Oka Castle Ruins

The Oka Castle Ruins site overlooks the city of Taketa from its location on a flattened hilltop. A castle has stood on this site more than 800 years, and the formidable stone ramparts that line the steep hillsides and remains of towering walls that once defended the castle from attack offer glimpses of Edo-period (1603–1867) castle architecture. The Kuju mountain range, as well as Mt. Sobo and the active volcano Mt. Aso, are visible from the top of the site.

It is believed a structure was first built on the hill in 1185 to hide Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189), a hero of the Genpei War (1180–1185). This civil war between the Minamoto and Taira clans led to the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate, the first warrior-led government to rule Japan. A permanent castle was constructed in the fourteenth century by the Shiga family, which governed the area for the Otomo warrior family.

In 1593, to punish the Shiga family for having failed in an invasion of the Korean peninsula, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), the de facto ruler of Japan at the time, ordered them to leave Oka Castle. The Shiga were replaced by the Nakagawa family, which relocated from what is now Hyogo Prefecture in central Japan. The Nakagawa remained at Oka Castle for 277 years until 1874, when the fortress was demolished in the wake of the Meiji Restoration, with which warrior rule came to an end and a new government embarked on modernization of the country.

Many of the fortifications constructed by the Nakagawa family remain at the site. These include several imposing stone walls along the path to the summit. Embedded in some of these walls are giant flattened stones called *kagami-ishi* ("mirror stones"), which were placed there as displays of power. Even in its ruined form, the site has remained influential—it inspired renowned composer Taki Rentaro (1879–1903), who spent part of his childhood in Taketa, to write his most famous song, *Kojo no tsuki* (The Moon over the Ruined Castle). Today, a statue of Taki stands at the site.