



Persons and Things in Marseille and Lucca, 1300–1450

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Over the course of the high Middle Ages, at some indeterminate point between the decline of Carolingian civilization and the rise of the great kingdoms of the thirteenth century, Europe began to grow rich again. A symbolic date is 1252, the year in which the city-states of Genoa and Florence returned to the custom of minting gold, a practice forgotten in Christian Europe since the days of the Romans.¹ But money itself is not wealth; it is only a convenient way to represent value as it circulates from one coffer to the next.² Value itself is something quite different, a quality defined in some ineffable way by the operations of desire. If we choose to trace value back to its source, we will find that value is rooted in energy, for everything of value, at its core, is labor or energy that has congealed in some form.³ Whenever the circulation of value slows down and begins to pool, whether in homes or temples or businesses, value itself freezes. In freezing, value is embodied, transmuted into materiality in the form of things or elements of the built environment. The return to gold in 1252, therefore, may provide a convenient date for marking the slow turning of the tide in medieval Europe, but for all practical purposes the wealth that became increasingly manifest in the thirteenth century consisted of the stuff that money bought, rendered in material forms ranging from the fabric of Gothic cathedrals to the fashionable clothes featured in French romances.

Whenever value solidifies in material form, the resulting stuff serves some kind of role or function. One of the most interesting features of things, however, is that they are always capable of acquiring new functions, ranging from the aesthetic and the symbolic

to the mechanical.⁴ These new roles arise from the affordances of things, that is to say, certain qualities that suggest possible uses. The fancy silver buttons that decorated the sleeves of late medieval gowns, to take an example, were put there to display taste and status, but it did not take long for dress designers to realize that buttons could also serve the mechanical function of fastening two edges of cloth together. Affordances like this are not present *a priori*; they emerge instead from the properties of things and from the networks in which they are embedded. For this reason, we can never predict all the potential affordances of things in advance. This is why the study of the entanglement of persons and things is best understood through the lens of sciences such as history or evolutionary biology that look backward rather than the predictive or experimental natural sciences. Here, we are interested in the manner in which later medieval things were swept up into a system of signs that communicated social distinction. But it is important to bear in mind that an object that signals prestige does not cease to be an aesthetic or mechanical object. Nor does it cease to be a store of value, as long as there are mechanisms for releasing that store of value.⁵

By the early fourteenth century, the rising tide of wealth, which began in the south of Europe, had caught the eye and the fancy of Italian chroniclers and commentators. Many of them were divided in their minds about whether to gloat over the new-found wealth of their lands and cities or, following the example of ancient Roman commentators, to bemoan the shallowness and softness that would inevitably attend any exaltation of the material.⁶ Either way, they understood that the new-found wealth was doing something to the social worlds in which they moved. Those skeptical of the benefits of the new-found wealth were joined by the preachers who condemned vanity and by the city fathers or

kings and parliaments who passed sumptuary laws in the hopes of restraining excessive and untoward consumption. But the tide itself was indifferent to the outrage generated among its critics. As it turned inexorably northward across Europe, the tide of wealth flowed into great courts and peasant homes alike. As it did so, it reshaped or transformed everything from rooms and the arts with which they were decorated to clothing and beds.⁷ By the sixteenth century, the kinds of things regularly found in the Mediterranean household of the fourteenth century, including fancy coverlets, feather pillows, and bright colors made from expensive dyes, begin to show up in inventories of English households.⁸

When it surrounds us, matter such as this forms part of our extended phenotype, in much the same way that the beaver's dam is part of the beaver or the bower a part of the bower bird.⁹ Humanity without a self-fashioned materiality, like a honey bee without a hive, is very nearly unimaginable.¹⁰ This point has been made to great effect by the world's ascetics, who are arguably more powerfully defined by materiality than the rest of us.¹¹ What is especially interesting about all self-fashioned niches are the feedback loops that bind the organism to its environment. Humans systematically create and recreate the material habitat in which human culture and human bodies continue to evolve.¹² Collectively, humans and things are entangled in a network in which all the nodes, whether human or material, can be theorized as actors.¹³

The existence of connections that bind us to our habitat and vice versa have important consequences for our understanding of why things change in history. Whenever there are changes in the material regime, we should expect to see changes reverberating in the system of signs that people use to communicate status, identity, and belonging. And we

do.¹⁴ The anthropology and archaeology of European expansion and colonialism provide innumerable examples of new objects that are caught up in new systems of signs or are repurposed in dramatic ways when they are translated from one culture to another.¹⁵ One among many is a spool from a Kodak film packet that makes a cameo appearance in an ethnography from the area around Mt. Kilimanjaro, where it was observed serving as a plug in the earlobe of Maasai man.¹⁶

