

Neil Harris

## *The Beginnings and Purposes of the Countermark*

Countermarks, or secondary watermarks, usually placed in the corner of the mould opposite to the half containing the principal watermark, are a characteristic of Italian paper and more specifically of paper produced in or around Lake Garda and Toscolano. Their history and original purposes are obscure and they have also suffered from neglect from watermark scholars, who have often failed to note their presence. Scholarship, including a fleeting remark by Briquet in *Les filigranes* (1907), has so far identified the earliest instances of countermarks in 1483, and suggested that their primary function was to identify individual papermakers. In the context of ongoing research on the *Zornale* of Francesco de Madiis, a bookseller's ledger from Venice covering the years 1484 to 1488, I have been examining a large quantity of incunabula on paper, often from Lake Garda. The first examples of marks placed in the corner of a sheet, albeit without a main watermark in the other half, appear in Venetian incunabula from 1476 and 1477. Seemingly, their purpose was to identify some unusual paper sizes, such as Half-median, although by 1483 [now 1482, so the previous date is moved forward!] some examples of marks with initials have also been found. The paper surveys the use of countermarks in paper up to the end of the Fifteenth century, with some remarks about their subsequent development

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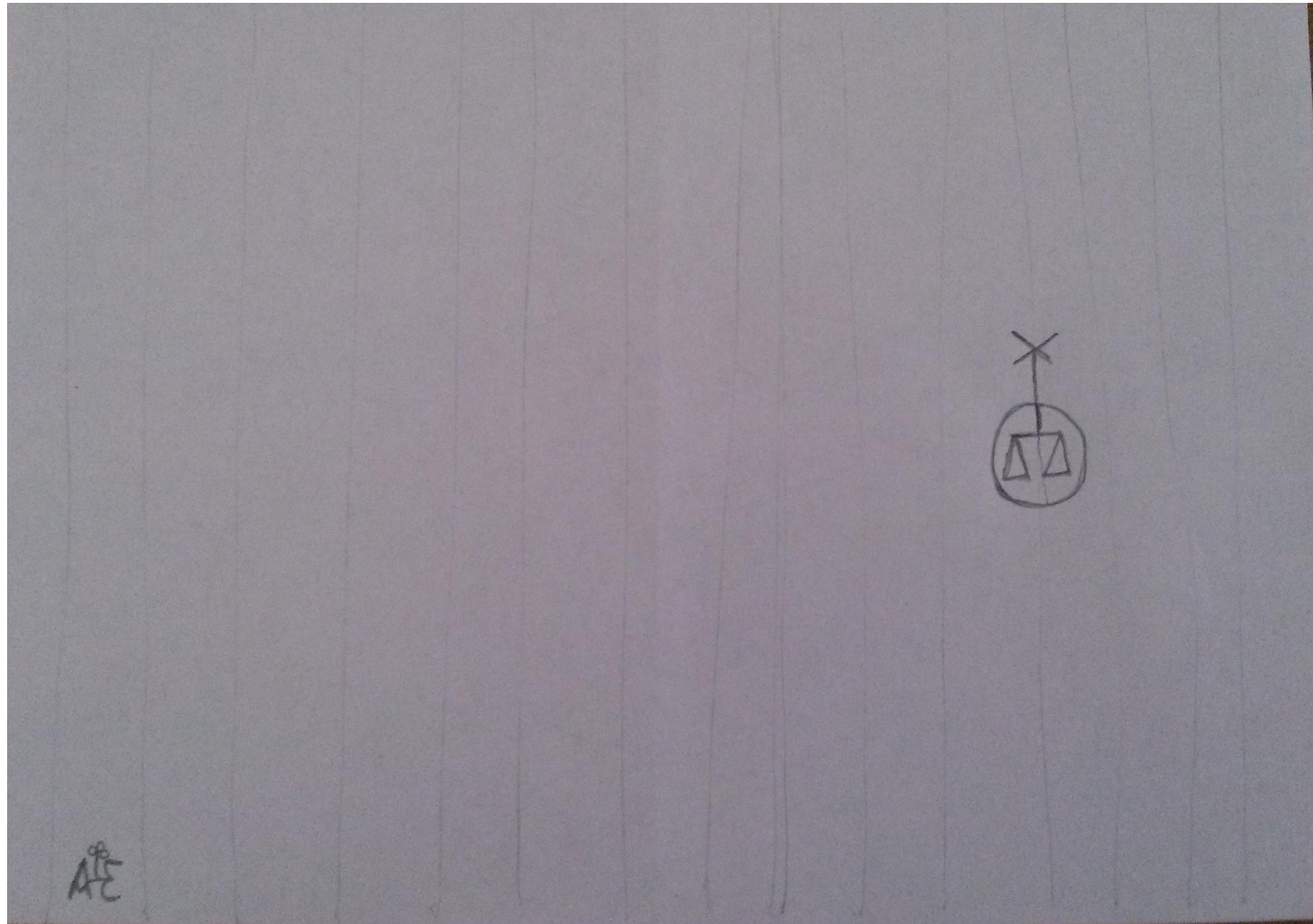
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*The Beginnings and Purposes of  
the Countermark*

*7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Watermarks in  
International Collections*

Verona and Toscolano Maderno, 6-8 September 2023

what do I  
mean by a  
counter  
mark, also  
denominated  
an  
'edgemark'  
(Allan  
Stevenson)  
or a  
'cornermark'  
(Paul  
Needham) ?



the geographical evidence of the sheets of paper with countermarks suggests that they were first used in the papermills on or around Lake Garda. They are common in incunabula and sixteenth-century editions printed in Brescia and Venice, whereas in centres such as Florence and Rome the dominant paper supply is from Fabriano

their purpose was probably to identify individual mills that shared a common watermark, so they often take the form of pairs of letters

they are valuable in terms of 'recognisability', since not only are they distinctive, but the use of letters placed in the corner makes it easy to identify twin moulds

