

Material Culture in Transformation: The Afterlives of Premodern Stone and Metal Objects

Third Workshop in the Series *Cultures of Use and Reuse*

Three-day workshop, Academy of Sciences and Literature, Mainz

12–14 April 2027

Organised by Carolin Gluchowski (Universität Hamburg), Julia von Ditzfurth (Universität Freiburg) and Julia Noll (Akademie der Wissenschaften und Literatur Mainz).

Premodern stone and metal objects – tomb slabs and epitaphs, architectural sculpture and spolia, epigraphic panels, reliquaries, liturgical implements, bells, vessels and tools – rarely led single, linear lives. They were displaced, cut down, erased, reinscribed, reframed, melted, or embedded into new structures. As they moved between churches and city walls, cemeteries and sacristies, treasuries, streets and museums, they accumulated layers of use that were at once material, social and symbolic. Each act of reuse or transformation responded to particular constellations of need, value and meaning; taken together, these practices open a privileged window onto how communities engaged with their own past and with the material remains of earlier periods.

This workshop, the third in the ongoing series *Cultures of Use and Reuse*, follows earlier meetings in [Oxford 2022](#) (on parchment and paper) and [Freiburg 2025](#) (on glass and premodern reuse) and turns to stone and metal as especially instructive materials. Their physical endurance has often been taken to guarantee continuity, stability and memory. At the same time, they are among the most drastically reworked of all premodern media: chiselled down to pave church floors, recut into new tombs, quarried from ruins to fortify city walls, or melted and refashioned in response to changing liturgical, economic or political regimes. To trace the afterlives of such objects is therefore to trace how societies navigated the tension between conservation and innovation, veneration and violence, scarcity and abundance.

The workshop builds on and contributes to current debates shaped by the “material turn” in medieval and early modern studies. Concepts such as the “social life of things”, cultural biographies of objects, and material agency have emphasised that artefacts participate in networks of exchange, commemoration and power, rather than merely reflecting them. Scholarship on spolia has further shown that the reuse of earlier stone and metal work – from late antique capitals and sarcophagi to medieval portals and inscriptions – can articulate claims to authority, lineage and legitimacy, or conversely signal rupture, appropriation and critique. At the same time, detailed archaeological and archival studies of grave slabs, funerary monuments and architectural sculpture have foregrounded quieter practices of re-siting, levelling, layering and repair, in which objects slide gradually from prominence to near-invisibility without ever fully disappearing.

Within this broader field, the Mainz workshop concentrates on the afterlives of medieval stone and metal objects from the Middle Ages into the Early Modern Period and beyond. It seeks to understand how practices of reuse, transformation and erasure articulated changing relations to the medieval past: as a resource to be mined, an inheritance to be curated, a burden to be dismantled, or a repertoire to be selectively revived. The organisers are

particularly interested in the interplay between economic pragmatism and more explicitly confessional, political or ideological motives. The melting down of liturgical metalwork, the re-cutting of effigies, the transfer of tomb slabs into church pavements or cemetery walls, the insertion of ancient or medieval reliefs into new façades, or the reinscription of earlier stones are rarely either purely practical or purely symbolic; they sit precisely at the intersection of both.

The workshop invites contributions that bring art-historical, archaeological, historical, epigraphic and conservation perspectives into conversation. Papers may focus on individual objects or ensembles, on particular sites, regions or religious communities, or on more comparative and theoretical questions. Contributors are encouraged to reflect explicitly on the methodological implications of tracing “object biographies” in stone and metal: how can we reconstruct sequences of cutting, erasing and re-siting; how do we handle gaps and silences in the record; and how do we write histories that take seriously both the agency of materials and the intentions, constraints and imaginations of human actors?

We are especially keen to receive proposals that address questions such as how different forms of reuse – for instance, the secondary deployment of sarcophagi as altars or of grave slabs as thresholds – reshaped patterns of visibility and commemoration; how acts of erasure, reinscription or re-facing intersected with broader regimes of memory, including *damnatio memoriae*, the management of necropolises and churchyards, or the politics of post-Reformation and post-Tridentine reform; how cross-confessional or cross-cultural transfers of stone and metal objects (for example between Christian and Muslim communities, or between Catholic and Protestant institutions) reconfigured the religious topographies of cities and regions; how legal and institutional norms sought to regulate the reuse of funerary or liturgical objects and how far such norms were observed, ignored or creatively negotiated in practice; and how modern conservation, heritage-making and museum practices have framed, stabilised or, in some cases, further transformed the long afterlives of these artefacts.

