

Towards the mystery of the Kutami area of Naoiri Town, one of the eight great missionaries in Japan

There is a tombstone in the Haru area of Naoiri Town that bears the markings, “INRI.” This is an extremely valuable Christian relic comparable to the Santiago Bell or the statue of Saint James the Greater. However, before discussing this tombstone I’d like to talk about the relationship between Christianity and Naoiri Town.

Surprisingly, the history of Christianity in Oka domain began not in the castle town but, in Naoiri. Today, Kutami is a name not often heard but in those days the neighborhoods of Niida, Shimogawara, and Haru were known collectively as Kutami. Two years after Father Xavier was invited to Funai (now Oita City) by Sorin Otomo, missionaries came to Kutami. Kutami was then controlled by Sousaku Kutami, a vassal of Sorin. Sousaku himself was strongly influenced by Christianity and took the Christian name of Lucas. Not only his family and servants but also 260 people were baptized in Kutami in 1553. The number of Christians rapidly increased so Kutami was referred to as “one of the eight great missionaries” in Japan. Because of reports from the missionaries, the name Kutami was known to the King of Portugal, the Pope, and the Christian nations of Europe. For Japanese people of that time, Christianity was in vogue, and Christian culture already existed in Naoiri. The first church built in Bungo, and social welfare facility known as Misericordia (“The House of Mercy”) were constructed there. Because Kutami was along the Road of Christianity that connected Nagasaki to Funai, and missionaries often stopped there, it’s no wonder that the latest information and culture were brought to Kutami.

Now, let’s return to the tombstone with the “INRI” markings from the beginning of the lecture. The meaning of INRI is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. When Jesus was crucified these letters were written at the top of his cross to announce his crime. The tombstone is considered to be one of 80 that were produced in Bungo in 1585. Only four are assumed to still exist in Japan. There is also a T-shaped cross (which does not bear the markings, “INRI”) in Hyugazuka in Naoiri, so there are two crosses in total there.

The tombstone is thought to have been originally located a little way away from its current location, in Umebaka. Lucas (Sousaku) ordered a large stone cross be built, and put a perimeter fence around the cemetery, and that he be buried under the stone cross after his death. This order was reported in a letter written by a missionary (“First Iruman,” written by Yuki Ryogo). According to this description, the tombstone was attached to the tip of the stone cross, which was built for Lucas. It is believed that there may have been many other Christian graves around the cross.

There is another mysterious thing that was found here recently, a wooden statue of a figure resembling Michizane Sugawara wearing an Eboshi hat (a kind of black-lacquered hat worn by court nobles in Heian-era Japan) with a cross inscribed in it. The box in which the statue was housed bears the inscription, “Ikitsuki Shrine,” which could be a reference to Ikitsuki Island (part of Hirado in Nagasaki), which is known as the “Island of the Christians.” Because of the cross inscribed in the hat, it can be inferred that this statue was probably used in rites by hidden Christians. But why is this statue in Naoiri? Furthermore, the statue was found in the immediate vicinity of the largest Christian mass graves in Naoiri. Did the missionaries bring this statue to Naoiri while escaping from oppression on Ikitsuki Island? This is an open question. I will talk about the relationship between the carbonated spring of Naoiri and holy water in the sequel.



① Mass Christian graves in Naoiri Town



② INRI Stone monument in Naoiri Town



④ A faceless wooden statue in a sitting position. A cross is engraved onto the headscarf.



⑤ A wooden box containing a wooden statue in a sitting position. It contains characters of Ikitsuki shrine.