

Maruoka Castle ruins

The area around Maruoka Castle in Tsuruoka was first developed in 716 when about 400 families were relocated from present-day Fukui and Nagano prefectures by the ruling Yamato regime in Nara.

The move was intended to support the commercial growth and defense capabilities of Dewa province (in modern-day Yamagata Prefecture). The area was named by the new inhabitants from Maruoka Echizen.

Maruoka Castle is believed to have been built during the Kamakura period (1185–1333). It began as a branch castle controlled by the Muto family, who ruled the region until the latter 16 century.

After that, the castle changed hands several times under an extended period of civil unrest. It played a key role in protecting the only direct route from the Shonai region on the coast to the inner parts of Dewa province. The route was used by merchants transporting salt and by pilgrims traveling to Mt. Haguro as part of their tour of the Dewa Sanzan (three sacred mountains of Dewa).

In 1600, the Battle of Sekigahara brought an end to centuries of warlord rivalry and conflict. Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) claimed a decisive victory and established the shogunate with central control over all domains in the country. New castles were built on flat land and became centers of commerce and politics, with merchants, samurai, and artisans living in the towns around them. At that time, Maruoka Castle was controlled by the Mogami family.

In 1615, after the Tokugawa shogunate issued a decree that there should be only one castle in each domain (*ikkoku ichijo*), the Mogami family was displaced and Maruoka Castle abandoned. In 1622, control of the castle was assigned to the Sakai family.

In 1632, the shogunate under Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651) disciplined Kato Tadahiro (1600–1653), the young daimyo of the Kumamoto domain in Kyushu, confiscating his domain and exiling him to the Dewa area to the north on the Japan Sea side of the country. Tadahiro was assigned to Maruoka, a territory valued at 10,000 *koku* (one *koku* equals five bushels of rice, enough to feed one person for one year), but placed him under the supervision of Sakai Tadakatsu, the daimyo of the Shonai domain.

The Kato of Kumamoto were a high-ranking and respected daimyo family, as Tadahiro's father, Kiyomasa (1562–1611), was a famous general and had sided with Ieyasu at the Battle of Sekigahara. The Sakai family took pity on Tadahiro, refurbishing Maruoka Castle for him and establishing the Dewa Maruoka domain with Tadahiro as daimyo, although the Shonai domain officially retained control of the area. Tadahiro led a comfortable and simple life at the castle. Upon his death in 1653, it was abandoned and reverted to direct control of the shogunate.

Today, only the castle's inner moat and earthen foundations remain. Within the grounds are a shrine, a reproduction of the original water channel and moat, and the main stones once used in the castle's garden. A monument to Tadahiro's father, Kiyomasa, is located at the adjacent Tentakuji Temple.

The castle grounds are designated a historic site by Yamagata Prefecture and today serve as a community park of Tsuruoka city.