

Documenting Multiculturalism Project
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Paper versus parchment : Countess Adelaide's Bilingual Mandate of 1109

The bilingual mandate issued by the [Countess Adelaide](#) in March 1109 enjoys a certain fame as the earliest surviving public document from a European chancery to be written on paper. But this early document on paper was not alone. Later Norman documents refer to a handful of other paper charters, all issued between 1090 and 1110, which have since been lost. In 1222, a group of mandates issued by [William II](#) some fifty years earlier were said to be “now consumed by age”, and have consequently been presumed to have been written on paper. Ten years later, in the [Constitutions of Melfi](#), [Frederick II](#) forbade the use of paper and prescribed that [parchment](#) alone be used for public documents. But by then, paper was already so well established in Christian Europe that even Frederick's own chancery issued mandates and kept registers of public acts on paper.

Multicultural Norman Sicily is thus widely claimed to have played a key role in the transfer of paper and papermaking from the Islamic world to Christian Europe. According to this narrative, the first Norman rulers inherited the use of paper from the [Kalbid emirs of Palermo](#). [Count Roger I](#) and his successors, right down to Frederick II, continued to use paper, if not for all public acts then at least for royal mandates. The paper used by the Norman chancery, it is widely assumed, was made in Sicily, so that papermaking must have been introduced during the Muslim period and then spread from Norman Sicily to the mainland during the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The reappraisal of Adelaide's bilingual mandate of 1109, recently carried out by *Documenting Multiculturalism*, has caused us to question this traditional narrative, and to develop a radically different assessment of the role of Norman Sicily in the history of paper and papermaking in Christian Europe.

[Adelaide's mandate](#) belongs to the archive of the Greek monastery of [San Filippo di Fragalà](#), now conserved in the [Archivio di Stato in Palermo](#). In its present, heavily restored condition, the document measures 37.5cm high by 27cm wide. It was originally folded three times into sixteen, and extensive damage was provoked along these folds, especially where one corner was attacked by insects. At an unknown date, an attempt was made to conserve the document by unfolding it and gluing and sewing it into a parchment frame — an operation that provoked still further damage, as the glue dried and crystallised, and the paper and parchment each expanded and contracted at different rates according to atmospheric change. The result is that more than a third of the text is now missing, so that the content of the mandate can with some difficulty be reconstructed only in part:

Translation

Recto

[Greek] Adelaide, countess of Calabria and Sicily. / We order all the mighty viscounts and all the caids / in our service, present and future, on our lands at Castrogiovanni, to whom this document shall be presented / [... *two and a half lines missing* ...] not to be troubled by anyone / [... *half a line missing* ...] to remain, but rather to give assistance to them / [... *three lines missing* ...] / sealed mandate, and sealed with my usual wax seal in the month of March in the second indiction, when I was / in Messina. ✠ /

[Arabic] In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. / This is a document from the Great Lady, the ruler of Sicily and Calabria, the Defender of the Faith of Christianity. / Our command is issued to all who read, or to whom shall be read, this our document, from among the governors and the caids who are in our service, and those who are invested with our authority, / today and henceforth in Castrogiovanni until such time as is willed [in regard of the monks] residing at the monastery of San Filippo, which is at Demenna, in the valley of San Marco / [... *missing half a line* ...] them, and be true to them, and give to them, and protect them / [... *missing one line* ...]. / Our order was issued on the sixth of March [... *missing middle of line* ...] our well-known wax seal [... *missing end of line*]. /

[Greek signature] Countess Adelaide

Verso

[Greek note] Concerning the salt-mine



Fig. 1. Adelaide's bilingual mandate of 1109, before restoration in 1995. Palermo, Archivio di Stato, Tabulario dell'Ospedale Grande di Palermo, Tabulario dei monasteri di San Filippo di Fragalà e di Santa Maria di Maniaci, number 9. Photograph: Carlo Alberto Garufi (1868-1948): see [Acta: Pergamene siciliane](#)

The mandate was intended to be kept by the monks of San Filippo, who were to present it as needed to the officials of the comital administration responsible for the district of Castrogiovanni (modern [Enna](#)). The lacunose text surviving on the *recto* makes it clear that those officials were to protect the monks of San Filippo from molestation, but only a terse Greek note on the *verso* now provides the crucial information, lost in the holes of the *recto*, that Adelaide was ordering her officials to assist the monks to extract salt from a mine belonging to the comital demesne near Castrogiovanni. In March 1145, King Roger confirmed and renewed a number of donations and privileges issued by his parents

and by his younger self, to San Filippo, including a molybdobull — a charter bearing a lead seal — of the Countess Adelaide, now lost, that granted the monastery each year as much salt from the mine at Castrogiovanni as the monks needed for their own purposes.



