expansions, the Himeji-jō is a Japanese castle located in the Himeji city of Harima Province, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan.¹ It is a product of marked political ambition and architectural achievement combined with complex technological innovations in strategic defense. Throughout its service the Himeji-jō exchanged its ownership several times and was a highly important strategic site for *daimyō* who fought for dominance of Japan. The castle is a testament to the political turmoil of the Sengoku era which lasted from the middle of the fifteenth century to the early seventeenth century, and it offers a wealth of information regarding the architectural innovations of the time. What is most significant about the Himeji-jō is not its architectural beauty or the interpretation of it as a work of art. Instead, the castle should be seen as a political tool used effectively by the various *daimyō* who controlled it, and any advancement in architecture or perceived aesthetics should be attributed as consequences of its use as an icon of power, as a center of political control, and as a strategic, defensive fort.

The history of the construction of Himeji-jō is colored by rulers seeking to claim its ownership and make expansions on the already immense structure. The Himeji-jō played a key political role in the campaign of many warlords vying for control of Western Japan. The site on which the castle rests was first fortified by Akamatsu Sadanori in 1346 who built a primitive fort that could scarcely be classified as a castle, followed by the Kodera and Yamane families. By 1577 the owner had switched to Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a follower of the powerful *daimyō* named Oda Nobunaga who, at the time, was at the peak of his influence and prestige. Nobunaga ordered Hideyoshi to build the castle as a strategic base for Japan, a command to which Hideyoshi complied by adding a three-story fortified tower.² Five years later, after Hideyoshi's later expansion of the Himeji-jō and subsequent defeat at the Battle of Sekigahara, the victorious *shōgun* Tokugawa Ieyasu stationed his *daimyō* Terumasa Ikeda at the castle. Dramatic modifications to the Himeji-jō soon appeared under Terumasa's guidance, including the demolishment of the keep that Hideyoshi built, the rebuilding of the entire castle complex, and the installment of middle and outer moat systems. After both Terumasa's and his son's deaths, Tadamasa Honda, one of Tokugawa Ieyasu's legendary four generals known as the *shitennō*, inherited the castle in 1617. Tadamasa ordered further expansion of Himeji-jō, extending it with more buildings, including a tower known as the *keshō-yagura*, or "cosmetics tower", where his daughter-in-law, Princess Sen, was dressed. These new buildings served to

¹ Motoo Hinago, *Japanese Castles* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd. and Shibundo 1986) p. 121.

² Ibid, 121.

house and protect the noblemen and further demonstrate the power of the Lord of Himeji. For Tadamasa, the expansion also asserted his authority and control over his assigned territory. Besides the buildings, many new compounds were built where the noblemen would conduct their cultural traditions in their aristocratic lifestyles, dramatically increasing the total area occupied by the Himeji-jō. Thus, the castle grounds grew as a consequence of the need to establish political control by asserting its authority and the need to support the clan culture in the traditions of rituals of feudal Japan. The presence and iconic beauty of the Himeji-jō reminded onlookers of the power of the warlord, and the size of the entire compound gave room to inhabitants who could live inside the complex knowing that they were safe from harm.

The Himeji-jō was first established as a castle by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1581, a time when it was most likely smaller in size than Oda Nobunaga's magnificent Azuchi-jō. However, after Ikeda Terumasa's expansion of the castle which finished in 1614, it became one of the largest castles ever built in the world. The Himeji-jō is composed of a main *tenshu* (a central keep), several smaller nearby *tenshu*, and an organized system of compounds, all separated by stone and masonry walls. The entire castle complex is surrounded by a moat that serves as another line of defense. Beyond the moat is a residential area reserved for warriors, and at the edge of these residences is another outer moat, on the other side of which lies the residential area for normal citizens who were typically merchants or peasants.³ This entire city system was surrounded by another wall around its perimeter. With this many layers of barricades and such awe-inspiring architecture in the main compounds, the Himeji-jō served as an important center of control as well as a model example of defense technologies employed during the feudal era of Japan. The core icon of the castle was without question the extravagantly built Great Tenshu with its five stories, five layers of intricate roof designs, and an impressive, beautiful white exterior. The importance of this *tenshu* was further compounded by the three surrounding smaller *tenshu* which draw the viewer's attention to the *tenshu* they surrounded. Few other castles matched the number of *tenshu* featured by the Himeji-jō. So the *tenshu* further emphasized the castle's role as the center of command for the daimyō living at the base of the structure, and it particularly demanded respect and obedience from all visitors not part of the daimyō's family or warriors.

