

## **Christian Gravestones of Sahara**

These two gravestones sit on a pine-covered hillside directly overlooking the sea. While they are both flat horizontal slabs, they are not made of the same stone. The more weathered one is made of basaltic submarine pyroclastic rock. The better-preserved one is made of andesite carved at the front end with a cross fleury, an ornate cross with three petals representing the Holy Trinity at the end of each arm. (Note that the stone base on which the slab rests is not part of the original gravestone.) Neither gravestone is inscribed with a name or date, but they are assumed to date from the early seventeenth century. Locals used to refer to these as the “ox graves” or the “ox gods,” perhaps because the Christians used to eat beef at Christmas.

## **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.