Fig. 2. Adelaide's bilingual mandate of 1109, after restoration in 1995. Palermo, Archivio di Stato, Tabulario dell'Ospedale Grande di Palermo, Tabulario dei monasteri di San Filippo di Fragalà e di Santa Maria di Maniaci, number 9. See [Archivio di Stato](#).

Adelaide's mandate of 1109 still bears the remains of her scarlet wax seal, no longer legible, which was applied to a disk of paper attached to the document by two slits through which a paper ribbon

seems to have been passed in order fasten the mandate as needed. When the document was restored in the 1990s, microscopic examination revealed the paper to be composed of cellulose fibres identified as linen. Chemical analysis demonstrated that it was sized with starch. Since then, the study of early papers has significantly advanced, so that a new examination of the paper of Adelaide's mandate would almost certainly produce additional and more detailed evidence. But, on the basis of the data now available, the paper would seem to have been produced according to the tradition of papermaking current in the [Mašhriq](#) (the east of the Islamic world, including Egypt) and not in the [Mağrib](#) (*al-Andalus* or Morocco). The dimensions of the mandate correspond to the smallest of the three formats standard in Egypt and Syria. Unlike most papers from the Mağrib, Adelaide's mandate is pale cream to white in colour, thin, and with regular borders; regrettably, no information is yet available as to the absence or presence of [laid and chain lines](#) which would reveal the nature of the screen on which it was formed.

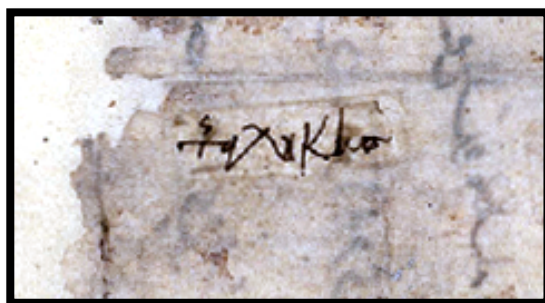


Fig. 3. Detail of the Greek note on the verso of Adelaide's bilingual mandate of 1109, after restoration in 1995: της αλυκής, "Concerning the salt-mine". See [Archivio di Stato](#).

All this does not necessarily indicate that the paper for Adelaide's mandate was exported to Messina directly from the Mašriq. First, very little is known about paper made in the late tenth or early eleventh century in [Ifriqiya](#) (roughly corresponding to western Libya, Tunisia, and eastern Algeria), the region of North Africa which formed a cultural unity with Sicily before 1060 and, albeit in different ways, between the Norman conquest of Sicily and the conquest of Ifriqiya by the [Almohads](#). Compared with both the Mašhriq and the far Mağrib, Ifriqiya was very slow to replace parchment with paper, not just for copies of the Qur'ān but also for "secular" texts, which were still being copied on parchment in the eleventh century. The only surviving manuscript from Islamic Sicily, [a Qur'ān copied in Palermo in 983/4](#), was written on parchment. Giuseppe Mandalà has recently drawn attention to one manuscript, written on paper and completed in 1067, that might conceivably have been copied in Sicily. Even the private letters and accounts in the [Cairo Geniza](#) sent by Jewish traders from Ifriqiya and Sicily to Cairo were written on parchment, and there are only two references to the importation of paper from Cairo to Sicily, both from the years immediately before the Norman conquest.

Second, during the eleventh and early twelfth century, paper was already beginning to be used in Christian Europe, so that the Islamic paper for Adelaide's mandate, and for the other early Norman documents written on paper, could well have reached Messina by way of a European intermediary. Paper, presumably imported from Egypt or Syria, was used in Constantinople by the mid eleventh century, both for imperial documents and for books. On the Italian mainland, Islamic paper began to be used in Genoa during the first half of the twelfth century. There, the earliest paper seems to have come from the Mašriq, possibly by way of Byzantium, before Spanish paper came to dominate in the later twelfth century. Only in the thirteenth century, it would seem, was paper first made in Italy: in Liguria, near Genoa, by the 1230s; perhaps at about the same time in Campania, in the territories of Amalfi, Naples and Sorrento; and at Fabriano in the Marche by about 1260. By the fourteenth century, Italian paper was widely exported to Byzantium and the Mašriq.

