

Shimabara Martyrdom Site

The Vatican has designated this beach as an official pilgrimage site because of a mass martyrdom that took place here in the first half of the seventeenth century. Sixteen people from a larger group of Christians that had been captured and held in Shimabara Castle had their fingers cut off and were placed in a small boat. They were then told they would be tossed into the Ariake Sea with stones around their necks unless they renounced Christ. They all refused and were drowned.

Paolo Uchibori Sakuemon, a Christian samurai who had been a retainer of Arima Harunobu (1567–1612), the Christian daimyo who had previously run Shimabara, was forced to watch his three sons die this way before he was executed by being dunked into boiling water on Mt. Unzen. Paolo and his three sons were among the 188 Japanese martyrs beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in November 2008.

According to some historians, there was once an island opposite the beach with a church built by Luis de Almeida, a Portuguese merchant who became a missionary. The island has disappeared, probably as a result of the Shimabara Catastrophe of 1792. This was a massive seismic event caused by the eruption of Mt. Fugen, which triggered the collapse of Mt. Maruyama and generated a huge tsunami, transforming the local topography.