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Riccardo Rao, Università degli Studi di Bergamo, riccardo.rao@unibg.it, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9072-2896
Daniel L. Smail, Harvard University, smail@fas.harvard.edu, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2232-145X

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An interview with Daniel L. Smail*

by Riccardo Rao

The interview with Daniel L. Smail traces his academic background and scholarly work as a medievalist, from *Imaginary Cartographies* (now translated into Italian as *Cartografie immaginarie*) to his recent projects on late medieval household inventories and documentary archaeology.

Middle Ages, Europe, USA, Marseille, historiography, Open Access, History of France, Anthrohistory, Documentary Archaeology.

This interview took shape as a series of questions asked to Daniel Smail in May 2024, while he was in Bergamo for a research stay. Its structure is simple and straightforward, beginning with the author's training in medieval history before focusing on his major works. The responses were written and returned upon his return to the United States in the summer of the same year.

Although conducted remotely and within a short timeframe, the interview distills some of the reflections that emerged from our discussions on history and archives over the past five years, between Boston, Bergamo, and Marseille. Topics such as archival research, the relationship between history and anthropology, the different approaches to environmental history and landscape history on either side of the Atlantic, as well as French, Italian, and American medieval studies, have frequently been at the center of our conversations. Likewise, we have often discussed the experimentation with open and collaborative research through digital platforms – particularly the experience of The Documentary Archaeology of Late Middle Europe *(https://dalme.org/).*

* Daniel Lord Smail was born in Ithaca, New York, in 1961. He studied History and Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin (1979-1984) and earned his PhD from the University of Michigan in 1994 with a dissertation titled *Mapping Networks and Knowledge in Medieval Marseicomelle, 1337-62: Variations on a Theme of Mobility*. From 1995 to 2005, he taught in the Department of History at Fordham University. Since 2006, he has been a professor in the History Department at Harvard University. He has held numerous visiting professorships at institutions including the University of St Andrews, Université Paris I, Università degli Studi di Bergamo, Queen Mary University of London (canceled by COVID), Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès, and Universiteit Antwerpen, where he was also awarded an honorary Doctor of Arts degree.

It is fair to say that some of these questions began to take shape from my first encounter with Daniel at Harvard in 2019 and from the impression of intellectual openness that my initial contact with American medieval studies left on me. But the interview, of course, offers much more: it presents a nuanced, original, and remarkably coherent set of reflections from one of the leading American medievalists not only on historical methodology and research trajectories but also on the characteristics of historical research and epistemology across the Atlantic.

Several questions in the interview are dedicated to Daniel Smail's first, thought-provoking book, Imaginary Cartographies*, which is now being published in Italian translation by Attilio Stella (Reti Medievali E-Book 51).*

1.1 *The first question I would like to ask is about your educational background and your encounter with historiography on the Mediterranean. How did your research path build between the United States and Europe, and which scholars most influenced your interest in the late medieval Mediterranean?*

In the United States, very little attention is paid to either antiquity or the Middle Ages in primary and secondary school curricula. For most students, therefore, their first introduction to the Middle Ages comes from taking elective courses at the university level. When I was an undergraduate student, I did not take any history courses that covered the Middle Ages; the earliest historical period I studied in a course was the Reformation. When I applied to graduate school, I expected to study early modern France. But during the first three years of my doctoral program at the University of Michigan (these years are the equivalent to an MA program in the European system), my interests moved back in time, largely because of the charisma of my eventual dissertation supervisor, Diane Owen Hughes. Hughes was (and is) a historian of medieval and Renaissance Italy; she wrote her doctoral thesis on Genoa, under the supervision of Roberto Lopez at Yale University, and subsequently worked on a number of themes related to women's history and cultural history in Italy. I was drawn to the general subject area, which we now sometimes call "medieval Mediterranean history" as a useful shorthand, but since I generally identified and still identify with France and French history, I explored potential dissertation topics in several southern French cities, including Toulouse, Montpellier, Perpignan, and Marseille. Eventually, I settled on Marseille, largely because the city's archives are large by French standards and, at the time, relatively understudied. Following the interests of my dissertation supervisor, I pursued various questions in family and urban history. At the time (I entered graduate school in 1987), these were very active areas of research.

