

Discovery of the Underground Chapel at a Mercantile House

There are still multiple underground rooms at the castle town today.

There were some incidents to prove the existence of hidden Christians in the Oka clan even after the anti-Christianity edict.

The strong faith of the Taketa Christians was demonstrated through the building of underground chapels.

The Tono-machi cave chapel is the first name that comes up when talking about historical sites of hidden Christians in Taketa.

However, this cave chapel had not been the only chapel because there were many Christian believers in Taketa at the time. In fact, it was discovered that a chapel had been built in the basement of a mercantile house in the 3rd year of Genbun (1738). The complete story is as follows.

The old N company building across from Taketa station used to be a mercantile house called Tarumi-ya. During a test to uncover hidden Christians conducted there by dozens of government officers, the weight from the large number of people in the room caused the floor to give way, and everyone, including the officials, fell through the floor. It was then that they discovered a basement with an altar set in the back, and the statue of Virgin Mary enshrined in the altar. Worshipping the Virgin Mary was proof to the existence of hidden Christians, and the master of the house, Heibe, was captured and sent to Nagasaki.

Tarumiya Heibe held the position of *otona*, which is the equivalent of the head of neighborhood community association in modern times. Even though this incident had taken place many years after the enforcement of the anti-Christianity edict, people were still holding fast to their faiths as hidden Christians and praying to a statue of the Virgin Mary hidden underground. This was a great shock to the Oka clan.

After conducting some research into the mercantile houses around Tarumi-ya based on this story, I found three that still retained old basements even today. Each of these basements had entrances placed in unexpected locations, and appeared to be camouflaged. Some of these even contained what could clearly be perceived as altars. These were private basements for each of the merchants, and like Tarumi-ya, had probably served as chapels. This was because the castle town was located in the wetlands to begin with, and the weather was humid there. As such, the basement would not have been considered to be a good place for storage. According to one of the store owners that I had spoken to, "Formerly, there had been another huge basement somewhere else, even though it is closed down and is now used as a car park. It was so spacious that employees could even hold dance parties (*) there". I wondered how many basements had actually existed in this area, and I believed that more would turn up if I continued searching.

Other than Tarumi-ya, many other mercantile houses had basement rooms, and it would not have been surprising if there were more incidents such as the Tarumi-ya incident occurred. However, Heibe never told the government officers in order to protect his fellow Christians. There were also no records of house searches conducted by officers. The incident had apparently ended with the Tarumi-ya case. However, as the castle town had been built at the time of the first feudal lord Hidenari (Furu-machi was built during the time of the third lord Hisakiyo), the magistrate of town planning or ruling domain itself should have known about the existence of the basement rooms at the mercantile houses. Moreover, if it had been the beginning of the Edo period when the anti-Christianity edict had not yet been strictly enforced, the ruling domain may have discovered something about the purpose of these basement rooms. This is the reason why Taketa is described not as a place of hidden Christians, but rather, as the place of "hiding Christians" who are covered up by the entire ruling domain.

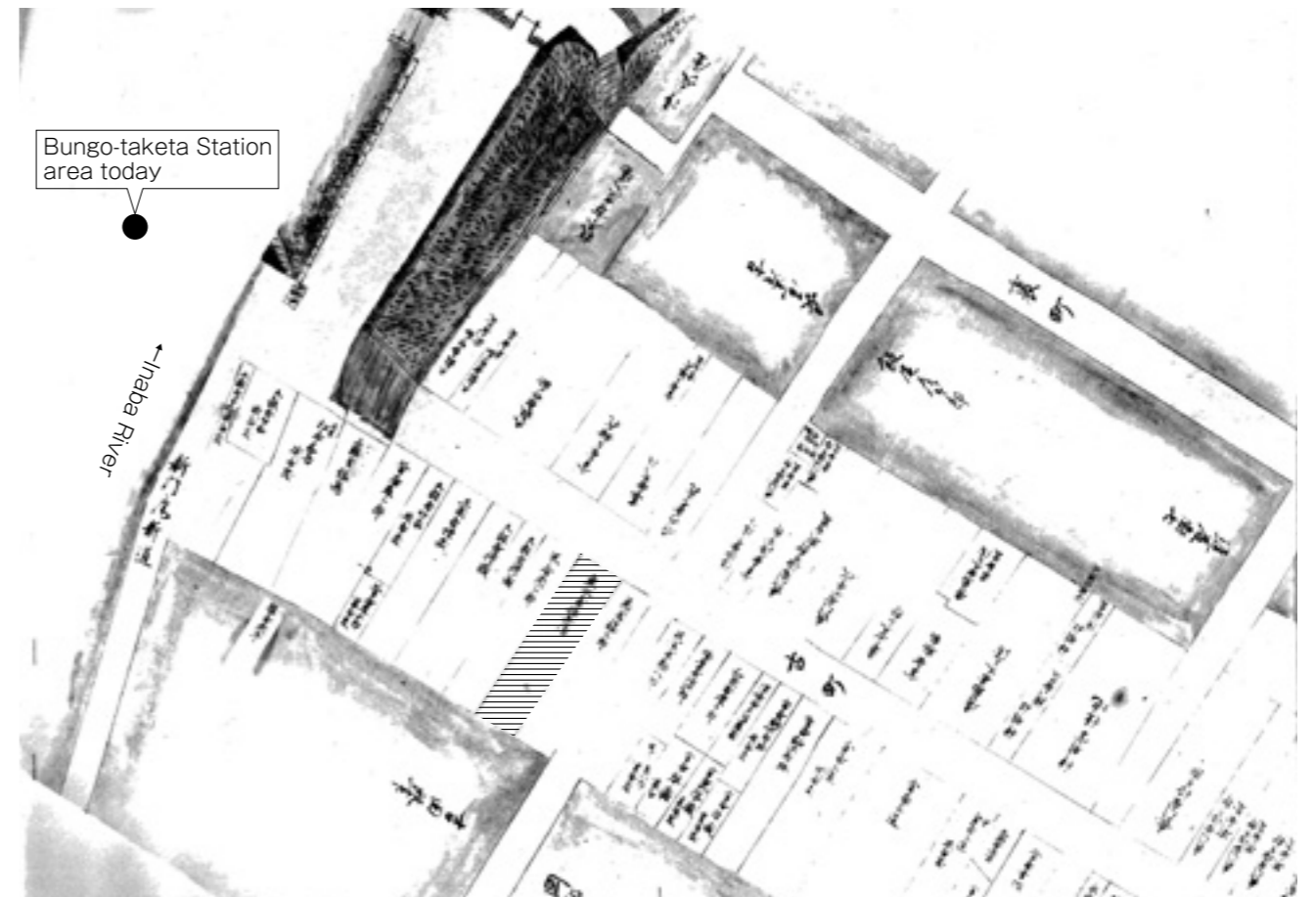
Taketa was a town of Christians, with a cave chapel in its rocky hills and underground chapels in the mercantile houses of the castle town. Are there any towns in other parts of Japan that contain greater mystery than Taketa?

(NANBAN Culture Promotion Division GOTO Atsumi)

*It could not be ascertained if the basement room that was used as a dance hall had been a chapel.



↑ The basement room of a mercantile house near Tarumi-ya. The whole place is now covered by mortar walls. The horizontal tunnel at the back is a stone staircase that makes good use of the geographical terrain. However, it could not be ascertained if this had been an underground chapel.



The location of Tarumi-ya in an old map (the shaded area). There are no traces left as new buildings have been constructed.

From the Oka clan illustrated map (Taketa City Education Commission)