

Christian Gravestones of Dotenomoto

This is a group of four gravestones, all made of dacite. Three are gabled with a central ridge and sloping sides on either side, while the best-preserved one is a horizontal semicircular pillar 121.5 centimeters long. On the front face is a relief carving of a cross fleury, along with the date Keicho 9 (1604) at the bottom left. Traces of the baptismal name and month of death are visible but not legible. On the upper face is a hole that probably supported a cross. Since several gravestones were found in this vicinity, there may have been a Christian cemetery in the area prior to the Shimabara Rebellion (1637–1638).

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.