In hindsight, it is fair to say that my dissertation was inspired primarily by Italian historiography available in English or French (I did not read Italian at the time). Some of the major figures that come to mind include Jacques Heers, David Herlihy, Francis W. Kent, Christian Klapisch, Thomas Kuehn,

and Richard Trexler. My dissertation borrowed methods and approaches used in Italian historiography at the time and applied them to Marseille. But I was also greatly influenced by historians associated with the Annales school, partly because my doctoral institution, the University of Michigan, had a faculty exchange program with the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. During my MA-equivalent years, I had a chance to take classes and/or engage in conversations with visiting EHESS historians, including Alain Boureau, André Burguière, Michel Cartier, Jacques Revel, and Jean-Claude Schmitt. Burguière was an especially important influence. Among other things, he very kindly helped me prepare an article that was eventually published in *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*.

I should note that Michigan, at the time, was a leading center for anthropological approaches to historical subjects. Although I was not in the "Anthro-History" Ph.D. program, I was, without really noticing it, deeply influenced by anthropology, and in particular some of the big questions asked by major scholars of the past such as Henry Sumner Maine, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Herbert Spencer. I avidly read historians of 19th-century social science, such as Peter Bowler, in order to understand the effect of the Darwinian revolution on historical thinking. This kind of out-of-the-box thinking was encouraged at Michigan. At the time this seemed perfectly normal to me, and it was only after I graduated and began to move in medieval history circles that I realized what an unconventional education I had had.

1.2 *A common thread links you to Roberto Sabatino Lopez. What was your knowledge of Italian historiography and medievalism in your training and start in research?*

As I noted above, my major research field, following the influence of Diane Owen Hughes, was in late medieval southern France and Italian. Since I did not read Italian at the time, I consulted mostly anglophone and francophone scholarship. Studies of the Italian communes featured prominently in my bibliography since they were the best model for approaching Marseille.

1.3. *What was your first encounter with French and Provençal historiography like?*

Earlier, I described the enduring influence of Annales-style historiography on my early years as a historian. I also read much of the literature available at the time on southern French history, including Jacques Chiffoleau, Richard Emery, André Gouron, John Hine Mundy, Kathryn Reyerson, Jacques Rossiaud, Philippe Wolff, and many others. At the time, very little attention was paid to southeastern France in the historical community in the United States. This is still largely true today. Among North American scholars, the only important work was being done by Francophone historians in Canada, including Andrée Courtemanche, John Drendel, Michel Hébert, Rodrigue Lavoie, and

Francine Michaud. This was a body of work that drew on and made visible the extensive local historiography in Provence, led by figures such as Noël Coulet and Louis Stouff. Coulet was a particularly generous mentor to me; I was very saddened by the news of his recent death.

2. *With the exception of* Deep History*, your books and projects start from deep archival research, that on Marseille. Overall, you have chosen to always keep at the center of your research as a medievalist a solid case study, analyzed through research on unpublished archival holdings, avoiding, for example, synthetic approaches conducted on secondary sources. I would like to ask you to explain how important it is and what it means to you to do research on the Middle Ages through archives, even in comparison to historiographic research practices that have on several occasions in recent decades marginalized archival work.*

It's hard to know where to begin answering this question. To go back to a point I made earlier, the doctoral training I received at the University of Michigan was, in hindsight, rather unconventional. My interest in the fascinating though wildly idiosyncratic developmental theories produced in 19th-century Europe led to a related interest in understanding the continuing grip of those same theories and ideas. One of my advisers, the anthropologist and historian Sally Humphreys, talked about "ghost theories", by which she meant ideas and theories that had once been discussed openly but have since receded into the background, shaping thought without anyone really being aware of their influence. It was, and is, a deeply unsettling idea. Later, through reading the early work of Richard Dawkins, I found language that helped me understand how disturbing this was. What Dawkins suggested, in effect, is that ideas are perfectly capable of using your mind to be thought about, without you having much say in the matter. He called those ideas "memes", although the concept has now been perverted by popular understandings.

In the first year or two of my graduate education, I remember asking my adviser the following desert-island question. Take a group of students with some historical training but no background in medieval Europe and put them on a desert island. They have access to the entire array of medieval primary sources and are skilled in all the necessary languages, but otherwise have no bibliography about the Middle Ages and no library to consult. You ask them to reconstruct the outlines of medieval European history solely on the basis of the primary sources. (Note how this question reflected my own autobiography). Would they produce a history that was even remotely like the one we have now? For example, would they reinvent "feudalism" or "the Renaissance"? It seemed vanishingly unlikely to me that they would do any such thing, a stance which led to my abiding concern about the problem of self-referentiality in historical writing. If you take the product of historical thought as the primary subject of historical thought, you enter into a self-referential spiral that leads down into discourse, and when you arrive at the bottom,

everything has become talk about talk. Archival work acts against the spiral of self-referentiality.

