

The Post-Mortem Inventory of Astrug Mosse, a Jew of Marseille (1397)
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Abstract. This brief essay offers a set of remarks on the post-mortem inventory of a Jew from the city of Marseille who died in 1397. The inventory, which lists all the assets in the estate, had been compiled by the decedent's daughters and was then presented to the court in order to be registered. Like many inventories from the region, it proceeds room-by-room, and offers valuable glimpses of Jewish material culture as well as the folk ontology governing the classification of things. The article includes a translation of the inventory, recording strikethrough deletions and interlineations.

Keywords. Folk ontology, Jewish-Christian relations, lists, material culture, medieval Europe, post-mortem inventory

The list featured in this brief essay, a post-mortem inventory of goods, came into being in the city of Marseille in July of 1397.¹ On the 24th of that month, two sisters, Venguesseta and Stereta, appeared before a judge to report the death of their father, Astrug Mosse, who had died intestate on the 18th of July. Since the sisters were underage, they asked to have their cousin, Boniaquet Cohen, assigned as their guardian. Boniaquet, who was present, swore on the Mosaic law to serve honorably. There was some question about whether the estate was burdened with debts, although we cannot tell whether this was a serious concern or a legal formula.² Little in the subsequent inventory suggests that Astrug's estate was insolvent.

An official post-mortem inventory was a useful thing for any heir to have.³ Inventories helped protect the rights of both wards and guardians, the former from wicked guardians who might spirit goods out of the estate, and the latter from wards who might accuse them of having done so or complain about a guardian's failure to maintain the items in good condition. In cases where the decedent was in debt, inventories defined the extent of the heirs' liability to creditors.

¹ Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône, 3 B 128, folios 128r-130r. The inventory itself begins on fol. 129r.

² *Ibid.*, fol. 128r: *cum beneficio tamen legis et inventarii cum sint dubie an ipsa hereditas dampnosa vel comoda ipsis sororibus esse possit, dubitantes equidem eadem hereditatem fore pluribus et diversis creditoribus obligatam.*

³ Thomas Kuehn, *Heirs, Kin, and Creditors in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Kuehn has discussed the laws governing estate inventories in more detail in his chapter "Estate Inventories as Legal Instruments of Credit in Renaissance Italy," forthcoming in *Law and Patrimony*.

To serve these legal purposes, inventories had to be officially registered with courts or notaries. In Provence, private individuals, typically widows, heirs, and/or guardians, were responsible for compiling the inventory in the presence of any party having an interest in the estate, including creditors. They then brought the resulting hand-list to the court or notary for registration.

The judge approved the sisters' plea and ordered a court crier to deliver a public cry inviting all creditors to attend the compilation of the inventory on Friday, the 27th of July. On that day, the sisters, perhaps accompanied by Boniaquet, compiled an inventory of their father's estate and returned to court in the evening, around the hour of vespers, to register the act. In all likelihood, the hand-list they transmitted to the notary was written in Provençal, not in the Latin of the registered list. As was customary, the procedure of registration began with someone making the sign of the cross, although the document does not tell us who.⁴ The presence of numerous deletions and interlineations in the registered act suggests that the notary, simultaneously copying and translating the hand-list into Latin, lost his way from time to time.

The post-mortem inventory of the estate of Astrug Mosse is one of six known inventories of Jewish households from later medieval Marseille. They form a small but interesting cluster alongside a larger corpus of about one hundred and fifty inventories of Christian households I have collected from Marseille and its environs.⁵ These inventories, in turn, represent a tiny sample of the tens of thousands of estate inventories of secular households from Europe between 1250 and 1500 that await discovery in the archives. All these inventories reflect a broader turn toward list-making that is such a noteworthy feature of later medieval European literary and administrative practice.⁶

As the anthropologist Jack Goody pointed out some decades ago, lists are good to think with.⁷ By virtue of breaking up the flow of text into discrete semantic units, the list alters the cognitive habits of those who use them. Unlike other kinds of prose, lists lack verbs. If verbs are like the mortar that allows a pile of stone or brick to be assembled and given shape or meaning as an edifice, a list is a heap of disaggregated material. But however disaggregated, no list is a random assortment of things—or if it is, it is not a list. All lists are defined by a principle of classification, like the bricks and stones at the masonry supply yard that are carefully sorted into pallets or bins. At the heart of Goody's argument is the claim that the very act of list-making invites systematic thought about classification. Lists generate ontologies.

