

## Sub-project B10

# Narrated theatre: the window onto reality offered by Japanese Noh manuscripts and the contexts in which they were produced from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period

Prof. Dr. Jörg B. Quenzer

Berenice Möller, M.A.

### Project summary

The golden age of Japanese Noh theatre began with the author and actor Zeami (1363–1443) and ended towards the mid-16th century. Manuscripts from this period, normally the focus of theatre research, also survive; they include libretti for plays (utaibon), and theoretical treatises about the theatre. By contrast, this sub-project will focus on manuscripts known as utai'ehon, which have seldom been the subject of research, having been produced between 1550 and 1650, that is, after the heyday of this theatrical genre. Apart from the form they take as books and lateral handscrolls in varying formats, they are distinguishable by the genre of text represented within them (= Noh libretti) and their combination of texts and pictures. There are no further distinct characteristics in the genre, which may well be a reason for their neglect by academic researchers to date. Little is known about the precise context in which the approximately 35 known utai'ehon were employed and thus the exact circumstances of their use with attendant customs.

### Aims

The objective of this project is to reconstruct the cultural knowledge imparted by these manuscripts, both in the texts and images they contain, and the social context in which they were made. The physical characteristics of such manuscripts, as yet only sporadically analysed, allow us to identify those cultural practices evoked by the manuscripts by means of their specific combination of textual and visual media. The interrelationship with the theatre sheds light on the societal background of the manuscripts. Moreover, utai'ehon open up a visual level of reception regarding the contemporary period, which the more conventional Noh libretti are only able to provide on the level of the imaginary since they do not include any illustrations.



*Hyakuman emaki, Kokuritsu nōgakudō, Tōkyō.*



*Miidera, Tōyō bunko, Tōkyō.*

### Japanese manuscripts containing texts and pictures

Japanese literature is closely intertwined with pictorial representations, which were to be found in many manuscripts until the late 19th century. In respect of illustrated manuscripts, the picture scroll (emaki-mono) was the predominant form used until c. 1500. Sutras and other religious texts were not the only pieces of writing to be illustrated; from the 10th century, secular tales were also ornamented with images. Texts and pictures occur both separated from one another in distinct passages and together in the same paragraph. In the case of emaki-mono, in particular, copies repeatedly produced over the centuries, which throw light on the reception of the subject matter, played a major role.

Illustrated books that were bound called nara-e-hon have survived from around 1500. The utai'e-hon addressed as part of this project also fall under this category. With their unpretentious illustrations, they are considered to be forerunners of illustrated woodblock-printed books, produced from the second half of the 17th century onwards. Until the country was opened up in the mid-19th century, texts and pictures were often blended to such a degree that it is now impossible to focus on one media independently of the other in printed books.