Methodological and theoretical reflections are warmly welcomed alongside case studies. Contributions may, for example, test the applicability of notions such as object biography, fragmentation and repair, upcycling and recycling, or “recycling the sacred” to specific sets of material. They may explore how scientific analyses (petrography, archaeometry, metal analysis), digital recording (3D modelling, GIS-based mapping of spolia) or systematic epigraphic documentation change our understanding of reuse practices. They may also ask how the study of medieval stone and metal afterlives speaks back to current debates on sustainability, circular economies and the politics of heritage.

What we are looking for

The organisers invite proposals from historians, art historians, archaeologists, epigraphists, conservators, heritage practitioners and scholars of religion and cultural studies at all career stages. Contributions should engage directly with the themes of reuse and transformation in medieval stone and/or metal, whether through detailed case studies, comparative analyses or conceptual interventions. Work that situates local or regional material within broader Mediterranean, transregional or global frameworks, or that reflects on the relationship between medieval and early modern practices, is particularly welcome.

We welcome papers that explore, for example, the long afterlives of specific object types such as tomb slabs, epitaphs, brasses, monumental inscriptions, portals, capitals, reliefs, bells or liturgical implements; that analyse how different building campaigns, waves of reform, episodes of iconoclasm or phases of urban development generated distinct patterns of reuse and erasure; that reconstruct the social actors involved in such processes, from patrons, canons and magistrates to stonemasons, founders and gravediggers; or that trace how individual objects have been reinterpreted in antiquarian scholarship, collecting, restoration and exhibition history. Contributions that consciously unsettle conventional distinctions between “art”, “craft” and “building material”, or between “original” and “secondary” use, are particularly encouraged.

What to expect

The workshop will bring together approximately twelve to fifteen speakers for three days of intensive discussion at the Academy of Sciences and Literature in Mainz. Papers will be pre-circulated in draft form to allow for focused commentary, and each session will leave substantial time for collective discussion. In addition to standard research papers of around twenty to twenty-five minutes, the programme anticipates including shorter presentations for work in progress or conceptual provocations, which can open up new questions or methodological avenues. The event is conceived as a research seminar rather than a large-scale conference, with an emphasis on shared vocabularies, carefully contextualised case studies and the development of future collaborative projects, including potential publications emerging from the *Cultures of Use and Reuse* series.

Subject to the availability of funding, the organisers expect to be able to cover accommodation for speakers in Mainz and to contribute towards travel and subsistence costs. Further practical information will be provided with the acceptance letters. The working language of the workshop is English.

How to apply

Please submit a single PDF file that contains an abstract of 300–400 words and a short biographical note of no more than 150 words. The abstract should outline your main argument, indicate the primary sources and materials you will discuss, specify the geographical and chronological focus of your paper, and explain how your contribution engages with the workshop’s interest in reuse, afterlives and material transformation in stone and metal. The biographical note should include your name, institutional affiliation and up to five relevant publications, projects or exhibitions (where applicable). If you would prefer to present a shorter, more exploratory contribution instead of a full-length paper, please indicate this clearly in your proposal.

Proposals should be sent by **Monday, 13 April 2026** to: carolin.gluchowski@uni-hamburg.de, Julia.Noll@adwmainz.de and julia.von.ditfurth@kunstgeschichte.uni-freiburg.de. Applicants will be informed of the outcome by **mid-May 2026**. Draft versions of accepted papers of approximately 3,000–5,000 words will be circulated among all participants by the beginning of 2027 in order to facilitate substantive discussion during the workshop.

Selected Bibliography (for orientation)

The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986).

Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 64–91.

Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects," *World Archaeology* 31 (1999), 169–178.

Dale Kinney, "The Concept of Spolia," in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, 2019), 233–252.

Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (eds.), *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine* (Farnham, 2011).

Michael Greenhalgh, *Marble Past, Monumental Present: Building with Antiquities in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Leiden, 2009).

Alexandra Walsham, "Recycling the Sacred: Material Culture and Cultural Memory after the English Reformation," *Church History* 86 (2017), 104–146.

Claudia Murer, "From the Tombs into the City: Grave Robbing and the Reuse of Funerary Spolia in Late Antique Italy," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 29 (2019), 7–32.

Aleksandra N. McClain, "Medieval Grave Slabs at Skipwith Church," *The Archaeological Journal* 165 (2009), 457–461.