Here, it is important to note that the meaning of materiality is not constrained by its use within semiotic systems. Of all the platitudes inscribed on the chat labels found in museums of ethnography, one the most ubiquitous and least informative is the one that says “prestige good, used for display purposes” (or whatever). Objects can and do signal all kinds of things, including prestige, but even so it is reasonable for us to ask whether the display of status represents the sum total of the meaning inherent in an object.¹⁷ In addition, we may reasonably doubt the attribution itself; after all, a museum’s prestige is parasitic on that of its display goods, so we are dealing with a system of mutually self-fashioning prestige. The relationship between humans and things is surely more complex than a purely semiotic approach would indicate, although we are only beginning to scratch the surface of the non-semiotic approaches to materiality. The penchant for destroying things provides a case in point, for although some things are broken for reasons that include a desire to communicate, other things—think of television screens in moments of stress or lovers’ gifts following moments of betrayal—are broken for reasons that seem to go beyond a desire to signal. In some cultures, the healing process can involve the transmigration of the disease into a pot, which is then broken in a ceremony of healing so as to enact the destruction of the disease.¹⁸

An accumulation of stuff, moreover, can happen for reasons that have nothing to do with conspicuous consumption or conspicuous display. Studies in cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience, to take a vivid recent example, have shown how the compulsive hoarders of the present day accumulate for reasons that have nothing to do with communicating. Although hoarding behavior is not well understood, it is clear that the materiality that overwhelms the compulsive hoarder has somehow gotten entangled in deep cognitive processes involving anxiety, stress, contentment, and belonging. In the psyche of some hoarders, objects are more like body fat than anything external to the body—not wanted, maybe, but not easy to get rid of for all that.¹⁹

We should expect to find that the rising tide of wealth in Europe after 1252, as it materialized in the form of buildings and things, created new affordances that altered, in some significant and interesting way, the complex and perpetually changing matrix or network constituted by medieval Europeans and their material environment. If we want to understand the people of this world not through their writings but instead through their things, we need to have some things at hand. But here is where we run up against the most severe of the methodological challenges associated with studying past materiality.

Here is the problem: no assemblage of material remains available today is even remotely representative of the original environment. It is not just a question of there being little left to study. The most intractable problem lies in the fact that the taphonomic process, whereby a once-extant thing disappears from the stream of history, to resurface later as a fossil consisting of altered traces of the original, is systematically biased against whole classes of objects, such as those made of organic materials, notably cloth and wood. Colors are preserved on ceramics, but are hard to find elsewhere. Anything that is

habitually recycled, ranging from household linens to metal wares, is typically consumed before it gets into the ground, and because metal is so easily recycled, large things such as iron coffers are preserved at a much lower rate than small things such as coins, which fall out of pockets into fields and latrines.²⁰ The taphonomic process, moreover, is systematically biased in favor of material forms that are preserved from the cycles of decay and rebirth by enduring institutions. Museum holdings of medieval European objects, for this reason, are wildly biased toward items that once filled ecclesiastical treasuries. Much the same is true for medieval Europe's extraordinary manuscripts, not to mention cathedrals and churches.

By the later Middle Ages, the ecclesiastical imbalance in our collections is righted somewhat by the astonishing array of visual arts that have survived from the period. Many of the arguments concerning the fashion revolution of later medieval Europe, to take an example, rely to a significant degree on the images of dress and dress accessories available in paintings and illuminations.²¹ But one can also find humbler things in the visual arts, such as images of the curved barrels used by the wine porters of Northern Italy.²² Alongside visual art, there is much to learn from literature, which can convey extraordinary details about the material horizons of the characters.²³ Finally, another of Europe's great medieval treasures consists of its archives, which preserve a truly monumental quantity of records left by state and local governments, private families, and businesses.²⁴ We are nowhere near to grasping the sheer bulk of the surviving mass of archival documentation, but there are tens or even hundreds of millions of extant pages of material. The medieval archives of Marseille and Lucca, the cities from which some of

the examples used below are drawn, each preserve page counts in the hundreds of thousands, or, in the case of Lucca, probably the low millions.

These archives, by definition, consist of tangible things—that is to say, the registers or parchments themselves. It is quite feasible to study documents insofar as they are also things, focusing on the paper, parchment, ink, and binding from which they were made so as to draw conclusions about the trade in paper, the culture of documentation, the changing composition of sealing wax, and so on. But like the visual arts, the archives also preserve ghostly remnants of the tangible things that were present in the world in which those documents were made. We can see this most vividly in the post-mortem or probate inventories that have survived from the period. Before 1500, such inventories are relatively uncommon, but even so there are enough to go around. If we hazard a guess that there are 5,000 inventories to be found in all Europe's archives, each listing, on average, fifty line-items, we could without much difficulty assemble a database of some 250,000 late medieval household goods. Unless we choose to adopt a radical post-structural stance, where all is text and the external reality of medieval Europe is forever beyond our grasp, we can assume that the items found in this database are linked by an exceedingly thin and tenuous thread to actual things that, once upon a time, entered the eye and impinged upon the consciousness of the family members or officials who took the inventory.