## Briquet, *Les filigranes*, 1907, I, p. 14

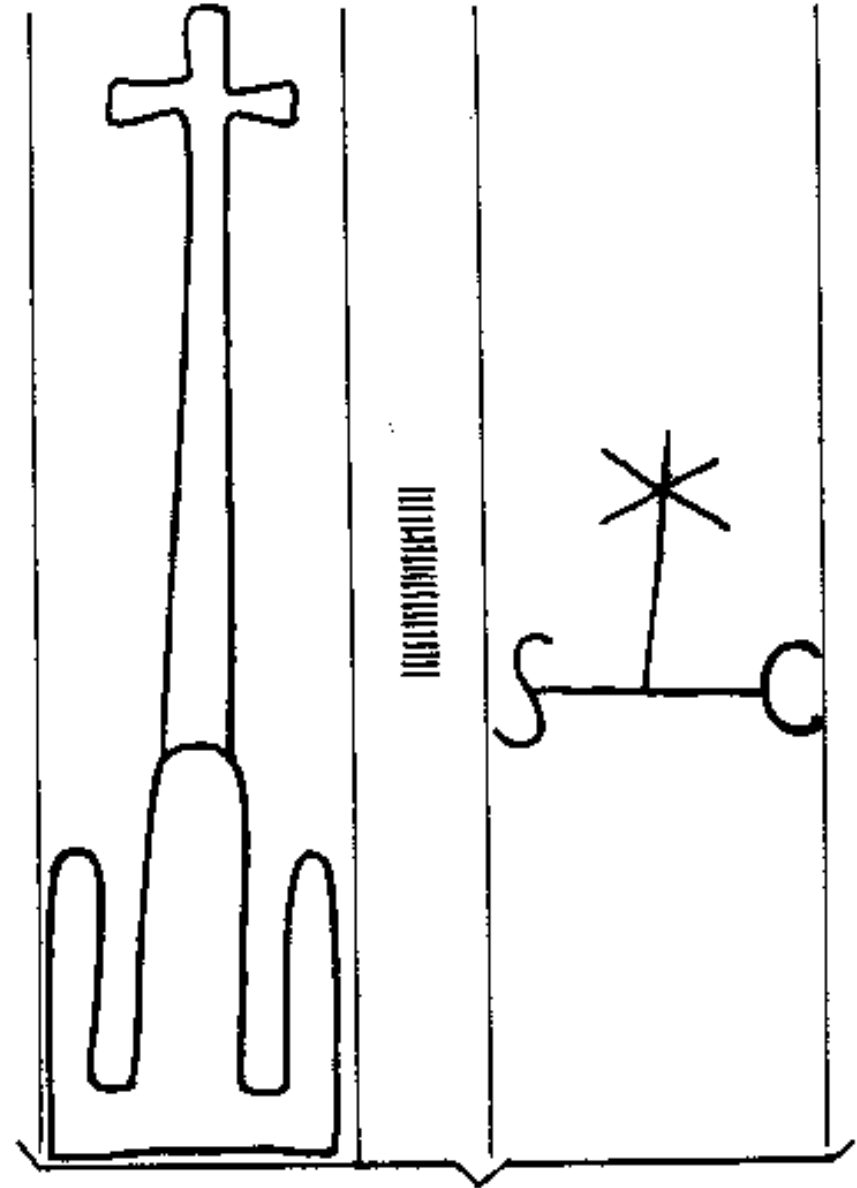
A Venise, dès la fin du XV<sup>e</sup> s., cette place était réservée à la contremarque du fabricant, tandis que le filigrane principal était apposé vers le centre de l'un des feuillets. Ces particularités peuvent aider à reconnaître la provenance de certains papiers. Les filigranes *doubles* ou *triples* se voient à la fin du XIII<sup>e</sup> et au commencement du XIV<sup>e</sup> s., mais on y renonça vite pour se borner à n'en employer qu'un seul

Les papetiers de Venise dérochèrent les premiers à cet usage et appliquèrent la contremarque dont il vient d'être parlé. **Le plus ancien exemple du nouveau système remonte à 1483; il n'a pas été suivi ailleurs.** Dans le reste de l'Italie, en France et en Allemagne, à partir de 1550, les papetiers placèrent une contremarque ou second filigrane, symétriquement avec le premier, au centre du second feuillet de la feuille. Cet usage, qui s'est généralisé dès lors, ne se montre qu'à titre exceptionnel au XVI<sup>e</sup> s.

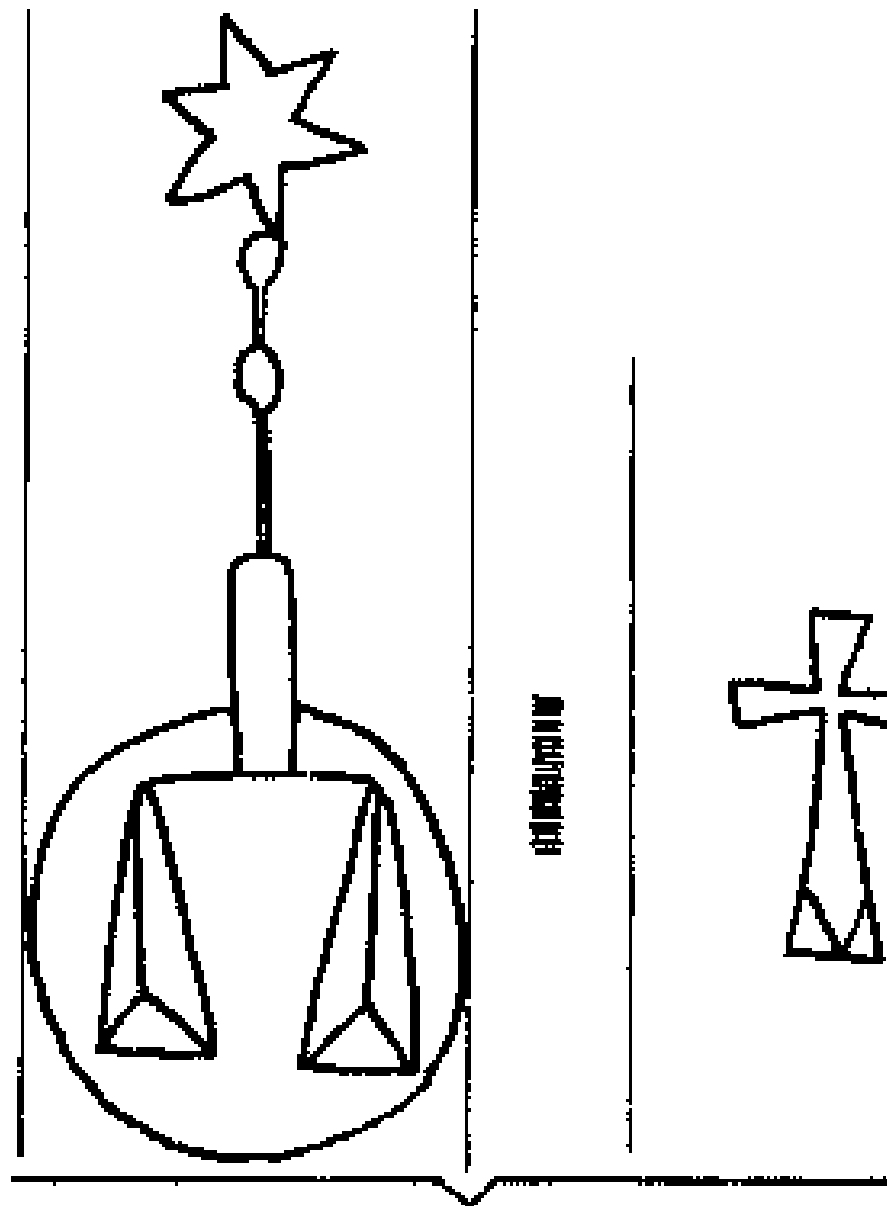
**11.815.** 32x44.

