

The Nihonmatsu Castle *Honmaru*

A Japanese castle's *honmaru* is its main compound, surrounded by walls and designed to be defended against the fiercest attack. In most castles, the *honmaru* contained a towering keep called a *tenshu* as well as other buildings used for living quarters, domain administration, and storage. When a battle went against the castle's defenders, the *honmaru* was where they gathered to mount their final defense. If the enemy breached the *honmaru*, the battle was lost.

The stone walls around the *honmaru* during the Niwa family's tenure have been excavated and restored to give a sense of what the compound was like during its heyday. Because the *honmaru* occupied the high ground for greater defensibility, today its former site doubles as a lookout point with panoramic views of the city to the east and the Adatara massif to the west.

The Missing Keep

The northern corner of Nihonmatsu Castle's *honmaru* contains a raised square area called the *tenshudai*, or "keep foundation." Historians had long assumed that the keep that stood here had been destroyed when the castle burned in 1868, but careful archaeological work eventually revealed that a building was never constructed on the site.

Why Nihonmatsu Castle had a keep foundation but no keep is unclear, but the most likely explanation is political. By the time the lords of the castle had the funds to build a keep on top of the foundation, there was no plausible threat to defend against, and the Tokugawa shogunate saw no need to allow the domain to increase its military capabilities and enable a possible rebellion.

Defending the Gate

The only entrance to Nihonmatsu Castle's *honmaru* was the southern gate, which has now been restored to its former state. As in most castles of the time, the gate opened onto an enclosure with a hard right turn and a second gate before the *honmaru* proper. This was designed to make the gate more defensible by preventing potential attackers from charging in, and the enclosure also made a useful staging ground when defenders were preparing to charge out.