

### **Unzen Onsen Town Religious History Trail: The Headless Statue of Kūkai**

The Shimabara Peninsula has a long history of religious upheaval. From the 700s, Unzen was home to a large Buddhist community, but when the region converted to Christianity in the late 1500s, sacred religious symbols—like this stone statue of the famous Buddhist monk Kūkai (774–835)—were damaged or destroyed in clashes between Christians and Buddhists. The Shimabara Rebellion (1637–1638) brought an end to popular Christianity in Japan, allowing Buddhism to regain its religious dominance.

This was not the last time that Kūkai would be beheaded. Although Shinto and Buddhism were most commonly practiced as an interwoven belief system during the Edo period (1603–1867), in 1868 the new Meiji government ordered a separation of Buddhist elements from Shinto in order to establish Shinto as the state religion. This forced separation spurred acts of violence, and many Buddhist icons and artifacts were destroyed or lost.

This stone image of Kūkai has been repaired, but countless other statues across the region are still missing their heads—a modern reminder of the Shimabara Peninsula's tumultuous past.