Contremarque posée à  
l'angle du même feuillet.

Trévisè, 1484-85. A. COM.:  
Atti del Podestà, n<sup>os</sup>. 323  
et 325



**2455.** Seule var. de ce style avec contremarque posée à l'angle de l'autre feuillet. Venise? 1485.  
VÉRONE A. COM. : Lettere. Ospedale, A, n° 7. - Voy. Ongania (p. 55, n° 1), Venise, 1477, sans contremarque



# *Progetto carta*

*Biblia Latina*, Venice, Johannes Herbort, 31 October 1483. GW 4254, ISTC ib00579000.

Folio, 398 leaves.

[largest copy in MEI: Venice, Marciana: 320 x 220 mm, though the study did not see the significance of the paper size]

Paola F. Munafò-Maria Speranza Storace, 'Countermarks in 15th Century Italian Paper', in *Paper as a Medium of Cultural Heritage*. Archaeology and Conservation. 26th Congress IPH. Rome-Verona, August 30-September 6th, 2002, edited by Rossella Graziaplena, with the assistance of Mark Livesey, Roma, Istituto Centrale per la Patologia del Libro, 2004, pp. 311-321



1484. ady. 17. mayo

Opera s <sup>ca</sup> augustini n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	2	—	—
Valtino Dolgare n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	2	—	—
Lunovon n <sup>o</sup> 2. venduta	—	—	4	810
Opera s <sup>ca</sup> aug <sup>stini</sup> n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	4	815
Missaletto dott <sup>o</sup> n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	—	810
Simon d <sup>o</sup> fra michelo n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	1	—	—
Rationali n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	—	816
Libro del giusoluro n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	—	810
Masosino n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	1	—	810
Inamorameto corlay n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	2	—
Eractio d <sup>o</sup> poggio n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	—	81
Burchiello n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	—	819
Posterore s <sup>ca</sup> tomie n <sup>o</sup> 2. venduta	—	—	—	810
Columnelle h <sup>o</sup> n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	—	814
Ep <sup>ist</sup> le pape pi <sup>o</sup> n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	1	—	810
Produce d <sup>o</sup> Dolgare n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	—	810
Carotano s <sup>ca</sup> regale d <sup>o</sup> entuber n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	—	81
Ut g <sup>o</sup> empta m <sup>o</sup> dy n <sup>o</sup> 1. venduta	—	—	—	816
fatto saldo ady. 21. mayo	—	—	—	810

the *Zornale* of  
Francesco de Madiis

Venezia, Biblioteca  
nazionale Marciana, It.  
XI. 45 (7439)

it records the daily  
sales in a Venetian  
bookshop from 17  
May 1484 until 15  
January 1488 with  
prices in ducats, lire,  
and soldi

project for an edition of the *Zornale*:  
Cristina Dondi (Oxford) and Neil Harris (Udine)

for each and every entry we want to identify the factors of cost ...

§ edition (closest in time and space)

§ one-pull or two-pull press

**§ size of the original sheet (Imperial, Royal, Median, Chancery)**

§ cost per sheet

**§ provenance of the paper (Fabriano, Garda or elsewhere)**

§ printing in red/black

§ illustrations

1476

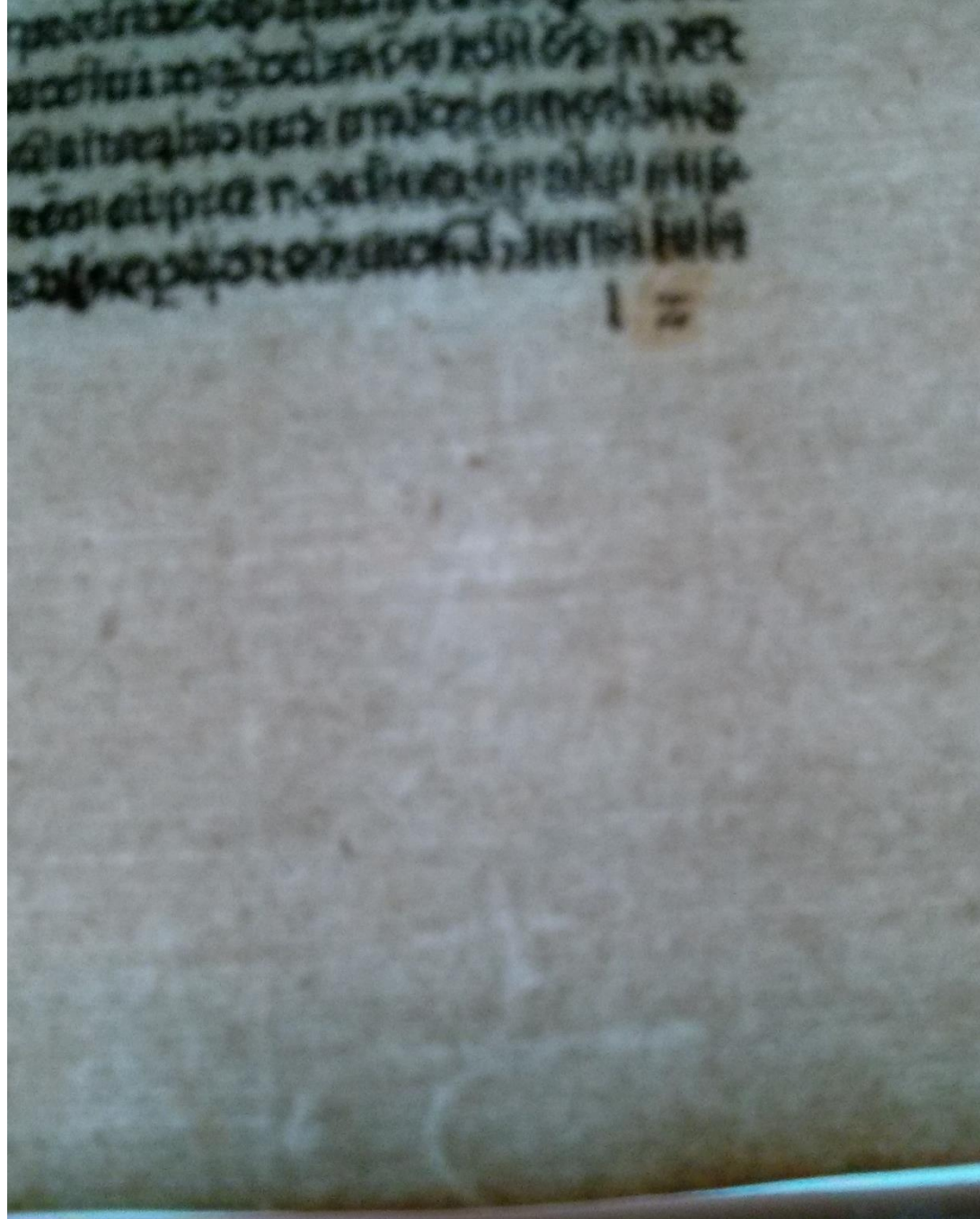
*Greek chi.* Maybe for Christoforus?

