

Graves of the Martyrs

The 24 graves inside the low stone fence belong to vassals of the Tokugawa family, which ruled Japan from 1603 to 1867. These 24 vassals died between 1610 and 1668.

From the left, the first five graves in the front row are those of personal aides of the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu (1604–1651). These five vassals committed ritual suicide after the death of their lord, a practice known as *junshi*, in order to serve him in the next world. Loyalty is a hallmark of samurai culture, and *junshi* is perhaps its most extreme example.

The “way of the warrior” (*bushido*), an informal code of behavior and ethics of the samurai, demanded loyalty even beyond death. During Japan’s Warring States period between 1467 and 1568, these ritual suicides usually took place on the battlefield when one’s lord was killed or captured. After Japan entered a period of peace under the Tokugawa regime, many retainers continued the practice of *junshi* to demonstrate their loyalty, committing suicide even when their lords died of natural causes.

The practice of *junshi* was prohibited by law in 1663 by the fourth Tokugawa shogun, Ietsuna (1641–1680).