

Visualizing the Invisible

Supernatural Sight and Power in Early-Medieval Japanese Handscrolls

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Abstract

The field of secrecy theory involves a collection of discourses on the processes of secrecy that are complex and often contradictory. Different social, religious, and political frameworks make use of secrecy in different ways—to protect or popularize valuable knowledge, or to create, and make exclusive, clan or temple lineages. Nevertheless, despite the potential for confusion, secrecy theory offers valuable methods of analyzing sociopolitical and religiopolitical processes in pre-modern periods of history, where very few concrete cultural objects remain available as subjects of inquiry.

The eleventh-or-twelfth-century text *Ôkagami* (The Great Mirror) narrates an episode in the life of Fujiwara no Morosuke (908-960)—in which Morosuke’s party encounters the *hyakki yagyô* (night parade of the hundred demons) late at night—that appears to intersect, and therefore engage, with theories of secrecy. In this tale, Morosuke’s unique ability to see the *hyakki yagyô* is construed as an emblem of his political authority. This vision-based power dynamic is also expressed in two episodes from the twelfth and thirteenth-century illustrated handscrolls, *Kibi Daijin nittô emaki* (Illustrated Adventures of Minister Kibi in China) and *Kitano Tenjin engi emaki* (Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Tenjin Shrine), where a Japanese envoy and a Tendai abbot, respectively, confront—and control—dangerous spirits of the dead.

This paper explores how the narrative sequences, and visual illustrations, of these tales utilize processes of secrecy to construct propagandistic discourses that promote a sense of social, political, and religious authority for their beneficiaries in the early medieval period.