I won't go too deeply into the thorny problems posed by this concern, since they are obvious to anyone. To consider just one of the problems, if you swing too far to the other side of the spectrum, into a scenario where everyone reads primary sources on their own desert islands and eschews the bibliography, then there's no point to publishing anything. As in all things, one looks for the middle ground.

In the United States, the marginalization of archival work has been driven by a distinctly political set of concerns associated with social justice. To some, the archive is seen as an instrument of power used to silence marginal voices in myriad ways. There is some truth to this, of course. I don't know enough about the situation of European historiography to know whether you're speaking about the same issue or something unrelated. What I will say is that I have always used archives to study ordinary men and women, 'subalterns' if you will, which is a legacy of the social history that I was trained in.

There is another reason I much prefer reading archival sources over secondary interpretations. It has to do with my understanding of what knowledge is and how it is made. I can explain this best by means of anecdote. Some years ago, I was reading through a small sample of records from Lucca in the 1330s and creating a database of around 2,600 acts of debt collection, featuring about 7,000 individual line items that identified articles of material culture. I transcribed all this by hand and entered it into a spreadsheet. One day, I mentioned what I was doing to a colleague in the quantitative social sciences. He looked at me in amazement and said "why don't you just hire a research assistant to do that and then analyze the results?" It's a question I've thought a lot about. The answer lies in the benefits of slow reading. When you read serial documents slowly, your mind has the leisure it needs to begin recognizing patterns across the sample. Those patterns are forms of knowledge, as I tried to explain in a short publication I once wrote entitled "Pattern in History." The phenomenon of intuitive knowledge is well known to psychologists; it has been described as "System 1 processing" by the behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman, for example. Most good historians are conscious of the fact that they have a great deal of knowledge without necessarily knowing how they know it. For me – this is a purely aesthetic observation, not a value judgment – this is the type of knowledge I am most attracted to.

3.1 Imaginary Cartographies: Possession and Identity in Late Medieval Marseille *(New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), which is now coming out in Italian (*Cartografie immaginarie. Mappare il possesso e l'identità nella Marsiglia bassomedievale*, Firenze University Press, 2025, published in Open Access for the Reti Medievali E-Book series), is a book of strong originality, marking the start of research on the mental maps that guide men of the Middle Ages, which you are still continuing today through the study of inventories. Since this work, the theme of perception takes a central place in*

your research. First of all, I would like to ask you where your interest in this research subject came from, which creates a natural intersection with landscape studies, starting with those of New Cultural Geography. And I would also like to ask you if this book has built a bridge with research conducted by geographers.

Well, it's interesting that you would ask this question. Earlier, I expressed concern about the way in which historiography can silently shape interpretation without the historian necessarily being aware of the shaping influence of inherited structures of thought. Obviously this has counterparts in Thomas Kuhn's ideas about paradigms, as discussed in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). There is also a distinctive linguistic counterpart, going back to linguists such as Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. The idea here is that language itself subtly shapes how people think and perceive the world. All these examples partake of the same general situation, which runs like this. There is a perceiving mind. There is an external world. In between, there are cognitive and linguistic filters of various sorts that alter how the input from the real world is perceived and interpreted. As an undergraduate, I was a Philosophy major as well as a major in History. Through philosophy, I acquired an interest in metaphysics, running from Hume through Kant and down to the phenomenologists of the 20th century, to whom I have been returning in recent years. Much of my interest in those filters emerged from this early encounter with Philosophy.

What is interesting about the filters is that they are real. In other words, by studying cognitive and linguistic filters, I don't think I'm abandoning an interest in the 'real' world in favor of the fuzzy world of ideas.

