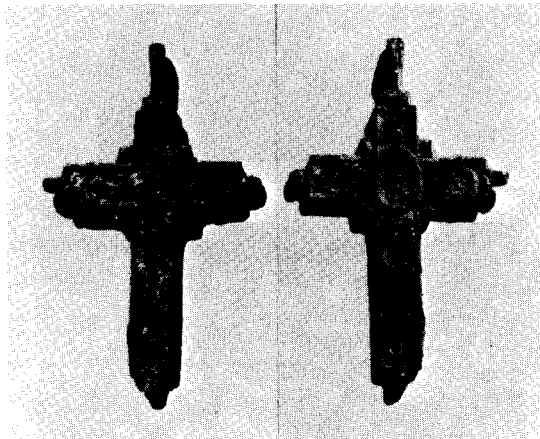


Christian Relics Discovered at Nyu Hill in Ōita City

Mitsuo KAGAWA

In southeastern Nyu Hill, Oita City, on the island of Kyushu in Japan is a site upon which much attention has been focused by specialists dealing with the question of palaeolithic stone implements. It is a site that has continued to spawn new topics for study. The Christian relics of the latest discovery are thought-provoking—not only as an example of art objects made in Europe but also in the opportunity they afford us to deduce that they were buried in the midst of martyrdom during the early Edo period (1603-1868).

The relics were recovered from a Sue jar found in a field being prepared for cultivation in Nyu Hill near an area rich with topics for research that include Nyu Hill, a palaeolithic stone implement site, and Nyu River, noted for the information it provides us on the origins of Yayoi farming techniques. Among the many items discovered were wooden statues of the crucifixion of Christ, and the Virgin Mary. These were donated to the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki Museum, a hallowed place for the martyrs, by the devout Christian who discovered them, Suenaga Tsuneo. During the ten days between discovery of the relics and their transferral to the Museum, I obtained permission to examine the objects and conduct numerous investigations. The objects examined were several rosaries, four medals with a design of the Eucharist, four small medals, two gold crosses, two oval glass lids for what were probably containers for holy relics, one locket with a chamber for a holy relic, and some rare Sacred Eucharistic wafers. Wooden sculptures of the crucified Christ and the Virgin Mary (one each) were also included in the highly interesting collection of relics. They are beautifully sculptured



Front

Back

Figure 1 Copper Crucifix

and provide us with the means to date the relics. I am most grateful to Prof. Yakichi Kataoka of Nagasaki Junshin Women's College and Father Diego Pacheco of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki Museum, for providing me with detailed information about these objects, and in the summary that follows I will discuss the significance of this discovery.

1. Discovery of Sue Tiles (須恵質瓦器)

Sakanoichi (Oita Prefecture), near the town closest to Nyu Hill, has produced superior clay from times past. The area is filled with tile kilns. Originally, however, unglazed pottery was produced in great quantity, and jars and jugs could often be found in homes nearby. In fact, it was not unusual to find tile fragments in the upper layers during excavation work. Based on these fragments alone, it would be difficult to determine what kind of kilns were used to fire them, but by examining the construction of Sue tiles, we can deduce information about the kilns and date them to the medieval period. The jars and jugs, and the set of mixing bowls found among the remains, also give us an idea of the characteristics of medieval kilns. Distributed widely, examples of these wares can be found over a wide area in the prefecture.

The rims of these jars and jugs are thick, and their lips are round. The bodies are long and cylindrical, and rolling can be seen on both the front and back. Four ribbon-like grips have been attached at the shoulders. The base is stable, with a wide, flat shape. The coloring is brown or ash white, and there are some examples of natural glazing which, though simple, are interesting artistically.

Jars excavated at Nyu Hill and Oharu display four ribbon-like ears. They are Sue vessels, which at first glance, remind one of Bizen (備前) or Nanban (南蛮) wares.. Their diameter measure 11 cm, they are 27 cm tall, and their cylindrical bodies have stable bases. They were



Figure 2 Pottery (Sue Tiles..須恵質瓦器)

discovered around 1965 at the bottom of a hill being prepared for cultivating, but were abandoned for two years until they were donated in April, 1967, along with excavation relics to the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki Museum. At that time, I was asked for an opinion and conducted my investigation at the Museum.

2. Christian Relics

A. Wooden crucifixes (*Crucifijo*). Among the Christian relics excavated, the quietly moving wooden crucifix is a splendid representative example of Gothic art. He wears a crown of thorns, and his arms (utilizing a joinery technique in which they are fitted into the body with spokes) are outstretched. The right arm and both legs are missing. An arm and part of a leg (one each) displaying the same techniques exist, leading us to believe that this crucifix was comprised of two parts. There is no joint on the body for a cross which suggests that one was made separately and probably hung with a string or cord. Since vestiges of a cross were not found, we can only assume that it was stored separately.

