Material Ontologies in Europe, 13th-15th centuries

Daniel Lord Smail
Harvard University
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Abstract: Among his many distinguished intellectual achievements, Laurent Feller has made signal contributions to one of the most important methodological turns in recent historiography. As Laurent Feller and others are argued, written documents preserved in archives should not be seen as containers of information useful to historians solely because they passively preserve or reflect historical facts, ideas, or habits of thought. Instead, written documents, and the processes that generated them, should be understood as devices that act recursively in the world, creating the very facts and ideas that they appear to merely reflect. This contribution applies Feller's approach to the study of estate inventories and other lists of household possessions from later medieval Europe (13th-15th centuries). With the revival of Roman law in the twelfth century, the members of a decedent's family and the executors of his or her estate were invited to compile post-mortem inventories listing the estate's contents. This invitation to contemplate goods and possessions induced members of the laity to develop material ontologies, that is to say, the frames of thought necessary for the task of organizing descriptions of material culture and grappling with abstract concepts such as belonging and value.

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Beginning in the thirteenth century, estate inventories survive in increasing numbers in European archives.[1] An inventory compiled in 1240 by the Genoese notary Giovanni Enrico de Porta provides a clue as to why.[2] At the outset of the act, drawn up for the heir of the late Wilielmus de Castro, the notary observed that the heir's guardian, wishing to avoid the penalties that could be imposed on guardians who fail to compile inventories, sought legal shelter under the provisions of a law passed by "the most sacred emperor Justinian." One

[1] A sample may be found at https://dalme.org/. Important editions include Jordi Bolòs Masclans and Imma Sánchez Boira, *Inventaris i encants conservats a l'Arxiu Capitular de Lleida (segles XIV-XVI)*, vol. 52, Textos i documents (Barcelona, 2014); Henri Bresc and Geneviève Bresc-Bautier, *Une maison de mots. Inventaires de maisons, de boutiques, d'ateliers et de châteaux de Sicile XIIIe-XVe siècles*, 6 vols. (Palermo: Associazione no profit Mediterranea, 2014), http://www.storiamediterranea.it/portfolio/une-maison-de-mots-inventaires-de-maisons-de-boutiques-dateliers-et-de-chateaux-de-sicile-xiiie-xve-siecles/; Guilhem Ferrand, *Les inventaires après décès de la ville de Dijon à la fin du Moyen Âge (1390-1459)* (Presses universitaires du Midi, 2017). My thanks to Tom Johnson for his careful reading and wise suggestions.

[2] Robert Sabatino Lopez, *Studi sull'economia genovese nel medio evo, Documenti e studi per la storia del commercio e del diritto commerciale italiano* 8 (Torino: Lattes, 1936), 247–49.

recognizes this as a reference to an element of the extensive body of Roman law governing successions.[3] Guardians, in this legal framework, were encouraged to assess the value of inherited estates by means of an inventory to ensure that heirs would not be burdened by debts.

As the legal context indicates, the inventory was not new to thirteenth-century Europe. Extant inventories from prior centuries provide details about the continuity of the practice. In their three-volume catalogue, published between 1892 and 1895, Fernand de Mély and Edmund Bishop identify 182 inventories that were compiled in Europe and Byzantium between 471 and 1200.[4] Many other early-medieval inventories have been discovered since then.[5] What changed, in the thirteenth century, were the incentives that encouraged actors to compile inventories. One of the most important of these was the growing availability of credit and the resulting increase in rates of insolvency.[6] Heirs exposed to the debts of their progenitors learned how to the use the Roman inventory as a means for evading such debts.

Secular inventories surviving from Mediterranean Europe in the thirteenth century probably number in the hundreds, a speculative figure that includes the dozens of known inventories from locales such as Genoa, Bologna, and Marseille, and the uncounted numbers in series such as Bologna's *Memoriali*. The numbers increase by orders of magnitude all over Europe over the next two centuries, from thousands in the fourteenth century to possibly tens of thousands in the fifteenth. This is but a fragment of the original corpus. Early on, inventories were typically compiled by members or friends of the family, who walked through the decedent's house, sometimes in the presence of a notary, and took the resulting list to the court to be registered. By the mid- to late-fourteenth century, officials associated with the courts of wards also began to compile inventories, adding to the volume preserved in notarial registers.[7]

Once the inventory had become available as a conceptual tool, legal actors found ways to deploy it in other other domains. Insolvent estates were regularly inventoried and

[3] Jerome D. Hannan, *The Canon Law of Wills: An Historical Synopsis and Commentary* (District of Columbia: The Catholic University of America, 1934), 72–73, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.35112104341849. The relevant passage in the Codex of Justinian is 6.30.22.