Parenthetically, the idea for the underlying premise of *Imaginary Cartographies* came from the difficulty I had creating in a prosopographical database of people in 14th-century Marseille. This database, which I still have and use, has the names of about 13,000 unique people who appear in records in Marseille between 1337 and 1362. For about 6,000 of these people, I have some sense of where they lived: their "home address", if you will. When I first started schematizing this database, it was relatively easy to name some of the fields. For example, it was easy to characterize people as "men" or "women", since gender identity was treated as unproblematic in the sources and marked in given names. It was easy to enter a value for "year of death", if I had that information. Names were a little harder, since spellings were variable and women's surnames usually changed at marriage. This was also true for profession or trade, since there was some variability here. But the greatest problems were associated with the "home address" field, since the way in which the records described places of residence were extraordinarily variable. After fighting this for a while, I began to realize that the variability of address forms was itself a historical question that needed answering.

To pursue this, I began reading literature in the history of cartography, which overlaps with what you described as "geography" but is not quite the same. The greatest influence here came from the historian John B. Harley,

who was one of the first to argue that maps are always shaped by discourse. Harley was a figure of seminal importance in the history of cartography for steering the field away from the developmental paradigm that used to describe a shift from "schematic and cosmological" to "real and scientific", a paradigm that had hitherto shaped the discipline. My contribution was to take this a step further by pointing out that once we acknowledge the existence of a discourse about maps, we can find that discourse in texts. What this meant is that the history of cartography no longer had to limit itself to physical maps. After the book came out, I had a chance to meet and talk with David Woodward, Harley's close collaborator. I remember David asking me at one point "Do you have any sense of the impact your book has had in the history of cartography?" The honest answer was "no", because – to respond to your question – I wasn't in regular communication with historians of cartography. I did give one or two papers to cartography circles and at the time, I thought my next research project would remain in the field of cartography and geography.

3.2 *In October 2000, in Florence, just a few months after the release of* Imaginary cartographies*, the Council of Europe signed the European Landscape Convention, in which the latter is defined as "a certain part of the territory, as perceived by people, whose character results from the action of natural and/or human factors and their interrelationships". In a sense, your book is in the vein of this updated sensibility, which still guides much landscape history research today. For me,* Imaginary cartographies *is an essential book for medievalists (and others) who intend to deal with landscape. However, the word landscape is not strongly enunciated in your work. I would like to ask you what is your thinking about it and how do you think* Imaginary cartographies *can contribute to the debate on this issue.*

Actually, this is something I have learned from you; it's not something I arrived at on my own! At the time of writing *Imaginary Cartographies*, it simply hadn't occurred to me how the imagined or mental maps of a city constituted a portion of a broader set of perceptions of the world. As I think we discussed one day, the suffix -scap, in English, is related to the suffix -ship, which has the idea of describing the state or the condition of being of the entity to which it is attached. For example, "friendship" is a word that describes the state that exists between two friends. "Landscape", in this sense, is the condition or the state of a tract of land. To think about it another way, it describes how the land is both made and perceived, a derivation that is nicely reflected in the statement of the European Landscape Convention. The word "landscape" is absent from *Imaginary Cartographies* because I got into the subject via family history and prosopography, not via environmental history.

Since this is an area of environmental history where I still haven't done much work, I am not sure if I can easily answer the question of how *Imaginary Cartographies* might contribute to the debate on the issue. Among other things, I am not sure what the debate concerns. What I will say, though, is

that *Imaginary Cartographies* has two important premises. First, ordinary people have a sense of landscape, and participate in broader understandings of landscape that are widely shared within a given society. In other words, the power to think about the land does not lie solely with social élites. Second, traces of those understandings appear in some kinds of documents, including in medieval documents. In other words, we do not have to limit our study of landscape to documents generated by social and political élites.

3.3. *Today* Imaginary cartographies *is a book in Italian. I ask you what dialogue you hope will arise with the Italian scholarly community and also, some time later, if there are any themes or aspects of the book that you would have developed further.*

The book is very much a product of its time and place, and I would be very interested in seeing how some of the interesting ideas or approaches can be brought up to date and made to engage with current scholarly interests. The Italian archival record is unparalleled in its richness, and the kinds of things that were somewhat difficult to do with a typically Provençal archive can probably be done with greater sophistication using Italian archives.

