Watermarks and Paper Features in Modern Italian Manuscripts: A Digital and Archival Approach

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The ERC-funded PRIMA project, based at the Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance (CESR), University of Tours, investigates modern manuscript production, with a particular focus on Italian collections from the late 16th century to the end of the 18th century. Despite the widespread assumption that print replaced manuscripts, an overwhelming number of manuscripts continued to be produced during this period, accounting for a significant portion of Italian library holdings. Given the vast scale of this manuscript tradition, our approach prioritises the structured yet selective documentation of laid paper features, including watermarks. While full-scale recording of all paper characteristics is impractical, our methodology aims for a systematic collection of essential data to support research in watermark studies.

In parallel, we will conduct an archival study of paper production and trade, employing an archivist to analyse watermarks and paper features in archival documents from the period. This will include outlining paper acquisition records from family account books and other financial documents, shedding light on the economic networks behind manuscript production.

To enhance our analysis, we are collaborating with Robert Erdmann (University of Amsterdam) to apply machine vision and AI tools. His Magic Eraser technology (https://images.erdmann.io/magic_eraser/) will be used to digitally remove ink, allowing for clearer watermark identification. Additionally, a specialised imaging pipeline will be employed to help differentiate between felt and mould sides of paper.

Our findings and dataset will be made available for integration into the Bernstein database, contributing to the broader study of watermarks and historical paper research.