THE NIJO CASTLE, KYOTO

The Shoguns’ Castle in the Imperial City

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The first Europeans arrived in Japan in 1543. Some writers say 1542, but 1543 is the more likely date when a few Portuguese traders were blown off course and landed on a small island off Kyushu. They arrived at a time of strife and almost endemic warfare among feudal lords. Most were small local military leaders whose headquarters were hilltop fortresses which hardly deserved the name of castle. The Portuguese brought with them muskets which interested the Japanese immensely. Before long they were manufacturing their own, and those leaders who used them best, developing European-like tactics and later using cannons, succeeded in gaining regional and, finally, national power. In the last thirty years of the sixteenth century there was such a building boom in castles and castle towns that some historians see it as the most rapid urbanisation in Japan’s history. Many of the castle towns founded then are now the important cities of Japan, including Edo, present-day Tokyo. The castles, with moats and huge walls of fitted stones, each weighing many tons, were built to withstand the firearms of the time.

The castle buildings, inspired by the Portuguese in Japan, were of utmost magnificence, meant to impress the people with the power and prosperity of the daimyo, the feudal lords. The introverted art of the previous period, understated and delicate, with sparing use of colour, suddenly became extrovert. Colour, including gold, came into lavish use. Large wall, screen and door paintings gave new scope to painters, who responded with work of remarkable boldness and strength.

The largest castle was in Edo, the residence and headquarters of the fifteen Tokugawa Shoguns who ruled Japan, preserving the continuity and legality of delegation from the Emperor, from 1603 until 1868, a period of peace and indigenous cultural development. But the castle has been greatly modified since 1868 to adapt it as the residence of a ‘modern’ Emperor. Most of Osaka Castle, like many others, was destroyed by the bombing in the last war. It has been rebuilt, but with modern materials, including much concrete. Himeji Castle, not much changed, is the most impressive fortification, but it has less historical importance for the Tokugawa period and much less art, than the Nijō Castle in Kyoto, the old Imperial capital.

In 1601, only a year after Tokugawa Ieyasu won control of the country at the Battle of Sekigahara, preparations were begun to build a castle in the centre of Kyoto, at the junction of Horikawa (Canal Street) and Nijō (Second Avenue). Work began in 1602, and was completed in 1603, just in time for Ieyasu to celebrate there his elevation by the Emperor (at Ieyasu’s suggestion) to the office of Shogun (complete title: Sei’i Tai Shōgun, Barbarian-quelling Generalissimo). The castle was surrounded by a moat and high fitted-stone walls with towers, but the residential, rather than the defensive, purpose of the castle was predominating. Since 1603, many structures, mostly wooden, have been added and subtracted, and one of the two fine gardens much changed.
Ieyasu built the castle as a residence for himself and for his successors when visiting the Imperial capital. It was also intended as the seat of the military governor appointed by the Shogun. The governor's chief duties were to oversee the Imperial court and regulate the already extremely limited access to the Emperor. But more than that, this castle, in what had been the Imperial city since 794 AD, permitted the Shogun to demonstrate his power and wealth to the people of Kyoto and of the Kansai region, far from his castle in Edo. The proclamation, in 1609, of Hidetada as the second Tokugawa Shogun, was made in the Nijō Castle. Ieyasu, who died in 1616, did this to assure the succession for his son. The castle did play a military role in 1614-1615, during the siege and battle of Osaka, just south of Kyoto, in which Ieyasu eliminated the last of his enemies. The strategy for the taking of Osaka Castle was worked out at the Nijō Castle, and when it was successful, Ieyasu staged a triumphal return to Nijō. In the same year (1615), the castle was enlarged by buildings and gates taken from Fushimi Castle, southeast of Kyoto. This movement of buildings was a simple matter, as they could be taken apart piece by piece.

The third Tokugawa Shogun, Iemitsu, instituted a two-year building project from 1624 to 1626 which added an inner castle surrounded by a wide moat and high walls on the southwest corner of which he erected a five-story donjon which afforded a complete view of Kyoto, then a city of some 500,000 inhabitants. The inner castle buildings, described then as 'splendid', were on almost the same scale as the outer ones, but all that is left today of this inner castle of 1626 are the walls and the moat, on which a pair of swans, introduced from Europe, are permitted to glide. A pleasant residence built in 1847 for Prince Katsura has been moved to the site from the old Imperial Palace.