Michael de Carcano, *Sermonarium de peccatis per adventum et per duas quadragesimas*, Venice, Franciscus Renner, de Heilbronn, and Nicolaus de Frankfordia, 1476

Folio and 4°. 448 leaves

GW 6129, ISTC ic00194000

Edition on Median half-sheets and Half-median sheets. The majority of the paper in this edition comes from Fabriano



1477

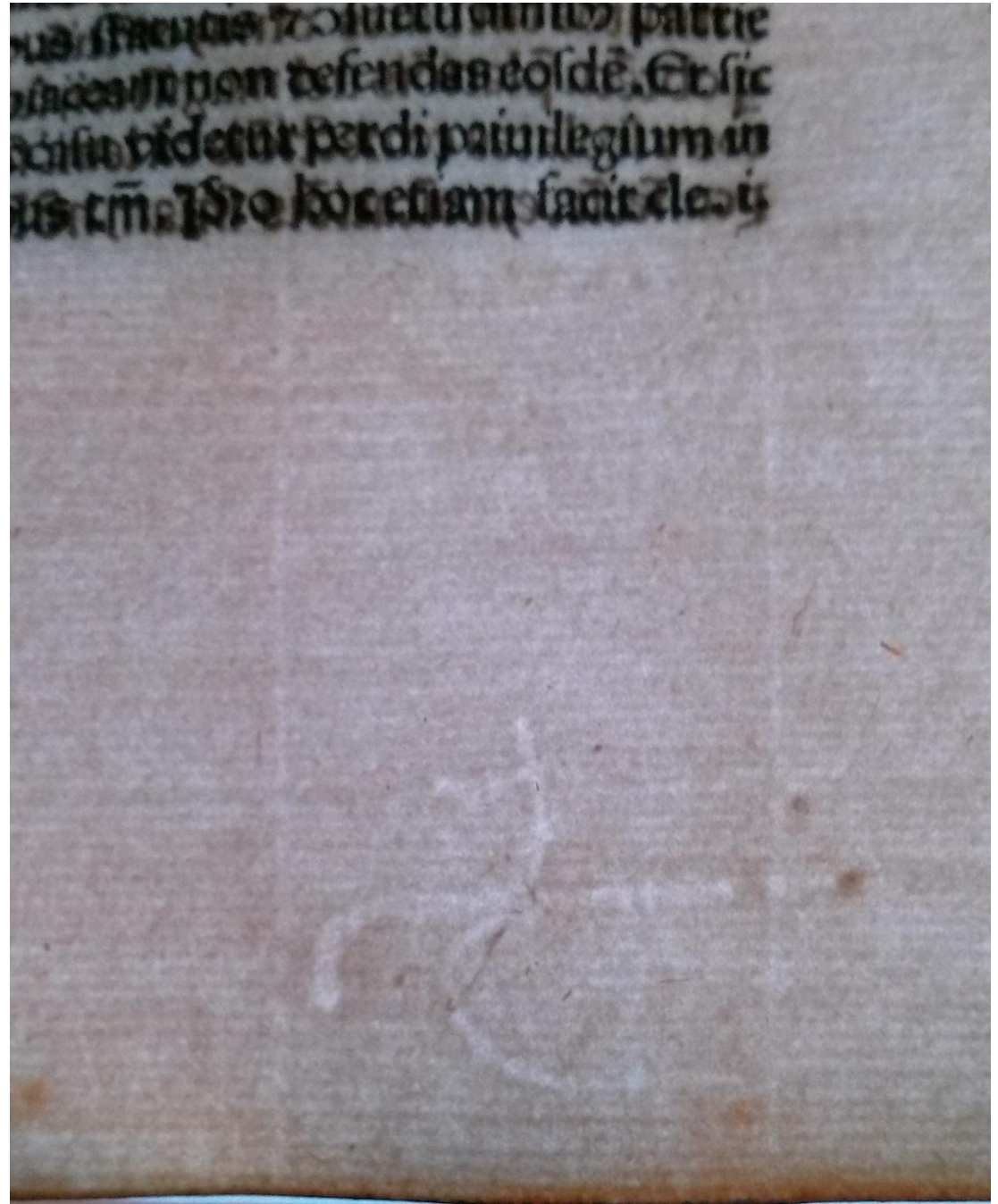
*Greek chi.*

Nicolaus de Ausmo,  
*Supplementum Summae  
Pisanellae*, Venice,  
Franciscus Renner and  
Petrus de Bartua, 1477

Folio.

GW M26257, ISTC  
in00068000

Half-median sheets



1477

*six-petal flower watermark*

Nicolaus de Ausmo,  
*Supplementum Summae  
Pisanellae*, Venice,  
Franciscus Renner and  
Petrus de Bartua, 1477

GW M26257, ISTC  
in00068000

Half-median sheets

Watermark positioned  
between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>  
chainline



