

Gravestone from the Hidden Christian Era

This gravestone sits against the perimeter wall among the Buddhist graves in Kyonomine Cemetery in Nagasaki. It is a horizontal stone slab with a central ridge and sloping sides, a style known as *kirizumagata*, or “gabled.” There is no trace of an inscription.

After Christianity was banned in 1614, Christian communities were either persecuted or forcibly converted to Buddhism. As a consequence, Christian-style gravestones, which tended to be horizontal and thus visibly different from upright Buddhist gravestones, became unacceptable. In the early nineteenth century, Takagi Sakuemon, the Nagasaki local magistrate, heard about a “deviant-shaped grave” in the Sakamoto area and initiated an inquiry. The authorities were unable to conclusively prove that the gravestone was of Christian origin, however, and it was left undisturbed.

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.