With few exceptions, such as the tughras of the Ottoman sultans, the art of the signature has rarely drawn the attention of Islamicists. And yet, the signatures used by Muslim rulers and their officers—their different types; the honoriﬁc addresses attached to each type; which type and address were to be used on which occasion for which recipient; whether the signature should be penned by the sultan himself or by his vizier or secretary and, if by one of the latter, the question of his rank according to the status of the recipient; the position of the signature upon the page and, of course, its form and how it was to be penned—were matters of the greatest interest and signiﬁcance to medieval writers upon the sultan’s art, such as the great al-Qalqashandi. Modern scholars, most notably Samuel Stern, have paid some attention to the origin and development of the ‘ahma, which Stern called “the classical Islamic method of signature, namely the inscribing of a motto, rather than the name of the signatory.” But the morphology of the signature—its form and the manner in which it was penned—has generally been neglected. In large part, this reﬂects the fact that few original documents from the divans of Muslim rulers survive before the thirteenth century. However, given the modest size of the surviving corpus, it is remarkable that there exists no comprehensive review of it, and it is to be regretted that the study of Islamic diplomatics still lags far behind that of the Latin West and even Byzantium.

The Arabic documents issued by the Norman rulers of Sicily have begun to be given the attention that they deserve. Until recently, it was taken for granted that the trilingual chancery of the Norman kings, in which Arab, Greek, and Latin scribes worked side-by-side to produce documents in all three languages, was the almost spontaneous product of the proximity in which the three cultures coexisted in Sicily. It is now becoming clear, however, that the trilingual chancery was the deliberate creation of King Roger and his ministers, who imported scribes—and with them, scripts, diplomatic form, bureaucratic structure, and chancery practices—from outside the island. This was done not for purely administrative purposes—not in order to issue Arabic documents to their Arab subjects, Greek to the Greeks, Latin to the Latins—but rather to enhance the image of the king, whose beneﬁcent authority was to be seen in the act of mastering, through use of their languages and scripts, the three cultures of his subjects.

A similar process was responsible for the celebrated art and architecture of the Norman kingdom. Thus, as is well known, King Roger was depicted not just as a Latin king, but also in Byzantine imperial robes of a bygone age, and in the guise of an Islamic sultan. The Cappella Palatina, for example, was not the spontaneous product of the fusion of Arab, Greek, and Latin cultures in Sicily, but rather the deliberate creation of King Roger and his ministers, who imported mosaics from Byzantium, painters from Fatimid Egypt, and masons and stone carvers from Campania and Puglia, who each contributed a part to the artful and composite royal image. Once in Palermo, of course, these foreign ateliers inﬂuenced both each other and their Sicilian pupils, so that there rapidly developed local traditions of mosaics, painting, sculpture, and so on. But just as the creative impulse had come from the king and his ministers, so did the artistic traditions that they created remain conﬁned within the narrow royal circle and escape remarkably little beyond the walls of the palace.

That extraordinary ﬂourishing of art and architecture in Norman Sicily lasted only sixty years, from the coronation of King Roger on Christmas Day, 1130, to the death of his grandson, William II, in 1189. On William’s death the dynasty failed, and the increasingly fragile hold of the Norman kings upon their subjects was broken. The Latins attacked the Muslims, who ﬂed to the mountains of the interior and in their hilltop refuges created an independent rebel emirate that fought on until the ﬁnal destruction of the Muslim community in 1246. Frederick II attempted to recreate something of the atmosphere that had surrounded his grandfa-
Greek, in which the most valuable gifts—the estate of
Rahl al-Sha'rami near Misilmeri, and ten households of
Muslim villeins—are also named in Arabic. Arabic is
used, too, for Roger’s ‘alāmah at the head of the chas-
ter, and for the note at its foot, which explains the
purpose of the ‘alāmah, as follows:

Lammā bāna fi shakhs miyā l-insūq tawāsul wa abāli da bi-sināa tawāsul
wa insānīa ba-nawza bi-jahāli ḥadādā ba-tawāsul fi an yāqū a ‘alāmah-hu t-baširat bi-hādā bi-sīrī bi-yawm i-a-niwa
aw-nah t-tāhā bi-bāka i-zāza ni-ni wa-dāli awa-dāli bi-fa-
nuqūma bā-dinā bi wa-sīrī bi-mu-nawqa’ a ‘alāmah-hu bāfīl a-ta
bi-yawm-i. (When it was the month of May, in Indiction
VI [= AD 1143], we asked our majesty, the glorified and
holy king—may God prolong his rule!—to place his noble
‘alāmah upon this charter to let it be known that he—may
God maintain his power!—has approved that [gift] and
signed it. He graciously gave his consent, and sanctioned
it, and placed his exalted ‘alāmah at the head of it.)

The ‘alāmah itself (fig. 2) is written in black ink, which
contrasts strongly with the light brown ink of the text
of the charter, and probably reads al-hamdu li-llāhi
wa-shukran l-bāna-hu l-bāna-hu (‘Praise be to God,
and thanks for His blessings’) as a motto extremely close
to that which Ibn Jubayar reports was used by William I.
At first sight, the presence of Roger’s ‘alāmah at the
head of the endowment charter for Santa Maria would seem
to confirm the truth of Ibn Jubayar’s report that the
Norman kings could read and write Arabic. But could
Roger’s hand really have written this elegant piece of
Arabic penmanship?

