

Is the Jizo stone statue with unusual facial features, standing on the mountain ridge, a statue of the Virgin Mary?

Your eyes fall with great surprise on a Jizo stone statue with unusual facial features that looks undoubtedly like the Virgin Mary.

You also notice signs that mark the workmanship of Anoshu, the best group of stonemasons in Japan.

Many Christian tombs remain on the mountain ridge around the castle town. This happened while I was walking along the path beside the mountain ridge and studying the tombs that lay by the roadside. I could not believe my eyes when I saw the statue standing far back in the area. It was a Jizo stone statue measuring 35cm high, but it was not an ordinary one no matter which way you looked at it. I saw the figure of the Virgin Mary (Photo 1 and 2, Reference photo 3), with the gentle and peaceful facial features of a women. Her upper body was bent, and her neck and hands were crossed in an “omega” style, and her toes were peeping out from under her hemlines. This Jizo, who looked just like the Virgin Mary, appeared to be leaning closely against the tombstone of a child who had died at a young age, and was erected in such a way that it appeared to be looking over all the ancestral tombstones. The age that the tombstone was built is unknown, but the resemblance to Jizo probably means that it had been during the period of the anti-Christianity edict. It is possible that descendants had built the tomb for their Christian ancestors.

The “Mary Kannon” deity, which is the Kannon deity that hidden Christians used as a camouflage for the Virgin Mary, could be seen in many parts of Japan. However, I have never seen a stone Jizo statue of the Virgin Mary. However, it is regrettable that there is no way to prove objectively that this Jizo represents the Virgin Mary. However, it is certain that this is not an ordinary Jizo from the Buddhist religion. If this were actually a Jizo statue of the Virgin Mary, it would be a valuable relic in the study of Christian culture. Furthermore, there is great significance to its existence in Taketa. According to the landowner, their ancestors had come from Ibaraki, Osaka, to Taketa with Lord Nakagawa. However, they had not known that their ancestor’s tomb was designed in the Christian style, nor did they know anything about this Jizo.

Apart from this Jizo, there was another surprising finding. The characters “Ano” had been inscribed on one of the tombstones (Photo 4, indicated by the arrow). “Ano” refers to the name of the best group of stonemasons, Anoshu, who had built the stonewalls of Oka castle and Osaka castle. Did the mark express that a member of Anoshu had built the tomb, or did it show a connection between a stonemason from Anoshu and the person who lay in the tomb? Usually, I would guess that there were connections with Anoshu for the large number of caves and Inari shrines, including the Tono-machi cave chapel, based on their highly-skilled construction. Hence, I was really surprised when I saw the name “Ano” in this unexpected place. Could it be possible that the Jizo statue of the Virgin Mary had been made by an Anoshu stonemason?

There is another graveyard nearby (Photo 7) that drew my attention. The tombstone has a cross of Tau at the top (Photo 5), while the family emblem is a rhombus-shaped cross (Photo 6). The entire graveyard is surrounded by barrel-shaped stones. The barrel-shaped stones are in the exact same shape as Christian tombs from southern Europe. The tomb of the Christian feudal lord, Otomo Sorin, (Photo 8), situated in Tsukumi City, also has a very similar shape to the Otomon gate of Oka castle. The barrel-shaped stones are seen in many parts of Taketa such as the Oka castle, graveyards and temples. Some have hypothesized that there is a close connection between the stones and Christianity, but this cannot be determined. It is one of the most significant mysteries of Taketa.

Compared to the history of oppression and destruction in Nagasaki and Amakusa, Taketa’s history could be described as a history of faith. It is a miracle that such a large number of relics have remained, undestroyed till the present day, and it can certainly be proud of its status as a “small town of great treasures”. However, on the other hand, it is also surprising that Taketa’s Christian culture has not become more widely known in the world. The mysterious relics hold enormous potential as the center of focus for the 2.1 billion Christians around the world.

(GOTO Atsumi)

※We are unable to respond to any questions regarding the places and owners.

(Produced by NANBAN Culture Promotion Division)



↑ A Jizo statue that resembles the Virgin Mary



↑ The tombstone inscribed with the characters “Ano”



↑ The cross of Tau at the top of tombstone



↑ Family emblem designed with a rhombus-shaped cross



↑ A Jizo statue that resembles the Virgin Mary, and a drawing of the blessed Virgin Mary (Reference photo 3)



↑ Barrel-shaped stones surrounding the graveyard



↑ The tomb of the Christian feudal lord, Otomo Sorin