

World Cultural Heritage: “Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region”

A unique religious tradition that evolved in the absence of missionaries

—The significance of this world heritage property and its components

The Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region are a group of properties that testify to Japan’s Hidden Christian tradition. Despite a ban excluding foreign missionaries from the country, the Hidden Christians successfully maintained their religion by engaging with Japan’s traditional Shinto and Buddhist religions, and with society at large. The property consists of 12 sites relevant to: 1) the events that drove the missionaries out of Japan and the Christians into hiding; 2) stratagems the Christians adopted to secretly practice their faith and maintain their organizational bodies; and 3) the turning point, when renewed contact with missionaries brought the Christian faith back out into the open. Japan, at Asia’s easternmost edge, was exposed to Christianity when it first came to Asia during the Age of Exploration. Missionary work in Japan was most intensive in the Nagasaki region. That is why the 12 sites are dotted around the peninsulas and islands of the region.

What is a World Cultural Heritage site?

A World Heritage site is an irreplaceable legacy from the past, natural or made by humans. Its heritage belongs to all nations of the world, and the international community has decided to pass this on to future generations. World Heritage sites are classified under three categories. The cultural heritage category includes monuments, groups of buildings, and sites of outstanding universal value. Natural heritage includes geological and physiographical formations, ecosystems, habitats for threatened species of animals and plants, and the like, which are of outstanding universal value. Mixed heritage satisfies the definitions of both the cultural and natural heritage categories. There are over 1,100 inscribed properties worldwide, most of them in the cultural heritage grouping.

1. Remains of Hara Castle

The site of the key battle of the Shimabara Rebellion. Defeat forced the Christians to go underground and develop ways to practice their religion in secret.

2. Kasuga Village and Sacred Places in Hirado (Kasuga Village and Mt. Yasumandake)

3. Kasuga Village and Sacred Places in Hirado (Nakaenoshima Island)

These communities secretly practiced their faith by venerating mountains that had been objects of worship prior to the advent of Christianity, and by venerating an island where Christians had been martyred.

© Higurashi Yuichi

© Higurashi Yuichi

4. Sakitsu Village in Amakusa

The villagers here practiced their faith in secret by turning everyday items into articles of devotion.

© Higurashi Yuichi

5. Shitsu Village in Sotome

These Hidden Christian villagers worshipped religious pictures derived from Christian imagery as a way of practicing their faith in secret.

6. Ōno Village in Sotome

The people of this community practiced their religion in secret by praying to their own objects of worship, which they enshrined in the local Shinto shrines.

© Higurashi Yuichi

7. Villages on Kuroshima Island

The inhabitants of these villages maintained their religious organizations by moving to the abandoned horse farms of the Hirado domain, which they brought under the plow.

8. Remains of Villages on Nozaki Island

Christians maintained their secret religious communities by settling on an island that was sacred to the Shinto religion.

© Higurashi Yuichi

9. Villages on Kashiragashima Island

Kashiragashima was originally used for the quarantining of people with smallpox. Christians who settled on the island were able to maintain their religious communities.

10. Villages on Hisaka Island

The inhabitants of these villages were able to maintain their religious communities by settling on undeveloped land in accord with the migration policy of the Gotō domain.

11. Egami Village on Naru Island (Egami Church and Its Surroundings)

This village was developed during the ban on Christianity. The church, built after the ban was lifted, is a visual expression of the end of the Hidden Christian era.

12. Ōura Cathedral

Site of the so-called Discovery of the Hidden Christians, when the meeting of Hidden Christians with French missionaries brought Christianity out of hiding.