Thus, while there can be little doubt that Adelaide's mandate and the other early Norman documents were written on paper made in the Islamic world, it cannot yet be said whether that paper arrived in Messina directly from the Mašriq, the Mağrib, or even Ifriqiya, or whether it was imported via a European intermediary, such as Byzantium or Genoa.

It is highly improbable that the paper for these early Norman documents was made in Sicily. There is no evidence that paper was ever manufactured in Muslim Sicily, nor even that documents issued by the Kalbid emirs of Palermo were written on imported paper. Our only source, the Iraqi traveller Ibn Ḥawqal, who visited Palermo in the mid 970s, reports that the marshy lands along the banks of the rivers of Palermo produced above all “papyrus (*al-barbīr*) — that is, the papyrus (*al-bardīya*) from which scrolls (*al-ṭawāmīr*) are made”. Ibn Ḥawqal chose these words carefully to avoid any doubt that he was referring to the manufacture of *Cyperus papyrus* into scrolls by the ancient Egyptian process. Indeed, he continued, Sicilian papyrus was the only variety in the world that could rival that of Egypt. While most of the Sicilian papyrus went to make hawsers for ships, a small quantity was retained by the state to be made into papyrus scrolls (*ṭawāmīr al-qarāfīs*) that met the needs of the administration. Ibn Ḥawqal’s report cannot be verified because no written document survives from the Kalbid chancery — not on paper, nor papyrus, nor parchment — but his careful phraseology and the rich circumstantial detail of the passage add verisimilitude to his account, as does the topography of Palermo, where the River Papireto ran to the north of the old city. The Kalbid emirs continued in power for about seventy years after Ibn Ḥawqal visited Palermo, and may well have used papyrus right down into the 1040s. Papyrus was indubitably still used in Italy in the second half of the eleventh century: the papyrus used by the papal chancery, alongside parchment, until at least the late 1050s is generally assumed to have been imported from Sicily, either from Palermo or Syracuse, and a late eleventh- or twelfth-century copy of the *Life* of St Nephon of Constantia is written on what is said to be Sicilian papyrus. In neither case is there any compelling evidence that the papyrus was indeed made in Sicily, and papyrus was still being produced in Egypt until at least the late 1080s.



Fig. 4. Papyrus (*Cyperus papyrus*) growing in the Fontana Aretusa (Syracuse) in a photograph of Carlo Brogi (1850-1925).

Writing papyrus is not mentioned by any Sicilian source after the Norman conquest. A law of Frederick II (quoted below) and a translation of 1252 (*Deperditum* 1 below) both mention documents written “on papyrus paper (*in cartis papyri* ; *in charta papyri*)”, but they do not refer to papyrus proper made by the

ancient Egyptian technique, and rather use mid-thirteenth-century Latin terms for what in early Norman documents is more often called “cotton paper” (*carta bombycina* or *carta cutunea*). Papyrus-making seems to have died out in Sicily before the mid twelfth century, and was only resumed in the 1780s when the archaeologist and botanist Saverio Landolina obtained royal protection for the colony of wild *Cyperus papyrus* growing on the banks of the River Ciane near Syracuse, and began to experiment with its manufacture. By then, papyrus was long extinct on the Nile, and the few plants established in 1872 in front of the Egyptian Museum at Bulaq had to be imported from the Jardin de Luxembourg in Paris. These were washed away by the disastrous Nile flood of 1878 so that, when the late Dr Hassan Ragab founded his Papyrus Institute in 1962, papyrus was again re-introduced, but this time from Syracuse.



Fig. 5. Wild *Cyperus papyrus* on the Fiume Ciane (Syracuse) in an early twentieth-century postcard.

In addition to Adelaide’s mandate, five early Norman documents are known to have been written on cotton paper; all are now lost — in the jargon of [diplomats](#) they are *deperdita* (singular *deperditum*):