[4] Fernand de Mély and Edmund Bishop, *Bibliographie générale des inventaires imprimés*, 3 vols. (Paris: Leroux, 1892).

[5] Pere Benito Monclús, "'Hoc est breve...': l'emergència del costum i els orígens de la pràctica de capbrevació, segles XI-XIII.," in *Estudios sobre renta, fiscalidad y finanzas en la Cataluña bajomedieval*, Anuario de estudios medievales: Anejo, 27 (Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Institutición Milá y Fontanals, 1993), 3–27; Jean-Pierre Devroey, "Recording social and legal conditions in early medieval rural society in Francia and central Italy. Denominations, lists, status, and judgments," *Quaderni storici* 163, no. 1 (2020): 29–48. My thanks to Adam Kosto for these references.

[6] François Menant and Odile Redon, eds., *Notaires et crédit dans l'occident méditerranéen médiéval* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2004).

[7] For the *Magistrato dei Pupilli* in Florence, see Caroline M. Fisher, "The State as Surrogate Father: State Guardianship in Renaissance Florence, 1368-1532" (Dissertation, Brandeis University, 2003).

assessed in order to distribute the assets among the creditors.[8] The estates of those who had become fugitives from justice were inventoried by criminal and civil courts so that fines could be collected from the assets of the estate.[9] In the Crown of Aragon, the rise of the second-hand market was instrumental in stimulating inventory-production, since inventories helped identify the goods owned by the decedent and therefore eligible for auction.[10] In notarial records from the Crown of Aragon, as a result, inventories are often followed by the records of auctions.

Since the late nineteenth century, inventories have been important sources for historians interested in art, books, clothing and fashion, scientific instruments, and other aspects of material culture. They figure prominently in histories of everyday life and practices of consumption.[11] All these approaches rely on a methodological stance that is instantly recognizable, one that follows the objectivist position common to economists and other practitioners of modern scientific methods. Adopting this stance, one assumes that inventories are useful for scholarship because they provide access to objects that once existed. Several decades ago, scholars began to question the principle of objectivity that informed this approach. Among the earliest and most trenchant critiques in the anglophone literature were offered by Margaret Spufford in 1990, followed by Lena Orlin in 2002.[12] Tom Kuehn has described how Florentines used inventories to defraud other claimants on an estate, a practice whereby the inventory became a tool of deception rather than a list of known facts.[13] The force of this critique has undermined the truth status of the information provided by inventories, and has encouraged scholars to approach these records as complex texts.

How should we use or interpret inventories, if we need to retreat from the idea that they offer windows onto past materiality? An answer to this question lies in the methodological approach to which Laurent Feller has contributed so significantly in his

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[8] Some of the earliest Bolognese records are of this type; see Eric Nemarich, "Insolvent Households in Bologna," in *The Documentary Archaeology of Late Medieval Europe*, edited by Daniel Lord Smail, Gabriel H. Pizzorno, and Laura Morreale. http://dalme.org/collections/insolvent-households-in-bologna.

[9] Ben Jervis, Chris Briggs, and Matthew Tompkins, "Exploring Text and Objects: Escheators' Inventories and Material Culture in Medieval English Rural Households," *Medieval Archaeology* 59, no. 1 (2015): 168–92.

[10] Juan Vicente García Marsilla, Germán Navarro Espinach, and Carles Vela Aulesa, "Pledges and auctions: the second-hand market in the late medieval crown of Aragon," in *Il Commercio al minuto: Domanda e offerta tra economia formale e informale. Secc. XIII-XVIII / Retail Trade: Supply and Demand in the Formal and Informal Economy from the 13th to the 18th Century. Selezione di ricerche*, ed. Giampiero Nigro, Atti delle Settimane di Studi e altri Convegni, 46 (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2015), 295–317.