The Himeji-jō is also known as the *Shirasagi-jō*, or the White Heron Castle, which pays homage to the *Sagi-yama* (Heron Mountain), the hill on which the *nishinomaru* (West Compound) of the castle was built.⁴ Owing to the aesthetic importance placed upon castles by the shōgunate of the time, the castle is visually elegant with its walls painted pure white. The Himeji-jō is representative of the most dramatic castles built in the feudal era with smooth, curving walls, elegant designs, and many layers of roof that the Japanese historian Motoo Hinago describes as proliferating "to the point of seeming absurdity."⁵ Its sheer splendor speaks of powerful warlords eager to display their prosperity and power to those who gazed upon the establishment. Indeed, the castle has undergone so many expansions that its *tenshu* complex, the main tower of the castle, is the grandest of all Japanese castles with its five-story Great

³ Ibid, 122.

⁴ Ibid, 124.

⁵ Ibid, 14.

Tenshu.⁶ In fact, the Himeji-jō is the largest extant castle in Japan and uncontestedly overshadows even the largest castles of Europe. The castle grounds in their final form stretch around two large separated hills with an enormous ring of walls enclosing an organized system of castle compounds, towers, and the housing of the townspeople population. One may be awestruck by the sheer vastness of the Himeji-jō when realizing that within the castle's perimeter one could place all four of Edward I's largest castles, including the Caernarvon, the Conway, the Harlech, and the Beaumaris.⁷

Besides the Great Tenshu and the smaller *tenshu*, there are an abundance of other buildings, compounds, towers, and connecting corridors. Their placement in the design of the castle grounds is largely based upon the geography of the land upon which the castle was built. The Himeji-jō is built atop two shallow hills on the Harima plain approximately six kilometers from the Inland Sea coast. The eastern hill is known as the *Hime-yama*, or "Princess Mountain," while the western hill is the aforementioned *Sagi-yama*. The *Hime-yama* included the *honmaru* (Primary Compound) and the *ninomaru* (Secondary Compound) compounds, while the *Sagi-yama* featured the *nishinomaru*. On the plain immediately south of these topological features is another compound known as the *sannomaru* (Tertiary Compound). The *honmaru* incorporates another smaller compound known as the Bizen Maru, named for Tokugawa's rule of the Bizen Domain to the west. The *ninomaru* includes a small, surrounded courtyard named the Seppuku Maru, designed for the warriors and/or warlords to commit *seppuku*, or Japanese ritual suicide, should the castle fall to an enemy attack. The main castle complex spans these two hills and covers an area of about 200,000 square meters, a fourth of that figure accounted by the area that the two hills occupy. The whole complex includes sixteen gateways and about one kilometer of plastered wall. In total there are thirty-seven buildings that are extant at the Himeji-jō grounds.⁸

Indeed, the Himeji-jō presents us with the image of the representative feudal castle built by the most powerful warlords, its power spanning from its earliest castle stages in 1581 to its present state completed in 1617, after both Terumasa's reconstruction and Tadamasa's expansion. The architecture and defense technologies of the times showed great progress and improvement, and the Himeji-jō was the culmination of architectural skill, defensive war strategy, and an undeniable mark of prestige. Scholar Hirai Kiyoshi observes:

[The] Himeji Castle is representative of castle construction at its peak, in regard to both its defense structures and its general design. The donjon [*tenshu*] of Himeji Castle was one of the most heavily fortified donjons built. In order to enter the donjon complex several gates had to be passed, and even if invaders successfully broke through all these gates they would only gain entry to a yard where they would encounter an assault from four donjons and the connecting corridors.⁹

Additionally, the castle town outside of the actual castle was built with roads that did not necessarily penetrate completely from outside the town to the castle grounds themselves. This

⁶ Ibid, 124.

