Hara Castle Ruins

The story of Hara Castle began around 90,000 years ago with the eruption of Mt. Aso, 150 kilometers to the east in Kumamoto Prefecture. A massive eruption sent a wave of hot gas, ash, and white pumice an incredible distance, creating a ridge that today seems to rise suddenly out of the Ariake Sea. This set the scene for a very different kind of catastrophe in the seventeenth century.

Hara Castle was built in 1604 by the Arima clan, who were led by the Christian lord Arima Harunobu (1567–1612). Although Christianity had only arrived in Japan in 1549, it had quickly spread to the leaders of the region. Their conversion would be their downfall. Christianity was outlawed in Japan in 1614, and after controlling the area for almost 300 years, the Arima clan was removed by the Tokugawa shogunate and replaced by the Matsukura clan in 1616. Shortly thereafter, Hara Castle was abandoned.

This new clan began brutally repressing Christianity while dramatically raising taxes to pay for a brand-new castle to the north. Suffering from famine and overwork, the peasants revolted in 1637. Nearly the entire population of the Shimabara Peninsula rose up in arms in what would come to be known as the Shimabara Rebellion. Joined by masterless samurai and other Christian peasants from the Amakusa Islands and led by the charismatic 16-year old Amakusa Shirō, the peasants fought against the new lords of the region. After several defeats, the nearly 37,000 rebels—including women and children—decided to reestablish Hara Castle and make their final stand.

More than 120,000 shogunate troops from around Kyushu were mobilized to crush the rebellion, but the rebels held out. Eventually, after months of winter and a blockade by Dutch and shogunate ships, the rebels ran out of food and ammunition. A final assault in April 1638 destroyed the castle, and the tens of thousands of rebels inside were executed.

Today, monuments to the rebels, the foundations of the castle, and the white pumice of Mt. Aso are all that remain.