

Tono-machi Cave Chapel and the mystery of Furuta Shigeharu, the chief retainer of the Oka clan

While holding down the important position as chief retainer, he also sheltered missionaries in a cave. This was Furuta Shigeharu ("John Tiago"), who had also been a Taketa Christian.

Foreign missionaries lived secretly in the Tono-machi cave chapel during the Genna period (1617-1620). This cave was found in the 28th year of Showa (1953), and there had apparently been a dense jungle of bamboo trees around this area at the time, which prevented people from approaching the cave. As shown in photo 1, the altar at the back of the cave had been painted in a bright golden color until the third decade of the Showa. Word has it that a cross had been engraved in relief on the upper part of the altar, and a statue of the Virgin Mary had been placed in the altar. While it has now become weathered, there used to be three steps at the main entrance to the cave (Photo 2), and the missionaries came and went using these steps. What is of interest here is the drawing (Photo 3) from the Edo period. There were also five guard posts around the cave chapel. What was the reason for building them? It was actually to detect the approach of non-Christians toward the cave.

Although they were less famous, there were many huge caves around this area, including those that people believed had been failed efforts to construct cave chapels.

There are two reasons for bringing up the topic of the cave chapel again. Firstly, Furuta Shigeharu, who had been the chief retainer of Oka clan, could have owned this piece of land. Secondly, Furuta himself was a Christian with the Christian name "John Tiago". Hence, if the land where the cave chapel is located had belonged to Furuta, the chief retainer himself had been taking risks. It was very unusual to shelter missionaries in a cave chapel located on one's own property. If it had become known to the public and the feudal government, the Furuta family as well as the entire Oka clan would have been placed in a dangerous situation. Knowing full well what he had been risking, this would have been a major decision for the Christian, John Tiago, to make.

Furuta came from the family of Furuta Oribe, who was a great master of Japanese tea ceremony. There is still persistent speculation across Japan that Oribe had been a Christian. He had apparently told the missionaries, "It is not an exaggeration to say that tea ceremony is a Christian practice, and tea ceremony is essential to missionary activities in Japan". Oribe, the Christian feudal lord, Takayama Ukon, and the domain head of the Oka clan, Nakagawa Kiyohide, were close blood relations, being stepbrothers or cousins to one another. Hence, it would not have been surprising if these Christians had influenced Shigeharu, who was a descendant of Oribe's, to become a Christian himself.

However, the biggest mystery lies in the chapel. The siege of Osaka was a battle between Tokugawa and Toyotomi, but at the same time, it had also been a battle between Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Christianity. The Oka Clan had been allies with Tokugawa, and attacked Osaka castle with gunfire. On the other hand, Roman Catholic missionaries were besieged in Osaka castle with Toyotomi Hideyori. One of these missionaries was a Catholic priest called Francisco Bardolino. However, for some reason, he had gone into hiding at the Tono-machi cave chapel after Osaka Castle was taken in the battle. More importantly, it was a complete mystery as to why a Christian chief retainer himself had sheltered a Catholic priest who had been fighting with the enemy. The reason for sheltering him was unknown, but it is rather difficult to imagine that Lord Hisamori had not known about this important incident. If that were so, I cannot help but think that someone else had given the instructions to do so.

Bardolino had even lived at the Furuta residence when the anti-Christianity campaign became even more severe. Therefore, the Oka clan was the last area in Bungo where missionaries remained. Furuta was certainly a protector of Christians in the Taketa area, but this secret operation could not have been accomplished without the support of the Oka clan. The mystery deepens with regards to the ties between the Taketa Christians and the Oka clan.

(NANBAN Culture Promotion Division GOTO Atsumi)

◇References

- Xavier Code / Author: Kozan Ken (2012, e-bookland company)
- Interpretations of the Ruins of the Christian Chapel / Author: Kitamura Seiji (year of publication unknown)
- Reference Book of Bungo Christians, Part II / Author: Mario Marega (1946, Don Bosco Sha)
- Korean Peony / Author: Miura Yasumasa (2010, Bungeisha company)



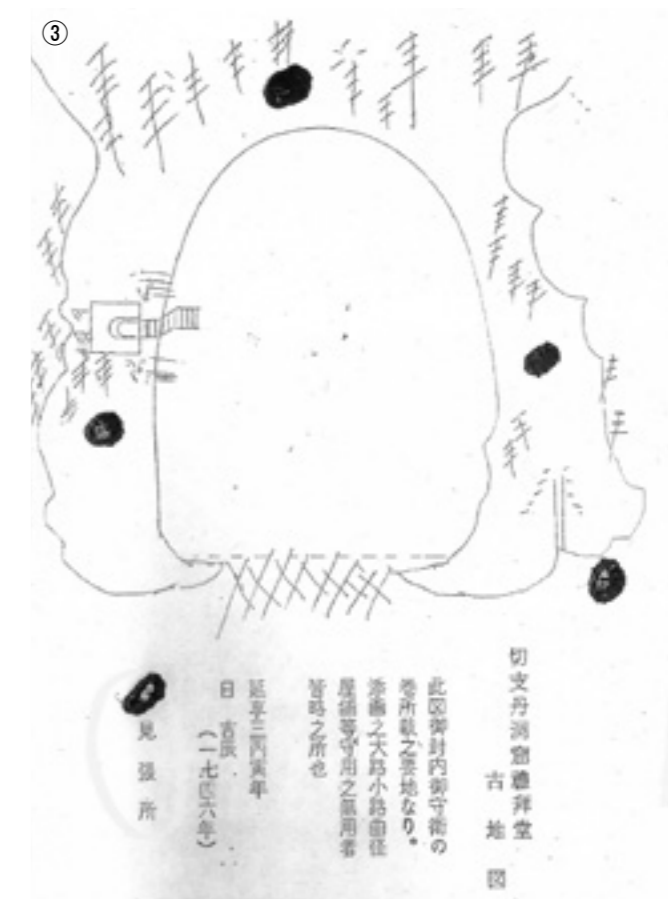
↑ Tono-machi cave chapel in the third decade of the Showa era. An altar painted in a beautiful golden color.



↑ The scene of the cave chapel at the time. The front steps are visible behind Mr. Kitamura Seiji.



↑ The cave chapel today (Tono-machi)



↑ Drawing from the Edo period. There were several guard posts around the Tono-machi cave chapel.