[11] Françoise Piponnier, "Inventaires bourguignons (XIVe-XVe siècles)," in *Probate inventories, a new source for the historical study of wealth, material culture and agricultural development*, ed. Ad van der Woude and Anton Schuurman (Landbouwhogeschool-Wageningen: Afdeling Agrarische Geschiedenis, 1980), 127–40.

[12] Margaret Spufford, "The Limitations of the Probate Inventory," in *English Rural Society, 1500-1800: Essays in Honour of Joan Thirsk*, ed. John Chartres and David Hey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 139–74; Lena Cowen Orlin, "Fictions of the Early Modern English Probate Inventory," in *The Culture of Capital: Property, Cities, and Knowledge in Early Modern England*, ed. Henry S. Turner (New York: Routledge, 2002), 51–83.

[13] Thomas Kuehn, *Patrimony and Law in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

work. A premise of this approach is that documents preserved in archives should not be seen merely as containers of information. Instead, written documents, and the processes that generated them, can be seen as devices that shape the very world that brought them into existence. As Laurent Feller has argued, documents ranging from lists to account books participate in a complex process whereby loosely structured information is slotted into standardized cognitive templates. The formal properties of these templates emerge in the process of their own elaboration, and subtly alter the manner whereby information is subsequently known, apprehended, and manipulated.[14] Facts or data points, in short, do not exist before the unspooling of the procedures that render them in written form.

Value estimates offer a useful example of this feedback. Seeing a monetary value in a document, an economic historian might be tempted to conclude that an item was "worth" a given sum of money. But this is a simplistic reading of a more complex phenomenon that occurs when documents such as this are created, for the act of asking someone to provide a value estimate that can be put down in writing helps generate the reality—in this case, the value—that it purportedly describes. Among other things, it assumes that the item has a knowable value. Furthermore, the resulting value becomes a psychological anchor that subtly alters all future value estimates.[15] In other words, there is feedback between the cognitive framework in which the initial query was shaped and the resulting value, such that the act of defining the value alters the cognitive framework. This feedback is an instance of a more general phenomenon that unspools in other domains of action. Polling agencies today, for example, are aware that questions appearing on an opinion poll, such as "Do you trust the electoral process?", do more than record information. They actually create the very opinions, in this case skepticism about the electoral process, that the poll is nominally designed to measure. Following Marilyn Strathern's reformulation of Goodhart's Law, the act of measurement is not isolated from the system whose information is being measured, since the act of measurement changes the properties of the system and thereby alters all subsequent measurements.[16]

With these principles in hand, it is possible to argue that as members of Europe's lay population grew accustomed to the act of compiling lists of objects, notably inventories, they participated in a collective cognitive exercise that produced changes in material ontologies.[17] As participants or spectators in the act of listing objects, they began to perceive, understand, and value objects in different ways. The process of compiling inventories and similar lists of objects, such as dowries and testaments, had a feedback effect on those who produced them. In the process, there emerged a particular understanding of things as *objects*. In philosophical terms, the iterative act of compiling

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[14] Laurent Feller, *Richesse, terre et valeur dans l'occident médiéval: Économie politique et économie chrétienne*, vol. 19, Collection d'études médiévales (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 7.

[15] The anchoring effect is described in Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

[16] Marilyn Strathern, "'Improving Ratings': Audit in the British University System," *European Review* 5, no. 3 (1997): 305–21.

[17] Étienne Anheim et al., eds., *Le pouvoir des listes au Moyen Age. Listes d'objets, listes de personnes*, Éditions de la Sorbonne. Histoire ancienne et médiévale 171 (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2020).

lists of things contributed to the elaboration of a social metaphysics: a widespread cultural and cognitive apparatus for apprehending and describing the material world.

Surviving inventories contain faint clues regarding this complex feedback—that is, if we choose to read them not as descriptions of material culture but instead as texts that reveal how people perceived and understood their material surroundings.

