

The Four Christian Gravestones of Nakasukawa

Four Christian gravestones made of dacite are lined up in a row by the side of National Road 251. They were moved from a nearby stand of trees where they were discovered in 1902 by Mori Toyozo, a local historian. This launched the widespread discovery of Christian gravestones in Nagasaki. Locally, people are believed to have worshipped them as Suijin-sama, water gods whose benevolence provided abundant harvests. It is believed there was once a Christian seminary in this vicinity.

The two gravestones of the flat slab variety have no markings. The one with the square pillar or box shape with a slightly rounded surface, however, has a very well preserved cross fleury—an ornate cross with three petals representing the Holy Trinity at the end of each arm—carved in relief on the upper face.

The fourth gravestone in the group, which is decorated with a patriarchal cross, has an unusual shape: a horizontal five-sided pillar with a ridge and sloping sides on its upper surface. The angle of the sides is steeper than the usual *kirizumagata*, or gabled gravestone.

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.