

Gravestones in Arie Christian History Park

In the early seventeenth century, Arie was one of the economic centers of the Shimabara Peninsula. This meant that wealthy members of the population had the financial resources to commission expensive gravestones.

Situated on a gentle slope overlooking the sea, this park has 20 gravestones gathered from different parts of Arie. There are only 192 Christian gravestones in all of Japan, which means that more than 10 percent of the total can be viewed on a single visit to this park. The park opened in 1986 to mark the 350th anniversary of the Shimabara Rebellion (1637–1638) in which many Japanese Christians were slaughtered.

Three of the gravestones have decorative carvings. There is one with a cross fleury (an ornate cross with three petals representing the Holy Trinity at the end of each arm); another with a double-barred patriarchal cross; and another carved with a unique combination of a cross fleury and a patriarchal cross.

Only one of the gravestones features an inscription. Carved on the long upper face rather than on the front, it reads “Keicho 12” (1607), then the name “Luis” (written in two kanji characters) and the date, March 24. There are also some old Buddhist stone pagodas, including five-ring pagodas, on display. (Arima Harunobu, the lord of Shimabara [1567–1612], who became a Christian in 1579, had a staircase at Hinoe Castle built entirely of Buddhist stone pagodas, so that people would tread on them as they climbed. It was a foreshadowing of the *fumi-e* ceremony later inflicted on the Christians.)

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 grave markers 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.