

Audio Guide: Headless Buddha

Nearly a thousand years after Buddhism was first brought to Japan from China, another foreign religion arrived in Unzen. In 1549, Jesuit missionaries began converting Japanese people to Christianity. The headless Buddhist statue just beyond the fence is an example of what happened when these two religions clashed.

By the end of the sixteenth century, Christianity had spread across Japan. In fact, the lord of the Shimabara Peninsula, Arima Harunobu, converted to Christianity in 1580 and ordered the destruction of Buddhist and Shinto temples and shrines. The community of Buddhist monks on Unzen was destroyed, and the region never regained its former religious prominence.

The statue you see nearby is of Yakushi Nyōrai, the Buddha of medicine and healing. Its head, like those of countless other Buddhist statues, was removed during the attacks because the statues were seen as idolatry by the new Christians. Although some were repaired after Christianity was banned in 1614, many were beheaded again in the nineteenth century. After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the new Japanese government was focused on creating a nation-state similar to the empires of Europe and America. State religion was seen as a prerequisite to nation building, and an imperial edict was published that ordered the separation of Shinto and Buddhist beliefs. Shinto became the state religion, and Shinto adherents destroyed many Buddhist icons and temple structures. Although it was a center of spirituality, Unzen has not always been a place of religious harmony.