4. *The book on justice in Marseille (*The Consumption of Justice: Emotions, Publicity, and Legal Culture in Marseille, 1264-1423*, Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003) has had an important historiographical impact, including on Italian historiography: immediately after the book's release, first and foremost, Chris Wickham, in his work on judicial disputes in Lucca, Andrea Zorzi and Massimo Vallerani wrote about it or confronted themselves with it. In this work you show how behind judicial procedures and legal vocabulary lie the complex feelings of conflict, hatred and enmity. And that ordinary people begin to choose to resort to justice, with its heavy economic investment, in late medieval Marseille, almost as if it were a commodity. In the Marseille of the time, going to trial thus presupposes choosing a form of social representation: the spectacle of justice, in which the course of history and events is publicly rewritten. This key opens up the application of anthropology to the study of historical sources, which guides much of your research. I would like to ask you how your interest in anthropology came about and how you understand the relationship between anthropology and history.*

I would be inclined to describe the central premise of *The Consumption of Justice* in a slightly different way. People get into disputes for reasons that are extraordinarily varied; indeed, one could argue that the configuration of reasons or explanations for any given dispute are unique to that dispute. The law, however, recognizes only certain kinds of injuries, framed in a certain way, as legally actionable. Thus, every person in every society who chooses to take a dispute into a court of law has to find a way to reformat the 'reasons' for the

dispute along lines that are legitimate for law as it is defined in that society. In the law that emerged in medieval Europe, it was not legitimate to sue someone because you hated or were envious of someone, or were vying with him or her for precedence within a neighborhood, or for some such 'illegitimate' reason. Thus, suits had to be redefined along lines that were legally permissible. But we shouldn't deceive ourselves into imagining that the emotions were irrelevant to a lawsuit over a debt. The premise of *The Consumption of Justice*, then, is that by the 14th century, people were discovering that lawsuits were an increasingly satisfying way of pursuing their emotionally driven conflicts with their rivals, more efficent and less dangerous than the vendetta or the bloodfeud. The book offered a strongly anti-Elias perspective on the idea that we have gotten more 'civilized' and less emotional.

I noted earlier how my graduate training at the University of Michigan was suffused with anthropology, to the point where the anthropological approaches, for me at least, were just as important as the traditionally historical ones. But I think you may be getting at something else with this question, something which ultimately concerns the relationship between the general and the particular. Like a lot of anthropologists, I am interested in sociocultural phenomena that appear in many human societies across time and space. Virtually all human societies, for example, have material culture. In virtually all human societies, there are disputes and systems for handling disputes. The list goes on. Anthropologists are interested in understanding these phenomena wherever they are found. Because they are interested in family resemblances, they are not particularly interested in understanding those phenomena as being unique to any given society. To be more precise, the way in which people in a given society use material culture or engage in disputing is necessarily unique in its particular configuration, but each and every instance is a variation on a common theme. By studying the particular, as an anthropologist, you gain insight into the general. For me, what is especially fun about approaching such questions historically is that one can explore how the changes taking place in a given historical society operate against the backgroup of continuity of general phenomena. Or to put this in more concrete terms, the idea of *The Consumption of Justice* is that although the institutional forms of disputing began to change in the 13th and 14th century, the emotional drivers of disputing activity remained constant, as people found ways to pursue their antagonisms in new settings.

5. On Deep History and the Brain *(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, translated into Italian* Storia profonda. Il cervello umano e l'origine della storia*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2017) was an influential book, even on the general public. The theme of the origin of history becomes an epistemological reflection on the historian's craft and on a new interdisciplinary way of doing history, strongly open to anthropology and neuroscience, that looks at the transformations of humanity over the long term, also breaking established interpretative frameworks (the role of writing).* Deep

History *is not a book about the Middle Ages, but here I would like to ask precisely how neurohistory can be applied to the study of this era.*

As any close reader will notice, *On Deep History and the Brain* actually consists of two distinct essays, each spread over 2-3 chapters, that have been fitted together into a single book. What brings them together is a shared sense that biology matters to history, especially evolutionary biology, but otherwise they are distinct. Once upon a time, each existed as a separate essay, and I was planning on publishing them as independent articles. The problem is that they grew too long to be free-standing articles, hence the decision to package them together as a book.

Both are essays in the classical sense of the word: intellectual experiments. Neither is intended to be a methodological treatise that tries to explain to the reader how to implement either of the two proposals. Neurohistory, in particular, is not a methodological proposal.

The premise of the neurohistory is that the human brain-body system is an actor in history rather than a biological entity shaped by evolution long ago and divorced from history. It is an actor in history for two reasons. First, the brain-body system is a target of human action and human institutions. To take a simple example, constant acts of humiliation and degradation do terrible things to human bodies, and for this reason, every system of power relies on the humiliation and degradation of the weak and the outcast. This is something George Orwell understood well. Second, the brain-body system is constantly changing in response to exogenous factors, meaning that the target is always shifting. By way of example, humiliation and even pain used to be effective pedagogical devices, because students could and did learn things when motivated by fear and stress. But pedagogy based on humiliation and pain no longer has any positive role to play in contemporary pedagogy because students' bodies, in the aggregate, no longer respond well to fear and stress.

