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Abstract 1

Mining, Knowledge, and Power: The Cosmogeopolitics of Early Modern Europe

Tina Asmussen, Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum & Ruhr-Universität Bochum

In this presentation, I explore mining ecologies as a framework for understanding early modern European extractive landscapes. Mining was not merely an economic or technological enterprise but a deeply embedded ecological, epistemic, and political process, shaped by complex interactions between humans, minerals, environments, and non-human agencies. By introducing the concept of "cosmogeopolitics", I examine how early modern mining landscapes were arenas of environmental transformation, territorial power, and the entanglement of material and immaterial forces, where different forms of knowledge production converged. Religious beliefs, planetary influences, mythological narratives, and spiritual entities were not separate from mining but actively shaped the ways in which subterranean worlds were understood, accessed, and controlled.



Detail from Andreas Ryff, Münz- und Mineralienbuch, Basel 1594-1600, Universitätsbibliothek Basel, MS A lambda II 46a.

Cosmogeopolitics builds upon Isabelle Stengers' cosmopolitics, which challenges the idea of a singular, universal world by emphasizing the plurality of world-making practices. Expanding this notion to resource extraction, cosmogeopolitics highlights the ways in which material, political, and cosmological forces intersected in mining regions. This perspective challenges teleological narratives of disenchantment, instead revealing how early modern mineral extraction was shaped by enduring ontological and epistemic entanglements.

Through an analysis of 16th- and 17th-century texts and material sources, including technical literature, mining chronicles, theological writings and artefacts, I examine how early modern actors conceptualized the underground as both animated and extractable. Minerals were widely believed to "grow" within the earth, but rather than encouraging conservationist thinking, this understanding was used to justify intensified resource appropriation. Mining was not perceived as a simple unidirectional act of domination but as a negotiation with subterranean forces, requiring technical expertise, legal regulation, and material mediation. By shifting the focus to cosmogeopolitics, this talk brings early modern mining history into dialogue with modern debates on extractivism, planetary thinking, and environmental governance. The appropriation of georesources has long been framed as a matter of labor control, technological development, and political authority, yet it has also been shaped by cosmological imaginaries and ontological frameworks. Recognizing these long-standing entanglements allows us to rethink contemporary debates on mining and ecological crises beyond simplistic binaries of mechanistic domination versus organic relationality. Instead, it reveals how past and present extractive regimes have continuously negotiated between material agency, sovereign power, and competing visions of the earth as both a living and governable entity.

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Abstract 2

Amber, Eighteenth-century England, and Uncomfortable Truths: Decolonizing European Amber Studies

Rachel King, The British Museum

This contribution discusses recent work towards expanding the ways in which European amber is interrogated, with a view to better understanding European amber as a material of global entanglement.



Anklet made of coral, amber and glass beads.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Post medieval European amber has, to date, been excluded from the decolonization process underway in the cultural-heritage sector. There are several reasons, some driven by museological practice and others by museological practicalities. On one hand, many Museums have adopted the *Princely Schatz* and *Kunstkammer* model to mobilize and display previously isolated early modern objects, elevating many well above the historical status suggested by contemporary primary sources. This has dislocated ambers from their historic reality, rarified them and, in the focus on Europe, encouraged a sense that their making, buying, selling and acquisition took place outside of the pre-modern global economy. On the other hand, much research on European amber since circa 2000, has been led by or involved dealer-specialists, for whom a less glamorous side, I suggest, has little appeal. In short, art-historical perspectives and celebratory narratives have marginalized, sometimes inadvertently lauded,
but generally completely omitted the role of European amber in European colonial projects.

Relatively inexpensive, produced in large volumes, and lightweight, amber beads connected the lives of artisans in Gdansk and Konigsberg with people on other continents where European amber sometimes became integrated and reworked into socially and ideologically meaningful new items, reflecting local preferences and local systems of value and exchange. Heavily indebted to work already done on Venetian glass beads in assortment cargoes bound for Africa and North America, this contribution will suggest – based on English sources from the eighteenth century – a relationship between British Imperialism, the growth in the trade in enslaved persons, and the expansion of documents relating to the re-export of Baltic amber and amber beads from England. It will present examples of the pathways and mechanisms that carried European amber beyond Europe in this period and consider Baltic amber in the exercise of European power in non-European contexts.

This work is intended to be a proactive contribution to the museological interpretation of Europe's colonial past in the postcolonial present which acknowledges Audre Lorde's categorical declaration that 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.



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Abstract 3

In Defence of "Strangeness": Mining Materials for Central European Ceramic Glazes

Zuzanna Sarnecka, Universität Bern

"I have also heard that it [tin] is found in certain places in Flanders, in Bohemia, and in the Duchy of Bavaria, but I am not able to list these exactly because of the strangeness of the names and places, though this matters little."

Vannoccio Biringuccio, De la pirotechnia 1540 (Book I, Chapter 5)



Image copyright: Zuzanna Sarnecka

This paper argues against the unencumbered mid-sixteenth-century statement of the Sienese metallurgist and highlights the importance of flagging similar attempts to obliterate or generalise knowledge of sites considered negligible by Western writers. Biringuccio's assertion that the finest tin was mined in Cornwall had a lasting impact on scholarship, which for a long time neglected early modern tin mining at Krušné Hory, despite evidence that the site had been in use already in the Bronze Age.

Studies of the origin of tin and other raw materials that played a key role in ceramic production illuminate our understanding of differences between artefacts made using metals mined at distinct locations. Comparisons of the elemental composition of artefacts made in Italian workshops with those from Moravia and western Slovakia reveal quantitative and qualitative differences suggesting varying places of extraction of the materials used by historic makers. In contrast to previous studies, which used the non-destructive method of XRF spectroscopy for dating and attribution of specific pieces, the present contribution argues for the significance of the gathered data for an inclusive and precise history of access to resources by different artisanal groups working in the same medium.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ceramic production was driven not only by skill and know-how, but also by politics, economy, cultural capital and ecology. The inquiries into the elemental composition of the glazes produced in various parts of Central Europe point to significant differences, which have more to do with access and strategic dissemination of resources than with specific artistic techniques and aesthetic choices.