

## Book Review: *Fabriano: City of Medieval and Renaissance Papermaking – The First 500 Years*

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The Italian town of Fabriano is known for producing high-quality handmade paper – an industry that began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and that has endured for eight centuries. How did the industry take hold in this Italian town and how did it endure for so long? Author Sylvia Rodgers Albro tells this story in her new book, *Fabriano: City of Medieval and Renaissance Papermaking*. Readers who appreciate history and engineering will enjoy Albro's narrative, wonderful photography, and diagrams as they bring to life the art, science, and social history of papermaking in Fabriano.

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A new book on the history of papermaking in the Italian town, Fabriano, is a delight for anyone interested in art history or Italian history, and especially those interested in the papermaking craft. Author Sylvia Rodgers Albro's narrative of papermaking in Italy focuses on the first 500 years, in *Fabriano: City of Medieval and Renaissance Papermaking* (Oak Knoll Press, Delaware, USA). Albro is a senior paper conservator at the Library of Congress. She notes that her interest in handmade Italian paper was sparked when examining a legal document on Italian watermarked paper, dating back to the 1500s. The paper was still in beautiful condition. In her later visits to Italian archives and museums she found ancient paper records, all in fine condition, and all originating from the Fabriano area. Albro describes her role as a conservator as solving "preservation mysteries." It is in this spirit that the author delves into the following questions – How did papermaking come to be in Fabriano and how did the industry endure for eight centuries? Albro answers these questions, weaving together a fabric of evidence from archives and original paper samples to develop her narrative of papermaking in Fabriano in its first 500 years.

The book begins with a sonnet – an ode to paper – dated 1630, written by Stelluti, a scientist and poet whose family were papermakers in Fabriano: "...All that happens here on Earth, it records. Seemingly fragile; yet more enduring than marble it gives long life to our words...". These words and the ancient paper it is recorded on sets the tone for readers. What follows is a well-researched exploration of the long-enduring industry of papermaking in Fabriano and especially the town's passion for the craft.

Albro starts with a geographical description of Fabriano. It is a town with ample access to mountain springs to fuel paper mills, and close to Ancona, a busy coastal town on the trading route. The early medieval period saw a burst of advancements in agricultural and craft technologies, improving on technology from its Roman past (the water wheel). New settlers flowed into the region bringing an increase in merchant and monastery activities. All things combined, there was a need for recording information, setting the scene for the papermaking industry in Fabriano. And so, the sleuthing begins – from where did papermaking in Fabriano originate? Albro outlines many existing theories and guides

readers on a visual show-and-tell of her own photographs of structures in Fabriano and beta-radiography of watermarks of ancient records. For instance, the author notes that Gasparinetti, former president of the Cartiere Miliani Fabriano, theorized a potential link between Fabriano papermaking and the Middle East *via* the coastal city, Ancona. Albro brings this idea to life in a photograph of the arch of the S. Antonio confraternity building, located just outside Fabriano. Above the arch is a carved “T” for Tau, the symbol for the Order of the Knights, a society associated with the Knights Templar. Another picture shows that this same “T” symbol was used as a watermark in a 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian document. Members of this secret society likely fought in the Crusades and brought home a rich collection of ideas from the Middle East; their presence in Fabriano and the watermarked symbol suggests a potential connection and transfer of knowledge in papermaking between the Middle East and Fabriano.

Albro assembles more puzzle pieces of medieval papermaking through her presentation of watermarks. An image of a notary from 1282-1302 shows readers some of the earliest watermarks produced in Fabriano – Arabic numerals, suggesting a link between the merchants and monasteries that used these symbols and the papermaking industry in Fabriano. Over time, watermarks changed from whole names of papermakers (difficult to maintain in a paper mould) to images of objects (a hunting horn), animals (a leaping deer), insignia (family crests), and talismans (a key). Albro presents wonderful photographs, often radiographs, of these watermarks throughout the text and in the appendix, displaying images of Fabriano paper from the special collections of the Library of Congress.

Readers with a keen interest in the art of papermaking will enjoy Albro’s meticulous details of life at a Fabriano paper mill. For instance, 14<sup>th</sup>-century records from the city archives describe categories of rags and their prices ranging from white, clean rags at the top price, eventually to become *Fina* (fine, white paper); striped rags (mid-price) to become *Fioretto* (somewhat good quality); and colored rags at the lowest price, eventually producing *Miglioramento* (brown paper used for packaging). Peppered throughout the text are photographs *ca.* 1900s of the men and women that worked at their craft – hanging paper sheets in a drying loft; sewing watermarks on mould covers; and leaving the paper mill at the end of the day. Albro’s assembly of ancient documents, historical records, and photography is a wonderful resource for anyone with a specialized or generalized interest in history, art, and science. As the author notes, ancient documents of Fabriano “having remarkably survived the trials and turmoils of time, are themselves a physical testament to the skill and craft of the town’s papermaking beginnings...”