1. May 1090. A Greek *sigillion*, in which Roger I granted to Nicodemus, archimandrite and abbot of Santa Maria di Terreti and San Nicola di Calamizzi de Salamicio (near Reggio Calabria) unlimited rights to graze and to fish on the surrounding comital lands, was renewed by [Count Roger II](#) in 1115. Both documents are lost, but a Latin translation made in 1252 of the renewal of 1115 reports that the donation of 1090 was “originally written on papyrus paper” (*quod primum fuit in charta papiři*).
2. July 1097. A Greek *sigillion* in which Roger I confirms that the abbot of San Filippo di Fragalà possesses pasture land near San Giorgio on Monte Linario near Messina and describes its boundaries. The Greek text of the original was inserted in full in a confirmation issued by the Regent Adelaide in 1110, which reports that the original was written “on cotton paper” (ἐν βαμβάκινω χάρτω).
3. July 1099. A Greek *sigillion* in which Roger I grants to Gregory, abbot of San Filippo di Fragalà, eight named villeins. The Greek text of the original was inserted into a confirmation issued by Adelaide and the young Roger II, at an unknown date between the death of [Count Simon](#) (the elder son of Roger I and Adelaide, born 1093) on 28 September 1105 and the assumption of sole rule by Count Roger II in the first half of 1112, which reports that the privilege of 1099 was “originally written on cotton paper” (διὰ εἶναι τὸ πρῶτον βαμβάκινον).
4. 1101/2 (6610AM). A Greek *sigillion* in which Adelaide grants a mill to San Filippo di Fragalà. The brief summary of the original, which is preserved in a sixteenth-century Latin translation of a Greek

renewal by [King Roger II](#) in 1145 of various documents issued to San Filippo, reports that it was written “on cotton paper ... which we (i.e. King Roger II in 1145) renewed on parchment” (*ex carta cuctunea ... quod renovavimus in pargamenum*).

5. 1101–1105. A Greek *sigillion* of Countess Adelaide and Count Simon, granting lands to Santa Maria di Gullia, a dependency of San Filippo di Fragalà, was renewed on parchment by Adelaide and Count Roger II in March 1112, because it had been written “on cotton paper” (*de carta cuctunea in pargamenum renovavimus*).

The composition of the paper of Adelaide’s mandate — linen fibre — helps to elucidate the obscure and contested terms in Greek and Latin used in the early Norman documents for “cotton paper” — *carta bombycina* or *carta cutunea*. The adjective *bombycina*, and variants in Greek, Latin, Italian *etcetera*, is descended through Greek *bambakion* (βαμβάκιον), through the influence of *bombyx* (βόμβυξ, “silkworm”), from *pambag*, the Pahlavi word for “cotton” (*pambagēn*, “made of cotton”), which is ancestor to a wide range of early medieval terms for cotton in Byzantine Greek (βάμβαξ, *bambax*), Medieval Latin (*bambax*, *bambagium*), Italian (*bombagio*) and so forth. By extension, paper made from cotton and other vegetable fibres such as hemp and flax, and from textiles woven of such fibres, were all termed “cotton paper” — *carta bombycina* or *carta cutunea*. (Needless to say, the much repeated suggestion that *bombycina* be derived from the name of the town of Manbiğ in northern Syria may safely be ignored.)

These six early Norman documents on paper form a distinct group with the following characteristics in common. They were all composed in Greek, and issued in or near Messina, to Greek monasteries in northeastern Sicily or Calabria, within the two decades 1090-1109. Four of them (*Deperdita* 1-3 and 5) were renewed on parchment within fifteen years of their original issue on paper. These paper documents seem to have been something in the nature of a limited experiment that soon failed and was rapidly abandoned, and was associated for some unknown reason with a particular time and place. That the use of paper was concentrated in the northeast of the island, far away from the seat of the pre-conquest Kalbid administration in Palermo, emphasises the point that the early Normans did not inherit the use of paper from the Muslim rulers of the island. What is more, paper was definitively abandoned in favour of parchment even before 1112, when Adelaide and the young Roger II moved their capital from Messina to Palermo, the ancient seat of the Kalbid administration. All this raises the suspicion that the Greek monasteries of northeastern Sicily, and perhaps especially San Filippo di Fragalà, the most important and influential of the Greek monasteries of the island before 1130, may in some way have been involved with, and perhaps to some extent responsible for, the early Norman experiment with paper.



Fig. 5. San Filippo di Fragalà (or di Demenna), Frazzano (Messina, Sicily), view from the west.

Following the rejection of paper soon after 1109, the transfer of the capital from Messina to Palermo, and the assumption of sole rule by Count Roger II, there is no evidence that paper was again used as a support for public acts in Norman Sicily. All the surviving authentic and original documents are written on parchment, and none makes any mention of paper. There is no need to conclude that the four mandates of King William II which, fifty years after they were first issued to the nuns of San Gregorio in Naples, were “consumed with age”, had originally been written on paper — even parchment can suffer the ravages of time, as all too many of the documents studied for this project attest. Had William’s mandates been written on paper, the officials of Frederick II, who disapproved of the stuff so violently as to legislate against its use, would surely have said so.

