Studying the Provenance of Written Artefacts (Hamburg, 14–16 Apr 27)

Hamburg, Apr 14–16, 2027
Deadline: Jul 31, 2026

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Studying the Provenance of Written Artefacts: Methods, Ethics, and Law.

Over the last decades, provenance studies have become an integral aspect of art history and cultural heritage studies. Yet, the provenance of written artefacts has remained understudied, even though their stories evolve in response to significant events, including colonialism, and changes in cultural practices of individuals, institutions, or communities. For various reasons, determining the complete chronology of a cultural object's successive locations and affiliations can be challenging, especially when illicit trade is involved.

The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) and its Cluster of Excellence, 'Understanding Written Artefacts' (UWA), published recommendations for ethical and responsible research (see DOI: 10.25592/uhhfdm.14757). These include establishing the provenance of written artefacts, that is, the chronology of ownership, custody or location of archaeological or historical cultural objects from their production context to the present day.

In order to establish and advance the study of the provenance of written artefacts as a field of research, the conference will focus on the methodologies, tools and implications involved in tracing the history of such artefacts, that is any artificial or natural object with visual signs applied by humans. The following topics of discussion are envisaged, and we welcome submissions for papers that fall into these different topics:

- Methodological frameworks to trace the provenance of written artefacts, with a particular focus on building comprehensive documentation and taking into account the distinction between an artefact's origin and its full life cycle.
- Material analyses in reconstructing the history of written artefacts.
- Digital tools, including those based on AI, and databases available to support provenance research.
- Archival provenance (of written artefacts preserved together) vs individual cases (of items dispersed across different collections and institutions).
- Ethical aspects: What responsibilities do scholars and institutions have when dealing with the provenance of written artefacts, especially unprovenanced or illicitly acquired ones?
- Legal aspects and policies concerning the ownership, transfer, and display of written artefacts, including their digital representations.

To encourage deeper engagement, case study sessions will enable participants to explore these issues hands-on. Each session will conclude with a round-table discussion that shifts towards a more theoretical perspective, featuring contributions from museum professionals and provenance specialists.

PRACTICALITIES:
We invite proposals for 20-min presentations, including a title, an abstract of 400 words (half a page) and a short CV (1 page) before 31 July 2026 to conference.csmc@uni-hamburg.de. Proposals must be submitted in English. Abstracts will be reviewed by the organisers and the Scientific Committee.
There will be no conference fees.
Costs for travel and accommodation will be covered for accepted speakers.

KEY DATES:
31 July 2026 - Deadline for proposal submissions
30 September 2026 - Notification of acceptance
14-16 April 2027 - Conference date

CONTACT:
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Reference:
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