This being the case, we can approach the inventory of Astrug Mosse as a list of things and as the product of a cognitive exercise carried out by two young women in 1397. As a list of things, can this inventory tell us something about Jewish life and Jewish-Christian relations at the end of the fourteenth century? As a product of an act of cognition, does the list tell us anything about how Venguesseta and Stereta, either as women or as Jews, thought about and

⁴ *Ibid.*: *dixerunt et manifestarunt in presencia dicti domini iudicis meique notarii et testium subscriptorum, signo preposito venerabilis sancte + prout in talibus est fieri consuetum, se invenisse in bonis et hereditate predictis bona et res que inferius particulariter describuntur*. Normally, the parties responsible for compiling the inventory would make the sign.

⁵ The collection is at <https://dalme.org/>. Three Jewish inventories are currently available; the remaining three will be entered relatively soon. The DALME site also includes a growing collection of inventories of medieval Jewish households assembled by Ryan Low.

⁶ Madeleine Jeay, *Le commerce des mots: l'usage des listes dans la littérature médiévale (XIIe-XVe siècles)*, Publications romanes et françaises 241 (Genève: Droz, 2006); Claire Angotti et al., eds., *Le pouvoir des listes au Moyen Age*, Publications de la Sorbonne. Histoire ancienne et médiévale 165 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2019).

⁷ Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

classified items of material culture? To what degree were their own perceptions of thinghood overridden by the folk ontologies that governed the identification and classification of objects in later medieval Provence? Did the intervention of the notary further obscure the matter?

Such questions cannot be approached with a single inventory in hand. Like other serial documents, inventories have little meaning on their own. They acquire historical significance as part of a corpus. The list of Astrug's goods, for example, included a type of Jewish woman's headdress known as an *oralh*, a glass lamp imported from Damascus, and seven ostrich eggshells. Only by comparison with other Jewish and Christian inventories can such items begin to say something to us. Where cognition or perception is concerned, we can ask whether an inventory produced by two young Jewish women has linguistic features that depart from what is characteristic of the corpus as a whole. But despite the caveat, let us walk through this inventory, and consider the lessons it may hold for the act of list-making in the later medieval Europe.

The inventory of Astrug Mosse took a linear rather than tabular form, with text flowing continuously from the lefthand to righthand margins.⁸ In Marseille and elsewhere at this time, it was more common for estate inventories to be formatted as tables or single columns. Tables were popping up everywhere in late medieval documentation, in administrative records as well as in private registers of shops and households. This was part of the tabularization of recording habits. But even though the list in the court register was linear, it is doubtful that the sisters chose this format for their original hand-list. Tabular lists were associated with ephemeral contents, things that might be useful in the moment but did not need to be kept in perpetuity. Tables were appropriate for lists on scraps of paper that were going to be thrown away. Linear lists, where we find them, have the aura of formality and permanence.

Curiously, in both tabular and linear lists, object phrases—the semantic units that describe objects or sets of identical objects—typically begin with the Latin word *item*, translated in the text below as "next." In tabular format, the word acts visually as a bullet point. In linear format, *item* adds semantic content by defining the beginnings and ends of object phrases. For this reason, the absence of the word is meaningful. Consider this object phrase: "Next... a bed-frame with a mattress and top-mattress, a cushion, and a bedspread." As the absence of *items* suggests, this bed was perceived as a single object with components rather than as a set of stand-alone objects. The presence or absence of the word *item*, in other words, allows us to grasp how contemporaries defined thinghood. A rare vernacular hand-list from the year 1315, kept in tabular format, shows that private citizens were accustomed to using *item*.⁹ This suggests that the phrase reflects an ontology proper to Venguesseta and Stereta rather than the notary.

In defining a bed as object with daughter components rather than an assemblage of sibling objects, Venguesseta and Stereta reproduced a common feature of the folk ontology of medieval Provence. Here, as elsewhere, one gets the very strong impression that Jews and Christians participated in a single folk ontology common to all speakers of Provençal and to

⁸ For a digital version of the inventory, including the original archival images, see Juliette Sibon and Daniel Lord Smail, "Inventory of Astrug Mosse," in Daniel Lord Smail, Gabriel H. Pizzorno, and L. Morreale (eds.), *The Documentary Archaeology of Late Medieval Europe*. Retrieved from <https://dalme.org/b75ac7dd-be6e-48b4-ade3-64be64490b9e/>

⁹ Archives municipales de la ville de Marseille 1 II 18.

women and men. In one very particular linguistic domain, however, their inventory displays an element that is unique in the existing corpus.