Although Arabic had been used as an administrative
language in Norman Sicily until 1111, the year before
Roger II came of age, thereafter his chancellor issued no
Arabic document until 1130, and for two decades Arabic
was almost completely supplanted by Greek as the lan-
guage of central administration and government.9 None
of the Norman rulers of Sicily employed an Arabic sig-
nature before 1130, and only after Roger’s coronation,
and the creation of the Arabic facet of the monarchy,
was the royal ‘alāmah imported from a Muslim chancery
as part of the reconstruction of the royal diwān.10 The
Arabic note quoted above, which explains the purpose
of the ‘alāmah, suggests that as late as May 1143 it was
not a standard feature of diwān documents. Indeed, it
may never have become standard, for this is the only
surviving occurrence of a royal ‘alāmah from Norman
Sicily.

Each of the ‘alāmhāt employed by or attributed to
the Sicilian kings is a hamdah—a formula beginning
with the words al-hamdu li-llāhi (‘Praise be to God’)—

KING ROGER’S ‘ALĀMA

During the months that the Spanish pilgrim Ibn Jubayar
spent stranded on Sicily during the winter of 1184–85,
he heard the following report about the Norman King
William II:

Amongst the extraordinary things told about him is that
he reads and writes Arabic. His ‘alāmah, according to what
one of his qualified servants told us about him, is al-hamdu
li-llāhi wa-shukran l-bāna-hu l-bāna-hu (‘Praise be to God,
as it is right
to praise Him’), and his father’s [i.e., King William I’s]
‘alāmah was al-hamdu li-llāhi wa-shukran l-bāna-hu l-bāna-hu
(‘Praise be to God, in gratitude for His blessings’).1

No document bearing the ‘alāmah of either William I
or William II has survived,2 but the ‘alāmah of King
Roger is preserved at the head of an original docu-
ment in the archive of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo
(fig. 1).3 We believe this to be the only surviving ‘alāmah
of a ruler from the Fatimid period and, with the single
exception of the ‘alāmah of the Fatimid vizier Bahram that
dates from March 1136 (see below), the earliest known
example of an ‘alāmah on an original document.

Roger’s ‘alāmah signals his approval of and consent
to the endowment of Santa Maria dell’Ammiraglio, the
church founded by his vizier, George of Antioch, as an
act of personal piety to the Virgin.4 In May 1143, George
listed his gifts to Santa Maria in a charter written in

ther but was unable to reproduce the unique palace
culture of Norman Sicily.

Two of the Arabic signatures discussed in this article—
King Roger’s ‘alāmah and the Arabic signature of William
Malconvenant, a Royal Justiciar under William II and
Constance—have been thought to attest to the accul-
turation of their signatories, the extent to which these
two Normans had become Arabized. The remainder
are the ‘alāmhāt of four of the royal eunuchs, a group
that is sometimes held to exemplify the level of accul-
turation reached within the royal palace, the extent to
which the rulers were Arabized and their servants
Christianized. On such evidence rests the assumption
of what in medieval Iberia has been termed convivencia
and the assertion that such fruitful cultural proxim-
ity was what produced the palace culture of Norman
Sicily. But when the morphology of these signatures
is thoroughly examined, and when they are set in the
fullest possible historical context, each can be seen to
offer an individual perspective upon the real nature of
court life under the Norman kings.

182 JEREMY JOHNS AND NADIA JAMIL
which had been a standard form for the ‘alāma since the early tenth century, when it was used by a vizier of the Abbasid chancery. The Fatimids were the first to use the hamdala as a royal ‘alāma, and all the Fatimid caliphs used the same formula: al-handu li-lāhi rabbi l-‘alāma ("Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds"). The Norman ‘alāmāt were thus not modeled upon the motto of the caliph himself, but rather upon those used by his leading officials and viziers. For example, an ‘alāma extremely close to that of Roger II—al-handu li-lāhi shukran li-n‘mati-hi ("Praise be to God, in gratitude for his bounty")—had been used by the eleventh-
century vizier, al-Jarara'i, while a similar formula—al-hamdu li-Llahi ‘ala nṣamihi (“Praise be to God, for His bounties”)—was widely used in the Fatimid chancery in King Roger’s own day, by Ibn Muyassar, chief kadi under al-Amir and al-Hafiz, and by at least two unnamed clerks in al-Hafiz’s chancery. Thus, in May 1143, the use of the ‘alima was a recent innovation in Norman Sicily, and the formula used by Roger imitated a Fatimid model.

Roger II’s regular signature was Greek, even on Arabic and Latin documents. But even though Roger had been educated by his mother’s Greek advisors and administrators, five years after reaching adulthood he was still unable, or at least unaccustomed, to write his name, and used instead the sign of the cross. Indeed, throughout Roger’s life his Greek signature was written not by his own hand but by professional scribes.