⁷ Ibid, 14.

⁸ Ibid, 122-125.

⁹ Hirai Kiyoshi, *Feudal Architecture of Japan* (Tokyo: Heibonsha 1973) p. 40.

prevented enemy intruders from straightforwardly discovering a direct path to the castle complex. Thus the Himeji-jō was built to withstand even the most formidable attacks from its many enemies. As was the case with most attacks taken upon castles, the enemy would often resort to prolonged siege, as attacking a castle directly was incredibly difficult and usually involved launching uphill offensives which were much too costly as the defenders could handily kill the invaders by shooting projectiles downhill while they were shielded naturally by advantage of terrain. Although the *samurai* culture of the time encouraged warriors to fight outside the castle and away from the townspeople, this custom was not one set in stone, and many *daimyō* found it far wiser to stay in the shelter of their *tenshu* and simply wait for the siege to pass. Thus the Himeji-jō had storages for food and a kitchen in the *tenshu* for times of siege which could drag on from weeks to months or years.

The present form of the Himeji-jō is almost completely preserved in the form it was in after the final expansions of the castle lead by Honda Tadamasa. Its architecture exhibits a collection of strategic and aesthetic elements often combined such that the structure appeared powerful and impenetrable while impressing onlookers with its sheer beauty. The stone walls of the castle were built characteristically curved inward, a feature that distinguishes itself from European castles and was prominent as it served to diminish the damaging effects of earthquakes. In fact, a major design element of Japanese castle architecture is the emphasis on earthquake resistance due to the incessant barrage of earthquakes buildings received over the years. The complexes inside Himeji-jō's enclosure also have many architectural ideas taken from China, including the castle floor plan, the building designs, and most noticeably the roofs. All the roofs of the buildings in the complex were generously placed layer upon layer, especially, as mentioned before, for the Great Tenshu, upon which there is a roof for each of its five stories.¹⁰ If one considers the vast amount of effort required for building all this architecture which conferred no real utility and therefore not entirely necessary, one can easily see the expensive amount of importance the feudal era of Japan placed upon castle during times of constant war and strife. Indeed, Nobunaga set aside a room in his Azuchi-jō in order to hold the position of a retired emperor:

The adoption of an imperial prince meant that Nobunaga would become the father-in-law of the next Emperor, thus assuring him of a position analogous to that held by a retired Emperor. Also, the fact that he set aside in the Azuchi castle a special room for imperial visits clearly indicated his anticipation that the adopted prince, after ascending the throne, would make frequent imperial visits to his father-in-law.¹¹

With such importance placed upon castles in the feudal era it comes as no surprise that such care and effort was taken in building the grandest and strikingly beautiful castles, indubitably as a point of competition. After the Tokugawa victory at the Battle of Sekigahara, the triumphant clan ordered the demolition of all but one castle in each province, increasing the significance of the remaining castles. The less extravagant castles, losing the political competition, were thus destroyed in favor of the majestic, supreme castles which suddenly

¹⁰ Ibid, 37.

¹¹ Wakita Osamu, "The Emergence of the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan: From Oda to Tokugawa," *Journal of Japanese Studies* Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer, 1982) p. 349.

acquired newfound control of the territories once dominated by the obliterated castles.¹² The consolidation of power by the Tokugawa also diminished the role of the castle as a defensive fort while emphasizing its role as a governing headquarters. As less attention was given to a castle town's defensive capabilities since military conflicts virtually ceased to exist, *daimyō* followed the practice of the aristocracy at Edo Castle and further diminished the independence of their vassals by moving them into the castle grounds.¹³ Political power condensed and concentrated itself at the castle towns of each province, and competition between provinces became better defined with fewer but more powerful *daimyō*. The interaction between castle architecture and political competition rapidly propelled architectural styles forward in the relatively short span of twenty-five years before the first construction of Himeji-jō to the finished form of the castle.

