

Nanao Castle Site

Nanao Castle was considered impenetrable when it was built in the early sixteenth century. It was the home fortress of the Noto branch of the Hatakeyama family, who governed the Noto Peninsula from the late fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. The castle and defensive works were built in the first half of the sixteenth century, though the exact dates are unknown. It encompassed the upper reaches of Mt. Jo (300 m), stretching 2.5 kilometers north to south and 1 kilometer east to west.

A complex power dynamic

Multiple enclosures were built on the mountain ridges, with natural protection provided by steep cliffs and valleys supplemented by earthworks, stone ramparts, and fences. The castle compound functioned like a small city with walled enclosures for the senior retainers, storehouses, a temple, an armory, and a horse-riding ground. The residences for the senior retainers were large, and their scale indicated the significant power they wielded within the Hatakeyama family. By the mid-sixteenth century, a group of seven senior retainers managed Hatakeyama affairs and essentially controlled the region. Over several generations, rivalries developed among the retainers, and loyalties shifted.

Remains of an impressive fortress

Walking through what remains of the castle grounds, visitors get a sense of how it might have looked in the sixteenth century. A bridge now crosses a man-made valley, dug to slow attackers. A winding path through a cedar forest is lined on one side by ramparts, a perilous slope on the other. Two defensive enclosures, the *ninomaru* and the *sannomaru*, are separated by another man-made valley. A number of wells, which supplied the compound with water, can still be seen. Signboards around the site indicate how the castle stronghold may have looked in the sixteenth century, based on historical records and excavations.

The *honmaru*, or main bailey, is at the summit of the mountain and commands views across Nanao Bay. It was well protected by the enclosures and the fortifications of the Hatakeyama retainers' residences. Nanao Castle would likely have comprised single-story wooden structures. None of the original buildings remain, but some of the surrounding ramparts, constructed with formidable interlocking stonework, are in their original state.

A castle city under siege

The defensive strength of Nanao Castle became its weakness: the castle complex could be completely closed to the outside, but with no way in or out, it could also be held under siege. For several months in 1576 and again in 1577, the warlord Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578) laid siege to the castle in his campaign to take over the coastal provinces along the Sea of Japan. He finally breached the castle defenses in the autumn of 1577. Some of the soldiers and civilians inside had been weakened by disease during the siege. Accounts suggest that Yusa Tsugumitsu, one of the Hatakeyama family's influential retainers, secretly supported Kenshin and turned against the Hatakeyama, killing head retainer Cho Tsugutsura, and opening the castle gates to the enemy. The Hatakeyama had requested help from Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582)—the powerful warlord who fought to unify Japan under his rule—but help did not arrive in time.

A castle abandoned

Uesugi Kenshin took possession of the castle, but he died the following spring. After Kenshin's death, Oda Nobunaga took control of the Noto Peninsula and Nanao Castle, which he awarded to his general Maeda Toshiie (1538–1599) in 1581. Toshiie further fortified the castle but made his home closer to Nanao Port, which was more convenient for transport and governance. The castle was abandoned in 1589, but some of the fortification walls Toshiie added remain.

After Nanao Castle was abandoned, the surrounding cedar forests were preserved, and they retain the original atmosphere of the castle's surroundings. Stone steps lead to the site of the main keep (Honmaru), where a shrine was constructed by Hatakeyama descendants in 1934. The site of the main keep commands views over the city of Nanao.

There is a parking area a short walk from the steps to the Honmaru. Visitors can also walk to the main keep from the base of the mountain. The route starts near the Nanao Castle History Museum and takes about one hour.