

“Luisa”—the baptism name of a Christian woman from the Oka clan.

There is a huge Christian stone tomb in Ume town (now Ume-machi, Saiki City), where the enclave of the Oka clan was located during the Edo era.

Many people may have heard of the name “Luisa,” and perhaps connected it to the name of a famous Western-style confectionery found in Oita. However, it is a surprisingly little known fact that the name of this product had come from a Christian woman who had actually lived in Taketa.

“Luisa” had been her baptism name, and she was born in Tamarai as the daughter of Watanabe Yokichiro, a samurai warrior in the Oka Clan. Her true name had been Watanabe Ran. Her tomb lies in a Japanese cedar forest in Shigeoka, Ume Town today, and the tombstone a massive one that is almost as big as a tatami mat (Photo 1). It is also unusual that the year, month and date of her death, her Christian name, and an emblem of the sun have been engraved in a circle with diameter of about 20 cm on the surface of her tombstone (Photo 2). There is a rectangular hole beneath the sun emblem, which may have been used to stand a cross. Based on the size of the tomb, if Luisa had been a woman with a large build, it can well be imagined that she had been a mysterious woman of with European blood running through her veins.

Luisa had spent her girlhood in Tamarai, in the colorful and glamorous society of European culture. She married Watanabe Zenzaemon, a successful village headman in Ume town, which was an enclave of the Oka clan. She gave birth to a boy and a girl but died from illness in the 5th year of Genna (1619) when she was 29 years old. She was given a generous burial as a devoted Christian, but the Watanabe family buried her grave deep below the ground for fear of having Christian connections, as the oppression against Christians grew even stronger. Everything that was related to Luisa was expunged, and even her descendants never found out about the Christian named Luisa. In this way, about 300 years passed till the end of the Taisho era. The headman of the Watanabe family and his son found this deeply buried tomb by chance when they visited the Japanese cedar forest. However, they were afraid of the shape of the strange tombstone, and buried it back underground again. Forty years later, the scene returned suddenly to the son’s mind, and he decided to excavate the tomb. It has stayed there till the present day. Had Luisa’s spirit awoken his sleeping memory and cried out to be released from below the ground?

The following story is found in “Japan Christian Chapel History” (Note 1) under the February 1614 section. When a Dominican missionary was travelling between Taketa and Usuki, he had spent a night at the house of a Christian woman named Luisa, and baptized the child of the family. (It is not certain if the Luisa from this story is the same Luisa that we have been discussing above.) There are also descriptions that point to the existence of Christianity in Tamarai at the time. According to the description, “Six missionaries spent some nights hiding at a large temple outside of Tamarai on their way to Nagasaki from Usuki, after they had been forced out by the anti-Christian edict. Contrary to their expectations, a large number of Christians gathered at the temple.” While there is no evidence proving the connection to this description, it is interesting to note that there are still semi-circular shaped stones (Photo 4 and 5) placed along the approach to the two temples in Tamarai. These stones are of the same shape as those found at the Christian tombstones in Europe. Who had placed stones that were similar to the ones at Ote-mon gate of Oka castle, and for what reason? No one knows the answers. There are many things about Taketa that remain a complete mystery.

As I faced Luisa’s tomb in the silence of the dark cedar forest, I could not help but feel that she was still crying for help to return to Tamarai. “Luisa” had been a treasured and beloved Christian who had lived from the beginning of the Christian missionary period through the period of oppression. She never knew that Santiago’s bell had been rung, but continued to sleep in Ume for more than four hundred years till the present day.

(NANBAN Culture Promotion Division GOTO Atsumi)

(Note 1) Author: Jacinto Orfanel. 1977. Yushodo Bookstore
Reference: *History of Ume Town* / Author: Kitamura Seiji. *Historical Records of Oita Christians*. Author: Mario Marega. *Historical Records of Bungo Christians*.



↑ Emblem of the sun on the circle of the surface of Luisa's tombstone



↑ Semi-circular stones at temples in Tamarai area



↑ Luisa's tomb, which is as large as a tatami mat



↑ The Christian name “Luisa” is engraved on the front and center of the tombstone