

Himeji's Evolution

From Hill Fort to Castle

Though the present Himeji Castle dates back to the early seventeenth century, there has been fortifications on this site since the mid-fourteenth century. Akamatsu Sadanori (1306–1374), a local warlord, is believed to have been the first to build a permanent structure here, erecting a simple fort on what was then a small hill overlooking the Himeji Plain. More than two centuries later, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) turned Himeji into a full-fledged castle. Hideyoshi re-unified Japan after more than a century of civil war. He took control of the surrounding province of Harima in 1580, and he afterward built a three-story keep and bailey on the site of Akamatsu's old fort.

The Birth of the “White Heron Castle”

When Ikeda Terumasa (1565–1613) became the lord of Himeji in 1600, he replaced Hideyoshi's three-story keep with the structure we see today: a white-walled, five-story main keep with three smaller adjacent towers. He undertook a sweeping renovation of the castle grounds, adding many new stone walls. He expanded the fortified town around the castle proper, encircling the whole area with a moat and earthen embankments. He also built a canal to link the town to the southern port of Shikamatsu, facilitating transport of supplies to Himeji from the sea.

Himeji as Administrative Center

Structures were added to the West Bailey under Honda Tadamasa (1575–1631), lord of Himeji from 1617 to 1631. Tadamasa built a palace for his heir, Tadatoki (1596–1626), and erected the bailey's long fortified gallery, an addition that strengthened the castle's defenses and expanded its living quarters. He moved his own residence and offices from the cramped bailey next to the keep to the more spacious Third Bailey. The remodeling reflected Himeji's shifting role: with the end of Japan's long period of civil war, the castle became less a military installation and more a center for local administration.