

Proof & Authenticity in Medieval Cities (c.1050–1500)

Location: Complutense University of Madrid, May 28th - 30th 2025

Application Details:

Format: 25-minute presentations, to be given in person in either English or Spanish

Send proposal abstracts (c.250 words) to: proofandproving@gmail.com

Proposal Deadline: March 10th 2025

How did people prove their credentials in the pre-modern era? Although the tension between oral and written authentication is an old debate within historiography, over the past decade the issue has ignited scholarship in new ways. Whereas Michael Clanchy once cited royal bureaucracy and the early universities as the twin agents of a shift to written record, the emphasis has increasingly shifted to urbanization itself. Some have pointed to the power of notaries and scribes as bearers of public faith, who as well as establishing the terms for recording and fixing oral testimonies preserved proofs of ties and transactions across the urban space. Others have stressed how the changing social fabric of cities prompted new documentary practices, which destabilized and transformed conditions of proof in the process. But despite these recent debates there remain unanswered questions about the nature of proof itself. What did it mean to prove in an ever-evolving urban setting? How was the concept of proof itself inflected by theological, scholastic, economic, or commercial practices? Which forms of proof were considered most reliable, and who oversaw them? And how did practices of proof relate to processes of community-building, or condition the writing of collective memory?

This seminar aims at exploring the social, political, and cultural mechanisms for securing proof in premodern cities, and the evolving nature of the concept within shifting urban contexts. Although one of our focuses is the urban panorama of the Iberian Peninsula, we are interested in comparative views from across European cities in the broad period c.1050–1500.

Specifically, we are interested in three distinct but overlapping branches of discussion:

1) **Legal forms of proof:** How were legal definitions of proof fixed or agreed upon, especially in the evolution from the use of ordeals to the use of witnesses and witnessing? Contributions may explore the power of proof to determine social order, the social impact of mechanisms of proof, the influence of jurists' opinions in the matter and the significance of notaries and notarial culture in the establishment of an urban society that progressively relied on written forms of social trust.

2) **Bureaucracy and the transformation of proof:** As the seminar considers these issues over the *longue durée* (11th-15th centuries), we wish to analyze how the emergence of a complex and refined bureaucracy transformed practices related to the creation of proof and authenticity. Exploring the institutions that tested or approved mechanisms of proof, this discussion may engage with a range of documentary evidence, from financial accounts

to charters, receipts and identity papers, scrutinizing the use of proof in the rise of bureaucratic governments whose power was predicated on the mastery of record-keeping.

3) Material & alternative sources of proof: Beyond legal and bureaucratic procedures, we are also interested in the materiality of proof, embodied in objects, patrimonial artefacts and seals. Our aim here is to offer a fuller picture of the diversity of pre-modern proof mechanisms, appreciating the role of objects and images in the shaping of collective memories.

Contributions might focus on:

- Legal codifications of proof in specific contexts and their application in urban settings.
- Documentary and diplomatic practices of proof in the medieval and early modern city. This may include cases related to the production and uses of forgeries.
- The agents of proof: jurists, witnesses (as urban inhabitants), notaries and institutions.
- Language and the making of proof.
- Seals and other forms of verifying documents.
- Proof of identity and identification in the medieval and early modern city.
- The role of proof in the constitution of collective forms of (urban) memory.



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