

## **Murakami Castle Site**

All that remains of Murakami Castle are stone ramparts, remnants of large gates, and the foundation stones of watchtowers on the forested summit of the 135-meter hill called Mt. Gagyu just east of central Murakami. The castle towered over the town for nearly 250 years during the Edo period (1603–1867) when daimyo lords governed the Murakami domain, yet it was never tested in battle.

Mt. Gagyu was first fortified in the early 1500s when conflicts between rival families drove a local warrior group to establish an outpost on the hill's eastern slope. The fortifications were composed mainly of dry moats and earthen walls, and made good use of the site's steep slopes as a defensive position.

Those early fortifications were abandoned in the early 1600s when the Tokugawa family unified the country and established a shogunate based in Edo (now Tokyo). The shogunate installed trusted retainers to serve as daimyo lords of domains such as Murakami that were situated in strategic

locations. The castle town expanded as successive daimyo built residences for the samurai in their service to the west of Mt. Gagyū. A new castle was built on the western edge of the hill, with high ramparts, stone walls, and a three-story wooden turret that stood on the hill's flattened peak.

Construction took more than 50 years.

The daimyo resided in a compound at the foot of the mountain near the entrance to the castle grounds, occasionally sending samurai to patrol the hilltop. The Edo period was a time of relative peace, and the castle was important mainly as a source of prestige for the daimyo. This is reflected in some surviving sections of the ramparts. Large stones were painstakingly cut and stacked together in a process that achieved a perfectly smooth surface but added no defensive advantage.

A fire caused by lightning destroyed the turret in 1667, but the rest of the castle endured for another two centuries. During the Boshin War (1868–69), fought between forces loyal to the shogunate and those who supported a return to imperial rule, the Murakami samurai set fire to the daimyo's compound to prevent it from falling into the hands of the

advancing enemy. However, no combat took place at the castle, which was

dismantled in 1875, as the new government embarked on the modernization of the country with Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) as its figurehead.

The hilltop site of Murakami Castle can be reached in about 15 minutes by hiking up a slope with nine sharp turns. The site commands a view of the former castle town, the Miomote River, and the Sea of Japan.