

Searching for the roots of the cross family emblem unique to the Oka clan

15,000 Christians used to live in Taketa. The traces of their faith were found in their family emblems. The cross family emblems are also Christian relics that had crossed the oceans from southern Europe.

We do not usually observe the emblems of other families as we go about our everyday lives. That is why it is not unusual if one does not recognize the emblem of other families. However, have you realized that there are many family emblems in Taketa that use the cross as a design motif (sometimes used as an informal emblem)? (Photo 1)

The family emblem belonging to the old feudal lord Nakagawa, called the Nakagawa cross, is well known among the residents of Taketa. It is said that the emblem has the letters "IHS", which marks the Jesuit faith, hidden into its design motif in a skillful way. Perhaps it was this influence; in any case, having many old retainer families that had crosses as the design motif for the family emblem became a situation that was unique to Taketa. This was also a rare occurrence in Japan, and some researchers have even expressed surprise at the large variety of family emblems with cross designs from Taketa.

There is a considerable number of retainers in the Nakagawa family from the Ibaraki-settsu era that had family emblems with the cross as a design motif. During the rule of Oda Nobunaga, Settsu had been a place where many Europeans came together under the lead of Xavier. Many samurai warriors fought each other to win the European designs that these Europeans had brought into Japan, in order to use these designs as their own family emblems. It is possible that those samurai warriors had converted to Christianity and willingly used the cross as a design motif in their family emblems. These retainers had come to Taketa together with their masters, so it would not have been surprising if family emblems with the cross as a design motif were then left behind in Taketa. Someone had said that since all of the families of retainers from the old Oka clan had been Christian, it is no wonder they all have family emblems with the cross as a design motif". While we cannot say definitively that all families that had crosses on their family emblems had been Christians, we could perhaps suggest that family emblems with cross designs had been a code for Christianity. This was because Christians could only marry other Christians, and furthermore, Christians needed to identify one another in order to conduct prayers away from the public eye. For these reasons, family emblems serve as the perfect mark of identity. Imagine a row of samurai warriors praying in the cave chapel, all donned in kimono with family emblems of cross designs; it would have made for a truly mysterious sight. Even family emblems are considered to be valuable Christian relics in Taketa.

The Christian's spirit reposes peacefully, buried under a cross-shaped tombstone.

The cross-shaped tombstone has overcome long years of suffering and survived till the present day in Taketa. We can hear the sounds of prayers amidst the peaceful repose.

Among the hundreds of tombstones built from the early Edo period to the beginning of the Meiji era, there was one that came in an unusual shape. The castle town is said to be the place with the largest number of Christian tombstones.

But why does no one come to visit this tomb? The tombstone was covered with overgrown vegetation. Feeling surprised, I removed the overgrowth and moss that had been growing there for a long time, and a remarkable cross-shaped tombstone emerged. (Photo 3)

I had seen many patterns of crosses carved into the surfaces of tombstones, but it was the first time that I had seen an old cross-shaped tombstone, or at least, the first time that I had seen one within the vicinity of the Oka clan. Furthermore, it is surprising that the tombstone stood facing the main street, unhidden from sight. There must have been many people passing by the road in those days. The name of the deceased has been inscribed onto the tombstone, but there were no inscriptions to indicate the year of death, so there is no way of knowing which era the tombstone had been built in. (The back of the tombstone also contained the following words—"Those who do not love do not know God. God is love.") I spoke to people from the church to obtain more details about this tomb, but could not gain any further information. Even so, it would be easy to imagine that the person who lays beneath this tombstone had been a fervent Christian. If this had been built during the Edo era under the anti-Christianity edict, it is a miracle that it has been preserved in its original shape until the present day without being destroyed. If this had been erected during the Meiji era, the person who rested in this tomb had probably been born during the Edo period, spent his/her lifetime as a hidden Christian, and requested to have a tombstone of this shape at the last moments of his/her life.

Many things about the cross-shaped tombstone are shrouded in mystery, including what this was person like, where and by whom he/she had been baptized, and what his/her faith had been.

(GOTO Atsumi)

(Produced by NANBAN Culture Promotion Division)



Photo 1: Family emblems with cross design motifs from the graveyard located in the city
 ※It is not possible to ascertain if all of these belong to Christians. These are private tombs, so places and names are not disclosed.



Photo 2: The Nakagawa cross of the old feudal lord of the Oka clan, which the residents of Taketa are familiar with



Cross-shaped tombstone
 ※This is a private tomb, so the place and name are not disclosed.