

Himejima Island

Unlikely home to a long-gone community

The island of Himejima may seem inhospitable: compact columnar joints as tall as 100 meters make up the western and northern coasts. While the southern shore, though still rocky, is less steep, the island has very little level land. But for more than a century and a half, the island was home to a community of hidden Christians who had fled persecution by the shogunate government in 1797. Their survival depended on spring water found at a high elevation, which, along with the fertile volcanic soil, supported fast-growing mulberry and *tsuwa*, a native wild plant widely used for food. Shrimp and *kibinago* (*Spratelloides gracilis*), a herring-like fish, were gathered, as were several varieties of seaweed. By the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912), the population had grown to 300. Schools and a cathedral, complete with stained-glass windows, were constructed, and a regular ferry service ran three times a week from 1921 to 1935. By 1955, however, only 81 people remained; of these, 15 moved to Brazil in 1959, and the last 38 people finally abandoned the island in 1965. Today, no trace of their presence is visible from the sea or in aerial photos. Even the graves of those who had died on the island were moved to Fukue Island in 1987.