Underlying every inventory is a hierarchy of containment. At the top, the entirety is folded within a conceptual container, namely, the set of possessions of the decedent, in this instance Astrug Mosse. Below that, the inventory moves to his two houses, the first level of physical containment, and then a set of rooms. Inside the rooms, we find the goods. Up to this point, the preposition used to indicate containment is *in*: "in the aforesaid goods and estate," "in the pantry," and so on. But several items were themselves containers. To indicate their contents, Venguesseta and Stereta shifted to a different preposition, *infra*, or "within," as in the phrase "next, another chest with a lock, inside of which was found a coffret and an apothecary's jar." The shift from *in* to *infra* defines the point where the sisters moved through a conceptual membrane separating the room-as-container from the chest-as-container.

The word *infra* and the membrane to which it gestures is also a commonplace in the Provençal folk ontology of material culture. What is unusual is that Venguesseta and Stereta, in a manner without precedent in the existing corpus, used the word *extra* on two occasions to identify the moment where they passed *back* through the membrane. One instance occurs where they left the contents of the chest above and returned to the room: "Next, outside the said chest, a candelabrum." The word must have been supplied by Venguesseta and Stereta because the notary could not have known where the candelabrum was located. Their use of the word demonstrates an unusual concern for spatial precision.

Let us return to the top of the hierarchy. A post-mortem inventory sought to identify the possessions of the deceased, the fundamental principle of classification where inventories are concerned. But possession in any culture is a complex and difficult idea. In a few spots, we see Venguesseta and Stereta wrestling with the problem, notably where they identified items in pledge for loans both owed and owing. In other respects, acts of judgment regarding ownership are revealed by their decision to omit certain items. For example, a literal reading of the inventory suggests that Venguesseta and Stereta had no clothes, shoes, or jewellery. At a bare minimum, therefore, they chose wittingly or unwittingly to omit the clothes they wore while compiling the inventory, even though their clothes probably belonged in some legal sense to their father. Astrug, too, apparently had few clothes. If custom is any guide, the daughters had placed his daily garment, the *houppelande*, out in pawn for 12 florins in order to raise funds for the funeral.

Astrug died on the 18th of July. The daughters came to the court on the 24th, suggesting that they had observed *shiva* in the interval. This clue, coupled with several items listed in the inventory—the *oralh*, the documents in Hebrew, the six "Jewish" books out in pledge, and possibly the coral branches and ostrich eggshells—comprise the only features of the inventory that may have been particular to a Jewish household. The coral-working trade in Marseille was dominated by Jewish laborers, typically poor craftsmen working under the thumb of Christian masters.¹⁰ Elsewhere in the corpus, only finished coral is found. Ostrich eggshells, in medieval and Renaissance Europe, were used for fashioning delicate goblets and reliquaries. Astrug's is the only inventory containing ostrich eggshells in the entire Marseille corpus, suggesting that these rare items had reached him through Jewish commercial circuits connecting Marseille to the Jewish communities of the Maghrib.

¹⁰ On this and other matters pertaining to Marseille's Jewish community, see Juliette Sibon, *Les juifs de Marseille au XIVe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 2011).

In all other respects, there was little to distinguish Astrug's household from those of his Christian neighbors: the inventory reveals a very conventional Provençal household of middling status. The family lived in two formerly distinct houses that had been combined into a single living unit. They cooked their food in kettles and on grills, consumed wine and fava beans, and mixed and kneaded dough which they carried to the communal oven on a bread-peel. Although the household lacked wine-making equipment, the presence of a harvest basket suggests that they gathered grapes from their vineyard and borrowed a neighbor's wine-press and vat to make wine. Either Astrug or the girls bedded down in a somewhat unusual room called a *mejanus*, or mezzanine, which also housed the family papers and a commode. Chests or bags for storing legal papers are relatively common in Massiliote inventories, reflecting the notarization of social and legal habits widespread by 1400. The commode is a bit unusual.