Like King Roger’s Greek signature, the Arabic ‘alima at the head of the endowment charter of Santa Maria is evidently the work of a practiced penman (fig. 2). It was written with a reed-pen (qalam), and not with the quill that was used for the Greek text of the document. The writer was at pains to give the impression that, from start to finish, he had not once lifted the pen off the page. Thus the first two words are written in a single flourish: the initial alif-lam are joined, the dal is looped up to join the top of the following lam, and the terminal rāʾ of Allāh turns back on itself to begin the loop of the waw; the writer may have lifted his pen after the hāʾ, before forming the waw. The tail of the waw twists sinuously back on itself to become the shīn. The crossbar of the hāʾ is furnished by the alif in the following word. The tail of the rāʾ lifts vertically in a calligraphic flourish that serves to carry the line to the height of the top of the lām-alif. Here, the writer may again have lifted his pen. The bridge between the rāʾ might indicate ‘alama tumain. The words l-ruʿam are written in a single sweep with the elaborate trefoil flourish that signals the end of the motto. Such a final trefoil is often attempted by Sicilian scribes for example, by the royal eunuchs Richard and ‘Ammar in their ‘alimāti discussed below—but is never more smoothly executed. Whether the writer of the royal ‘alima lifts his pen once, twice, or never, he controls the thickness of line and the flow of ink almost perfectly, and only in the very tail of the trefoil does he deliberately permit the line to thin and fade. In short, the ‘alima is the work of an expert Arabic calligrapher.

It is instructive to compare Roger’s ‘alima with those of two Fatimid viziers—Bahram, in March 1136, and Talaʾi, in May/June 1151. In each case, the vizier writes his ‘alima in bold, monumental script that contrasts strongly with the fluid cursive of the text. The individual letters are clearly differentiated, and the shafts of the alif and lam are greatly elongated in a manner that seems to be moving toward the tughra. Talaʾi’s ‘alima, in particular, is strikingly different from the polished cursive of the scribe, who frequently runs the letters into each other and joins them together. Both vizieral ‘alimās may be compared to those used by chancery clerks as notes of registration, which are written in workaday scribal hands that are much closer to the script of the text than are the monumental scripts used for the vizieral ‘alimās.

What this may suggest is that neither of the viziers was a master of the fluid cursive used by the scribes of the diwan.

In contrast to these vizieral ‘alimās, Roger’s is a superb example of the cursive script used in his diwan and must be the work of a professional Arabic scribe. It is inconceivable that Roger, who was unable or unaccustomed to write his own name in the Greek language in which he had been educated, and whose chancery had only recently begun to use Arabic after an interval of twenty years, could have guided the reed that wrote this elegant ‘alima.

For our purposes, the point to stress is that Roger’s Arabic signature does not indicate the extent to which he was Arabized, but rather the pains that he and his ministers took to ensure that he appeared to be so. Roger’s ‘alima helps to explain how it came to be believed, for example by Ibn Jubayr, that he and his successors could read and write Arabic—a deliberate fiction that contributed to the illusion that they resembled Muslim rulers.

THE ARABIC SIGNATURE OF WILLIAM MALCONVARIANT

While King Roger had his ‘alima written for him by a professional scribe, there can be little doubt that William Malconvenant, a Master Justiciar under King William II and Queen Constance, wrote his Arabic signature with his own hand.

Four documents signed by William survive in their original form. All bear his signature in Latin, written by the scribe of the document and preceded by William’s autograph mark of the cross—evidence that he was unaccustomed, or more probably unable, to write his name in Latin. But in the two documents issued after he became Master Justiciar, William adds to his Latin
signature his name in Arabic, غلیتم ملکونانت, which should probably be vocalized غلیتم ملکونانت: note that William omits the alif with which the king’s name, غلیتم or غلیتم, is usually written on coins, documents, and inscriptions. Twenty-five years separate the two Arabic signatures, but they are written in the same manner and clearly by the same hand.

In May 1183 (fig. 3), William began the name غلیتم by drawing a horizontal line from left to right. Onto that line, he drew rough approximations of the Arabic letters, lifting his pen for each in five separate actions. Below his Christian name, William constructed his family name ملکونانت in the same manner, starting with a horizontal line, onto which approximations of the Arabic letters were added in seven separate actions. The two names were then enclosed in an open-topped frame, which gives to his signature something of the feel of the roughly rectangular ciphers used by the royal eunuchs (see below).

In May 1198, William constructed his signature in an almost identical manner, again working from left to right (fig. 4). But, fifteen years on, the approximations of the Arabic letters have moved further away from their original model: an extra letter seems to have crept in between the ghayn and the لام in غلیتم,26 and the two مم in ملکونانت have developed from closed loops into open hooks.

While an Arab scribe or witness would have used cursive script (fig. 5a) to sign a name, the model that William followed was clearly written in the script known as Kufic (fig. 5b). Note, in particular, how in ملکونانت the initial مم is formed clockwise from the upper left, not anticlockwise from the lower left; how the غیف is formed as a circle or semicircle on a pronounced stem, not as a fluid loop; how the last three letters are distinguished by their descending heights; and how the final ت ا cores in a horizontal line—all of which can be characteristics of Kufic script.
Kufic is never used in the Arabic documents of Norman Sicily, but is rather employed on coins, monuments, and textiles, or in special manuscripts such as Qur’ans. Although William Malconvenant may have seen the name of King William written in Kufic on a coin or in an inscription, it is inconceivable that he happened by chance upon his own family name written in Kufic script. To write Malconvenant, he must surely have secured the cooperation of an Arab scribe. This is confirmed by the transformation of the Ṽ and ū in Malconvenant into mīn in Malquvanant, which reveals that the transcription derived from an aural source and not from transliteration of the written form. In other words, whoever composed the Arabic signature was attempting to reproduce the sounds that he heard, not written letters. The Arab scribe, in short, could not read Latin.

