

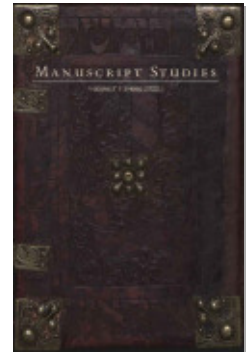


PROJECT MUSE®

Paper in Medieval England: From Pulp to Fictions by Orietta
Da Rold (review)

William Noel

Manuscript Studies: A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for
Manuscript Studies, Volume 7, Number 1, Spring 2022, pp. 210-212
(Review)



Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mns.2022.0007>

➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/856954>

Orietta Da Rold. *Paper in Medieval England: From Pulp to Fictions*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 112. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xx + 270 pp., illustrations. \$100. ISBN: 9781108840576.

WILLIAM NOEL
Princeton University

IT IS EASY TO be a lazy snob about books in the Middle Ages because an obvious comparison is set up for you in their very material. All you have to do is opine that parchment is better than paper, just as pinot noir is better than pinot grigio. Never mind whether parchment books cost more than paper books in the Middle Ages; they do at auction now. The illuminated manuscripts that form the popular conception of the Middle Ages were all made on parchment, and the books that act as cultural icons—the books of Kells and of Henry the Lion, for example—are of a vintage that no paper book can boast. There is some excuse, then, for this laziness in the popular imagination, but as Da Rold said to her Ph.D. supervisor, “What’s wrong with paper and scholars?”

The great merit of this book is that it refuses to consider paper as the low-cost, low-status alternative to parchment. Da Rold argues that paper had affordances that parchment simply did not have. It was, for example, flexible, flat, combustible, easy to mold with water, and easy to cut. It was a great material for wrappers, for surfaces to prepare things on, for turning into ashes to digest for medicinal purposes, for turning into wads to whiten teeth and staunch wounds, and for cutting into elaborate decorations for food on the dining table. Paper was magical; Chaucer could use it to describe Dido’s horse, and absorb Troilus’s tears. It was also thin, light, transportable, and from the fourteenth century available easily and in quantity, which made it an excellent surface for letters and business documentation. It had all sorts of affordances that set it apart from parchment, and it was through these affordances, demonstrated in England from the early thirteenth century onwards, that it gained general acceptance, and then was used in books.

One might in discussion of the economics of paper think that the author would be driven to compare the cost of paper and parchment, but this is a

tiny part of a much richer discussion. “Cost in this discussion is intentionally relegated to secondary considerations” (58). Instead we learn about supply and demand: that paper came to England along with spices and drugs, that paper came in different sizes and qualities that had different values as well as different uses, and that it was a necessary tool for accounting in the burgeoning wool trade. We learn too, that while there were no paper mills in England until John Tate’s in Hertfordshire in the 1470s, demand for paper here did not markedly lag behind that of other countries in northern Europe, and that demand was satisfied by traders like Michael de Force, who, in a galley owned by Bembo, brought forty-nine bales of paper, which included 4,090 reams, on 30 July 1392 (80). That is enough sheets of paper (500,000? 2,000,000?) to boggle the mind of any purveyor of parchment.

Of course we have medieval sources for the preference of parchment over paper. Da Rold has to deal with those. She does so effectively. She points out, quite reasonably, that humans are resistant to change, and that paper was a new and developing technology. She recontextualizes Frederick II’s edict banning paper from his archives as a political struggle in which his notaries strived to control the scripts and methods of local *curiali*. She notes that the humanists of the fifteenth century were indeed parchment snobs, but that they readily accepted that paper played a crucial part in literary culture, enabling the quick transcription of texts they required, and the drafting of texts that ultimately presented on what they hoped would be the finest parchment. The humanists, however, did not set the trend, and in Italy, as in England, hybrid books, in which paper bifolia nestle inside parchment ones in each quire, are common.

Specialists in particular disciplines might have quibbles with this book. The codicologist might note, for example, that the author sometimes confuses format with the size of the paper (e.g., p. 71). Format describes the number of times that a sheet has been folded (once is folio, twice quarto, three times octavo, and so on). The size of the paper depends on the size of the mold that it was made in, and these sizes can be categorized (for example, Imperial, Royal, Median, and Chancery). The size of the book is determined by the size of the paper and the number of times that it has been folded—so a book can be characterized as a Royal folio, for example, or a Chancery octavo. And once you know the simple fact that a Royal sheet is twice the

size of a Chancery sheet, you can understand why some books have mixed formats: one book, for example, can contain Royal paper in quarto, and Chancery paper in folio. The discussion of sizes and proportion of paper in chapter 2 is a long way from the discussion of the folding of paper in chapter 4, and the discussion in chapter 4 does not quite have the clarity it could (diagrams would have helped, and the poor design of the tables on pp. 174 and 175 does not).

Thanks to Da Rold we now know what is wrong with paper and scholars. It is that scholars have cut up paper study into nearly all of history's subdivisions: social, economic, codicological, political, literary, medicinal, art historical, et cetera; paper touches them all. It is also that scholars have generally considered paper as a support for their texts and those of their medieval forebears, and not as a technology that develops or an object that resonates in the medieval imagination. And so we have looked at fragments, but never the whole sheet. This is the great merit of Da Rold's book: it is a truly interdisciplinary study of paper in medieval England. Past studies can be placed in this landscape, future ones can sit in it, and the history of paper will be thicker.

Crystal B. Lake. *Artifacts: How We Think and Write About Found Objects*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. 272 pp., 4 black and white photos. \$34.95. ISBN: 978-1-4214-3650-0.

MEGAN L. COOK
Colby College

THE CENTRAL THESIS OF Lake's work is twofold: first, that her titular category, the artifact, exists as a specific and specifically meaningful category of object, and second, that in the long eighteenth century, that meaning had a distinct political valence that animated writing about artifacts across a wide range of genres and contexts. Both of these arguments derive from the premise that, as historical objects, "artifacts could