The presence of two items received in pledge suggests that Astrug or his late wife worked at least informally as pawnbrokers, a practice also revealed in numerous Christian inventories. The hypothesis is supported, toward the end of the inventory, by the peculiar contents of the upstairs room. Inventories, often enough, are hard to read, listing one thing after another after another. It takes imagination to visualize the items in this particular room and to work out the underlying principle of classification. Elsewhere in the inventory, items found in any given room typically obey a simple rule, namely, that the item should pertain to the room's function. Nearly everything found in the kitchen is the sort of thing we would expect to find in the kitchen. The presence of eight shabby tablecloths in the bedroom seems unusual at first blush, but all is explained when we learn that the bedroom did double duty as a dining hall.

This logic fails spectacularly when we climb the stairs, enter the final room, and observe therein a miscellaneous assortment of storage vessels and kitchen equipment, the coral branches, a balance, a writing desk, a mat, a bench, wares of iron and copper, an unidentified item made of silk, some weapons, and an adze. A parsimonious explanation for these oddments is that they had been left in pledge and subsequently abandoned by their owners. A plausible alternative is that these were goods received in inheritance or legacy for which the family had no current use.

Regardless of how he acquired the stuff, why did Astrug keep it? Rooms heaped with old furniture and other items not currently in use, which the English call "lumber rooms," are not uncommon in both Christian and Jewish inventories from Marseille. In cases where people lacked a spare room, they sometimes tucked miscellaneous assortments of goods here and there, which we can detect whenever the room contents of a given inventory go wildly off the rails. As to why Astrug kept it, the best response is to turn the question around, and ask what else he could have done with it. In the absence of a banking system, in a world lacking much coinage, material culture was a convenient way to store surplus value. Whenever Astrug needed funds, he could take any of these items down to the reseller.

Reading inventories, we can learn a lot by being attentive to the fluctuations between order and disorder. It is important to note that the apparent disorder of Astrug Mosse's lumber room is visible to us because the sisters, following custom, compiled the inventory following a spatial or linear protocol. They listed all the contents of one room, probably in their original spatial sequence, before moving on to the next. Had they chosen to organize the list by function—furniture, kitchen items, clothing, and so on—both the contents and the very existence of the lumber room would have vanished before our eyes. In this, as in other ways, it is important that we treat inventories as something more than evidence for objects. Read the

inventory that follows as a *list*, where much of what is interesting about it resides in the sequence of and interrelations between the objects found.

Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône, 3 B 128, folios 128r-130r. The act begins, on folios 128r-129r, with summary descriptions of the legal proceedings, including the nomination of the guardian and the details regarding the judge's authorization to compile an inventory. The inventory itself begins about half way down folio 129r and extends over folio 129v. The final folio, 130r, returns to boilerplate legal proceedings. This translation preserves the linear format of the inventory. Important deletions and interlineations in the text are indicated by means of strikethroughs and the use of superscript.

With these matters having been settled, Venguesseta and Stereta, sisters and Jews, wished to proceed immediately to the compilation of the goods of the estate, following the order of the said lord judge. And so that they might be able to profit from the favors, benefits, and concessions granted to those taking up an estate with benefit of inventory, they declared and revealed, in the presence of the lord judge, and me, the notary, and the witnesses below, with the venerable sign of the cross having been made as is customary in such matters, that they had found, in the aforesaid goods and inheritance, the goods and things which are described in detail below. And first, they said they had found two houses belonging to Astrug located next to one another in the street of the Jews in the city of Marseille, one of which abuts a certain house belonging to a merchant, Antoni Crote, and the other, the house of a Jew, Mosse Creguti. The houses are servile, one of them, namely, to Antoni de Jerusalem, and the other to Lady Ancelma de Montoliu. And within the houses, the aforesaid sisters, Jews, said that they had found the goods set out in detail below. First, in the house where the cooking is done,¹¹ a bench-chest with a small amount of flour. Next, a small casket. Next, a bench. Next, two buckets. Next, a tripod. Next, a grill. Next, a jar. Next, an earthenware cauldron. Next, a small basin. Next, around a dozen wooden bowls. Next, eight wooden trenchers. Next, a trough for kneading dough. Next, a bread-paddle of little value. Next, a stone mortar. Next, a sieve or sifter. In the other house where the bedroom is.¹² Next, a bed furnished with a mattress, a cushion, a blanket, two sheets of little value. Next, a length of curtain. Next, a small striped Barbary blanket and ~~next~~ a tablecloth belonging to Boniaqui Marvani ~~which was~~ ^{which the late Astrug} ~~has~~ in pledge for a certain amount of money. Next, eight shabby sheets. Next, three shabby tablecloths. Next, three blankets. Next, a dining table with trestles. Next, a bench. Next, two baskets made of palm. Next, a basket for the grape harvest. Next, a narrow chest. Next, a */fol. 129v/* coffer inside of which are the following things, namely, an *oralh*¹³ ~~with~~ finished in silver. Next, two towels. Next, a small ruby-red child's hood. Next, a copper cauldron. Next, another ~~hood~~ ^{chest} with a lock, inside of which ~~were~~ was found a coffret ~~next~~ and an apothecary's jar ~~of his lady daughter~~.¹⁴ Next, outside the said chest, a candelabrum. Next, two plates. Next, six tin bowls. Next, nine tin bowls. Next, a ^{glass} lamp from Damascus ~~glass~~.¹⁵ Next, a cradle. In the