This is not in the least to suggest that inventories capture belongings in some photographic way. Among other things, the uniqueness of each and every object is cruelly homogenized by the necessity of converting the thing into a descriptive phrase. The challenges associated with describing androgynous or in-between things perplexed

the makers of inventories themselves, a fact attested in the inventories by the ubiquity of the Latin words *vel* or *sive*, meaning “or,” as in “a houppelande or a cloak (*unam chopam sive unum mantellum*).” The absence of a photographic realism is also revealed, in a photo-negative way, by the silences or blind spots that characterize all inventories. By way of example, a sample of one hundred inventories from later medieval Marseille, between 1328 and 1451, records not a single pet, and indeed none of the paraphernalia of petdom, apart from a parrot’s cage that makes a rather improbable appearance in an inventory from 1405. But it is hard to believe that the houses of the deceased or the indebted were actually devoid of dogs and cats. Absent things abound in these documents; they range from charms and amulets to fireplaces. The blind spots that obliterated the fireplaces arose, perhaps, from an intuition that elements of the house’s fabric belong to the house, and not to its people. Likewise, we know that some residents of Marseille had painted walls, for we have notarial contracts that specify the commissions of such paintings, but those responsible for making inventories evidently did not feel that wall paintings constituted a thing capable of being inventoried. Surveying the totality of objects, comprising some 5,000 line entries in these hundred inventories, there are other bizarre silences, including surprising shortfalls in things that should be ubiquitous, such as slippers, sandals, hose, clogs, and boots.

But even if inventories offer a distorted or warped image of the stuff that was really there, it is no more distorted than the skewed impression of the material world of later medieval Europe we would derive from visiting museums or flipping through facsimile editions of illuminated manuscripts, or, for that matter, from walking the aisles of a rescue-archaeology warehouse where shelf after shelf is filled largely with broken

crookery. The textual things found in archival documents, moreover, contain information about tangible things that is not inferior to the facts we can glean from a chemical analysis of elemental ratios, even if textual information constitutes a different species of evidence. The presence of fish in the human diet, for example, leaves behind a legacy of stable isotopes found in the bone long after the fish itself is gone. In the case of an inventory, where an ephemeral object leaves a faint and ghostly trace of its passing in the form of words on a page, the signal we find today is distorted by virtue of having passed through the visual cortex of an observer, to reemerge as a faint linguistic echo or avatar of the original. The fact that we have to use history rather than chemistry to trace that signal back to its origin might seem to diminish the aura of authority that we might like to bring to the process of reconstituting the thing that emitted the signal. But chemistry is not everything.

Given this philosophical stance regarding the nature of things and their residual traces, the distinction we conventionally draw between tangible things and word things diminishes just a little bit. Proceeding in this hopeful way, we can approach the written archives of later medieval Europe in search of the tangible things that have long since vanished but have left behind a faint whiff of their passing. The purpose of a documentary archaeology of things from medieval Europe is to provide insights that can complement the archaeology of tangible things. A documentary archaeology would have been unimaginable a generation ago, and even now is little better than a research prospect.²⁵ But the immense and growing power of digital technology, coupled with the emerging possibilities of scholarly collaboration and crowd-sourcing, have made the prospect thinkable. If we *could* assemble 250,000 line items from 5,000 inventories, the

faintness of each and every signal would be compensated by the sheer richness and volume of their collective voice.

With this methodological point in hand, the question before us is the question of how the matrix of people and things underwent one of its many transformations as the rising tide of materiality flowed into the houses and onto and around the bodies of the Europeans of the later Middle Ages. Using the archaeological and art historical sources, we can reach durable and reliable conclusions that have formed the staple elements of the narrative of the history of material culture. All the indices, after all, point to a world in which habits of emulative consumption and competitive display were becoming more common, more costly, and increasingly accessible to a growing range of people. Since the 1980s, historians and scholars of many different eras, or at least those who believe that consumption is driven by demand, have sought to identify the moment marking the birth of desire in the Western world, and medievalists have not been slow to claim priority for their own period.²⁶

So what happens when we test this conclusion against the record of the material past provided by a documentary archaeology? Cities such as Marseille and Lucca in the later Middle Ages offer excellent case studies for measuring the findings of material and visual archaeology against the archival record. Although no city can be considered representative of a world in which the bulk of the population consisted of peasants and sharecroppers, cities do have the enormous virtue of generating far more surviving documents per capita. These two cities provide important counterweights to studies that focus on Florence, Venice, Paris, or London. Neither Marseille nor Lucca was in a flourishing condition across the period from 1250 to 1500; Marseille's economy, in

particular, was positively depressed. In neither city do we find anything like a royal court or a university. In the case of Lucca, the city's political domination over a hinterland means that records pertaining to the small communes and villages that dotted the countryside were preserved in the city itself, meaning that the possibilities for studying patterns of rural consumption are quite substantial.

Surveying the records, it would certainly be possible to write a history about the emergence of desire or the birth of a system of competitive consumption. By way of example, let us look at the inventory of a citizen and resident of Marseille who died on 5 June 1348, toward the tail end of the Black Death²⁷ (Fig. 1). INSERT FIG. 19.1 HERE. The deceased was a Jew named Bonafos Bonet, who had lived, with his late wife Doneta, in a house located in Marseille's Jewish quarter. The two appear to have immigrated several decades previously from the town of Lunel in Languedoc, across the Rhone River, and it is almost certain that they had fled to Marseille following the expulsion of Jews from France in 1306.²⁸ An inventory of a Jew, admittedly, is not typical, but once we start to screen inventories in search of typical individuals we soon find that there is no one left at all. Like most post-mortem inventories in this world, the document was not made by a government official. It was confected instead by a member of the extended family—in this case, by a Jew named Bonet Vital, an immigrant from the town of Uzès in Languedoc who was acting as the guardian of Bonafos's heir, a child named Benet Bensegnori. The inventory records everything the guardian found as he moved from room to room in the couple's house, keeping notes either in Provençal or Hebrew. The inventory itself was translated into Latin when it was entered into the record, although

many of the words are Provençal in origin and have been given Latin endings. One or two words may be Hebrew.

