

Writing a provenance report

Abstract

In this research aid you find information on how to draft a report of your findings.

The provenance report

The purpose of a provenance report is to record both the research itself and the key data it produced. It is important that the report provides the most comprehensive overview possible of the sources consulted, including those that did not yield anything or contained conflicting information. Future provenance researchers can build on this.

A provenance report can take different forms. There are no official guidelines for reporting provenance research from organisations such as the Dutch Museum Association or ICOM. Collection-managing institutions may combine different forms of reporting or use them alongside each other. For some examples, take a look at the provenance reports attached to the [published advisory reports of the Dutch Colonial Collections Committee](#).

Textual report

A textual report provides a comprehensive overview of the research. The structure depends on the purpose of the study. Various considerations regarding reporting content are discussed in the publication [Clues](#). The publication looks at various reporting options, including reporting based on a defined research question or chronological order, and the extent of historical contextualisation. Examples of textual reports can be found on the website of the [NIOD](#).

Schematic representation

A schematic representation of the object's provenance is useful to show the most important data at a glance. This can be in the form of a timeline showing key moments when possession was transferred or in the form of a provenance sentence: a standardised notation of known years, possessors and their places of residence, separated by punctuation marks. Any gaps in knowledge are also included in the schematic representation.

An example of a provenance sentence based on the model from [Yeide, Akinsha, Walsh \(2001\)](#) is: *Gravestone (Aceh, 16th-18th century), unknown burial site in Lhoknga, until 1901; (removed from Lhoknga by George Nijpels, 1901); donated to Hoofdcursus [officer training school], Kampen, 1902 to 1923; transfer to the Ethnographic Museum of the Royal Military Academy, Breda 1923 to 1956; transfer to Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde [National Museum of Ethnology]/ Wereldmuseum Leiden, 1956.*

Example of a timeline:

- **16th century - 18th century** Manufacture of the gravestone.
- **16th/18th century - before 1901** Cemetery in Lhoknga.
- **1901** Removed from Lhoknga by George Nijpels.
- **1902** Sent to the Netherlands by George Nijpels.
- **1902-1923** Hoofdcursus of the Royal Military Academy in Kampen, after donation by George Nijpels.

- **1923-1956** Ethnographic Museum of the Royal Military Academy in Breda, following transfer from the Hoofdcursus in Kampen.
- **1956-present** Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde / Wereldmuseum Leiden, after transfer from the Royal Military Academy in Breda.

Linking data

As well as textual reporting it is advisable for museums to record the provenance data in their collection management system by linking all individuals and institutions associated with the provenance to the object. It is also useful to create links to specific events if the collection management system offers this option. This makes it easier to browse the provenance data and link it to external sources.

Images

Historical photographs, maps and other illustrations can be used to illustrate the report. The same applies to photographs of the object and its details; for example decorations and inscriptions may contain important information. However, it is good to keep in mind that depicting and/or examining certain objects may be considered undesirable by communities of origin. If it is suspected that any such restrictions exist, it is advisable to seek expert advice. This applies in particular to the depiction of ancestral remains. In addition, if a provenance report is made available to the public applicable copyright laws must be observed.

Language

Colonial sources are written from a perspective that justifies colonial rule and often use terms that are no longer in use or are now considered inappropriate and offensive. The research aid [Sources](#) provides guidance on dealing with outdated language found in colonial sources. When writing a report it is important to cite historical words and terms – perhaps in quotation marks and accompanied by an explanatory note – if these are necessary to understand the object history and enable future research.

The Wereldmuseum publication [Words Matter](#) provides tips for dealing with colonial terminology.

Related Aids

- [Doing research](#)
- [Sources](#)
- [Select and delineate](#)

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