

Provenance in nineteenth-century Europe: Research practice and concept

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Abstract: *Provenance – an object's history of ownership – is a historically contingent concept and research practice that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe. In a novel project examining the cases of Beda Dudík (Moravia/Austria), Carl Schirren (Livonia/Russia), and Franz Hipler (Warmia/East Prussia) ca. 1850–1900 I argue that, while the art market and nationalism are important, scholars representing regions with a suppressed past and present are key to understanding the relevance of provenance. Due to seventeenth-century plundering, these scholars were dependent on foreign archives and libraries when researching their regions' history. Their publications describing provenance research are the project's main sources. The analysis of these publications targets practices such as classification, a crucial tool as determined provenance equaled historical existence. Merging regional inferiority and transnational dependencies, diverse institutional settings, and political, religious, and scholarly ambitions, scrutinizing these cases reveals the needs and encounters that explain the rise of provenance.*

Keywords: provenance, classification, history of archives and libraries, nineteenth-century historiography, history of ideas, history of knowledge, Beda Dudík, Carl Schirren, Franz Hipler.

Recently proclaimed to be a science in its own right, few scholarly terms are as topical – or as relevant to fields as diverse as archive theory, archaeology, anthropology, paleontology, computer science, genetics, and law – as *provenance* (Milosch & Pearce 2019). Art historians define provenance as the history of an object told through its chain of locations and owners; a burning issue since the 1990s, when the cultural looting of the

Nazi regime was finally investigated (Nicholas 1994; Petropoulos 2003; Anderl *et al.* 2009). Today, as Western museums more often examine the history of their collections, post-colonial provenance research is becoming an influential field (Savoy 2018). More seldom considered, however, is that provenance has a history of its own; as a distinctly European concept and research practice that arose in the nineteenth century (Feigenbaum & Rest 2012;

Hagström Molin 2015). Against this backdrop, the project “Provenance in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Research Practice and Concept” sets out to analyze provenance, as a historically contingent idea and scholarly practice that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe (“Provenance in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Concept and Research Practice”, diary number P20–0478, is funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond 2021–2023). The project seeks to answer why provenance research came to be practiced by European scholars in this century, and how they carried out their inquiries. What were the effects of studies into provenance; i.e. how was provenance data used, were object origins reinterpreted, were restitution requests initiated, etc.? As a closing question, and to link the project’s empirical cases to their broader societal contexts, I ask how scholars’ provenance research shaped the public idea of provenance in the studied period.

The project argues that, while the art market and nationalism are of great importance (Berger & Lorenz 2010; Raux 2012), the practices of actors representing regions with a suppressed past and present are key to understanding the rise of provenance and its research. It does this through an examination of the intertwined cases of Beda Dudík (Moravia/Austria), Carl Schirren (The Baltics/Livonia/Russia), and Franz Hipler (Warmia/East Prussia) ca. 1850–1900. These scholars were influential in their respective regions, striving to increase knowledge of regional history and access to historical sources that supported it. In this way, they represented a vital regionalism that existed among the population in the historical provinces of Moravia, Livonia, and Warmia, which could not benefit from nationalism (Núñez 2012). On the contrary, as the ongoing nationalization of historiography threatened these regions’ past with extinction,

it was therefore urgent to provide Moravian, Livonian, and Warmian historical scholarship with adequate sources (Hagström Molin, in press). As Swedish regents and commanders had looted many archives and libraries in Central and Eastern Europe in the seventeenth century, Dudík’s, Schirren’s, and Hipler’s respective research was dependent on locating sources abroad. Thus, these cases merged both regional subordination and transnational dependencies, diverse institutional settings, and political, religious, and scholarly ambitions: needs and encounters that explain provenance.

THREE CASES OF REGIONALLY MOTIVATED PROVENANCE RESEARCH

While Dudík, Schirren, and Hipler had their regions’ inferiority in common and went on similar missions, they inherently also differ from one another, which allows for a comparison of both differences and similarities in the approaches and effects of provenance research. The extremely productive Benedictine Dudík was Moravia’s official historiographer from 1859, conservative, and at the height of his career closely associated with the Austrian Emperor (Hroch & Malecková 1999; Mahel 2015). The Baltic German Schirren opposed the russification politics of the Russian sovereignty, which eventually forced him into exile in Germany. A major part of his scholarship dealt with the Teutonic Knights, as their rule of Livonia represented Baltic independence to him (Schirren 1861; Lenz 2011). Hipler was a pious local historian, like Dudík a Catholic priest, with an interest in the Swedish occupation of Prussia and Queen Christina’s Warmian manuscripts at the Vatican library (Hipler 1872; Hipler 1886). Unlike Dudík and Schirren, however, Hipler

travelled less to foreign archives and often made do with the Warmian collections at hand (Dittrich 1897). Schirren and Hipler's mother tongue was German and both were from educated families, being sons of priests. Dudík's background was more modest, and his native language Moravian Czech; nonetheless, he mainly published and even wrote his diaries in German (Tomášková 2015; Kamusella 2009; MZA Brno).