Therefore, the Himeji-jō, much like other castles, experienced a change from its function as a safe haven and strategic military fortification to a provincial governing center. At the same time, the political ecosystem at the castle also evolved with changing ownership from clan to clan during the tumultuous battle-stricken times of the Sengoku era. After the Tokugawa clan takeover of the castle and the end of constant strife, the Himeji-jō naturally adopted the Tokugawa traditions of ranking warriors and officials. Titles indicating status and position were sought after in the aristocratic castle nobility. The holder of a castle was automatically bestowed prestige and promotion in rank. Indeed, many nobles found aristocratic life difficult without owning a castle and may never have risen up through the ranks. By contrast, as the holder of Himeji-jō, Honda Tadamasa held the title of Lord of Himeji, already placing himself at a relatively high rank in the Tokugawa culture. The imperial court at the capital city of Kyōto at the time was being gradually overthrown by the dominant Tokugawa family who ruled from the Edo Castle, allowing Tadamasa, a fiercely loyal member of the Tokugawa clan, to claim the Himeji Domain and its capital Himeji-jō with ever more political significance, marking himself as one of high noble status. As the Tokugawa noble society and political atmosphere became more well-defined, the worth of holding a castle became quite apparent. According to scholar Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, *daimyō* were quite self-conscious about their rank and title, as they were "constantly reminded ... of [their] proper place in the socio-political hierarchy."¹⁴ As an integral part of the noble culture, a *daimyō* had to "use [certain] imperial honorifics whenever he introduced himself to and spoke with or about others, or whenever he signed or addressed documents."¹⁵

In conclusion, the Himeji-jō was a symbol of tremendous consequence and a constant subject of political intrigue. Not only was it built at a strategic location and used as a means of control throughout the Himeji Domain, but it also was integral in establishing one's reputation in the political ecosystem. A *daimyō* could dramatically demonstrate his worth by claiming ownership and control of a castle as holding one provided rank and honors to the castle holder. One can then see that Tokugawa's designation of Himeji-jō to Terumasa must have been a life-

¹² John Whitney Hall, "The Castle Town and Japan's Modern Urbanization," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* Vol. 15, No. 1 (November 1955), p. 44.

¹³ Ibid, 45.

¹⁴ Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, "In Name Only: Imperial Sovereignty in Early Modern Japan," *Journal of Japanese Studies* Vol. 17, No. 1 (Winter, 1991) p. 40-41.

¹⁵ Ibid.

changing milestone for the *daimyō*, and one can then also conclude with little doubt that Terumasa's expansion of the Himeji-jō was an attempt to expand his own political significance and gain higher recognition among the Tokugawa nobles. The province of Himeji, Harima Province, was governed by the Himeji Domain, the capital of which was the Himeji-jō after Tokugawa's 1615 edict to consolidate the castle powers. Consequently the castle gained prominence and gave its aristocrats influence among the nobility, emphasizing its own majesty with an intricate, sophisticated architecture of elegantly curved walls, plentiful layers of roofs, and brilliant white exterior extending across the castle grounds' 200,000 square meters or 2,000,000 square feet of land.¹⁶ So while Himeji-jō's involvement as a military institution was the primary concern during the Sengoku Period, its contribution in the politics of the post-Sengoku era is just as prominent, if not greater in magnitude, than it had in the pre-Tokugawa shōgunate. Indeed, the White Heron Castle is a magnificent testament to the history of the times, and its undeniable significance in feudal Japanese history along with its awe-inspiring appearance proves itself even today as it is a designated national treasure of Japan and a UNESCO World Heritage Site which attracts almost a million visitors to its grounds each year.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hinago, 122.

¹⁷ Yosuke Sakurai, "A hilltop white heron 400 years old: Embracing World Heritage," *The Daily Yomiuri*, sec. Columns, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/columns/0005/lens146.htm> (accessed October 20, 2012).

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