Textiles constitute the basis for contiguous fields like costume history and clothing studies, all sharing a common textile history; so what are the analytic methods inherent to textile history? As a textile curator in a museum where I spend long hours working with actual pieces, I have come to believe that for this study it is necessary to deal directly with historical textiles. That is, identifying whether certain aspects of a textile distinguish where or when it was made involves a process of induction, where one collects copious data on each piece, collates the accumulated information, and then extrapolates which characteristics might be time or place specific. To ascertain these distinguishing characteristics requires careful inspection of key pieces that can establish a standard for evaluating others. This thesis defines the concept of key textiles and examines the methodology for identifying these key pieces and effectively analyzing them. Then based on that methodology, it presents case studies of textiles from the medieval and early modern periods that accord with the requirements of key pieces and for which detailed information on their characteristics has yet to be published.

Chapter One, “Identification and Analysis of Key Pieces in Textile History” defines key textiles and summarizes the analytic methods to do this. The first section, “Analytic Methodology for Identifying Key Historical Textiles” reviews past research from the perspective of ascertaining the grounds used for establishing a piece as a key textile and singles out three bases: the existence of related written sources, scientific research into dating, and related visual sources.

It goes on to present five analytic methods for using key textiles to set a chronological standard. Focusing on one of these five, the second section, “History and Methods of Analyzing Weave Structure for Application to Art Historical Research” takes up the most fundamental—though not highly advanced in Japan—tool for textile research; the analysis of weave structure, introducing its history and processes. The chapter summarizes the fundamentals of the author’s methodology, which is further developed in Chapters Two and Three by presenting research on actual examples of key textiles.

Chapter Two, “Medieval Textiles: Fact and Fiction About Transmission Robes (denpōe),” takes up, from among many examples of medieval textiles that could count as key pieces since their
owner’s name has been handed down, the Zen-sect kasaya (kesa) used as transmission robes (denpō-e), which have hitherto not been studied in detail. The first section, “Zen and Transmission Robes” discusses the facts and fabrications found in written and painted sources that have been deemed important for establishing that a transmission robe is indeed a key textile and confirms the significant points through a study of the actual garments. The second section, “Denpōe and the Tōfukuji Five Dharma-Transmission Robes” introduces research on five transmission robes preserved at Tōfukuji and associated with the founder of the temple, En'ni (1202-80), a Zen priest who travelled to Song China. The third section, “Kasaya of Prestige: Nanpo Jōmyō’s Robe,” is a case study of the transmission robe said to be associated with Nanpo Jōmyō (1235-1308), who visited Song China. Careful examination of the transmission along with analysis of the textiles themselves places these within the contexts of East Asian Zen history and textile history.

The Third Chapter, “Early Modern Textiles: From Costumes to Beyond,” takes up key textiles of the early modern period that either have been only recently uncovered or as yet not researched in detail. The first section, “Noh Costumes from Kosawa Itsukushima Shrine and Sacred Noh at the foot of Kōya-san,” concerns noh costumes that have been recently discovered with an accompanying a list of contents dated to Keichō 15 (1610). The second section, “Two Examples Recently Come to Light of Garments from the First Years of the Edo Period: An Under-Armor Robe and a Vest Allegedly Worn by Tokugawa Ieyasu” treats robes stored in a box with an inscription stating that they were gifted in Keichō 8 (1603). The third section, “Intertwined Threads: The World Envisioned from the Altar Cloth at Enshōji Fashioned from a Kosode with Design of Grape Vines,” investigates an altar cloth bearing an inscription on its back stating that it was donated by Awa, a lady in waiting serving Tōfukumon’in Masako (1607-78). In each case study, by placing the textile within the context of other pieces of the same period, along with verifying the date of production as told by related written sources, I have, as much as possible, made an effort to reproduce the world in which the textiles were originally used.

Following the structure outlined above, this thesis confirms a methodology for identifying key textiles that set the standard for the study of textile history and through case studies it presents detailed information on select medieval and early modern textiles for which there are documentary/or pictorial sources to verify their provenance. At the same time it indicates possibilities for potential further research.