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Exploring Hirado's World Cultural Heritage Hirado Excursion Map

The Hidden Christian Heritage of the Nagasaki Region

MANGA PAGE

GREEN TITLE

The History of Christianity on Hirado

The arrival and flourishing of Christianity

1. Christianity arrives in Hirado, Japan's western capital

The first Portuguese ship to come to Japan arrived in Hirado, already a flourishing international port, in 1550. It was near the end of Japan's Age of Warring States, when the feudal lords were battling each other to expand their territory. That same year, the missionary Francis Xavier came to Hirado to preach. (A church known as Tenmonji Temple was later built here.)

The arrival and flourishing of Christianity

2. Christianity spreads and churches are built

At the time, Matsura Takanobu (1529–1599) was the hereditary lord of the Hirado domain. He permitted two of his vassals, Koteda Yasutsune and his brother Ichibu Kageyu, to convert to Christianity, because he thought it might be advantageous for trade.

In 1558 and 1565, the inhabitants of Ikitsuki Island and the west coast of Hirado Island (both territories controlled by the Koteda brothers) converted to Christianity, making this the first region in Japan where the religion flourished. As Christianity spread, both the religion and its followers were referred to by the same Japanese word: *kirishitan*.

Christianity is banned and transmitted in secret

3. Repression of the Christians begins

Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), who was seeking to unify Japan in order to end conflict, issued an edict expelling the Christian fathers from Japan in 1587. Despite this, serious repression of Hirado's Christians did not begin until 1599, when Matsura Takanobu, who had been tolerant toward the foreign religion, died, and his converted vassals, Koteda Yasutsune and his brother Ichibu, had to flee.

Christianity is banned and transmitted in secret

4. The Christians go into hiding

The churches and crosses in Hirado's villages were destroyed. The local Christians began to be referred to as Hidden Christians because, while outwardly going along with the religions of Buddhism and Shinto, they stayed secretly true to their own faith. They worshipped *nandogami* ("closet gods") in their homes, chanted Christian prayers known as *oratio*, and passed down the faith from generation to generation.

The ban is lifted and Christianity revives PART I

5. Continuing with the ceremonies that were secretly passed down

Some people chose to continue with the forms of worship they had been practicing in secret even after the ban on Christianity was lifted. Known as Kakure Kirishitan, they venerated

their ancestors who had been stalwart in their faith and treated the places where they had died as sacred.

Unlike today's Japanese Catholics, the Kakure Kirishitan have no churches of their own. Instead they continue to practice their faith alongside Buddhism and Shinto, just as they did when Christianity was forbidden in Japan. Focusing only on the *kirishitan* aspect of their faith, you can see that it preserves the basic forms of Christianity from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.

The ban is lifted and Christianity revives PART II

6. Returning to the faith

With the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853, Japan's state of national seclusion came to an end. In 1865, a group of Hidden Christians visited Oura Cathedral, a church built in the foreign settlement at Nagasaki, and made the world aware that Japan's Christian community had survived the long centuries of repression.

In 1873, the Meiji government revoked the ban on Christianity. Catholic priests began to preach in many regions, and Hidden Christians came out of hiding and began building churches in their villages.