It is easy to imagine that the scribe, faced with the task of teaching his master to write his name in Arabic, must very soon have realized that William could no more master Arabic cursive script than he could Latin. The scribe then had the happy thought that it would be far easier for William to copy his name were it to be written out for him in linear, angular Kufic. Instead of the complicated business of forming and joining—of truly writing—the twelve consonants of his name in cursive Arabic script (let alone the twenty-two letters of his Latin name), William would merely have to draw two horizontal lines onto which he would place twelve simple linear figures, seven of which were merely vertical strokes.

Why, when William had used the mark of the cross as his signature since 1159, did he in midlife take the trouble to learn how to write his name in Kufic? Clearly, it was not for the benefit of readers of Arabic, for William seems to have moved and worked within a predominantly Latin environment, and few Arabs would have been able to decipher his outlandish foreign name written in such a bizarre script. It follows that his Arabic signature was directed at a Latin audience, few of whom would have recognized that William was no more able to write Arabic than they. In other words, it served William’s purposes that he be thought by Latins to be able to read and write Arabic. The fortunes of his family, and his own career, may explain why this should have been so.

The Malconvenant were one of the oldest Norman baronial families in Sicily. Their family seat lay in Coutances, some five kilometers from Hauteville-le-Geuichard, and it is probable that at least one Malconvenant accompanied the young Roger d’Hauteville when he set out for Italy in 1057. William’s grandfather seems to have taken part in the conquest of Sicily and, in the division of the spoils, ca. 1095, to have been granted the barony of Calatrasi. The Malconvenant remained lords of Calatrasi until 1162, when the king summoned John, William’s eldest brother, to Messina, where the royal army was gathering for a campaign against the rebels on the mainland. John was to bring with him the eleven knights that he owed as service for his barony but, whether through poverty or ill-disguised sympathy with the rebels, brought only three. The king therefore took Calatrasi back into the royal demesne but graciously granted John two much smaller estates that lay far apart and had no castle, for which he was to owe three knights’ service. 27 It seems probable that the much-reduced family estate could no longer support the youngest son, so that William was obliged to seek his fortune in the royal administration. There he did well and by 1183 had come to hold the office of Master Justiciar. Master Justiciars were responsible for judging cases brought directly to the royal court or sent there from the local courts, and they also held inquests to investigate disputes involving the rights of the royal demesne. Under William II, they came to exercise a supervisory role from the royal court over the provincial justiciars. Master Justiciars tended to be drawn from the king’s closest counselors, and William’s appointment may indicate the return of the Malconvenant to royal favor. 28

In Sicily, from the reign of Roger II until the fall of the dynasty, the use of two or more languages in coins, documents, and inscriptions was almost exclusively a royal prerogative. Trilingual and bilingual public texts were effectively a royal monopoly, broken by no institution or individual outside the narrow circle of the court and palace. They were symbols of the royal policy of populus trilinguis—visual proclamations that the cohesive rule of the king had united the three linguistic communities of the island into a single Sicilian people. 29 William adopted his Arabic signature only after he entered royal service. It attested neither to his ability to read and write Arabic nor to his Arabization; rather it proclaimed that he belonged to the royal circle, it declared his adherence to royal policy, and it befitted his rank as Master Justiciar of the trilingual curia regis.
THE ‘ÂLÂMAT OF THE ROYAL EUNUCHS

From the reign of Roger II until the fall of the kingdom, the Norman kings employed eunuchs as household servants, palace officials, and administrators. Two of the royal eunuchs—Philip of al-Mahdiyya and Peter—came from Ifriqiya as children and were raised within the palace, and it is likely that the others had similar origins. The Arabic and Latin narrative sources agree that, although the royal eunuchs had been converted to Christianity, they remained Muslims at heart. Ibn Juhayr reports that all or most of them “hide [their] faith, fear for [their] lives, and cling to the worship of God and the performance of his precepts in secret”—in other words, that they practiced taqiyya. An interpolation into the Chronicle of Ronwald of Salerno tells how Philip of al-Mahdiyya, “beneath the cloak of the name of a Christian, behaved like a secret knight of the devil” and went to the stake for his faith. The author known as Hugo Falcandus describes the career of the eunuch Peter, who “like all the palace eunuchs...was a Christian only in name and appearance but a Muslim by conviction”; later, as Ibn Khaldun relates, Peter defected to the Almohads and, under the Muslim name of Ahmad, commanded the Almohad fleet.

Each of these Arab and Latin writers may have had his own reasons for emphasizing or exaggerating the extent to which the royal eunuchs were Muslim. A very different picture is painted by a Latin charter of January 1186, in which Bishop Stephen of Lipari-Patti grants the priory of Santa Sofia di Vicari to the eunuch Richard, “because...he is a brother of our church, and because this church is especially eager for his patronage.” Indeed, the careful qualification with which Ibn Juhayr opens his account of the royal eunuchs—“all or most of them hide their faith but cling to the law of Islam”—suggests that at least some may have been genuine converts to Christianity. Fortunately, the mottoes that they chose to use as their personal signatures supplement the testimony of external observers with the eunuchs’ own words. The ‘âlâmat of four royal eunuchs—Peter, Martin, Richard, and ‘Ammar—survive.

