

Hidden Christian Martyrdom Site

This quiet woodland in northeast Tome surrounds Kainashizawa Sankyōzuka, a site that is part of the history of Christianity in northern Japan. Here, 120 *Kakure Kirishitan*, or “Hidden Christians,” were crucified, speared, or beheaded during the Kyōhō era (1716–1736). The martyrs were members of a community that had practiced Christianity in secret ever since the Tokugawa shogunate prohibited the faith in 1623.

Prior to its prohibition, Christianity had a strong foundation in this region. It originally spread here with the development of ironworks in the late sixteenth century. At that time, the most advanced form of iron manufacturing used European technology, and two experts in the field were invited from Bitchū (present-day Okayama Prefecture) to teach iron manufacturing to producers in local villages. The experts were two Christian brothers, Senmatsu Daihachirō and Kohachirō, who taught the villagers both their iron-manufacturing techniques and their faith. The

faith spread, and in many cases, entire villages converted to Christianity together.

The powerful daimyo Date Masamune (1567–1636), who governed the Sendai domain, was initially receptive to Christianity. However, when the shogunate made practicing the religion illegal, the politically astute Masamune permitted the persecution of Christians in Sendai. Despite the risks, many Christians continued practicing in secret for several generations. However, the passage of time did not lessen the severity of the consequences. Upon being discovered, these villagers chose to die as martyrs rather than give up their faith.

At the Kainashizawa Sankyōzuka martyrdom site, a few stones mark the spot where the Christians were tortured and executed. The remote location was chosen to ensure that the screams of the dying were not heard by other villagers. A short walk farther uphill leads to a small, open flatland known as Meisō no Oka, or Meditation Hill, where the victims awaited the

summons to execution. A mound on the hilltop marks the location where around 40 of the victims were laid to rest beneath a pine tree, and an unmarked stone cross is the sole ornamentation. The other victims were buried in nearby sites that were called Hōnosawa and Oinosawa, but this is the only gravesite left undisturbed.

The site's tragic past would have been entirely forgotten, if not for its mention in a document discovered over 200 years later, in 1954. Since its discovery, Kainashizawa Sankyōzuka has become a site of pilgrimage for Christians, including visitors from abroad. The nearby Yonekawa Catholic Church has held commemorative outdoor services in the clearing by the mass grave, and today, the site is a place of quiet remembrance and faith.