

## **Oito Hell**

This is the Oito Jigoku, or Oito Hell—the word *jigoku* has the double meaning of “hot spring” and “hell.” According to local legend, there was once a wealthy woman named Oito who lived close to Shimabara Castle in the late 1800s. Oito was accused of killing her husband with the help of her secret lover, and she was found guilty and sentenced to death. At the moment of her execution, a *jigoku* came bubbling up from beneath the earth, indicating Oito’s fate in the afterlife.

## **Monument to Christian Martyrs**

On the hill above Oito Hell is the Monument to Christian Martyrs. Erected during the Meiji era (1868–1912), the monument commemorates the approximately 33 Christians who were tortured and killed in Unzen during the 1620s and 1630s.

Christianity was brought to Japan in the mid-1500s and flourished in Kyushu. Nagasaki became a stronghold of the Christian faith, and the lord of the Shimabara Peninsula, Arima Harunobu (1567–1612), converted in 1579. Christianity was popular for several decades in Kyushu and around Japan, but by the early 1600s the fortunes of this foreign faith changed. While embracing Christianity was originally seen as a necessary step in establishing relations with Europeans and subsequently gaining access to firearms and other trade goods, but the religion came to be seen as a sign of eventual colonization by hostile foreign powers. In response, missionaries were exiled, converts were executed, and the religion itself was banned.

Beginning in 1627, dozens of Christians were brought to Unzen from across the Shimabara Peninsula and tortured in the *jigoku* hot springs until they renounced their faith. Many did not; it may have been their sacrifice that inspired the people of Unzen to commemorate the martyrs after the ban on Christianity was lifted.

This dark period in Japanese history inspired the author Shūsaku Endō (1923–1996) to write the novel *Silence* in 1966. Director Martin Scorsese made the novel into a film in 2016, and a number of scenes were shot on location at the Unzen *jigoku*. The suffering of the Shimabara Peninsula’s Christians is now honored through monuments and memorial services.