This lecture will address what is perhaps the premier narrative in the whole of Japanese literary history, namely the Tales of Ise (also known as the Ise Stories, the Ise monogatari). It was composed over a long period by several hands, before about the year 1000. Ise remained in the repertory of court practitioners for centuries, but as the Edo Period dawned, in about 1610 commoners began to gain access to close-guarded court-privileged works, and Ise, being short and fairly readable, was to the fore. This was in contrast to the better-known Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari), which is extremely long and had already become impenetrable to the general reader. (Conventionally, Genji is referred to by the singular ‘tale’, while the more anthologistic Ise is pluralised - though Japanese makes no distinction).

It is the purpose of this lecture firstly to outline the key tales (some were more represented than others), and their iconographical traditions, but also to see how they transformed over time. It is of especial interest to see mutations once the court prerogative was broken and Ise became a great works for all educated people to learn from.

Suggested readings:

The Tales of Ise is available in several translations, but perhaps best is H. Jay Harris, The Tales of Ise (Rutland & Tokyo: Tuttle, 1972); the most recent version is by Royall Tyler (with notes by Joshua Mostow), The Ise Stories (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), though it translates the work into high-school slang.

Also recommended:
Joshua Mostow, Courtly Visions: The Ise Stories and the Politics of Cultural Appropriation (Leiden: Brill, 2014)