The point here is that neurohistory constitutes a set of very abstract ideas about the engine of historical change and the nature of human institutions. It is an argument rather than a methodology. The vast majority of work in medieval history has more concrete goals to pursue and doesn't need these abstract observations for research purposes.

6. Legal Plunder. Households and Debt Collection in Late Medieval Europe*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 2016, brings reflection on the relationship between words and things, particularly from the study of inventories: it is a study of objects and their – sometimes unsuspected – value within late medieval societies, and the even symbolic values associated with them. From imaginary cartographies to the consumption of justice to objects via neurohistory, your research path actually seems traversed by a strong red thread. I would like to ask you to explicate how* Legal plunder *reconnects numerous of your historical research interests.*

Well, I'm glad you can see the red thread, since it's not always apparent to me! Most of the time, I write about things I am curious about without worrying overmuch about whether they fit into a coherent research framework.

On the one hand, *Legal Plunder* represented an entirely new (for me) set of questions, because it is largely about material culture. I first became interested in material culture while reading up on the literature on consumption for *The Consumption of Justice*. Although "consumption" in the title of that book was largely metaphorical in nature – I didn't really pursue the idea of justice as a saleable commodity beyond the obvious – I began teaching material culture from historical and anthropological perspectives. *Legal Plunder*, aspects of which grew into the DALME project (see question 7.1), was the first time I seriously thought about all of the material culture that appears in later medieval records.

On the other hand, I brought to *Legal Plunder* a longstanding set of interests in the structure of historical change, interests ultimately rooted in evolutionary biology and its theoretical sibling, dual-inheritance theory. The fundamental idea here is that evolutionary processes are deeply entangled with one another, an idea that was being described as "co-evolution" by the 1970s and flowered in the 1980s. The process is similar to Hegelian dialectics, and indeed historians and other humanist scholars use several analogous terms (such as "co-constituting"). The premise is that human lives and institutions are intimately shaped by their material circumstances, and at the same time, the material environment created by humans is itself constantly changing. This creates a feedback loop that can drive change. All this has been nicely theorized fairly recently by Ian Hodder (*Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*, 2023). The central explanation for change in *Imaginary Cartographies* is also evolutionary in nature, since I argue at one point that the drive toward uniformity in descriptions of space emerged from the conversational field produced by discussions about place names. A different sort of evolutionary argument undergirds *The Consumption of Justice*. I find evolutionary arguments (or at least, properly construed ones) fascinating because they show how change can occur for reasons rooted in something other than human intention.

7.1. *In recent years you have devoted yourself to the study of Documentary Archaeology, through the DALME project (Documentary Archaeology of the Late Medieval Europe, https://dalme.org/), which you coordinate with Laura Morreale. What is documentary archaeology for you and what does it imply in its relationship with material sources?*

At the simplest level – and this goes back to pioneering work by figures such as Françoise Piponnier from the 1960s onward – documentary archaeology means looking for things in documents as well as in collections and in sites. As scholars of inventories have long pointed out, texts such as household inventories preserve a far broader spectrum of material culture than do col-

lections or archaeological stores. To get a sense of medieval Europe's material profile, then, one has to use texts in conjunction with tangible things. Documentary archaeology also means something more complex, because the textual record only imperfectly reflects the real world. You cannot simply count up things or materials found in texts and imagine that you can say anything meaningful from that counting. To give one of the most obvious examples, tools and equipment referred to in texts as being made of copper alloys are nearly as common as tools and equipment referred to as being made from iron. But that's illusory, because iron was a kind of default metal for many tools and equipment, meaning that there was less need to mention it. In addition, the compilers of inventories were more likely to mention copper alloy than they were to mention iron because copper alloy had greater value for recycling. In other words, you have to approach documentary archaeology with just as much care as excavation archaeology, paying careful attention to processes analogous to site formation and taphonomy.

