

A Mysterious Bell and the Story of Christianity in Taketa

There is a sense of mystery about the Santiago Hospital Bell, which is encased in a glass box inside a darkened room of the Taketa History and Culture Museum. While the name of the hospital and the year of production—1612—are engraved on the 108-kilogram bell, subtler signs tell more of the story of this enigmatic piece of metalwork. The two distinct lines stretching around the bell suggest it was cast in three parts. This method was traditionally used when casting Buddhist bells in Japan.

The Santiago Hospital was a Christian medical facility in the city of Nagasaki, where the religion took hold in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Records show the hospital was expanded in 1612, and the bell was likely cast for that occasion.

Around the same time, however, Christians in Japan began to be considered a threat by the government and faced increasing persecution. In one of the most infamous incidents, 26 Catholics were executed by crucifixion in Nagasaki in 1597. As the crackdown policies continued, the Santiago Hospital was forced to close down in 1614.

How the Santiago Hospital Bell made its way from Nagasaki to Taketa is unclear, but what is known is that it was hidden in Oka Castle, above the town. Decades before the Santiago Hospital closed, Taketa had become known as a safe haven for Christians under the governorship of daimyo lord Shiga Chikayoshi (1566–1660), who converted to the religion and took the name Don Paulo.

The Shiga family was forced to leave Taketa in 1593, and the Nakagawa family replaced them as lords of Oka Castle. The Nakagawa initially adopted a policy of leniency toward Christians; crackdowns on the religion gradually intensified, however, and many believers were punished.

Since the sixteenth century, many legends and rumors have been told about Taketa's Christian population. One of these stories concerns a cave at the end of Bukeyashiki-dori (Samurai Residence Street) in the old town. As the cave's walls appear to have been carved and decorated to resemble a church, the site is rumored to have been a former Christian place of worship.

Oka Castle was demolished in 1874 in the wake of the Meiji Restoration, which ended

warrior rule and sparked the modernization of the country. At this time, the Santiago Hospital Bell was moved to Nakagawa Shrine, the Nakagawa family's private site of worship, where it was discovered before being put on display in the Taketa History and Culture Museum.