

# The Majestic Okayama Castle: Legacy of the Great Unifiers

## Chapter 1: Prologue



Welcome to Okayama Castle! The black tenshu, the castle tower, stands over the Asahi River. Beautiful, isn't it? Today, this drone will be your eyes and guide you through Okayama Castle. Let's get closer to the roof. Notice the complex layering and the unique silhouette. Very few castles in Japan possess such beautifully tiered roofing.



This tenshu was recently reconstructed, and holds memories from the Sengoku period to the present. It acts as a sort of time capsule.

That raises a question... Aren't you curious about its original appearance 430 years ago?

This tour is also a journey through time! Let's travel back to the time when the castle tower was first built.

Now, let's take flight... back to the Azuchi-Momoyama period!



## Chapter 2: The *Tenshu*, a Symbol of Authority

The year is 1597. Look there. The gold and black of the tenshu stand out brilliantly in the soft light.



The black walls are lavishly lacquered, looking like a suit of jet-black armor. The gilded roof tiles signify the highest status of the time. The castle lord, Ukita Hideie, became one of the Five Elders of the Toyotomi regime.

A privilege granted to Hideyoshi's favorite, it was a symbol of his meteoric rise to power.

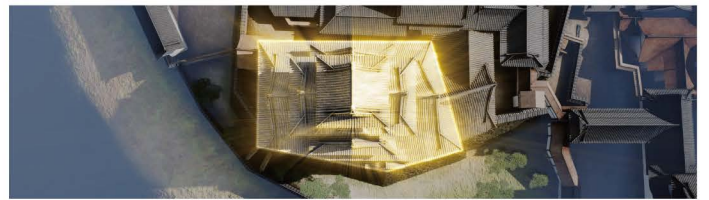


Let's look at the base of the tenshu! It may look like an ordinary stone wall. Still, it boasted some of Japan's tallest stone walls at the time.

From this view, the wall is imposing and unclimbable. It's a silent show of the lord's power.

Behold this unique shape!

The base is a mysterious, irregular pentagon.



This design can be traced back to Nobunaga's Azuchi Castle, which was influenced by Western architecture. You can see the aesthetic principles born from such a complex design still evident here in Okayama Castle. Even today, its complex structure creates a unique beauty, changing the expression of the tenshu from every angle.

## Chapter 3: The Castle Town's Growth Across Generations

By the way, do you know where the hill of "Okayama" really is? Actually, it exists right beneath this tenshu! Let's see how the town took shape.

First, Ukita Naoie and his son, Hideie, channeled the Asahi River into one.



Rerouting the Saigoku Kaido highway, building the Kyobashi Bridge, they drew trade and people to the castle.



Let's look a little further, around the year 1700.

Under Ikeda Tsunamasa, flood control stabilized the land.

He then founded Gokoen, the garden we now call Okayama Korakuen Garden. This was the golden age of the town of Okayama. The streets of Okayama we walk today are blueprints for prosperity passed down through generations.



#### Chapter 4: The *Honmaru* in Its Heyday

The year is 1700, the time of Ikeda Tsunamasa. Let's look at the Honmaru inner bailey at its peak. Inside the three-tiered walls, many buildings stand crowded. This structure is the key.



Dividing the Honmaru into multiple tiers is a style shared with Nobunaga's Azuchi Castle and Hideyoshi's Osaka Castle. Even here, Okayama Castle shows the status of a unifier.

Behind the Meyasubashi Bridge sits the Onando-yagura Turret. To the left are the Uchigeba-mon Gate and the Taiko-yagura Turret.

First, defensive structures from the Sengoku period greet us. Now, let's enter the Honmaru as if we were vassals. Past the gate, a massive kagami-ishi, or mirror stone, confronts us. The gatehouse turret reveals only darkness through the shutters.



Are there arrows or guns? You feel the lingering tension of the perilous Sengoku period.

Passing the guardhouse and moving forward, the Onando-yagura Turret towers ahead. It's so massive that it looks like a second tenshu.



This turret stored the domain's documents and treasures. Legend has it that in the event of a fire, ninjas would carry them out. Doesn't that sound exciting? In the back, white turrets stand in a row. The black and white walls mark the different times of their origin. We can simply call them "Ukita's Black" and "Ikeda's White." This contrast reveals the depth of Okayama Castle's history.

By the stairs to the middle tier is the attendants' bench, waiting room for subordinates.

The samurai world was very strict. Beyond this point, only permitted samurai could enter. Attendants sat here, waiting for their masters.

This bench has now been restored.

Why not stop by on your way back?



Now, for the chosen few vassals, we head toward the palace known as the Omote-shoin.

**"Open the gate!"**

Come, step inside the gate with me.

The Omote-shoin was a massive ceremonial hall seating hundreds. With over 60 various rooms, many vassals waited at their respective posts.



New Year's ceremonies were held in the Grand Hall.

Records say the lord received greetings on the first day, and on the second, they shared crane soup.

Major ceremonies like these were held over several days.

Tsunamasa loved Noh theater, so there was a stage in the back. Eventually, the stage was dismantled. It is said that it was not lost but moved to Okayama Korakuen Garden.

Next is the Hondan, the upper level.

The Akazu-no-mon Gate is usually closed, but today is special. Let's head up to the Hondan through this gate.

At the top is the Hondan Palace, the lord's private residence.



The Nagatsubone at the back housed the female attendants. It was similar to the Ooku in Edo Castle. They likely walked to the lord's quarters at the back left every night. Tsunamasa had many children. This palace was surely lively with voices shouting, **"Young master, no running in the halls!"** Unlike the tense atmosphere of the hall, this was a space where daily life breathed. Over the roofs stands the black tenshu of Ukita Hideie. After touring the Honmaru, it feels even more imposing as the castle's symbol.



We now go to the white Tsukimi-yagura, the Ikeda's moon-viewing turret. Supported by neatly stacked uchikomi-hagi stone walls, it looks truly powerful. The small holes below the earthen wall are stone coping gun loops called kasaishi-jugan.



These were advanced defenses for their time, made to strike at enemies. But inside, it's a completely different world! A refined, elegant space with a veranda and high railings appears. Ikeda Tadao, who built this turret, was a descendant of Tokugawa Ieyasu. That may be why he could build a new turret.



From the second floor, the tenshu sits across the Omote-shoin. Let's go inside. In peaceful times, small banquets were likely held here while they gazed at the tenshu and the moon. "Peace" and "War." We see the coexistence of these two faces here. This is the great charm of the Tsukimi-yagura. As night deepens, both the people and the castle go to sleep.



Morning has come. Let's see the Honmaru in the morning through the Roka-mon Gate. The two-tier corridors were for the lord's exclusive use. The Hondan Palace, the lord's residence, the Omote-shoin, administrative halls, and the Hanabatake Palace, for his rest.



Note Connecting Corridor extending to Shita-no-dan (the lower tier), a rare architectural feat throughout Japan. Drawing inspiration from the legendary Azuchi Castle, it reflects the lord's awe of Nobunaga. The unifiers' prestige lives on in this lineage of Connecting Corridor.

Listen closely.

Can you hear the lord heading from his residence to work? By this time, the lives of vassals and townsfolk are stirring.

Another day at Okayama Castle begins.



## Chapter 5: Epilogue

Starting with Ukita Naoie, Hideie, then Kobayakawa, and then Ikeda... Okayama Castle has been refined and developed through the ages.

Protecting this heritage through changing times, this time capsule of the Sengoku period will inspire visitors and continue to tell its story.

Our journey ends here.

Once you return to the modern world, please come and find these traces yourself.