PROVENANCE AS PROCESS AND SITUATED KNOWLEDGE

My interest in provenance stems from my postdoctoral project "Materializing Historical Knowledge", in which I focused on Beda Dudík's transnational research practices, as well as my PhD thesis on war booty in Swedish collections. In Dudík's research in Swedish archives and libraries, intriguing issues of provenance caught my attention at an early stage. Already in my work on the Swedish spoils, I noted that the word "provenance" entered the Swedish language as late as 1895, and that the concept's establishment was an effect of foreign scholars' research in Swedish archives and libraries (Hagström Molin, *in press*; Hagström Molin 2015; SAOB Lund).

Drawing upon my previous research, then, and the state of the art, the project understands provenance and its research as historically contingent. It tests the theoretical assumption that provenance is a process (Tang 2012), determined through and affected by practices such as locating, describing, classifying, mediating, and moving manuscripts, documents, and other historical sources in and between certain spatial and temporal situations (cf. Nicholas 2019:xi). By tracing these research practices, the analysis captures how provenance was created and constituted. Here, the study

follows the pioneering practice-oriented work of Bruno Latour and Bonnie G. Smith (Latour 1987; Smith 1998). The processual framing of provenance is indebted to recent decades' vital discussions on materiality (Damsholt et al. 2009). Rather than seeing provenance research in terms of an absolute science, then, my approach pairs fresh work on the intricacy of provenance with perspectives from iconic studies problematizing science: Donna Haraway's situated knowledge and Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's history of the concept of objectivity (Haraway 1986; Daston & Galison 2007). Another line of inspiration is object histories that have focused on transformations due to movement across cultures and times (Findlen 2013). Based on observations already made by scholars scrutinizing provenance, it has proven to change due to transfer as well as difference in interpretation (Bleichmar 2011; Savoy 2011), and there are cases in which it has been manipulated (Hong 2012). As noted in my own enquiry of the restitution of 21 Bohemian manuscripts that Dudík succeeded in negotiating with Swedish librarian G. E. Klemming in 1878: Manuscripts once perceived as Austrian were interpreted as having Bohemian or Moravian provenances, due to Dudík's classification of them (Hagström Molin 2019; Hagström Molin 2021). Thus, considering and developing the complexity of provenance, and its political potential and effects, promises to be the project's most important contribution to the concept's character and history.

PROVENANCE AND THE STATE OF THE ART

In line with its theoretical approach, the project contributes to the state of the art by merging the provenance research of history

of art and heritage studies with analytical perspectives developed in the history of science and ideas that have taken into account the practices, materiality, and space of knowledge production. Consequently, the project provides historical and theoretical perspectives on provenance research and can thus add valuable knowledge to the heritage field. Simultaneously, it will communicate with and contribute to scholarship dealing with the history of historiography and the emerging field of the history of humanities (Bod 2013).

Since the 1990s, several handbooks on provenance research and results of vast Nazi-looting investigations have been published, aiming to standardize this research field and its methods (e.g. Pearson 1994; Yeide *et al.* 2001; Lillie 2003; Anderl 2009). Provenance is occasionally used to highlight the lives and deeds of certain collectors. For instance, Hermione Waterfield and J. C. H. King's attention to provenance in ethnographic collections deals with twelve individual British collectors, but offers no deeper reflection on the colonialism and inequality that enabled their activities (Waterfield & King 2009). Contrastingly, inquiries that take their starting point in objects and collections, rather than collectors, have enabled more intricate and intersecting narratives (e.g. Mordhorst 2009; Ruud 2012). Hence, it is significant to interlace studies that overlap historical and critical perspectives on collecting and heritage with the growing provenance research field. Pioneering examples of this are Susan Crane's study of collecting and historical consciousness in nineteenth-century Germany, and Astrid Swenson's comparative history of heritage in Britain, France, and Germany. Crane interestingly argues that European nationalism could easily have been expressed without historical objects. According

to her, heritage represented *historicity* rather than the nation, and its value was determined by the ability to refer to already existing historical knowledge (Crane 2000). Swenson has pointed out that a national heritage context cannot be understood without a transnational dimension (Swenson 2013). Along this line, Heather Ellis has highlighted the nineteenth century as an era of increasing globalization, in which the transnational movements of people and ideas were of greater impact than activities within national borders. Moreover, histories of European regionalism and separatism have been brought together, and related to nineteenth-century nation-building processes (Augusteijn & Storm 2012). This project's fusion of the regional, the national/imperial, and the transnational in its cases explores provenance along these lines.