The sculpturing, down to the details, displays beautiful craftsmanship. The crown of thorns which adorns Christ's forehead, turned to the right in quiet suffering, is delicately and beautifully sculptured. (Height: 8 cm.)

B. Wood plaque with Madonna and Child (*Imagen*). The Madonna and Child have been carved into a thin piece of wood and framed in an oval hollow lined in white. (Length: 9 cm; width: 6.5 cm; shape: thick and rectangular; material: thin, treated wood.) In the center of the plaque has been carved an oval hollow (length: 6 cm; breadth: 4.5 cm) lined in white, in which the Madonna and Child were placed. The Madonna and Child (height: 5.5 cm; breadth: 3cm) are carved out of olive wood. The carving is skillful and precise. Unlike the oakwood frame, the Madonna and Child have a luster that at first glance gives the impression that the work is made of gold. The crucifix mentioned earlier is made of the same material and, as a result, perhaps, appears to be of especially high artistic caliber.

The veiled Madonna is beautifully rendered, and her robes (*tunica*) capture with great effect the flowing rhythm of a woman. She is supporting Christ's foot on her right hand and cradles him as he leans on her left shoulder. The rendering of the child's innocence, upon which much care was taken, is a work of great labor. The apple-like fruit held in the child's right hand, the beautiful figure of the Madonna, and the innocence of the child have been skillfully woven together, and in the elegance of the style can be seen the sculpture of the Renaissance.

C. Rosaries (*Rosario*). These are made of small pieces of wood or berries. The design is old, and the examples excavated can be divided into six categories. The crosses of these rosaries are made of four tapered wooden beads joined together with a string, a style that was popular during the sixteenth century. In fact, the style of the medal hung from the cross is similar that of a rosary in the possession of the Church of Kern in Germany that Mutius Vitelleschi (1563-1645, General Superior of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuit Order)) presented to Queen Medici. The rosaries discovered at Nyu are identical to this, allowing us to date it to the period between 1622 and 1652.

D. Medals (*Medalla*). The four small medals bear designs of St. Christopher, The Virgin Mary in Baroque style, and a bust of Christ and St. Mary. The large medals bear designs of the

spreaders of the gospel, St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) and St. Francis Xavier, (1506-1552) which aids us in dating the year of the burial of these medals. St. Ignacius and St. Francis were designated spreaders of the gospel in 1619 and canonized in 1622. We can thus date the production of the medals to around 1619, and if we add two or three years (the time necessary to make their way to Japan), we will find them appearing in the period of martyrdom in Japan, when missionaries and followers continued to spread the faith in an atmosphere of suppression. Prof. Kataoka has dated the medals based on this information. He concludes that the rosaries mentioned earlier are contemporaneous to the rosary possessed by the Church of Kern, and by dating the medal attached to the rosary, has been able to date the relics and to verify their significance.

Conclusion

In addition to their significance as artifacts dating from the period of martyrdom in our country, the relics excavated at Nyu Hill should also be recognized as representative works of European art. The discovery of Eucharistic hosts (*Hostia*) is, furthermore, of great import. Still a vital part of the faith, it is miraculous that they were preserved, and research should be devoted to the conditions of their preservation.

The serenity of Gothic art exemplified in the crucifix, and the superb sculpturing techniques of the Renaissance displayed in the elegant Madonna and Child, as well as European culture, were brought to Japan through the medium of the faith. Could there be any traces of this influence in some of the Japanese arts? Unfortunately it had no opportunity to take root, and only from the exquisite objects excavated from Nyu Hill, overgrown with grass, can we learn about the Christian tradition in Japan, and the power of its faith. Moreover, we cannot help but marvel at the way in which these examples of European art---such as the medal executed in the Baroque style---remained secretly hidden in a small jar. This pride in faith and art was preserved through all these years in Nyu Hill. We must not forget the source of this pride in what is known as the Christian daimyō, in the depths of Otomo Castle (Oita) and Usuki. Along with the numerous historical documents banning Christianity these objects are valuable relics of the history of the Christian tradition in Japan.

In closing, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Prof. Yakichi Kataoka of Nagasaki Junshin Women's College and Father Diego Pacheco of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki Museum for their assistance in preparing this article.



Plate 1 Wooden Crucifix (Crucifixo) 8 cm

spreaders of the gospel, St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1566) and St. Francis Xavier (1566-1622), which



Plate 2 Wood Plaque with Madonna and Child (Imagen) 5.5 × 3 cm

An Aspect of the Style of *Paradise Lost*



Plate 3 Rosaries (Rosario)