Peter was a Berber from the Sadghiyân of Sadwickish and had been captured as a boy from the island of Gerba. At court, he seems to have been known by the French diminutive Perron (“Little Peter”), and thus appears as Perrou in Greek and Barrûn in Arabic. By 1141, he was a royal chamberlain and one of the directors of the royal duwan. Like many palace officers, he also had military duties, and in 1159 he commanded the Sicilian fleet against the Almohads. Back in Sicily, Peter was promoted to Master Chamberlain of the Palace and—together with Richard Palmer, bishop-elect of Syracuse, and the notary, Matthew of Salerno—was one of the triumvirate of Royal Familiars who effectively ran the kingdom. He played a leading role in the suppression of the baronial rebellion against William I, both on the mainland and in Sicily. In 1166, on his deathbed, King William freed Peter and confirmed him as one of the triumvirate who were to advise his widow, Margaret, the regent for their young son, William II. During the struggle for power at court that followed the king’s death, Peter fell out with Richard Palmer, who joined forces with the baronial party and eventually forced Peter to flee to the Almohads.

Peter signs his ‘âlâma—âlîr allâhi tawakkulî (“In God is my trust”)—to two surviving documents, dated December 1149 (fig. 6) and May 1152. From the open loop of the initial ‘ayn, Peter draws a long horizontal line to the left, and then raises it vertically to form the lâm. The ‘âlîf al-maghari begins by curving to the left, but is then pulled sharply back to the right in a long horizontal line ending under the loop of the initial ‘ayn. The line is lifted vertically to give the ‘âlîf, turned down to give a lâm, and then carried leftwards up and down in four little peaks that indicate the second lâm and terminal hâ of Allâh, and the initial ‘ayn and waw of tawakkulî. The tail of the waw rises vertically and is tied to make the extravagant bow with two loops that indicates the kaf—the upper representing the cross-bar, the lower the body of the letter. From this bow, the line escapes horizontally, rises into a looped lâm, falls again, curves left, and finally turns sharply back to the
right in a ya’ that closely reproduces the form of the letter below it. The whole signature is written—or, at least, is intended to look as if it had been written—as a single line, without lifting the pen from the page.

Martin first appears in February 1161 as one of the leading officers of the royal diwan. In the following year, when William I led the army to which John Malcomvenant had brought only three knights against the rebels on the mainland, Martin was entrusted with the suppression of the rebellion in Palermo. Thereafter, he returned to his desk in the diwan and held the offices of Master Chamberlain and Royal Familiar until at least 1166.99

Martin signs his ‘adiama—lauakkuli ‘ala ilahi (“My trust is in God”), a variation on the motto used by Peter10—to three surviving documents, dated January 1161,12 November 1166,13 and March 1167 (fig. 7).14 The initial tā’ lies hidden in the lower right of the cipher. The tail of the following waw sweeps up to give a looped kāf that is strongly reminiscent of that used by Peter. So, too, is the way in which the ya’ begins by curving left but is then pulled back sharply to the right in a long horizontal. Although in this case there is no alif, the line is again extended vertically upwards and then looped around to form the ‘ayn. Martin pens the rest of the ‘alā in exactly the same way as does Peter. From the alif al-maqsura, the line again rises vertically to form the alif, turns downwards, and then bumps on in four rounded peaks representing the two lāms and the kāf with a final flourish that turns back horizontally to the right and fades away.15 This late signature of Martin’s is extremely balanced, confident, and fluid, and has clearly been much practiced. The earliest version of the same signature is much cruder, which raises the possibility that Martin may then have still been learning how to pen his cipher, perhaps using that of Peter as his model.

The emunuch Richard probably first appears in January 1161 as one of the officers of the royal diwan. As Master Chamberlain of the Palace and Royal Familiar, he played a leading role during the regency of Margareta, from the defection of Peter to the flight of Margareta’s cousin and chancellor, Stephen du Perche, whose fall Richard engineered in 1168. Thereafter, Richard seems to have returned to the royal diwan, where he served until at least March 1187. Towards the end of his career, he provided for his retirement by securing a life-interest in the priory of Santa Sofia at Vicari from the bishop of Lipari-Patti and by renting a piece of land from Palermo cathedral to plant an orchard or vineyard.16

Richard signs his ‘adiama—lau alahfi ‘ala ilahi shay (“Nothing is hidden from God”)—to two surviving documents, dated March 1167 (fig. 8)17 and March 1187,18 and perhaps also to a lease of January 1161, in which the signature is badly damaged.19 Richard introduces a new and distinctive element in the form of a bold lām—alif that divides his cipher with two strong diagonal lines. In order to write his ‘adiama without lifting the pen—or to seem to do so—Richard must write the two letters of the first word in the wrong order, beginning in the upper left corner at the top of the alif, and then falling diagonally, making the basal loop, and climbing diagonally to the upper right corner. There, from the top of the lām, the line sharply zigzags down through the ya’ and khā’. It continues horizontally across the rect-
angle, loops up to form the fā’ and then, as the alif al-马路, descends and curves to the left before being pulled sharply back horizontally to the far right of the rectangle. The words ‘ala llāhi are written in a manner already familiar from the signatures of Peter and Martin, but after the three sharp peaks of llāhi, the line bumps on through three more peaks and finally turns back on itself to form the last word, shay’. Richard’s ‘alāmā’ is framed by two trefoils, to the left and right, the tails of which are folded back under the cipher to make a sort of open-topped box that accentuates the rectangularity of his signature.

