

The removal of corpses in relation to Japanese medieval funereal rites: The concept of “*heisei-no-gi*”

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From the Heian period on, we observe many examples of funereal ritual in which the corpse was moved to religious facilities, like Buddhist temples. In many of these cases, the corpse was removed in the same manner as removing living persons. The research to date on the subject has termed such activity “*heisei-no-gi*” and “*nyozai-no-gi*” and has interpreted its purpose as an attempt to veil the manifestation of impurity arising from death. However, due to both the limited timeframe and material dealt with in the research literature, its conclusions lack sufficient historiographical confirmation, showing that they have been built on a fragile edifice of mere supposition and conjecture. Given such a situation, the author of the present article, referring to the way in which corpses were moved as “*heisei-no-gi*” citing cases from the 10th century to 16th century, proceeds to identify the very first requirement and the accepted condition through that age. He then points out that while “*heisei-no-gi*” was a part of funereal procedures, it was a unique practice existing apart from funereal ritual per se.

First, as to the purpose of “*heisei-no-gi*” in terms of its most fundamental meaning, an examination of its relationship between “*heisei-no-gi*” and ritual impurity shows that even in many cases where “*heisei-no-gi*” is evident, ritual impurity still occurred, thus proving the conventional interpretation of veiling ritual impurity untenable. Next, the author argues that in funereal rites per se, fear and affright of possibly leading a person to his eventual death would exist, and, therefore, “*heisei-no-gi*”, which was apart from funereal ritual per se, was a device for avoiding that kind of fear and affright. And so the necessity to remove the corpse in a non-funereal manner, by treating it as if it were still alive, gave rise to the practice known as “*heisei-no-gi*”.