Unlike virtually every other inventory of a well-to-do house in Marseille at this period, the document lists no kitchen and, for that matter, no trenchers, bowls, kettles, spits, or utensils of any kind. The text ends abruptly and it is possible that some elements of the inventory were lost. Leaving aside this major lacuna, the couple's known possessions were distributed in three rooms. First, we find a storeroom full of equipment for making and storing wine. Next comes a dining hall, furnished with a table, benches, and several chests containing linens and other things. Finally, a bedroom, with three beds and several more chests, in which the clothing was kept.

The guardian who made the inventory, Bonet Vital, had an eye for fabrics and colors, and he went to some lengths to describe the linens and clothing in all their glorious detail. One of the many things that strike us is the not-insignificant quantity of silk. Opening one of the chests in the dining hall, for example, Bonet discovered a large pile of thirty-two bed sheets and fifteen tablecloths, including the following items:

- One silk tablecloth
- One bed sheet worked with silk
- One silk purse
- One purse and a belt made of silk
- A certain silk *rasali*²⁹

In the chests in the bedroom, similarly, he found several articles of clothing in a whole rainbow of colors, several of which were dressed with sendal, a fabric made of silk. It is worth lingering over some of the highlights:

- An over-tunic, a tunic, and a cloak with red sendal and squirrel fur and tassels which are called “rapra,” colored lead-blue or “pes”
- A scarlet cloak with yellow sendal and silver tassels
- A green cloak with red sendal
- A ruby-red over-tunic with yellow sendal
- A ruby-red tunic
- A coverlet for a crib or a cradle made of sendal
- A child’s over-tunic, ruby-red
- A lead-blue hood
- A lead-blue scapular
- A silk hood faced with ruby-red linen
- A bright green tunic
- One bright green over-tunic, old, with a pelisse

Silks and fabrics dyed in spectacular colors can be found in other inventories from mid-fourteenth-century Marseille. What is remarkable here is the density of such items. We can construct several theories that might help explain the concentrated luxury in this house. It is possible, for example, that the deceased man and his wife were engaged in some form of pawn broking, and if so, perhaps these items came from their Christian debtors. But this seems unlikely, and not just because Bonafos and Doneta were clearly in the wine business. At least two of the items were fringed with tassels, presumably the *tzitzits* worn by male Jews, and the uncertainty with several other readings suggest that

the notary who translated the text was dealing with Hebrew words for which the corresponding Latin words were unclear.

The most likely explanation for the concentrated luxury in this house arises from the cosmopolitan nature of Marseille's Jews.³⁰ It is easy to imagine the pathways that could have bound an immigrant Jewish household tightly into networks of communication in the Western Mediterranean. In fact, we do not have to merely imagine it—we can see it in the inventory itself, in the form of two glass lamps from Damascus and a ceramic bowl from the city of Bougie in the Maghreb. These exotic items are nearly unprecedented in the sample collection of inventories. The networks of communication that bound together the world of Mediterranean Jewry facilitated the transmission not only of letters and rabbinic commentaries but also lamps, Islamic lusterware, and the latest fabrics and fashions from Italy and Valencia. If so, did the fashions paraded about by immigrant Jews in cities such as Marseille generate acquisitive envy among Christians? It is certainly possible. Jews, of course, were not the only Massiliotes with connections afar. Like any port city at this time, Marseille possessed a small community of expatriate Italians. There were many pathways whereby the colors and fabrics pioneered elsewhere in the Mediterranean could have found their way into the city.

This understanding of luxury consumption is modeled on an epidemiological approach wherein the desire for luxury is a contagious disease that started somewhere else, leapt from one port to the next, caught hold in a few households, and then gradually swept across the whole city, leaving unscathed only those whose poverty served to inoculate them. We could certainly write the history of luxury consumption in Marseille in this way, and highlight how the silken fabrics and colors found in the house of Bonafos

and Doneta eventually found their way into the houses of Christian fishmongers and bakers. But to write the history in this way would be to generate some enormous blind spots of our own. The fact of the matter is that any survey which tried very hard not to cherry-pick the results would reveal no more than tiny ripples of change in certain domains, such as silken fabrics, colors, coats of arms, books, and the decorative artistry dedicated to chests and coffers, and these ripples would scarcely blemish the surface of an otherwise unmoving sea of materiality. There are no meaningful changes to be found in wine-making equipment, utensils, lighting fixtures, rugs and carpets, bed furnishings and coverlets, tables, stools, and benches. We cannot find any signs of a takeoff in children's goods, pet accessories, or devotional objects. There are few meaningful changes in the ratio of tin or pewter to ceramic and no indication that the ceramics became so noticeably more beautiful as to impinge upon the awareness of the makers of inventories.