At the most basic level, the invitation to enter descriptions of objects on paper or parchment required that people think about what an object is and how an object may be known and described. As Tom Johnson has pointed out, this exercise is fundamentally ontological in nature, since it consists of an inquiry into the nature of being.[18] The procedure began with the act of identifying things by means of nouns or noun phrases. Though the process of naming something in language usually operated smoothly, occasionally we discern moments where a compiler was mildly perplexed by an ambiguous object occupying a conceptual space between two nounsl. Moments of uncertainty are revealed, for example, whenever the compiler introduced words for "or," such as the Latin *seu*, *vel*, and *sive*, into a text. Sometimes, the uncertainty arose because there was a mismatch between the vernacular language used to name an object and the Latin into which the original hand-list was subsequently translated. An example of this may be found in a 1390 inventory from the village of Clermont near Toulouse. The individual who compiled the original vernacular description had observed a type of hanging lamp known in Occitan as a *calelh*. The notary was inclined to translate this by means of the closest Latin equivalent, *crucibulum*. Perhaps because the lamp in question did not fully match his understanding of the Latin noun, however, he hedged his bets by including both words: "a crucibulum *or* a calelh."[19]

Similar ambiguities sometimes arose in cases where compilers sought to describe colors that were not otherwise named in language. An instance of this occurred in 1333, in a record from Lucca, in reference to a women's garment one of whose colors was described as "vermillion *or* bloodred."[20] Occasionally, objects themselves fell into the ambiguous space between the semantic fields covered by two distinct nouns in the same language. An interesting example occurs in a 1464 Latin inventory from Messina, which lists "common jars *or* pitchers, broken," using the Latin plural nouns *iarras* and *ydreas*.[21] The notary clearly knew what a *iarra* was; a few lines earlier, he had referenced "a small *iarra* of the type used by barbers." The broken jars listed on this line, apparently, were not distinct enough to fully qualify as *ydreas* (*hydria*), but they were not quite the same as what he would have normally called *iarras*.

Numerous examples of the kind described above may be found in inventories. The presence of words for "or" indicates how each and every act of observing an object and describing it in written language generated a momentary reflection about nouns and their

[18] Tom Johnson, "Medieval Law and Materiality: Shipwrecks, Finders, and Property on the Suffolk Coast, ca. 1380–1410," *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 2 (2015): esp. 407-408.

[19] Philippe Wolff, "Inventaires villageois du Toulousain (XIVe-XVe siècles)," *Bulletin philologique et historique*, 1966, 503: *unum cruciibolum sive caley*.

[20] Archivio di stato di Lucca, *Podestà di Lucca* 33, fol. 22v: *vermillio sive sanguinio*.

[21] Ferdinando Gabotto, "Inventari messinesi inediti del Quattrocento," *Archivio storico per la Sicilia orientale* 3, no. 1 (1906): 275: *Item iarras seu ydreas mediocres, fractas*.

meanings. In most cases, the act of identification occurred smoothly and unhesitatingly; only the occasional instance of ambiguity or uncertainty generated further reflection. The claim is not that any single act ultimately made any difference to how people thought about objects. The claim, instead, is that the growing need to list objects in acts related to succession and property transfer generated a conversational or intellectual space in which men and women routinely participated, either as compilers or observers. This was an ontological space: it required people to think about the nature and being of objects.

Objects that can be described as compound, notably beds, proved to be particularly challenging within this ontological exercise. Whenever compilers confronted beds—an event recorded in nearly every extant inventory, and often on multiple occasions—how did they choose to define the nature of the object visible to them?[22] Solutions varied from region to region and sometimes from person to person. Sometimes, the object of record was described as a "bed *with* a frame, mattresses, sheets, blankets, coverlets, pillows," and so on. On other occasions, however, the word for "bed" (Lat. *lectum*) was omitted, and the compiler instead listed each component of the bed as a separate object, dropping the preposition *with*. Corrections and strikethroughs occasionally point to moments of metaphysical indecision. A particularly revealing instance of this is found in a Marseille inventory from 1409 where the notary began an object phrase by noting "a wooden bedframe." Abruptly changing his mind, he decided to format the description differently, crossing out the reference to the bed frame and writing instead "a bed *with* a wooden bedframe, furnished with a mattress, a blanket, and a pillow."[23] As examples such as this indicate, descriptions of compound objects are especially useful for the light they shed on the ontological challenges that could arise whenever people were asked to define the object of record.

