

## **Christian Gravestones of Suzaki**

The picturesque village of Kazusacho sits by an estuary tucked between the mountains and the sea. The village's Buddhist graveyard contains a total of six Christian gravestones (actually five Christian gravestones and one Christian-linked relic). One stands by itself; a group of five are lined up in a row elsewhere.

The standalone gravestone is the most interesting. In contrast to most of the Christian gravestones around Nagasaki, which are made of local gray volcanic rock like andesite and dacite, this one is made of pink sandstone shipped in from Amakusa. The use of an expensive imported material suggests that some local people in the early seventeenth century had exceptional economic resources. The gravestone is a horizontal semicircular column, and at 1.2 meters, is unusually long.

The well-preserved inscription is protected by a removable metal cover. Inscribed on the left is the baptismal name, Ruis. The next line gives the age Ruis was when he died—either 19 or 29. The next line gives the date of his death; we can see it was the second day, but the number of the month is illegible. The last line on the right is the year Keicho 18, or 1613, the year before the nationwide ban on Christianity was introduced.

The other five gravestones are grouped together. Two of them are horizontal semicircular columns, two are flat slabs, and one is just a fragment. Both of the flat stones are carved with crosses: one a Latin cross with a single crossbar, the other a patriarchal cross with a double crossbar. It is possible that the flat stones once served as bases for the semicircular gravestones. It is also possible that the smaller of the two horizontal semicircular columns is the gravestone of a child.

## **About Christian Gravestones in Japan**

Of the 192 confirmed Christian gravestones from the early days of Christianity in Japan, 146 are found in Nagasaki Prefecture, all dating from the early seventeenth century. (The oldest Christian gravestone in the country, dating from 1581, is in Shijonawate, near Osaka.) Most of the Christian gravestones in the Nagasaki region are horizontal—either flat or gabled slabs, or semicircular or rectangular pillar shapes—reflecting European gravestone designs of the time. While Buddhist gravestones are inscribed with a posthumous name (*kaimyo*) of the

deceased consisting of multiple kanji characters, Christian gravestones often feature a Western baptismal name. They may be decorated with a floral cross (cross fleury), a double-barred cross (patriarchal cross), or the trigram IHS, an abbreviation of the name of Jesus. Since stone grave markers were an expensive luxury, it is safe to assume that they belonged to the wealthy and powerful. After Christianity was prohibited, some of the horizontal gravestones were upended and converted into Buddhist monuments, hollowed out to make stone vessels for handwashing (*chozubachi*), incorporated into dry stone walls, or simply swallowed up by the ground. Few of the Christian gravestones in Nagasaki remain in their original locations, though they are often found nearby.