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ThiMa - Things that Matter: Mobility and Agency of Everyday Objects in Late Medieval Italy

ThiMa challenges the assumption that action is a human prerogative by examining how everyday objects served as agents of transformation in late medieval societies. Investigating the boundary between material and human agency is particularly critical for the present, where new artificial intelligences call into question the very essence of being human. ThiMa reflects on these matters from another watershed moment in the redefinition of European material culture. Between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, everyday goods diversified and there was a significant increase of objects in circulation. This period can thus serve as a crucial laboratory to explore the impact of ordinary things on people's social behavior and emotional life. For the first time, ThiMa examines objects as agents that interacted with individuals, mediating social relationships and moving emotions, (ways of) thinking, and perceptions through their peculiar material language. To investigate these questions, this project employs a bold new comparative framework in the richly documented but diverse environments of Tuscany and Sicily. This critical move away from siloed approaches to material culture allows us to better understand how socio-economic, institutional, and legal contexts influenced the complex relationship between human and things. The project interrogates a broad range of textual and material sources, using quantitative and qualitative methods, cutting-edge digital tools and drawing on a ground-breaking theoretical framework on material agency. Thanks to this novel approach, ThiMa will profoundly advance our understanding of how humans perceive and interact with their material environment from the medieval past to the present day.

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