Of all the remains of the twelfth-century Norman kingdom of Sicily, none is more fascinating to the historian of Islamic culture and society than the documents issued by the diwān al-ma‘mūr, the Arabic administration of the Norman kings. In all, less than fifty Arabic and bilingual—Arabic with Greek or Latin—documents are known, counting not only those that survive in their original form, but also the translations of lost originals into Greek and Latin, and the deperdita that are merely mentioned in other documents.¹ Most were published at the end of the nineteenth century,² and since then eight further original documents have come to light, including one presumed forgery, and the privilege that is the subject of this study.³ The appearance of a new bilingual document from Sicily would therefore be quite sufficient to justify its inclusion among the hadāyā wa-l-tuḥaf offered here to our colleague and friend. But this gift is truly a rarity—the only Arabic document issued by the Empress Constance to survive; the latest original document to survive from her reign, the earliest surviving original document for the islands of Malta and Gozo; the only

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surviving Arabic document from Sicily to be written in the elevated chancery
genre known as inshāʾ; the first compelling evidence that the Norman dīwān
borrowed from the Almohad chancery; and an eloquent witness to the last days
of Islamic culture in Christian Sicily.

1 The Historical Background

In this document, Constance, Empress of the Romans and Queen of Sicily
(1190–1198), together with her young son Frederick, King of Sicily, Duke of Apu-
lia and Prince of Capua (1197–1250), rewards the entire population of Malta and
Gozo, Christians and Muslims alike, for their loyalty to her and to her Norman
predecessors by restoring them and their islands to the royal demesne in perpe-
tuity. To that extent, the tenor of the Latin and Arabic texts is largely in accord,
but they differ in two principal respects. First, while the Arabic refers vaguely to
the opposition of the Maltese to “obdurate enemies of our state”, “hypocrites”,
“renegade ingrates” (l. 19) and to the “enemies of our kingdom” (l. 22), the Latin
specifies none other than “our enemy William Crassus” (ll. 6 and 10). Second,
while the Arabic promises no greater reward than re-incorporation into the
royal demesne, the Latin text exempts specifically the Christians of Malta and
Gozo and their descendants from the annual tax payable to the royal court that
King Roger (reg. 1130–1154) had imposed upon them “for the slaying of a Mus-
lim” (ll. 10–12); no mention is made of either the penalty or its remission in the
Arabic text. To understand the significance of these differences, it is necessary
to begin with a brief sketch of the historical background.

Before the 1960s, the dominant myth of Maltese identity held that the indige-
nous inhabitants of Malta and Gozo had been Phoenician. After conversion
to Christianity by St. Paul, they had retained their ancient Semitic language
and their new Christian religion throughout the centuries of Muslim rule, until
they were liberated by Roger I, the Norman count of Sicily, in 1091. This endur-
ing myth owes much to Gian Francesco Abela’s strong differentiation between
Malta’s rulers—a succession of foreign powers—and its people—a continuum
of Maltese-speaking Christians—a distinction that enabled him and his suc-
cessors to argue that, long before the coming of the Knights of St. John in 1530,
Malta had been ordained by God as a bulwark of Christian European civiliza-
tion against the spread of Mediterranean Islam.4

4 G. Abela, Della descrizione di Malta isola nel mare Siciliano, con le sue antichità, ed altre notitie
libri quattro (Malta: Paolo Bonacotta, 1647).