Material Memory and the Provenances of Medieval Artefacts (Berlin, 3-4 Sep 26)

Institut für Kunstwissenschaft und Historische Urbanistik, Technische Universität Berlin
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Objects record their material pasts: A medieval manuscript's parchment pages, for instance, retain traces of animal bodies and thus reflect their physical source. Similarly, varying states of silver corrosion and shades of gold could have reminded its readers that metallic colours were produced from differently sourced and alloyed metals (Herbert 2022; Degler/Wenderholm 2016). Illuminations with rare pigments, such as lapis-lazuli, could transport connotations of precious foreignness and geographical expanse (Dunlop 2014), while a so-called toadstone placed on a book cover may have evoked a legendary origin, such as described in the Hortus sanitatis.

Medieval patrons, craftsmen, sellers, and users were highly attentive to the material qualities of artefacts and to their components' encapsulated memories of provenance. For example, Book III of Theophilus' twelfth-century Schedula diversarum artium describes various types of gold, including "gold of the land of Havilah", "Arabian gold", "Spanish gold" and "sand gold", which is said to be found on the banks of the Rhine (Dodwell 1998, pp. 96-98). The author mentions their colour and properties, as well as elaborating on their – often legendary – circumstances of extraction.

The conditions of an object or a raw material's acquisition could also be assessed on ethical grounds, as shown by the fourteenth-century Raw□ al-Qir□ās, a royal chronicle and history of Fez. Here, provenance is examined through a golden bracelet endowed to the Qarawiyyin mosque by the Marinid ruler Abū Ya□qūb Yūsuf (r. 1286–1307). According to the chronicle, the bracelet was made from booty taken in a war against Christians in al-Andalus and inherited by the ruler from his mother (Roudh el-Kartas 1860, p. 88). Its verifiably "pure" (□alāl) circumstances of acquisition and ownership chain made this piece of jewellery an appropriate resource to finance construction works in a religious edifice.

This conference aims to discuss how medieval objects and materials "remember" their origins (Plate 2025; Schlunke 2013; Jones 2007). Taking inspiration from the methods of modern-day provenance research, which traces the circumstances of acquisition and ownership chains, as well as embracing multiple perspectives on resource extraction and variable object narratives (Hagström-Molin 2022; Binter et al. 2021; Feigenbaum/Reist 2013), we propose to investigate how the prehistories of an object's components continue to reverberate within the artefact: What role does the memory of a sometimes extraordinary or mythic origin play in endowing things with particular significance? And extending the scope of provenance research to material narratives: To what extent does matter participate in processes of remembering and commemoration – and,

conversely, also in forgetting or actively covering up – provenance? Does matter-based memory rather emerge as a "side-effect" from a substance's properties, or could it also be actively anticipated through techniques of manufacture?

At stake in these questions is whether and how recollection can meaningfully be attributed to the materiality of medieval things. Although one may argue that artefacts "do not 'have' a memory of their own", but merely trigger a viewer's memory (Assmann 2008, p. 111), recent scholarship increasingly challenges strictly anthropocentric memory models by foregrounding interdependencies and entanglements among humans, animals, plants, and environments (e.g. Crane 2021; Steel 2022). This can be illustrated, for instance, by how materials register time through reactive and alterable qualities such as ageing, deformation, or corrosion, which could be understood as temporal inscriptions shaping how objects contribute to processes of remembering over time.

As a working hypothesis, we propose that these aspects of materiality constitute a form of non-human participation in knowledge production, whereby matter does not merely receive meaning retrospectively but actively influences how material memory is perceived, recalled, or obscured. The conference hence conceives objects as having agency within their own biographies, examining how material features prompt and preserve histories and memories – parchment reflecting animal bodies, recycled metals retaining traces of earlier uses, or textile smells evoking sensory connections to their origins.

We invite submissions that explore how materials store, absorb, or generate memories, and how reshaped objects prompt remembrance over time through the agencies of materials and the temporal narratives embedded within them. Case studies may address the multilayered provenances of objects by including also the imaginaries surrounding them as well as how myth, craft knowledge, and natural philosophy (like Pliny's Naturalis historia or Albertus Magnus' De animalibus and De mineralibus) shaped understandings of material memory in the medieval period.

Possible themes include, but are not limited to:

• Objects as material archives that contain origins and histories of their components
• Intersections of material memory and provenance (e.g. metals recast from ancient treasures)
• Legendary material origins (mythical genealogies, dragon-guarded substances, saintly or demonic origins etc.)
• Materials bearing traces of their extraction or ecological memory (e.g. the growth rings of timber, dentin structure revealing its origin in elephant or narwhal)
• Altered or "re-membered" objects storing, losing or projecting memories through decay, reuse, restoration, reintegration into new material cycles or forms (e.g. palimpsests, repurposed precious stones or ivories)
• Reactive, ageing, or "shape-shifting" materialities as mnemonic agents and carriers of memory (e.g. wax, parchment, bark, caoutchouc, asbestos)
• Conservational and theoretical approaches to material memory, addressing human-animal-nature-object relations

Contributions that focus on aspects of the perception, and/or artistic interactions with material memory in non-European contexts are explicitly encouraged.

Please send your paper title, an abstract (max. 300 words), and a short biographical notice (approx. 150 words) as a single file to i.dolezalek@tu-berlin.de and marie.hartmann@tu-berlin.de by 15 March 2026. A publication of selected papers is planned.

This conference is organized by Prof. Isabelle Dolezalek and Marie Hartmann, postdoctoral researcher in the project “Premodern Provenance. Tracing, Telling and Imagining the Origins of Objects and Materials in the Medieval Mediterranean“ (2025–2027).

There will be some funding to support travel and accommodation costs for those without institutional support. Professional childcare can be provided upon request for the duration of the conference.

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