Studies of nineteenth-century historiography to date have largely focused on intellectual novelty and the professionalization of the discipline (Bos 2012; Ottner & Ries 2014), as well as on the travels and practices of icons, such as Leopold Ranke (Risbjerg Eskildsen 2008; Müller 2010). There are likewise countless studies dealing with nationalism and historiography (e.g. Porciani & Tollebeek 2012; Berger & Lorenz 2010); here, Monika Baár's comparative study of Central- and Eastern-European historians is a rare exception to the Western focus (Baár 2012), and is therefore very important to this project. In relation to the mainstream icon- and/or nation-oriented historiographical field, then, this project proves the worth of exploring less-known actors representing inferior regions, as they bring in the qualities necessary for explaining the rise of provenance and its research. Diverse national contexts have been compared, for instance by Baár and Swenson, but the practices of regional actors and historical objects moving between

100 different geographical and temporal settings remain fairly unexplored.

While Dudík, Schirren, and Hipler can be called historians, it should be stressed that their expertise was far broader. They engaged with many subjects, such as archaeology, philosophy, geography, and statistics. For instance, Dudík published a work dealing with Moravian statistics and taught the natural sciences; Schirren was appointed Professor of Geography, Ethnography, and Statistics in 1860, and Hipler earned his PhD for a study of the neoplatonic philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (Dudík 1848; Kinter 1890; Lenz 2011; Dittrich 1897). As Anthony Grafton has brought attention to Ranké's and scientific history's debt to philology, it should be mentioned that both Dudík and Hipler were trained philologists (Grafton 1997; see also Turner 2014). Accordingly, as this project argues that knowledge about the past is generated by a variety of actors and their practices in a number of places, institutions, and media – people and spaces that were sometimes only partly connected to universities and disciplinary history – the formation and boundaries of the history discipline will receive less attention. With two of the chosen actors being Catholic priests, as many historians were in the nineteenth century, this opens up for exploring religion in the making of provenance and historical knowledge (cf. Fasolt 2006).

Historical studies have generally undergone an “archival turn” since the 1990s, originally sparked by Jacques Derrida's 1994 paper “Mal d'archive: une impression freudienne” (Derrida 1995). While this text dealt only to a limited extent with actual archives, it still fed an “archivisation” of the historical sciences (Steedman 2001). It has been first and foremost cultural historians who, in a

Foucauldian tradition, have pointed to archives as sites where the order, management, and state control of knowledge can be examined (Blouin & Rosenberg 2006; Blair & Milligan 2007; Head 2007), whereas historians of science have approached these questions more recently (Daston 2017). Peter Fritzsche has argued that certain ways of taking history into account, and believing one has experienced it, have shaped the being of archives (Fritzsche 2005). This argument fits well with the history of the *Mährisches Landesarchiv* that Dudík was involved with: Established in 1839, the scholars who gathered and arranged its collections clearly thought of Moravian history as an ideally unbroken chronological line of sources. When gaps were encountered in this chronology, measures were taken to fill them; one entailed sending Dudík abroad in search of sources of Moravian provenance (Hagström Molin, in press).

As the depositories, practices, and material conditions of historiographical research have drawn increasing attention, source classification and the epistemic structure of archives and libraries have likewise started to be regarded as parts of these settings: Maria Pia Donato's analysis of the classification and use of records in the French Imperial Archives under Napoleon's regime is one example of this (Donato 2017). Another article of great relevance to this project is Bodo Uhl's analysis of the provenance principle in relation to archival science and historical research from the nineteenth century onward (Uhl 2001). By considering provenance in terms of source classification and knowledge organization, then, this project participates in the development of this trajectory within the historiographical field.

A final main point of my study is to underline that textual sources – books, documents, and

manuscripts – are material objects as well, and in this way, bring the book-historical everyday closer to historiographical inquiries. Recently, Peter Miller scrutinized ways of studying the past through things, from the Renaissance up to this day (Miller 2017). His study, however, still distinguishes texts from objects as essentially different categories of sources. Interestingly, a concept like provenance blurs this demarcation, as thing sources and text sources could be researched and valued equally, primarily based on their origin and object history (Dudík 1852). This suggests that the time is ripe to introduce provenance to historical theory, and in conclusion, this project aims to do just that. The Rankean ambition to study the past “how it actually happened” has dominated Western historiography for the last 200 years (Sandmo 2015). Historians like Dudík, Schirren, and Hipler, however, were rather occupied with asking themselves to whom the past, in its material forms, actually belonged. As history was established as a distinct empirical science in the nineteenth century, it inherently became fully dependent on the material resources of archives and libraries (Bos 2012; Friedrich et al. 2017). In this way, historical thought was always materially vulnerable, and this vulnerability is far from fully explored (cf. Crane 2000; Smith 1998). Accordingly, this project argues that, to some historians, provenance became a tremendously important way of doing history, as determining it equaled existence. In other words: Inquiries into provenance entailed a practice that granted historical being to the less fortunate in the scholarly competition between the European nation-states.

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