Morphologically, these three ‘alāmā’ have certain features in common. All are ciphers formed from letters closely interwoven in such a way that their contents are concealed. Each is built up from three lines of text written one above the other. Each incorporates a frame of pronounced vertical and horizontal lines that imparts a distinctly rectangular shape to the composition. (This characteristic is perhaps deliberately evoked in the Arabic signature of William Malconvenant, with its two lines of text enclosed in a rectangular frame.) As has already been observed, the manner in which the words ‘ala llāhi are penned in all three ciphers is almost identical. These strong similarities suggest that the three cunuchs, who were not just contemporaries but also colleagues in both divān and palace as well as allies in the fierce political battles at court, may well have collaborated in developing their ‘alāmā’.

Indeed, in the close atmosphere of the palace, sharing exile, captivity, physical mutilation, and their common, hidden faith, the cunuchs came to think of themselves as a family, with siblings and even ‘sons’,50 so it comes as no surprise to find a family resemblance in their signatures.

Turning from morphology to content, a common theme may again be discerned. None of the motives used by the cunuchs belongs to the standard repertoire of the medieval Islamic world. It therefore seems probable that each was deliberately chosen or devised by the signatory. The motives used by Peter, Martin, and Richard are all ambiguous and could be read as referring to the Christian God, were it not for their strong Qur’anic resonances that would have been immediately recognized by a Muslim reader. The closely related alāmās of Peter and Martin are modeled upon a formula that occurs many times in the Qur’an, for example in such verses as fa-tawakkal ‘ala llāhi inna llāha yahbibhu l-mutaawakkilina (3:159: “Put your trust in God, for God loves those who put their trust [in Him]”) and wa-tawakkal ‘ala llāhi wa-kaﬁ bi-llāhi wakifan (4:81: “Put your trust in God, for God is sufficient as a representative”). But Muslims would also have heard echoes of the portentous warnings given by the prophets in Sūrat Ḥud. Ismā tawakkal tu llāhi (“I put my trust in God”), Hud proclaims (11:56) as he warns ‘Ad that, unless they listen to him, they will be cursed in this life and the next. Again, Shu‘ayb states that wa-nā tawaffiqi illa bi-l-lāhi tawakkaltu (“My prosperity is from God alone, in Him I trust”) as he warns Midyan (11:88) lest they suffer the same fate as other peoples who ignored their prophets—Noah, Lot, Hud, and Salih. Richard’s ‘alāmā confirms that this prophetic layer of meaning is intentional, for it is drawn from a verse in Sūrat al-Mu’min: yawma hum bārizina la yakhsī ‘ala llāhi min-hum shay’an li-maṣu l-malik lyawma bi-l-lihbi l-ỉwāhid l-baghibri (40:16: “On the [Last] Day [mankind] will arise. Nothing will be hidden from God concerning them. To whom will belongs the kingdom on that day? To God, the One, the Conquering”). The story to which this passage belongs tells of the Believer (al-mu’min) at the court of Pharaoh, who “concealed his faith” (40:28: yaktumnu imāna-hu—see n. 36, below) but then warned Pharaoh that if he did not turn to God the Egyptians would suffer the same fate as the peoples of Noah and Hud. In their signatures, the cunuchs Peter, Martin, and Richard cast themselves in the role of the Believer at Pharaoh’s court—as warners concealed in the court of an infidel king, as prophets who conceal their warnings in the Qur’anic verses to which their motives refer, and as Muslims who conceal their true faith behind the elaborate ciphers of their ‘alāmāt’.

Their colleague, the cunuch ‘Ammar, was altogether more blunt. He is the only royal cunuch to sign with his Arabic personal name (isn), instead of the Christian name with which he had been baptized. All he has left us is the formula with which he witnesses a Latin-Arabic lease dated March 1187, in which a fellow cunuch, John the Royal Chamberlain, rents a piece of land outside Palermo from a Greek monk.51

‘Ammar’s signature begins with a standard witness formula—aslāhāhu-lā ilā ‘Allāh wa-ḥaddāshī ‘alāmātī (‘He [John] called me, the cunuch ‘Ammar, as a witness, and this is my ‘alāmā’)—written as a perfectlyLegible line of text. The ‘alāmā itself, like those of the other cunuchs, is written as a cipher and has the form of a very rough rectangle (fig. 9). It begins with the pious formula known as the hasbāna—ḥasbīya l-lāh (“God is sufficient for me”). From the clear initial ḫa’, the line runs horizontally to the left to represent the sin, rises
in a single peak for the bāʿ, and then drops and runs horizontally back on itself to give the yāʿ. A loop carries the line round to a vertical alif, and then through the three peaks representing the word lāhu. Thus far, the motto can be easily read, but the final phrase is concealed both by the complexity of the cipher and by the faintness of the line. After the terminal bāʿ of lāhu, the line continues as a small waw and then rises and falls in a tall peak that represents the definite article al-. At the foot of the lām, the line performs a loop and runs back towards the right in a long diagonal that seems to end in a closed loop (mīm) out of which the line emerges to run back on itself in another long diagonal (sin) that passes through the initial alif-lām. Next, the line rises in a tall vertical stroke (lām), falls again, and then can just be seen to complete another loop (mīm). It rises again in two sharp peaks that bear, respectively, a pair of points below the line and a single point, only just visible, above (yāʿ + niʿū). The line then falls, and fades away to the right with a flourish that possibly includes two trefoil loops. Beneath his ʿalāma, Ammar has drawn two trefoil flourishes, the tails of which turn sharply right and run away beneath his witness formula.

