

Himeji's Defenses

A Military Stronghold

Himeji occupied a strategic location along the corridor between Kansai—specifically, the important cities of Osaka and Kyoto—and the rest of western Japan. When Ikeda Terumasa (1565–1613) took over as lord of the castle, he expanded and renovated its defenses. Between 1601 and 1609, Terumasa fortified the surrounding town with moats and earthen embankments and built a new, larger keep whose white plaster walls gave the fortress its nickname, “White Heron Castle.” Terumasa’s new Himeji had three layers of defense: the outer town, a middle ring of neighborhoods inhabited by samurai, and a central zone that contained the castle proper.

Castle and Town: Himeji's Fortifications

Siege Defenses

Storehouses in the *uchi-kuruwa*—the castle town’s central defensive ring—contained food and fuel and could double as samurai barracks during a siege. Weapons and supplies were stored in the main keep and its three auxiliary towers.

Gates

Entering the castle required passing through a series of heavily fortified gates. Built into the earthworks on the inner banks of moats, these gates are protected by stone walls, steep walkways, and watchtowers.

White Walls: Fireproofing with Style

Fire was an ever-present danger for Japanese castles, which were made mostly of wood. The lime-based white plaster on Himeji’s walls is not only fire resistant, but attractive: the majestic castle embodied the authority of the shogunate, visually signaling the arrival of a new era.

Loopholes for gunners and archers

Stone-dropping holes

Stone-throwing platforms

Hiding places for defenders

Weapon racks

West Bailey Watchtowers

The West Bailey was developed by Honda Tadamasa (1575–1631). He surrounded the

area with earthen walls and watchtowers and had the new structures finished with the same fire-resistant white plaster used in other parts of the castle. The walls of the towers were made extra thick to withstand firearms. A long gallery connected the towers, and stone-dropping holes and loopholes for archers and gunners were added for extra protection.