1484

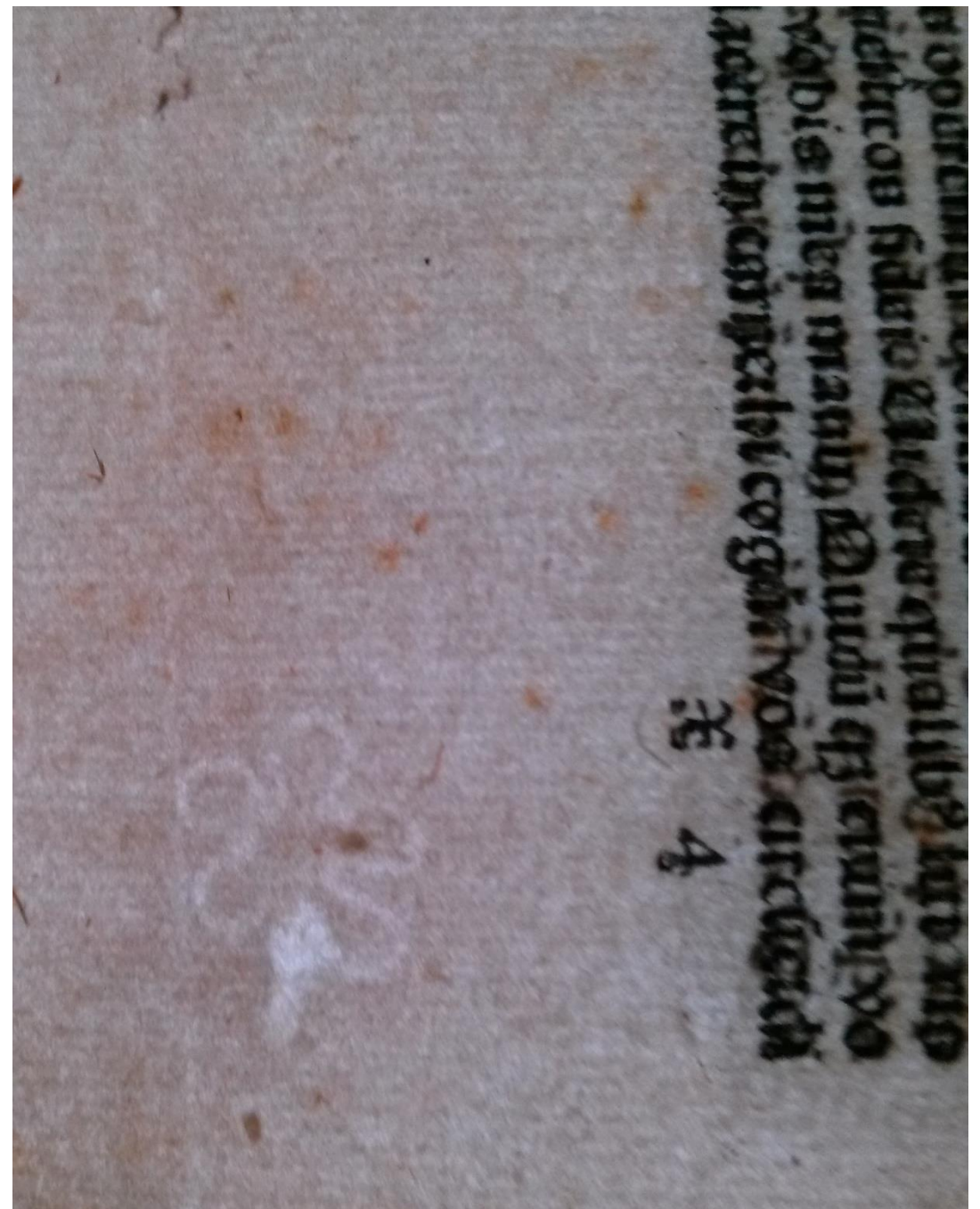
*two five-petal flower  
watermarks in opposite  
corners*

*Biblia Latina, Venice,  
Johannes Herbort, de  
Seligenstadt, 30 April 1484*

*4°, 408 leaves*

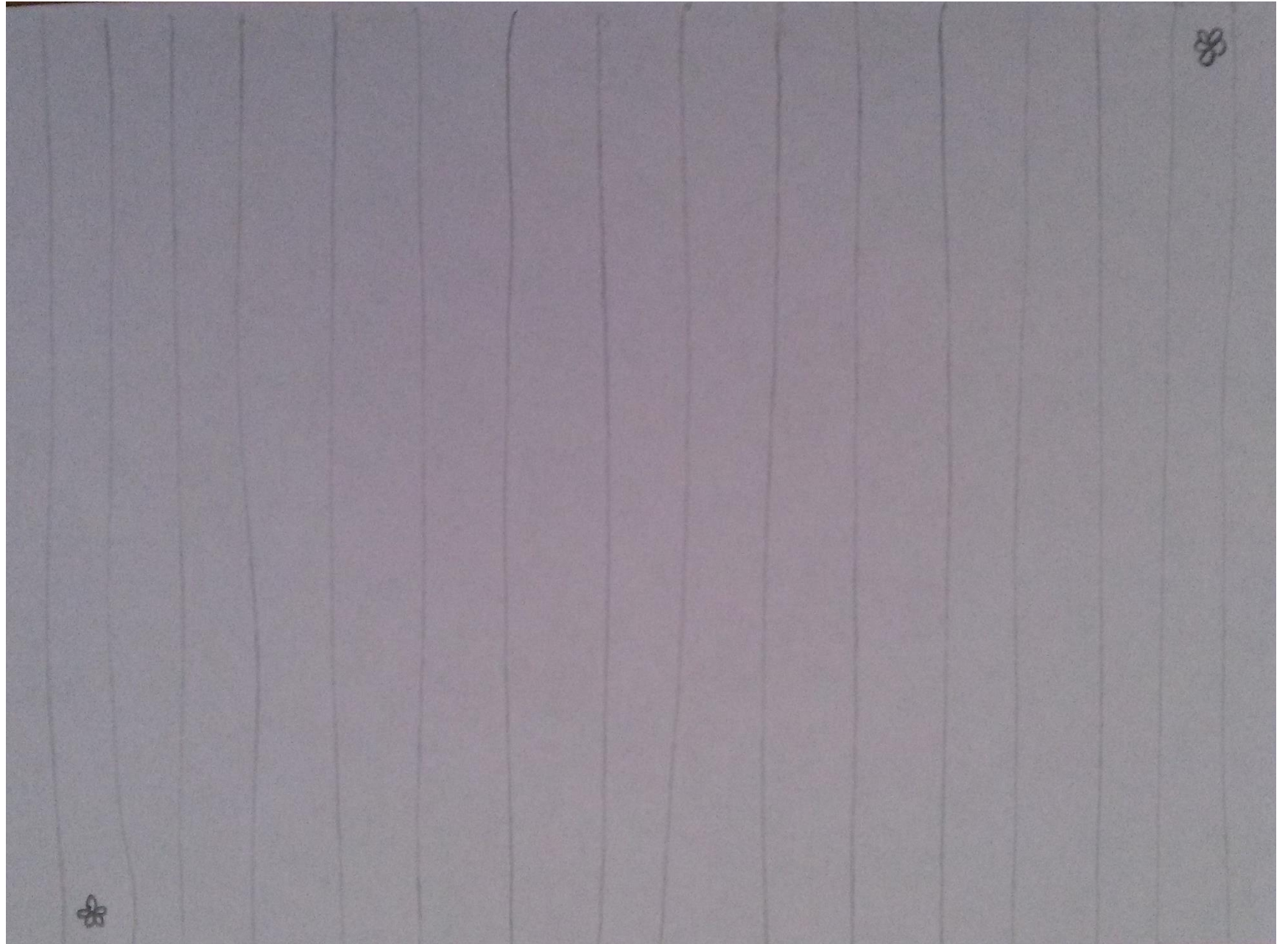
*GW 4255, ISTC ib00580000*

*Median sheets*



just to make  
things clear.

