

Shimabara Peninsula Geopark Leaflet: History

What historical events happened on the Shimabara Peninsula?

People have been living on the Shimabara Peninsula for thousands of years. But for a very long time, Shimabara was a backwater, far removed from places of power. That changed in the eighth century when the Unzen volcano cluster became an important location for the worship and study of Buddhism. By the late sixteenth century, Nagasaki had become an international port city, and Shimabara had some of the highest numbers of Christian converts. In 1614, however, Christianity was outlawed; during the winter of 1637–1638 the peninsula was the site of a terrible battle between Christians and the Tokugawa shogunate. In 1792 the combination of an earthquake and tsunami killed around 10,000 people living on the peninsula. And in 1853, after Japan opened to the West, it became a tourist destination for Westerners living in East Asia until the early 1900s.

What is the Shimabara Rebellion?

Christianity had been outlawed by the Tokugawa shogunate in 1614, but there was still a large group of Japanese Christians in western Kyushu. In the same year, the Tokugawa shogunate removed the Shimabara's Christian lord, replacing him with a new lord who persecuted the local Christians and taxed them heavily. The rebellion began in the winter of 1637, when Christians in Shimabara and Amakusa finally rose up against the lord installed by the shogunate. 37,000 rebels took over Hara Castle and held it until April 1638, when the shogunate's army of more than 125,000 soldiers overran them. About 30,000 Christian peasants were executed after the castle was retaken. The Shimabara Rebellion is considered the last significant battle of the Edo period (1603–1867). The shogunate blamed foreigners, specifically the Portuguese, for using Christianity to weaken Japan, ostensibly making it easier to colonize, and so for the next 230 years, Japan would keep itself strictly isolated from the outside world.

What is the greatest natural disaster in the history of the peninsula?

On May 21, 1792, after months of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions across the peninsula, part of Mt. Mayuyama collapsed, creating a landslide of debris that destroyed the town of Shimabara. When the landslide reached the coast, it triggered a tsunami that swept across the Ariake Sea, inundating the town of Higo in modern-day Kumamoto Prefecture before rebounding and returning to Shimabara, ultimately killing over 15,000 people. Simulations of the landslides and resulting tsunami indicate that the entire

disaster may have lasted only three minutes. The disaster is now often referred to as *Shimabara taihen*, *Higo meiwaku* meaning “Shimabara’s Catastrophe, Higo’s Cataclysm.” The numerous documents and drawings created shortly after the disaster help us understand how people at the time reacted to this terrible event.
