

Yoshichika, the Great-Grandson of Otomo Sorin Who Rests in Naoiri

Otomo Sorin who was christened Don Francisco, was a famous Japanese Christian feudal lord. The tomb of his great-grandson, named Yoshichika, lies in Naoiri.

Otomo Yoshinori was the grandson of Otomo Sorin, who was christened Don Francisco. Yoshinori had two sons, but the first son, Yoshimasa, passed away at an early age, so the second son Yoshichika, became the heir of the family. He was the great-grandson and a direct descendant of Otomo Sorin, as well as the last master of the great family of Otomo. However, it is not known among the local society that his tomb lies in Tochiwara, Naoiri. I visited the area to conduct interviews, but the tomb was underground and could no longer be seen. Hence, I will introduce the tomb of Yoshichika with an article from Oita Godo Newspaper published in 2010 and written by Sato Mitsuhiro, who is a local historian from Naoiri.

“Otomo Yoshichika lies in a reposing tomb measuring 54cm x 58cm on the upper surface and 15cm thick. There is a hole of diameter 15cm in the middle of the upper surface. Two lines (Photo 1) have been inscribed onto the surface of what is considered to be the front of the tomb. Written horizontally, these two lines say, ‘Lord Otomo Yoshishige*1 – Grandchild – The tomb of the Catholic*2 believer, Yoshichika – Died in the 9th year of Kanei (1632) – 54 years old’. The year of his death was dated as the 5th year of Genna (1919) in the history reference book called ‘List of Successors of the Otomo Family’, and there is a 13-year difference between these two dates. The Otomo family served the Tokugawa Shogunate as *koke**3 (Master of Court Ceremonies), and there was no doubt that Yoshichika had lived in Edo. Still, why had the year of his death been inscribed as the 9th year of Kanei (1632), 13 years after his actual death? Furthermore, why did his tomb in Tochiwara described him as a Catholic believer? Who had inscribed the lines in horizontal writing, which would have been unusual during the Edo period? Without any historical documents or folklore that describe the ties linking the Otomo family and Tochiwara where the tomb is located, this reposing tomb holds many mysteries. (Partially omitted)”

The above was extracted from Mr. Sato’s article, which he had written based on his onsite survey. According to the article, Yoshichika had been a *koke hatamoto* (high-ranking bannermen), and was therefore in a position to give directions about protocol in the government, such as Buddhism ceremonies or rites of the imperial family. In fact, he had been involved in the establishment of building the Ryogen-in temple, which is the branch temple of Daitokuji temple in Kyoto. Therefore, this tombstone provides credible proof that Yoshichika had been a hidden Christian. However, who had issued the directions to carve the words of “Catholic believer” on Yoshichika’s tombstone? What had been the purpose of building a tomb for a descendant of the Otomo family in the Oka clan, which had already come under the rule of the Nakagawa family at the time? It is a pity that the tombstone is now hidden in the earth with all of its countless mysteries.

My guide for this trip told me, “There is also something interesting nearby” , so we went to take a look. We took a route that had no marked paths, and found the letter “C” from the English alphabet carved into the edge of cliff. “C” is the initial for “Christ”. (Photo 2) This has come to be known as the mark left behind by horse hooves, but that is not a possibility in reality. This is because the place where the letter had been inscribed led downward to a precipitous cliff. It was very dangerous for horses, and could only barely be reached by the hands of a foolish man. In fact, this had apparently served as a signpost for Christians at the time. The direction of the sign leads toward Asaji Town, Bungo-ono City (old Oka clan). Why Asaji Town? While this is just a conjecture, if the “C” mark had been carved out before the Nakagawa family came into rule, then the reason may be because Don Paolo Shiga Chikatsugu had been holding a castle in Shiga, Asaji Town. Also, the Shiga area had been where the residence of the Jesuits had been located. The Christians had fixed on a direction using the letter “C”, and had probably then prayed in the direction of Don Paolo’s castle or the residence of the Jesuits. It appears that the tracks left behind from the faith of the Naoiri Kutami Christians from the Kutami, Otomo, Shiga and Nakagawa families, had survived the respective periods without disappearing into the mists of history.

(NANBAN Culture Promotion Division GOTO Atsumi)

(Note 1) Yoshishige: Otomo Sorin

(Note 2) Pronounced “Tenshukyo” , referring to the Catholic faith

(Note 3) *Koke* … The high-ranking *hatamoto* status, typically known as Master of Court Ceremonies. It was formerly held by descendants from noble families. Holders of the position could give directions about protocol in the Edo shogunate, such as Buddhism ceremonies or official rites for feudal lords.

(Reference)

Published on January 26th, 2010 “Oita Godo Shimbun” newspaper … “Christians of the Kuju/Naoiri Kutami Areas” (SATO Mitsuhiro/Author)



† (Photo 1) Tombstone found around the 37th to 38th year of Showa (1962-1963). It is the tombstone of Otomo Yoshichika, who is the grandson of Otomo Sorin. (Photo provided by SATO Mitsuhiro)



† (Photo 2) The letter “C” (representing “Christ”), carved into the edge of a cliff, serves as a signpost. According to folklore, the mark is said to be from the hooves of a vicious horse.



† The Tochiwara graveyard, part of which is currently under maintenance. The tomb of Otomo Yoshichika is believed to be under the ground in this area.



† Another tombstone marked clearly with a “O” (circle) and located in the same area. The “O” mark is a code used among the hidden Christians to represent the Virgin Mary.