Although the final phrase is initially difficult to decipher, even in the original document, the whole ʿalāma now becomes clear—hāshiya lāhu wa ʿmūsimin (“God and the Muslims are sufficient for me”). Ammar chose to make an explicit profession of Islam, knowing that the penalty for apostasy was death, and that other eunuchs had gone to the stake for their faith. The eunuchs John and Richard, who both signed the same document, must have been fully aware of the content of Ammar’s ʿalāma. The lease was issued with the approval of the whole chapter of the Royal Chapel and of James, the precentor of the Royal Chapel and Archdeacon of Catania—any of whom, the eunuchs must have been all too aware, might have denounced them for apostasy. They must have been supremely confident in the protection afforded them by the Arabic ciphers within which they concealed their true beliefs.

Two brief conclusions must serve to draw this little essay to an end. First, the Arabic signatures that it has examined all, in different ways, were intended to proclaim falsehoods and to conceal truths. Roger’s ʿalāma was designed to convey the idea that he was like a Muslim ruler, and to conceal the fact that he was nothing of the kind. William Malconvenant’s Arabic signature was designed to proclaim his mastery of Arabic, one of the languages of the trilingual administration to which he belonged, and to conceal the fact that he was unable to write his name in Latin and anything but his name in Arabic. The ʿalāma of the eunuchs concealed their professions of faith, encrypted in Arabic, from their Christian masters. But those very professions of faith at the same time concealed from themselves, and from any other Muslim who chanced to read them, that they were collaborating with a Christian king in the exploitation of their fellow Muslims. The palace art created for Roger II and his successors was also designed to proclaim falsehoods and to conceal truths, but on a far greater and more persuasive scale than the handful of signatures that we have here discussed. Historians of the art of Norman Sicily need to master the black arts of spin that already flourished in the Norman court of Sicily.

Our second conclusion is that much can be learned from the little details of material culture that normally escape the gaze of the art historian. The long list of Michael Rogers’s publications at the beginning of this volume includes some that venture well beyond the territory familiar to historians of Islamic art and that, by illuminating the hidden, neglected, and obscure, have thrown light back upon the wider subject. We cannot claim that our own taste for arcana has ever needed stimulation, but it is a great comfort to know that we are not alone. Nor do we claim ever to have made darkness visible with the luciferian brilliance of Michael Rogers. All that we have done to illustrate this point is to choose a few neglected signatures written by men who, in very different ways, were key figures in the Norman court. The detailed study of the morphology of their signatures may not have given much aesthetic pleasure, but it did permit us not only to read them—something which, in the case of the ʿalāma of the eunuchs, had not been done before—but also to collect new information about their acts and motivations. When that information was examined in context, it was shown to offer three little glimpses, from three
very different perspectives, into the Norman palace—
glimpses that afford new insights into the broader ques-
tion of the nature of palace culture in Norman Sicily.

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NOTES

Authors’ note: The article was written by J. J., but it was N. J. who cracked the ciphers behind which the enigma concealed their sig-
natures; she also contributed several crucial observations on the
signatures of Roger II and William Malconvenante. We are both
particularly grateful to Monsignor Benedetto Rosco, presco and
dedicated archivist of the Cappella Palatina, and to the directors
and staff of the Archivio di Stato, the Archivio Diocesano, and the
Biblioteca Centrale della Regione Siciliana, all in Palermo. It has not
proved possible to have detailed photographs made of all the sig-
natures; figs. 2–4 and 6–9 are therefore drawings made from
enlarged digitized images.

1. Abu ‘Abbas Ahmad al-Qalqashandi, Sahl ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn al-
Turki, 14 vols. and index (Cairo, 1913–72), passim.

2. Samuel M. Stern, Fittidow Decrees: Original Documents from the
Fittidow Chancery (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp. 123–
65 (quoting from pp. 125–24).

3. Most but not all of the documents are published in Salvatore
Cass, I Diploma greci ed arabi di Salerno, pubblicati nel tratto origi-
 nale, testo e illustrati, vol. 1 in 2 pars, projected vol. 2 ap-
 parently never published (Palermo: Lao, 1886–82). Recent
studies include: Albret Noth, “1 documenti arabi di Rog-
ero II,” in Carthage Brühl, Diplomi e cancellerie di Reggino
Sicilia,” in Trasmissione degli Arabi in Italia (Istituzione Leone
Cartona, Giunta di Stato, Rome, 1987) (Rome: Accademia Na-
zionale dei Lincei, 1988), pp. 57–75; Jeremy
Johns, Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily: The Royal Divan
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

al-Kinani, 2nd rev. edition, ed. Michael Jan de Goeye and

5. Coins of Roger II and William I struck in the mint of al-Mah-
dirya in Briga; employ a fuller version of the motto that
the Jibarî says was used by William II—al-amdu ta’liq waqqa
handalbi wakal-‘in huwa nhula ta’la wa-mustaghfu-lu ("May God
be praised, as it is right to praise Him, and as He deserves and
merits"); Hasan II, Abdel-Wahhab, "Deux dinars nom-
mands de Mahdia," Revue Tunisienne 1 (1930): 215–18; Jeremy
Johns, "Abd al-Hajjaj: the Norman Kingdom of Africa and the