From an epidemiological point of view, of course, this is not even remotely a problem. One can simply scratch cities like Marseille off the list of trend-setters and explain it away as a result of the city's poverty. This is, after all, how diffusionist models of cultural change always work. They proceed by identifying a hot spot, such as Sumeria at the outset of the agricultural transition or Western Europe on the eve of the colonial enterprise. They then isolate the reasons for the putative change, and assign the causal arrow of all future change to the vector identified in this way, as if urbanity or consumer desire will unfold in some predictable and uncomplicated way wherever its vector should land. But to return to the Kodak film canister repurposed as an ear-plug, we know that that is not how it happens. The actor-networks of cities like Marseille and Lucca are not

organisms that can catch a disease. They are complex networks with multiple feedback mechanisms that are, in turn, entangled in systems of communication and meaning-making that go far beyond the simple desire to display prestige. If we are trying to understand people through their things and possessions, if we are seeking to understand the phenotypes in which things and self-fashioned materials were so deeply embedded, let us return to the documentary archaeology of these cities and find out what else the things are trying to tell us.

One of the first and most important things is the presence of shabby things in and among the luxurious. Today, many of us inhabit a world where the social homogeneity of our neighborhoods is matched by a similar homogeneity in the profile of the goods we choose to surround ourselves with. It was quite the opposite in the later Middle Ages. The point is emblemized by the inventory of goods of Bonafos Bonet and his wife Doneta, for although the couple owned stacks of expensive linens, at least some of those linens were tucked away in these rather disreputable objects:

- One box with a broken lid
- Another box, old

Old and shabby things abound in the inventories. To the extent that inventories recorded things more or less in the order seen, moreover, it is clear that the luxury goods were often juxtaposed with the shabby things. In some cases, this is because people indiscriminately stacked the shabby things alongside the nice ones, as in these items

belonging to another victim of the Black Death which were found along with some other things in a great painted chest:³¹

- Thirty hand-towels, some good, some shabby
- Eight face-cloths
- Three shabby cloths³² which are worked with silk

Of course, it could be said that the things above were squirreled away in a chest and therefore the juxtaposition of the fine and the shabby was not one that made a public statement. But we find such juxtapositions even in display goods. The house of a candler who died in 1395, for example, included a bed of planks furnished with a bottom-mattress, a top-mattress, and sheets and coverlets to match, including a flocked coverlet in an Alexandrian style, but along with these we find a type of coverlet or blanket described as both shabby and torn. However much people were motivated by the desire for nice things, in other words, and however much they created hierarchies of objects, they did not seek to spatially isolate the fine from the shabby. The human world worked in much the same way, of course, with the poor living in the homes of the wealthy, as their servants or slaves, or, just as often, in houses or rented rooms right next door. In this way, we can see how the network of persons and the network of things were defined by the same social aesthetic.

The fact that Bonafos and Doneta tucked their fine linens away in old or shabby chests points to another finding revealed by documentary archaeology, namely, that the rising tide of wealth did not lift all areas of the household equally. Instead, the taste for

luxury was confined to certain kinds of things, notably outer clothing, fine metal wares, dress accessories such as belts and crowns, and bed accessories such as coverlets and quilts. Left far behind were furniture items of all types, including tables, bed-frames, chairs, benches, and stools. The reason for the asymmetry in investment probably lies in the fact that people were indeed using such articles to engage in prestige competition. The biological parallel can be found in sexual selection, a pattern that leads to spiraling takeoffs isolated in just one part of the (male) phenotype—the peacock’s tail, for example, or the sea lion’s bulk. The presence of isolated luxury articles in the homes of the modest also points to the pattern of emulative, trickle-down consumption that we have come to expect to find, following the theories of Thorstein Veblen and Werner Sombart.

But there is an important proviso, namely, the fact that the robust nature of the resale market and the system for guaranteeing credit that was based upon pawn goods means that the value found in luxury goods was far more fungible than we might otherwise imagine.³³ One of the astonishing findings of a documentary archaeology is that the value of luxury goods and garments, at least at the upper end, belongs to the same order of magnitude as the value of houses and plots of land. This fact is displayed with great clarity in a collection of inventories of insolvent estates from the years 1421-1422, where the estimated values of real estate holdings are listed alongside the estimated values of things. To take just one example, the inventory of a woman whose late husband, a notary, was insolvent at the time of his death lists seven units of property averaging 85 florins in value. The inventory also lists two outer garments valued at 25 florins and 28 florins, a woman’s belt of silver and enamel valued at 20 florins, and a crown of silver and pearls

at 18 florins. Surveys of individual holdings indicate that the ratio of the total investment in movable goods compared to the total investment in real estate was typically around 3:2, though there is much variation from one person to the next. What this means, in effect, is that luxury goods were simultaneously stores of value. Like subcutaneous fat, which in animals can serve both as a signaling device and as a store of calories, luxury goods serviced at least two functions.

