

## Search for the ruins of the abbey in Kuju

Where was the Kuju Church that had been marked on ancient maps? Are the statues of the Kannon Goddess and the small child she is holding, guarded by the tall, red camellia tree, not the same as the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ?

I had visited the town of Kuju at the request of the people of Kuju, who had asked me to take a look at something that “resembles a Christian tomb”. There was a small hill (Photo 1) at the back of a private house, small Shinto shrines (Photo 2) located at approximately midway up the hill, and six pagodas made of layers of stones (Photo 3) called “Hokyointo” \* at the top of the hill. The objects that the locals had labeled as Christian tombs were the Hokyointo. The Hokyointo is not always related with Christianity, but represent tombstones or memorial tablets, so there is a possibility that the Hokyointo had been built for a Christian Mass. After a detailed exploration, we found the character “志” carved onto one of the pagodas. (Photo 4) However, the stroke “一” at the bottom of the “士” figure and the “心” figure were carved in a different style from the rest of the character, and were believed to have been engraved into the pagoda later. That is to say, “一” and “心” had been added to hide the shape of the cross “+”. Examples such as these are called “hidden words”. These Hokyointo had actually been found several decades ago. The landowner, who had been digging up the hill, found many human bones and lined up the Hokyointo in the way that it now stands. The reason for burying the Hokyointo underground had probably been to escape religious oppression. If not, we are unable to provide any other explanations for the phenomenon.

With a fog of questions in my mind, I had taken a quick glance into the Shinto shrine described previously, and the sight drew an exclamation from me. A stone “Kodaki Kannon Goddess” (the Goddess holding a child) was enshrined in there. (Photo 4) The facial expression of the Kannon Goddess was a little different from an ordinary Kannon Goddess, and another figure had been engraved above its head. In the world of the hidden Christian, the Kodaki Kannon Goddess symbolizes the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. The Virgin Mary stands as the likeness of the Kannon Goddess, and was a holy relic worshipped by the Christians.

Sections of stonewalls have been left on the hill, and it is easy to imagine that there had once been some kind of building here. This was believed not to have been an ordinary house but rather, something smaller. There was a well at the base of the hill and an abundant quantity of clear water gushed naturally from the well in old times. A tall, red camellia tree stands beside the well as a sacred tree. It is unusual to make the camellia tree a sacred tree, but it is said that the red camellia had been the flower of Christians in the Oka clan. The way of the flower fell all at once was thought to symbolize martyred Christians. As I was putting these pieces of information together, I was also thinking about various things, and happened to remember the existence of the church in Kuju.

An ancient map is appended to a reference book about Christians in Oita Prefecture, and the church in Kuju is marked out on this map. If this map is superimposed onto a modern map of the town of Kuju, we would find that the church had been located in the downtown area of Kuju, and furthermore, on the side of the mountain. I had been looking for the ruins of the church but could never identify the position until now. This hill was an exact match for the location of the church. In addition to the location of the church, by putting together pieces of the mystery such as the Hokyointo, an actual image of the old Kuju church and Kuju Christians came into view.

However, I could not say for certain that this was the ruins of the church based only on the ancient map. I considered writing an article for the city news, but the landowner said the following to me.

“There had probably been a need to hide the Hokyointo by burying it underground. If so, there might be some links to Christianity. Furthermore, even as I guarded this Kannon Goddess with great care, I had always believed that it might be related to Christianity. If the existence of this Kannon Goddess were made known to people through this event, the spirits of the Kuju Christians can finally repose in peace.” I felt that these generous and kind words had sprung from the Virgin Mary herself. With the melting of the snow and the coming of spring to Kuju, spring may also come for the Kuju Christians for the first time at last.

(NANBAN Culture Promotion Division / Atsumi GOTO)

(Note) Hokyointo: It is made during and after the Kamakura period. In order to gain merits such as longevity and reduced transgressions, it was built as a memorial pagoda or tombstone pagoda for the purposes of *Tsuizen* (holding a Mass for the dead) or for *Gyakushu* (holding a Mass prior to death). The Hokyointo, which is elaborately decorated, is generally used by people of estate (high-ranking classes of society).

Reference

“Reference Book About Christians in Oita Prefecture (Appendix)” (Kitamura Seiji / 1961)



↑ (Photo 1) A small hill situated behind a private house



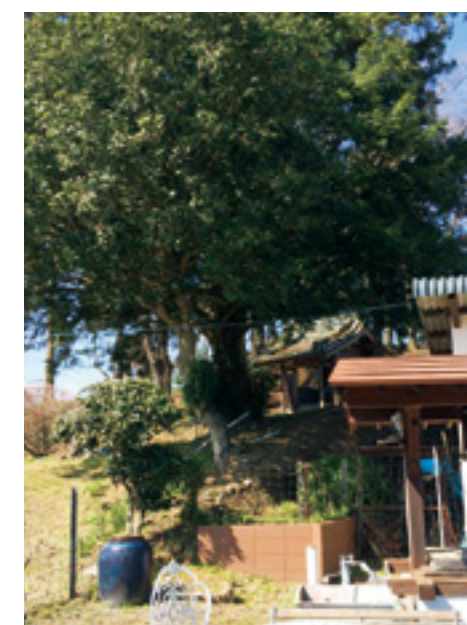
↑ (Photo 2) A small Shinto shrine located midway up the hill



(Photo 3) Five-layered pagodas lined up on the top of hill, from where Mt. Kuju is visible



↑ (Photo 4) “Kodaki Kannon Goddess” enshrined in the small Shinto shrine



↑ A tall, red camellia tree regarded as a sacred tree