6. Palermo, Archivio della Cappella Palatina, no. 8; ed. Casa,
Diplomi, no. 76, pp. 68–70; Color plate in L’età normanna e
araba in Sicilia: Memorie storico-documentarie e bibliografiche, cat. ed.
an exh. at Palermo: dei Normanni, Palermo, Nov. 18–Dec. 15,

For additional bibliography, see Johns, Royal Divan, p. 396, no.
29.

7. For George, see Johns, Royal Divan, pp. 80–90, 256–67, 280–
83. For his church, see Ernest Kühniger, The Monastery of St. Mary’s
of the Adalina in Palermo (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks

8. However, it is not impossible to read an alf (indicating fatih
inna) after the al’ in shakir, and to understand the preced-
ing noun as amma madu’ya—giving al-amdu ta’liq waqqa
handalbi ("Praise be to God with thanks for His blessings")—
see also note 19, below.


10. Ibid., pp. 277–78.

11. Dominique Sourdel, Le viceroi ‘al-kabisa de 749 à 936 (132 à
324 de l’hégire), 2 vols. (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas,

12. Stern, Fittidow Decrees, pp. 127–30, citing and supporting a state-
ment to that effect by Ahmad b. ‘Ali al-Maqiri, Al-Maqiri’s wa-
slabi bi-tibabi al-bilweti wa-l-tabani, ed. Muhammad Qattah al-

‘Abd Allah Mihkhi (Cairo, 1924), p. 36. Because al-Jafargli had
lost his hands, his ‘adwa was written for him by the qadi
al-Qadhi’.

14. Taj al-Din b. Marwass, Abshir Misr, ed. Henri Masse (Cairo:
Institut français d’archéologie orientale [Textes arabes 2],

15. Stern, Fittidow Decrees, doc. 6, nos. 3, no. of registration 6b and
4b, pl. 37 and pl. 4, and p. 132.

16. Vera von Falkenhausen, “I ceti dirigenti prenormanni al
tempo della costituzione degli stati normanni nell’Italia meri-
donionale e in Sicilia,” in Forme di potere e strutture sociali in
Italia nel medioevo, ed. Gabriella Rossetti (Bologna: Mulino, 1977),
pp. 350–67; Johns, Royal Divan, pp. 78–79. (This is a conve-
nient point to pass on Professor von Falkenhausen’s warmest
wishes to Michael Rogers, whom she remembers with great
friendship from a Scan Hellenic cruise on the Black Sea.)

17. Casa, Diplomi, no. 54, p. 385 and pl. 3.

18. Vera von Falkenhausen, “I diplomati dei re normanni in lingua
greca,” in Documenti medievali greci e latini. Studi compila-
tivi, Atti del seminario di Etro (23–24 ottobre 1995), ed. Giuseppe
De Gregorio and Otto Kressen (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di

19. This manner of raising the tail of the al’ in link to the fol-
lowing letter is well attested in Sicilian alifin scripts. Alterna-
tively, as already noted in no. 8 above, the vertical stroke could
be read as an alf, in which case the bridge might even rep-
resent the fatih inna.

20. Stern, Fittidow Decrees, pl. 17.

21. Ibid., pl. 33.

22. Ibid., pl. 4.


24. (1) Palermo, Biblioteca Centrale per la Regione Siciliana, Tab-
lario di Santa Maria di Monreale, pergamenta no. 6, dated
1159; ed. Carlo Alberto Garuti, I documenti notarili dell’epoca
normanna in Sicilia: Documenti per servire alla storia di Si-
cilia, ser. 1, vol. 18 (Palermo, 1999), p. 85 + Fig. Wybbi/nu
(ej-) jorjin (taw) mwa-nu (als.), [i.e., brother of Robertus Malecon-
ventane]. (2) Palermo, Biblioteca Centrale per la Regione Sicil-

25. See n. 20, below.

26. This might be a *sire*, in which case his name could be read *Galeazzo*.


30. Ibid., pp. 212-76.

31. Ibid., pp. 249-50.


41. One might also read *tanahkilat ‘alī bihā* ("My trust is in my God"), depending upon whether the final flourish is understood as a bar 'i or a 'a.

42. Palermo, Archivio di Stato, Tabulario di Santa Maria della Grotta, pergamenano no. 2; ed. Casa, *Diplomi*, no. 101, pp. 622–26 (with many errors and omissions); see Johns, *Royal Dinains*, pp. 310–11, no. 35.

43. Toledo, Archivio General de la Fundación Casa Ducal de Medinaceli, Fondo Messina, no. 1118 (S2064); only Greek text edited: see Johns, *Royal Dinains*, p. 311, no. 37.


45. See n. 41, above.


47. Cited in n. 41, above.


49. Cited in n. 44, above.


51. Cited in n. 48, above.

52. See n. 33, above.