¹¹ "in qua fit focanea." Literally, "in which the kitchen was made."

¹² "in qua fit camera"

¹³ A type of headdress worn by Jewish women: *Dictionnaire de l'Occitan Médiéval*, s.v. "oral" or "oralh"

¹⁴ "sue filie domicelle." The reading is slightly uncertain because the words have been struck through. Since the *domicella* in contemporary documents was invariably used to describe women of the minor nobility, the phrase clearly has no place here.

¹⁵ "de damasca ~~vitrea~~," which if left uncorrected would have meant "made of Damascene glass."

mezzanine. Next, a bench-chest inside of which were found seven ostrich eggs.¹⁶ Next, four towels and one measure of fava beans or thereabouts. Next, a chest inside of which was found a ~~eontra~~ quilt or bedspread, ^{white}. Next, a bench-cushion. Next, outside the chest, a bed-frame with a mattress and top-mattress, a cushion, and a bedspread. Next, several plates. Next, a small casket inside of which were found many Jewish and Christian documents.¹⁷ Next, a commode.¹⁸ In the pantry. Next, an empty cask. Next, a butt containing a millerole of wine or thereabouts. Next, two kegs. Next, a small vat of little value. In the house, upstairs. Next, two small earthenware jars. Next, a certain number of coral branches.¹⁹ Next, a copper casserole.²⁰ Next, a rod with its balance. Next, a grill. Next, a frying-pan. Next, a writing desk. Next, a small mat and ^{a bench}. Next, a lock. Next, an iron hook. Next, a tub. Next, a copper mortar with a pestle. Next, another small copper [mortar]. Next, two copper lamps. Next, a silk *tamem*. Next, a sword. Next, a battle-mace. Next, a small kettle in so-so condition. Next, a kettle. Next, a copper cauldron. Next, a hook. Next, an adze. What follows are the debts. First, Aquinon owes two and a half florins. What follows are Astrug's goods that are out in pledge. First, six Jewish books.²¹ Next, a houppelande of blood-red cloth for twelve gold florins. Next, the sisters said that they had found²² among the goods and the estate of their father, the late Astrug Mosse, a certain vineyard located in the territory of the aforesaid city in a place called "At Saint-Tronc."²³

¹⁶ Literally "Ova Strussi," with capital letters in the original. *Dictionnaire de l'Occitan Médiéval*, s.v. *struci*, "autruche," or "ostrich"

¹⁷ "scripture Judayce et Christiane"

¹⁸ "sellam trancatam." The translation is uncertain. Literally, the phrase refers to chair or seat that has been "cut" (Occitan *tranchar*). It is unlikely to mean "broken," since the notary would have used the common adjective "fractus -a -um." The most common expression for a commode found in Massiliote inventories is *sella perforata*. The use of an Occitan word may indicate that the family were refugees from Languedoc and had fled to Provence in the tense years leading up to the expulsion of Jews from France in 1396.

¹⁹ "scobilhe coralli." Provençal *escobilha* = "sweepings," from which I infer that *scobilhe* refers to the twigs from which brooms were made.

²⁰ Provençal *cassa* can mean "chest," "chasse," or "casserole." I assume the latter given the presence of other kitchen items nearby

²¹ "libri judayci"

²² "reperire." An inventory, etymologically speaking, is a list of "found things" (Lat. *invenire*). The frequent use of *invenire* and *reperire* in the corpus of Massiliote inventories demonstrates how the perception of the practice, at least in this period, reflected the etymology.

²³ Literally "Ad Sanct Tronc." Saint-Tronc is a district located about 6.5 kilometers southeast of the medieval city, in the foothills of the Marseillevyre chain.