

Christian Gravestones of Yoshikawa

These four gravestones sit in the Buddhist graveyard in Minamiarimacho, Minamishimabara, with a picturesque view across the Ariake Sea to Amakusa. Two of the four are housed in a small protective structure. The shorter one is a horizontal rectangular pillar, while the longer one is a horizontal semicircular pillar. They share two particularities: first, the upper part and base of each gravestone were carved from a single stone; second, they are both made of ignimbrite, an unusual material for the Shimabara Peninsula.

The other two gravestones have been left exposed to the elements. The one covered in moss and standing upright was once a horizontal gravestone. Although 41 centimeters of the stone protrude from the ground, its total length is unknown. In any event, it seems unusually thick.

Coincidentally, Minamiarimacho was the birthplace of Adam Arakawa, a Christian samurai martyr. He was beheaded in Amakusa in 1614 after taking charge of the local Christian community following the expulsion of the foreign priests. Arakawa was one of the 188 Japanese martyrs beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2008.

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.

