

Christian Gravestones of Saishoji Temple

The Saishoji Temple graveyard is located in the middle of the Shimabara Peninsula. Records show that this area twice hosted a Jesuit seminary in the years between 1588 to 1595.

(Seminaries, colleges, and even churches used to relocate frequently depending on how well-disposed the local daimyo was toward Christianity at any given time.)

The four Christian gravestones here have been collected and arranged in a row. The best preserved of the four is a 105-centimeter-long horizontal pillar of dacite with a gently rounded top and a cross fleury (an ornate cross with three petals representing the Holy Trinity at the end of each arm) inscribed on its front face. Two of the others are unusual, as the upper pillar-shaped part and the base have been carved from a single piece of stone. On one of them, a quite heavily eroded cross fleury can be made out. The fourth and most weathered of the gravestones is of the flat slab variety; it, too, is made of dacite.

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 found 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.