In point of fact, small, portable things had a very special kind of value, since they could be readily pawned, or, if the going got tough, hidden or spirited away from exigent creditors. In other words, their weight and size afforded a more rapid and efficient liquidation of their value in those moments when liquidity was needed. For this reason, wealth congealed much more readily in certain small objects than in other kinds of objects. Furniture, for example, was spectacularly cheap and often very shabby, something we know, counter-intuitively, from the curious fact that furniture was not commonly described as being shabby. The point is that things were called shabby only if they were capable of not being shabby. The drabness of the furniture, in turn, derives from furniture's being cumbersome. In addition, the materials themselves had different temporalities. Wool and especially silk were very durable fabrics; the latter could last hundreds of years. Linen, by contrast, wore out more quickly, revealed in the inventories by the fact that linens acquired the word "shabby" much more often than other fabrics. One of the consequences is that the system of dressing homes and bodies favored wealth that congealed as woolens with silk trims or as coverlets with embroidered designs. Some kinds of clothing were composites of fabrics of very different temporalities. This was possible because articles of dress were often modular. The durable parts, such as fur

trims, silken linings, or decorative buttons could be removed from worn clothing and attached to new designs. In this vein, we sometimes find sheets made of linen but decorated with a silken fringe.

Comparing the two cities, we find some striking similarities. The entanglement of prestige and value, for example, is just as marked in the things found in the Lucchesia, as are the striking asymmetries constituted by the juxtaposition of fine and shabby things. But the contrasts between the two cities are equally vivid. Lucca's fancy clothing, for example, relied on contrasting color schemes and striped or checkered patterns that are present in Marseille but distinctly less frequent. These include parti-colored clothing, where one-half of the costume was made up in one color or a type of weave that contrasted, sometimes violently, with the color or weave of the other half:

- A woman's parti-colored surcoat colored tawny on one side and peach-blossom on the other side
- A woman's parti-colored jacket in vermillion or blood-red and bluish medley cloth, piped with narrow gold fringes at the hands and neck and lined with rabbit skin
- A woman's parti-colored tunic, colored green and colored vermillion
- A man's parti-colored woolen cloak colored blood-red and peach blossom
- A man's parti-colored woolen jacket in vermillion [on one side] and yellow stripes [on the other] with a lining of white skin

Little of this can be found in Marseille, though there are one or two examples of clothing that was nearly similar:

- A woman's parti-colored tunic in good condition [colored] ruby-red [on one side] and deep blue [on the other]

The Lucchese clothing, moreover, was much more prone to be described using a gendered terminology of male and female. The entrenched habit of gendering in the Lucchesia seeped sideways into other linguistic domains. Double-beds and double-bed sheets, for example, were often gendered male simply because they were bigger.

Can we explain Lucca's distinctive color schemes in terms of the desire for social distinction? Possibly, but we should do so with care. We need to remind ourselves that the modern world is the child of Enlightenment philosophy, and of Thomas Malthus, and is therefore prone to imagine that the world operates by virtue of the competition that exists between atomistic individuals within societies. The very sameness of the clothing styles found in the Lucchesia, for example, may point to something other than prestige competition: namely, a regional costume that came into existence not because the individual pieces allowed Lucchese men and women to distance themselves from one another, but instead because the collective fashion allowed Lucchese men and women to demonstrate, publicly, that they were not to be confused with those god-damned Pisans or Florentines.³⁴

That the argument of distinction is so readily available does not mean that we should spurn it, of course, so let us look more closely at the patterns of prestige. The records of

Lucca are distinguished by the vast quantity of sources pertaining to the seizure of goods for the purposes of debt collection. Creditors in pursuit of a debt brought their complaints to the court, prompting a sergeant of the court to travel to the houses of debtors, seizing anywhere between one and one hundred objects with which to reimburse the creditor. Returning to the court, the sergeants handed to the notary a list of the plunder he had taken—the plunder itself was left with a bailee or handed over directly to the creditor—and the notary duly transcribed a translation of the list of objects and their descriptive phrases into his register. Thousands of these little inventories of objects seized exist from the early to middle decades of the fourteenth century. Simple calculations based on survival rates indicate that more than 2,000 seizures were made annually during the 1330s, in a city and district comprising around 20,000 households.

The sergeants took everything they could get their hands on, including wine casks both empty and full, wicker baskets, nets for catching thrushes and doves, swords, raw flax, and even manure. But they showed a distinct preference for fine clothing. In the rare cases where an individual was plundered in successive weeks, we can occasionally witness the process whereby the sergeants began with the fancy stuff, and gradually worked their way down to the ordinary stuff. This process bears more than a passing resemblance to the enforcement of a sumptuary law, for when an individual had proven himself or herself to be unworthy through falling into debt, the first things to be taken away were the fancy clothes. What is remarkable about the system is that the status of being unworthy was not given *a priori*, in the form of a status such as “peasant” or “tradesman.” Instead, unworthiness was proven *a posteriori* by indebtedness. In this way, we can see how materiality, in this case the materiality of a clothing regime enforced by

the process of debt collection, was swept up into systems of social marking or social control.