two  
watermarks  
on a  
diagonal  
axis



1482

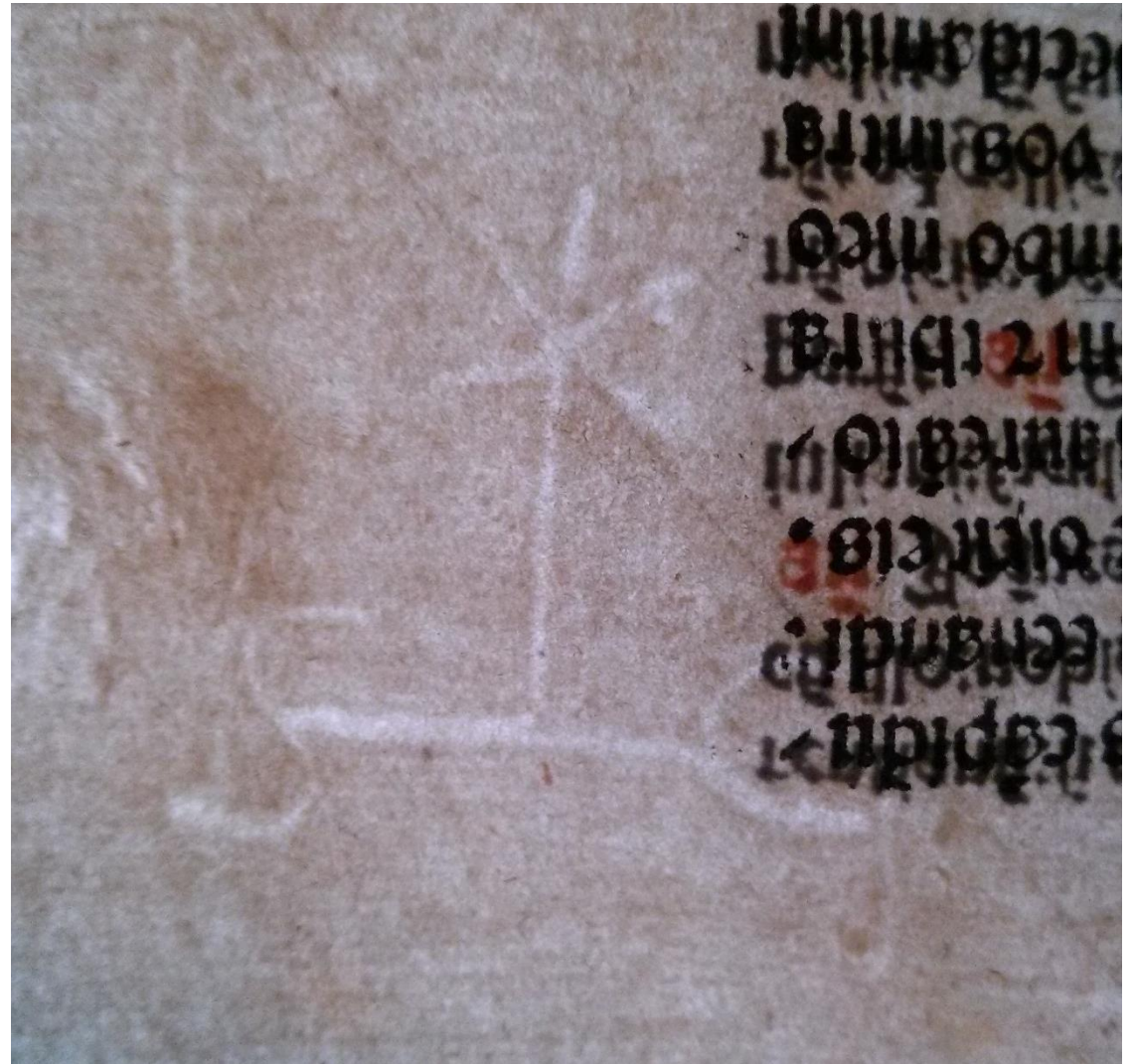
*S-C countermark upside down  
in the same half of the mould  
as a scales watermark*