7.2. *DALME is also a Digital Humanities project, in Open Access and based on a collaborative method: a project to which therefore Medieval Networks can only look at with strong sympathy. I would like to ask you for a reflection on what this new research initiative, in many ways different from the monographic studies you have previously produced, has meant for you.*

Another very big question! Let me make two remarks. First, Digital Humanities projects come in two basic forms. In one form, which is probably the most common, an institution such as an archive or a library uses a digital platform to disseminate some of its holdings. This practice vastly improves archival access, which is a very good thing. Other types of Digital Humanities projects, DALME included, are organized around a tightly focused set of research questions. Rather than disseminating a diverse array of sources from a given collection, they seek to assemble an array of sources from a wide variety of collections that have a bear on a small set of research questions. Stanford's "Republic of Letters" Digital Humanities collection is a prominent example of this type. When done right, such collections can lead to new research questions. In my own case, I am very hopeful that the availability of the collection for MA and PhD students in the United States can help introduce our students to research questions that are otherwise very difficult for them to pursue. Among other things, the facing-page transcriptions help students work on their paleography, a skill that is hard to learn in the United States for want of instructors and courses.

Second, let me make an observation about the inspiration behind the project. When I first collected a sample of records of debt collection from Lucca, I knew I would never use more than, say, 10 percent of the information potentially available in the sources. By way of example, the sample includes around 1,000 references to articles of clothing, which I thought could be amazingly helpful for historians of dress and fashion. Since I did not plan to pursue

dress history myself, it seemed logical to share all this information with people who might be able to use it. Later, I realized how this instinct is related to what is now a common policy in the scientific community, namely, data that have been collected with public funds (that is, government grants) have to be shared publicly. I believe fervently in open-source, open-access research.

8. *You have a new book being published, which still brings up Marseille as a key to understanding the late medieval Mediterranean. Can you anticipate anything about that and what are the new research themes you are addressing with this book?*

The new book, the manuscript of which I have just sent to the press for publication, is tentatively entitled *Magdalena Coline: A Life Beyond Slavery in Mediterranean Europe*. It is best described as a microhistory detailing the life history of a formerly enslaved Amazigh woman who appears in an early 15th-century lawsuit in Marseille. She was suing her former master for a small debt and was in turn sued by him on the grounds that she had not been manumitted. Apart from the fact that it is deeply rooted in archival research, the book is completely unlike anything I have written before. The story is quite dramatic, almost Hollywoodesque in some aspects.

9. *What do you think are the role and specificities of American medievalism right now and what do you think are the most original themes it is developing?*

I don't quite know how to answer this question! Increasingly, I find that my most important ties of intellectual kinship connect me to my Europe-based colleagues, though having said that I have many close friends and colleagues in this country whose work I find both interesting and inspiring. Some of the most important developments among United States medievalists are politically oriented, and seek to address the use of the Middle Ages by right-wing nationalists and white supremacists. I have been very interested in the enthusiasm for the Global Middle Ages among American medievalists. I have some concerns about the concept, but there is no question that it is a dynamic and interesting field. On a completely different matter, scientific approaches to the Middle Ages (and early historical periods) are getting a lot of play these days, e.g. through the work of my colleague Michael McCormick. I admire these approaches a great deal.

10.1 *Can you tell us something about the teaching of the Middle Ages in American universities, starting in particular with your experience at Harvard?*

As I noted earlier, the United States primary- and secondary-school curriculum has almost no components dedicated to the European Middle Ages.

The subject is typically taught in the first year of high school, as a component of "world history". Thus, for most university students, the European Middle Ages are largely unknown, or known primarily through stories, myths, and legends rather than history per se. A good deal of the teaching, therefore, is remedial, and is designed to counteract stereotypes. My classes are typically on the small side (I have never had more than 50 students in a medieval history class). I enjoy this kind of teaching because the students who do come to my classes are often quirkily intellectual, interesting, and adventurous.

10.2 *How is the issue of historical popularization, particularly of the medieval field, addressed in the Unites States context? And what relationship does it have with university research?*

Popular history of the European Middle Ages in the United States is dominated by just a few themes, including the crusades and, strangely, the Templars and similar themes that touch on the occult. Medieval historians, including historians at research universities, rarely try to publish books aimed at a popular readership. Understandably, the most popular themes in history for trade presses are themes in American or 20th-century history. Most historians of the European Middle Ages at research universities enter the profession knowing that the subject is relatively marginal, and normally dedicate themselves to publishing monographs on narrowly defined research subjects. These monographs rarely sell more than 1,000 copies.