

The origins of “*misso*”: The late premodern development of funereal rites among Japan’s aristocracy

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The study of the development of funereal rites among Japan’s aristocracy from antiquity through late premodern times has not only been made possible by the availability of ample historiographic sources, but is also helpful in examining both the peculiar and universal aspects of imperial funereal rites in late premodern times. That being said, no serious attempt has been made yet to trace the process of aristocratic funerals and burials throughout Japan’s premodern history. The present article is intended to shed light upon the late premodern transformation of Japanese funereal rites in both substance and perception, using the case of closed funerals (*misso* 密葬) among the aristocracy of that time.

The closed funeral (hereafter *misso*) was the rite of secretly transporting the body of the deceased to be either buried or cremated prior to the official funeral to be held several days later, and was also a method of avoiding the putrefaction of the corpse in the case of long delays in scheduling the official funeral. The rite itself, which had already been in existence prior to the beginning of the 17th century, became universally known as “*misso*” by the mid-18th century.

Rites similar to *misso* were often conducted during ancient and medieval times under the name of “*heisei-no-gi*” 平生之儀 (ordinary ceremony), the difference between the two being that *heisei-no-gi* was not conducted in secrecy or as an abridgement of the official funeral. Therefore, the transition from the popularity of *heisei-no-gi* in medieval times to the widespread diffusion of *misso* in late premodern Japan represents a change in the perception of funerals from a relatively unimportant ritual in medieval times to a ceremony arranged to befit the status of the deceased and carefully planned in advance to take place on the most auspicious day possible. In other words,

funereal rites experienced a significant increase in social value. In the opinion of the author, this increase in social value was felt throughout all social classes and became the rationale for the lavishness of funerals among the common people of late premodern Japan, as well as the huge scale on which imperial funerals came to be conducted during the time.