A far more basic type of challenge consisted in the act of determining what constituted an object worthy of inclusion in any given inventory. As they entered into any given room, after all, compilers of inventories would have been confronted with far more things than anyone would ever want to write down. The need to exclude absurd things such as a dead beetle or a lump of coal may have been obvious to everyone. Yet candidacy for inclusion or exclusion was not determined a priori. In each and every case, the compiler of an inventory, confronting a range of things, had to make decisions about the objects to be recorded and those to be ignored. Subtle formulations of value and relevance shaped all of these decisions, formulations that themselves had cognitive afterlives.

Let us begin with the fabric of the house. As scholars who use inventories have long noted, inventories typically omit most elements of the built environment, such as flooring materials, doors, mantelpieces, wall paintings, window coverings, and panes of glass. The explanation is that such objects were attributes of immovable property and thus did not need to be included in lists of movables. In some fundamental way, the fabric of the house

[22] See Katherine L. French, *Household Goods and Good Households in Late Medieval London: Consumption and Domesticity after the Plague*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 63–71.

[23] Daniel Lord Smail, "Inventory of Dulcia de Monteolivo," fol. 193r. In *The Documentary Archaeology of Late Medieval Europe*, edited by Daniel Lord Smail, Gabriel H. Pizzorno, and Laura Morreale. Accessed June 7, 2022. https://purl.dalme.org/d1063568-222c-4544-921e-357e45fac602/.

was conceived of as "belonging" to the house. For this reason, it belonged only in a transitory sense to the head of the household, who was just one of a succession of owners.

But the decision to exclude elements of the fabric of the house is less obvious than it may appear. To take an interesting example, although inventories frequently record locks and other ironwork found on coffers and strongboxes, they do not describe locks and hinges on doors. The presence of locks added to the value and prestige of coffers and strongboxes. The same was true for the locks on doors, since the status of the household was correlated with the strength and security of the lock on the front door. Yet this did not induce compilers of inventories to notice either doors or their locks. As this suggests, descriptions of objects found in inventories reveal how the Roman-law distinction between movable and immovable property had manifested itself in the minds of the actors responsible for compiling inventories. The attributes of immovable property, curiously, became almost entirely invisible to the gaze of the inventory.

Similarly, the relative absence of footwear in inventories can also be explained by the operations of a principle that ownership is not transitive. The majority of people who appear in some form or another in inventories, often off stage, seem to have possessed only a single pair of shoes, clogs, or sandals at any given moment. Since surviving family members, including children and widows, were almost certainly wearing their footgear at the time of the making of the inventory, shoes and clogs were excluded from the act because their status as belongings of their wearers outweighed their status as part of the estate of the head of household. Here, the most important thing to observe is that the act of making an inventory relentlessly forced individuals to confront, and implement, a concept of possession. Possessive individualism, to push this claim, emerged from the routinization of the concept of possession in the act of drawing up inventories and similar records.

Finally, the act of compiling inventories required extensive reflections on the nature of value. Strikingly, inventories almost invariably exclude cats, dogs, parrots, and any living creature that could be thought of as a pet. It is not the case that pets are absent from households: one finds parrot cages and dog collars from time to time, indicating that the pets were there. We can probably assume that pets had some sort of emotional value. What they lacked was the kind of value necessary to render them eligible for inclusion in inventories. The frequent listing of horses, cattle, donkeys, mules, bees, chickens, and other animals puts the absence of pets in a sharp light. Clearly, animals were included whenever they possessed value as assets.

As this suggests, the concept of monetary value hovers over all acts of inventory-making. Inventories constituted an important domain where ordinary people learned to think repeatedly about value. That said, one of the most interesting features of inventories from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries arises from the fact that monetary value was not explicitly important. Although one of the functions of most post-mortem inventories lay in the act of determining whether the combined assets of an estate outweighed the debts, post-mortem inventories, at least those from southern Europe, rarely preserve value estimates.

The cumulative act of compiling inventories and related acts amounted to a vast experiment in crowd-sourced metaphysics. This experiment was undertaken centuries before the philosophers of the Enlightenment took up the task of thinking about how (or whether) our senses are able to apprehend things. Yet arguably everything that Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers wrote was beholden to some degree

to this experiment. The social metaphysics it produced—emphasizing the distinctions between objects, their names, their owners, and their monetary value—underpinned the conceptual or cultural frameworks through which Europeans apprehended the material environment. The experiment, in other words, shaped the material ontologies of premodern Europe.