*Breviarium romanum, Venice,  
Octavianus Scotus, 1482*

Folio, 412 leaves

GW 5106, ISTC ib01112750

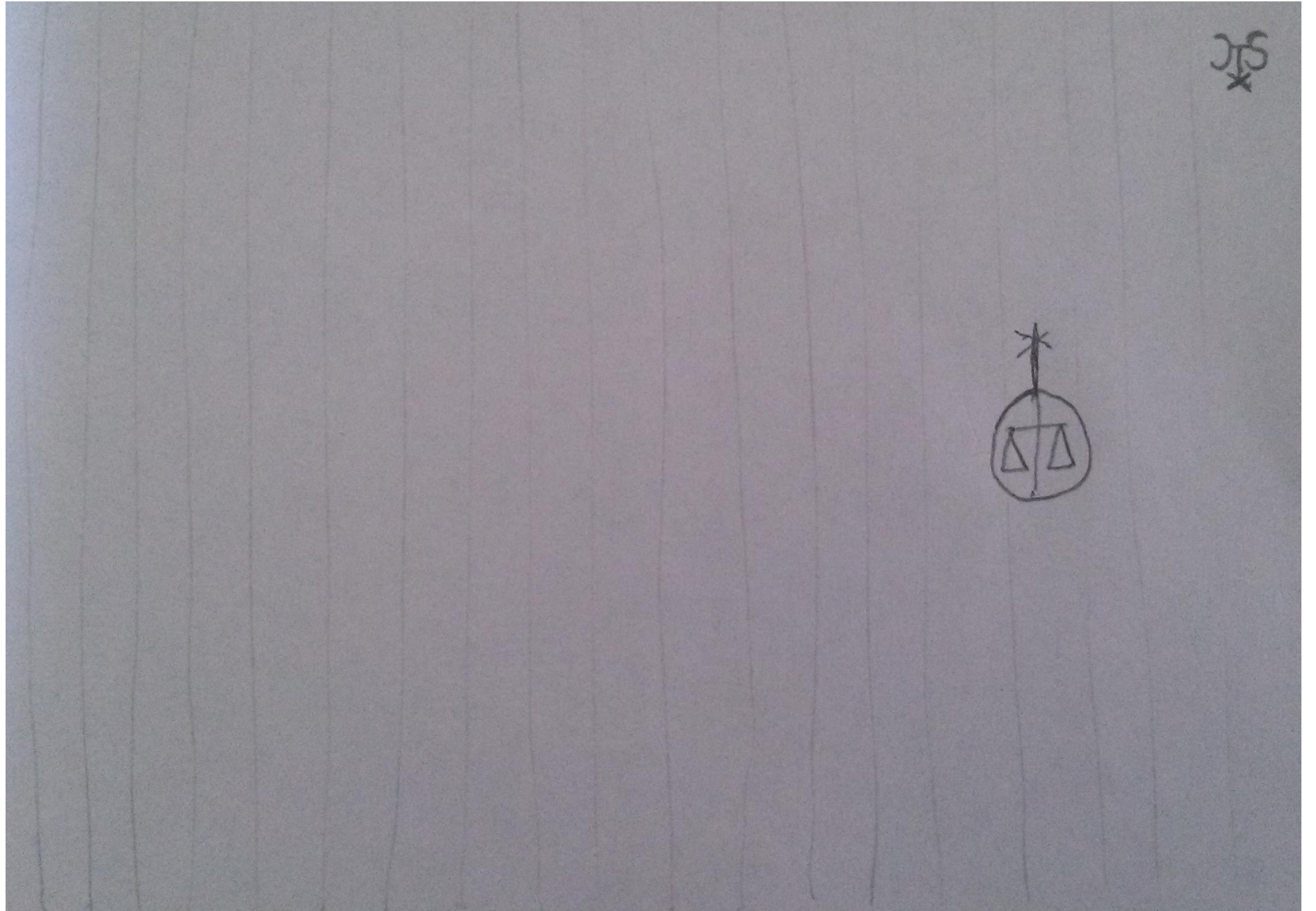
Chancery sheets





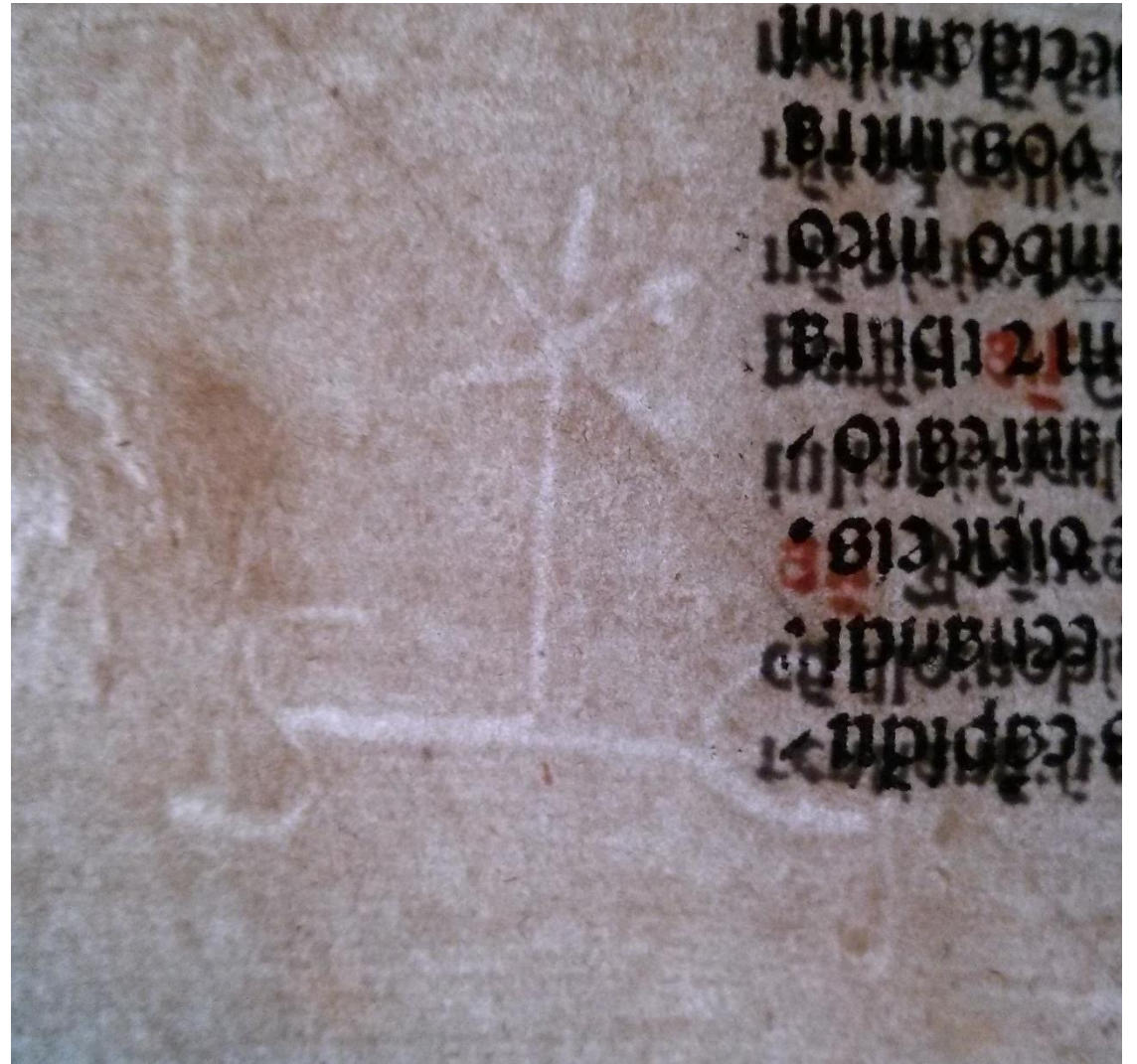
in other  
words

like this



1483-86

*further examples of the S-C countermark with watermarks of mounts, crossed arrows, and scales. The countermark is upside down in the same half of the mould as the main mark*