Iemitsu's determination to enhance the prestige of the Shogun prompted this building project. Ostensibly, it was to prepare for the visit of the Emperor Gomizuo. This celebration was arranged, again, to impress the people with the power and grandeur of the Shogunate and also to demonstrate its policy of harmony and good will between the Shogun and Emperor, de facto and de jure sovereigns. The Emperor was entertained for five days, and climbed to the top of the new donjon for the view, wondering, perhaps, who owned all this splendour. As part of Tokugawa cultural policy, the castle had reached its peak of political importance, attaining its full panoply of splendid buildings, with their fine examples, commissioned by the Tokugawa clan, of the art of the Momoyama style which flourished in the early Tokugawa period.

Iemitsu's Shogunate marked a high point in Tokugawa political and economic power, but after 'abolishing' war and settling down to peace and

(Left) The Nijō Maru grand audience hall; (below) The Karamon Gate.
stability undisturbed by worries of possible rebellions, the Shogunate relied less and less on tough political and military means and more and more on routine institutional methods of control. To maintain ‘prestige’ in Iemitsu’s manner was considered neither necessary nor, increasingly, financially advisable. As a result, after Iemitsu’s last visit to Nijō in 1634, the castle fell on hard times. It remained the military governor’s headquarters, but on a smaller scale, and some buildings were moved elsewhere to serve other purposes. Storms and earthquakes damaged the buildings. In 1750, Iemitsu’s great donjon was set on fire by lightning and not replaced. In the great Kyoto fire of 1788, the castle was damaged and became temporarily derelict (‘one Japanese source is more poetic: ‘it became a residence for birds’). When it was repaired and partly rebuilt, it became a centre of political manoeuvre. In 1863, Ieshige, the first Shogun since Iemitsu to visit the castle, issued from there the statement that the barbarians (the Westerners) would be expelled from Japan. He was reasserting, under pressure, the applicability of the ‘barbarian-quelling’ part of his title, but neither he nor his advisers had any intention of carrying it out, knowing it was not then possible.

In 1866, Yoshinobu, who was to be the last Shogun, was proclaimed Shogun in Nijō Castle. In the following year, ironically, the castle Jeyasu built to assert the Shogunal predominance over the Imperial court became the scene of the announcement by Yoshinobu to assembled daimyo that he was returning the actual sovereignty to the Emperor. This too, was not quite what it seems. No one expected the Emperor to play any personal political role. Moreover, as the greatest fuedal lord, Yoshinobu expected to play a major part in any new government. Also, he suspected that neither the Emperor nor his feudal supporters possessed any adequate administrative organ and, in fact, they politely replied that ‘for the time being’, the Shogun could continue to administer the affairs of the country. Six years ago, when I visited the castle, a tableau of authentically-dressed dolls had been arranged in the chief audience room showing this scene. At present, the Shogun is not identified and he no longer has in his hand the document which proved for him a step towards deprivation of all his offices, but otherwise the tableau looks the same. Perhaps it was felt to be too sad a comment on the Tokugawa clan which, though its cultural policies had political purposes, did leave the nation a rich heritage in buildings, libraries, museums and objects of art.

It is likely that some paintings in the Ni no Maru (the connected series of reception and residential rooms which comprise the chief building of the outer castle) date from the original building of 1603, but it is generally agreed that most were added during Iemitsu’s rebuilding of 1624-26. There are important examples of wood-carvings and metalwork as well, and the architecture remaining from the early period is among the finest of its kind, but perhaps the greatest treasure, unequalled by any other Japanese castle, is the Kanō School paintings, especially those by Kanō Tanyū, Kanō Naonobu and their teacher, Kanō Kōi, on the many walls, sliding doors (fusuma) and cryptomeria wood doors (sugido).

One or two rather special features of the castle should be mentioned. The Ni no Maru, the oldest building, consists of a series of reception or audience rooms, council rooms, and the Shogunal apartments. To this last, the innermost series of rooms, no man could enter except the Shogun. His company there consisted of his consort (or consorts) and the ladies in waiting. A realistic tableau is prepared for the visitor with lifesize models of the Shogun and several women. There are two interesting, elegantly discreet security features in this building. Next to where the Shogun sat in the chief audience room are several cupboards with beautifully-decorated sliding doors behind which stood samurai, completely hidden, with their swords at the ready.

The beautifully polished wooden floors of the hallways which lead to all the rooms used by the Shogun emit a peculiar squeaking sound at the lightest step to warn of anyone’s approach. Although they are called ‘nightingale boards’ (aguisubari), the sound bears no relation to the beautiful singing of the Japanese bush warbler, the agisu.