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Containing Gold: institutional attempts to define and constrict the values of gold objects

Gold objects have, for at least 2,500 years, been exploited as an instrument in the extension and consolidation of central authority across the West, as well as playing a crucial role in the demonstration of personal and institutional power and status. This reliance has generated anxieties on the part of hegemonic groups, due to the symbolic and practical implications of unsanctioned or disruptive actions on the part of unaligned actors. As a consequence, concerted (and at times draconian) efforts have been made to construct, maintain and police a system of value attribution that supports the hegemonic perspective through force of law, technological processes and social conventions.

Focussing on the United Kingdom (but including a selection of relevant negotiations and interactions with other European nation-states), this paper will explore how such systems rely heavily on materialising abstract values through the imposition of specific features on the gold objects in question. It will also demonstrate the extent to which these institutionalised systems require and support particular spatial pathways which become mandatory for gold objects to undertake. The paper will consider to what extent such systems display a tendency to colonise new territories, other classes of objects and other materials, as well as how aspects of the system under discussion have inadvertently fostered new, alternative regimes of value.