1486

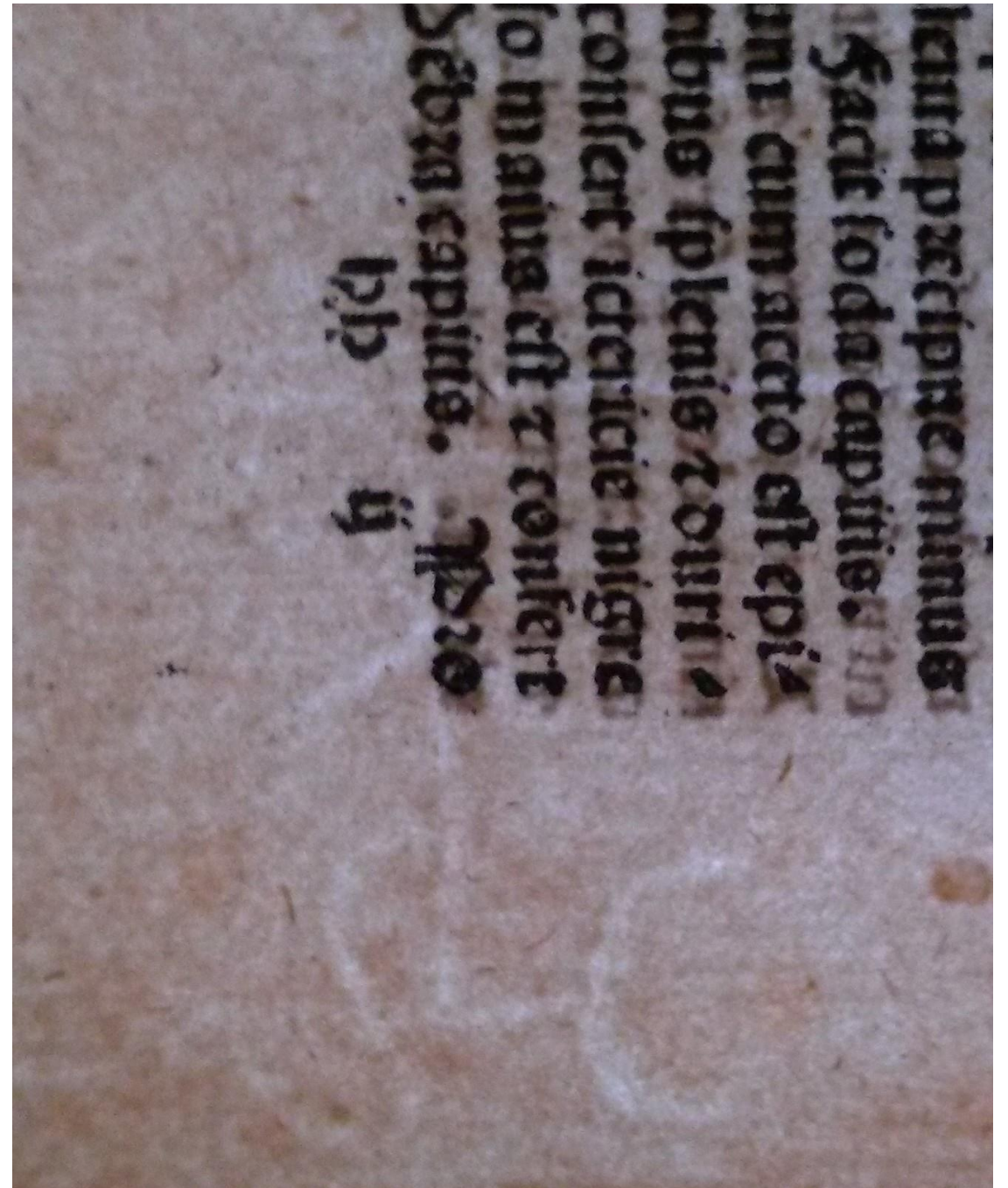
*First example of the S-C countermark in the 'canonical' position, i.e., in the opposite lower corner with respect to the main scales mark*

*Avicenna, Canon medicinae, Venice, Petrus Maufer and socii, 10 June 1486*

4°, 500 leaves

GW 3120, ISTC ia01422000

Chancery sheets



## conclusions

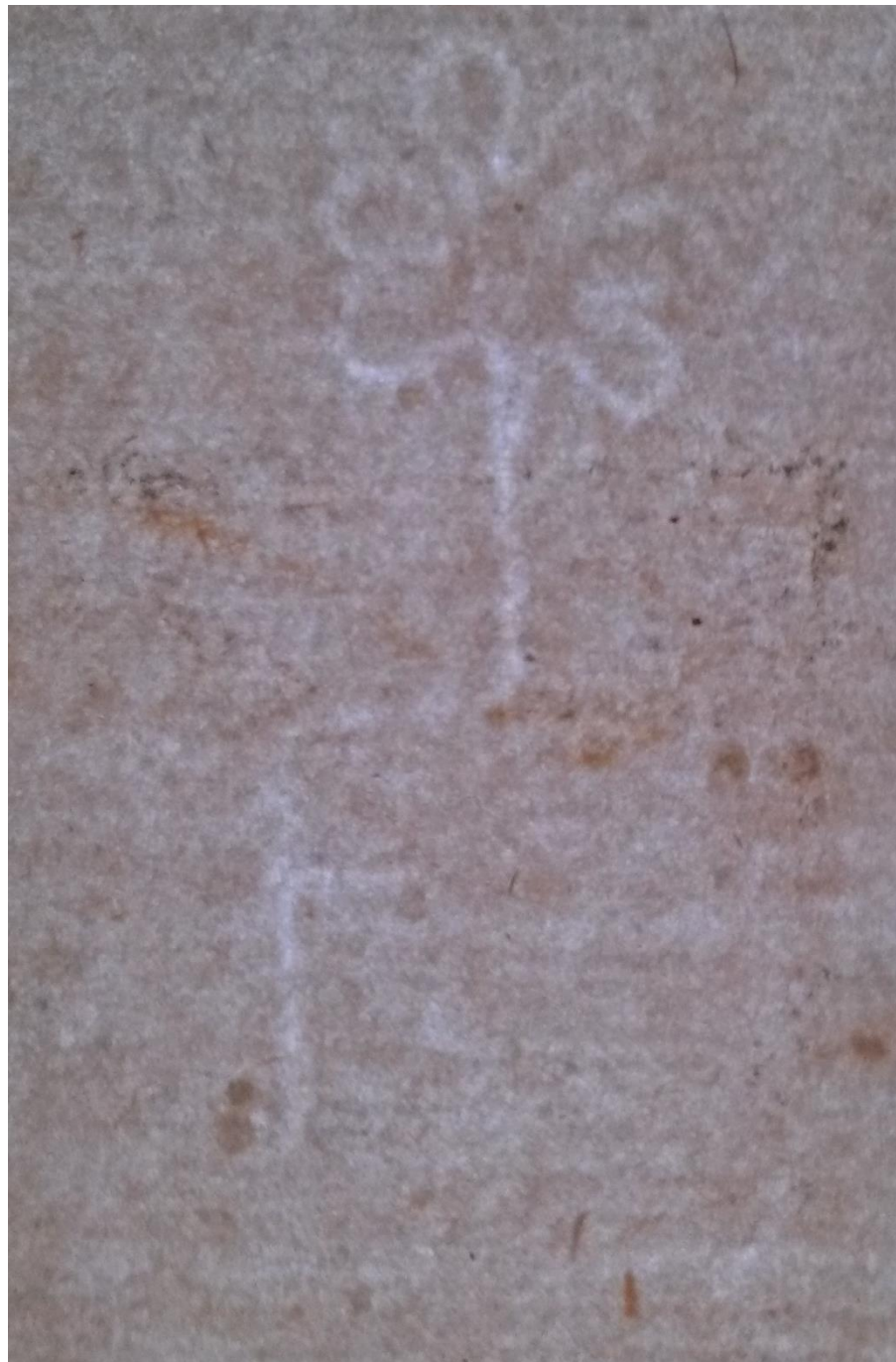
countermarks – earliest date 1476 – appear without a main watermark to identify less common sheet-sizes such as Median or Half-median produced on Lake Garda

they are then added to identify a particular mill – earliest example 1482 – upside down in the same half as the main mark

they shift to the ‘canonical’ position, i.e., the lower opposite corner, in 1486, and after that become widespread in Lake Garda paper

the practice is imitated in other European countries, especially France, but not at Fabriano, and in the second half of the sixteenth century the countermark shifts from the corner to the centre of the opposite half of the mould

given the present state of watermark repertories, it is difficult to chart these changes with any accuracy



arrivederci e grazie