What did the impoverished peasants, laborers, and artisans of the Lucchesia feel about the seizure of their things? All people have a map of the body laid out somewhere in the cortex. As literature in cognitive neuroscience has shown, the brain uses that map to know where to find heads and toes and everything in between.³⁵ But the brain is not fussy about what it chooses to consider the edges of the body, and is quite willing to include hats and boots in the body map, not to mention tools and tennis rackets, as long as they are in contact with the body for a sufficient amount of time. Objects that are further away cannot be necessarily absorbed into the body map, but they are readily caught up in affective relationships with their owners, as most of us know already without being told by neuroscientists. The compulsive hoarder is one whose emotional relationships with objects and pets have supplanted relationships with family and friends. It is not clear that people always acquire emotional relationships with things—the ubiquity of trash in the modern world suggests otherwise. But one of the most distinctive things to emerge from the records of debt collection from Lucca is the fact that people could and did develop emotional ties to their things. The evidence is necessarily indirect but the signal is suggestive.

To begin with, we find a small but revealing number of cases where individual debtors chose to hide certain special things away from the sergeants. The archetypal case is from the year 1334, when a sergeant of the court, visiting a farm in search of a debt, reported that he had found and carried off a fancy coverlet that had been hidden away in a haystack. This rather extraordinary tale tells us that at least some debtors were distressed

at the thought of losing precious coverlets. It also suggests that sergeants perceived the hiding away of coverlets as an affront to their office and their own dignity. This was not, as it happens, the only instance where a coverlet was hidden away in the Lucchesia, although the second coverlet, seized the previous day by the same sergeant, had been hidden in a shed. The world of debt collection was predicated on an overt system of monetary value, but as these examples indicate, it was shot through with a second economy, an economy of humiliation.

Cases such as these two illustrate the emotional bonds that could connect people with their things. These connections are also revealed by the violence with which the sergeants were sometimes confronted. Many features of the process, including the home invasions that were necessarily part of the process, would have been sufficient to anger even the most stoic of debtors. But as the practice of iconoclasm indicates so well, objects are especially good at channeling emotion, which is why the object itself often takes center stage among the violent responses. Here we find a debtor hastening to seize back a piglet squealing in the arms of a predatory sergeant. There, a debtor cuts the cords that tie a sack of plundered goods to a donkey.

The point is that if we take seriously our own intuition that goods form part of our bodies and are embedded in our emotions and psyches, then the objects seized in the Lucchesia were not just objects. They were proxies for the body. Michel de Montaigne, who understood humanity as well as anyone, makes much the same point in his essay on cruelty where he praises the Persian king, Artaxerxes, who chose to whip the clothing rather than the backs of errant noblemen.³⁶ As long as we understand objects as proxies for the body, we can draw an equivalence between debt collection and the body-based

humiliations that were rapidly emerging in the criminal justice system at this time, including whipping, maiming, and the stocks. Debt collection, as argued earlier, afforded a mechanism for enforcing sumptuary distinctions, but it also afforded a mechanism for inflicting stress and humiliation, which are key elements in a system of domination.

Surveying the records produced by a documentary archaeology of both Marseille and Lucca, we can, if we choose, pick out the luxury goods and thereby claim that the roots of modernity are somehow located in the later Middle Ages. As noted above, this is a stance necessarily informed by a diffusionist or epidemiological model of doubtful reliability. But even if we allow ourselves this dubious luxury, imagining thereby to enhance the standing of later medieval Europe and make of it a happening place, what do we do with all the evidence for the late-medieval patterns that are distinctly not modern?³⁷ We have already seen some of these not-modern patterns, such as the fact that their prestige goods, especially their clothing, were arguably far more fungible or liquid than ours, and far more likely to hold their value over the years. If we yield to the temptation to attach date-stamps to patterns or processes, then we commit ourselves to a historical vision where the modern elements of any world, like Michelangelo's unfinished sculpture of the dying slave, are somehow trapped in the stony matrix of premodernity, just waiting to be chipped free.

This is not how the world works, and if we really want to understand the people and things of the later Middle Ages, we need to understand them on their own terms. So let us, in closing, return to one of the most interesting observations to be gleaned from a survey of the archives of the two cities featured here. Once again, this is an absence, not a presence, and in this case it is the absence of anything that we can creditably call a

collection. By the sixteenth century, the habit of forming collections was beginning to manifest itself in the behavior of antiquarians, naturalists, scientists, and humanists of all stripes and conditions. We find vast assemblages of diverse objects, such as wondrous things gather from the four corners of the earth, or collections of nearly identical objects, such as books and beetles.³⁸ The streams and rivulets of this practice come down to the present day and constitute a fascinating realm of historical inquiry. But in all the documents from Marseille and Lucca, among the thousands upon thousands of individuals and objects to be found there, you will never find anything that even remotely suggests the existence of a collection.

Absence of evidence can hardly be assumed to mean evidence of absence, especially in the Lucchese records, where many of the victims of predation were far too poor to collect anything other than grain and beans. For this reason, research in other archives is quite capable of falsifying the claim. But if it should hold up, this noteworthy absence gestures to the fundamental alterity of this world, and points to a number of possible conclusions. Of these, the most interesting is the possibility that what really defines the last two hundred years, and even more the last two decades, is not the sheer volume of stuff so much as their sameness. Our desire to believe in our own individuality, so cherished a feature of modern identity constructs, is inversely proportional to the individuality of the very objects we assemble in the frantic pursuit of distinction. The results can be desperate indeed, for if you are a compulsive hoarder, and if you choose to treasure only one thing, such as a newspaper or a Tetra Brik container, then you will have a near-infinity of things to treasure.

The existence of compulsive hoards in modern Western societies, together with the fact that junk clings to most of us without our really having a say in the matter, stands in sharp contrast to the medieval world. In the Middle Ages, movable things really were movable, largely because the value they contained caused them to be sucked up into circulation. Observations such as these remind us that the relationship between persons and things is contingent on the societies of which they are a part, and highlight the futility of any exercise that seeks to find any of the trappings of our society in the societies of the past.

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Illustration

Fig. 1. Inventory of Bonafos Bonet, Marseille, 1348. Archives municipales de la Ville de Marseille, 1 II 44, fol. 55 verso. Reproduced with permission.

¹ Robert Sabatino Lopez, “Back to Gold, 1252,” *The Economic History Review* 9 (1956): 219–40.

² See Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

³ This perspective is in keeping with arguments made in Marshall David Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁴ James J. Gibson, “The Theory of Affordances,” in *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology*, ed. Robert Shaw and John Bransford (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates ; distributed by the Halsted Press Division, Wiley, 1977), 67–82.

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁶ These themes are discussed in David Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia: The Social History of an Italian Town, 1200-1430* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000-1700*, 3rd ed (New York: Norton, 1994).

⁷ Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1996); Evelyn S. Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy 1400-1600* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Maryanne Kowaleski and P. J. P. Goldberg, eds., *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁸ Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England*, *Early Modern History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype: The Long Reach of the Gene*, Rev. ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*.

¹¹ A point made by Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

¹² The theoretical premises of this claim are outlined in Kevin N. Laland and Michael J. O'Brien, "Niche Construction Theory and Archaeology," *Journal of Archaeological Method & Theory* 17, no. 4 (December 2010): 303–22.

¹³ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

¹⁴ Hugh Amory, *Bibliography and the Book Trades : Studies in the Print Culture of Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991); Michael Dietler, *Archaeologies of Colonialism: Consumption, Entanglement, and Violence in Ancient Mediterranean France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Sally Falk Moore, *Social Facts and Fabrications: "Customary" Law on Kilimanjaro, 1880-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 4.

¹⁷ Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*.

¹⁸ James Simpson, *Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition*, Clarendon Lectures in English 2009 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); John Chapman and Bisserka Gaydarska, *Parts and Wholes: Fragmentation in Prehistoric Context* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007).

¹⁹ I have reviewed some of the literature in Daniel Lord Smail, "Neurohistory in Action: Hoarding and the Human Past," *Isis; an International Review Devoted to the History of Science and Its Cultural Influences* 105, no. 1 (March 2014): 110–22.

²⁰ Whence the enormous number of small metal objects that can be found; see the Portable Antiquities database at <http://finds.org.uk/>. Christopher Dyer has commented on the prevalence of coin-finds in fields, implying that the coins fell out of the pockets of peasants working the fields; see Christopher Dyer, "Peasants and Coins: The Uses of Money in the Middle Ages," *British Numismatic Journal* 67 (1997): 31–47.

²¹ Much of the literature on the fashion revolution in later medieval Europe, for example, has included evidence drawn from visual sources; see Stella Mary Newton, *Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince: A Study of the Years, 1340-1365* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 1999); Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*,

trans. Caroline Beamish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Also valuable from a theoretical point of view are Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2001); Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

²² See Lester Little, *Indispensable Immigrants: The Wine Porters of Northern Italy and Their Saint (1200-1800)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

²³ Sarah-Grace Heller, *Fashion in Medieval France* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007).

²⁴ A fascinating introduction to this material, featuring private business records, can be found in Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato, Francesco Di Marco Datini, 1335-1410*, 1st American ed. (New York: Knopf, 1957).

²⁵ Mary Carolyn Beaudry, ed., *Documentary Archaeology in the New World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²⁶ This perspective on the meaning of consumption can be traced back to Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2007), and especially to Werner Sombart, *Luxury and Capitalism*, trans. W.R. Dittmar (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967). Scholars who emphasize the later medieval contribution to the consumer revolution include Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400-1800*, trans. Miriam Cochran (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300-1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Susan Mosher Stuard, *Gilding the Market: Luxury and Fashion in Fourteenth-Century Italy*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Maryanne

Kowaleski, “A Consumer Economy,” in *A Social History of England 1200 - 1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. M. Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 238–59.

²⁷ Archives municipales de la Ville de Marseille 1 II 44, fols. 55v-56v.

²⁸ Marseille, at the time, belonged to the Kingdom of Naples.

²⁹ scilicet *rançal*, Spanish for a fine woven textile; my thanks to Luis Girón-Negrón.

³⁰ Juliette Sibon, *Les juifs de Marseille au XIVe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 2011).

³¹ Archives Départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône 355E 1, fols. 25r-29v

³² Ms: *tralhole*

³³ See, inter alia, Evelyn Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*, ch. 9.

³⁴ A major point made by Mary Douglas, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption: With a New Introduction*, Rev. ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996).

³⁵ Sandra Blakeslee, *The Body Has a Mind of Its Own: How Body Maps in Your Brain Help You Do (almost) Everything Better* (New York: Random House, 2007).

³⁶ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), book 2, 101.

³⁷ This is the question that motivates Martha C. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁸ Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).