Except for Adelaide’s mandate, only one scrap of paper from Norman Sicily survives. It is [a fragmentary Arabic list of books](#) which may possibly have belonged to the Cappella Palatina in the royal palace in Palermo. Regrettably, no analysis of the paper was made before the list was mislaid following the death of Padre Benedetto Rocco, who had discovered it in 1994 wrapped around some holy relics belonging to the chapel. While this missing fragment indisputably attests to the use of paper in the royal palace during the middle of the twelfth century, there is no reason to conclude that paper was widely used in Norman Palermo. Even the Jewish merchants of Sicily, who occasionally bought and sold paper in Egypt, wrote the private letters and commercial accounts that they sent to their families and business partners in Cairo on parchment, not paper. Even rough copies and scribal exercises, which in contemporary Cairo would have scribbled on scraps of coarse paper, in Sicily could be written on large sheets of good quality parchment — such as the aide-memoire containing the rough drafts of [three Arabic contracts of sea exchange](#) from Cefalù that occupies on a sheet of good parchment measuring 70cm by 13.5cm.

If paper had not been widely used in Norman Sicily, why should Frederick II have felt compelled to legislate against its use? The simple answer is that he was anxious to maintain and uphold the authority and status of the public acts issued by his chancery and officials and was convinced that this could be done only if they were to be written on parchment. In this he was not alone: not until 2015 did the [Parliament of the United Kingdom](#) begin to print the record copy of its acts upon paper, and finally abandon [vellum](#) as a support. At the same time, Frederick was perfectly content that paper should be used for private acts and lesser administrative records. Indeed, his own chancery issued mandates, and kept registers of public acts, on paper.

[A copy of what appears to be a mandate addressed by Frederick](#) to all imperial notaries commands that neither palimpsest (*carta rasa*, i.e. parchment from which the original text had been scraped), nor cotton paper (*carta bombicina*) should be used for public acts. The prohibition of palimpsest was presumably intended to deter the fraudulent alteration of a public act, or to avoid suspicion that an act might have been so altered, but it is perplexing to find this also applied to cotton paper, the absorbent surface of which is far more difficult to prepare for reuse. This order would appear to have had universal application, unlike the far more famous law promulgated in the [Liber Augustalis](#) and entitled “[How documents should be made](#)” (l.lxxx). A close reading reveals it to be closely focused upon practices specific to Campania, and it can have had little, if anything, to do with the use of paper on the island of Sicily. It begins by proscribing the comparatively ornate [Beneventan script](#) that had survived in Campania but was almost unknown in Sicily (“we abolish completely the style of writing that was preserved until the present in the city of Naples, the Duchy of Amalfi, and Sorrento, and the areas belonging to them”). And goes on to insist that all public documents issued by imperial notaries should be written “in common and legible letters”, that is, in imperial miniscule, which was almost universally used on the island of Sicily. Only then does the law continue:

“...the aforementioned public documents should be written in the future only on parchment (*nonnisi in pergamenis*). For, since it should be hoped that their trustworthiness will last for many years in the future, we consider it right that they should not succumb to the danger of destruction from old age. No proof at all should be taken in court or outside of court from documents written on papyrus paper (*ex instrumentis in cartis papyri*) or in some other manner, as has been said (i.e. in the Beneventan script?), unless they are receipts for debts or the payment of debts. But those written in the past will continue in force. Moreover, those which are drawn up on the aforementioned cotton paper (*in predictis cartis bombicinis*) and written in the aforesaid places, Naples, Amalfi and

Sorrento, should be drawn up again in common and legible writing within two years from the day of the promulgation of this law”.

Clearly this law was intended to stamp out a trend current in Campania for issuing public acts written in the Beneventan script upon paper. Whether that paper was imported from the Islamic world through the Tyrrhenian ports, or whether Amalfi had already begun to make the paper for which it was later to become famous, is unclear. But the law states clearly that paper might be used for certain administrative and legal purposes, such as recording debts and their payment, and was proscribed only for “public documents” (*instrumenta publica*), specifically because it was believed to be over time more fragile and less durable than parchment — precisely the same reason, it would seem, that had caused Adelaide and the young Roger II to abandon the early Norman experiments with the use of paper for public acts.

This same distinction between durable parchment for public documents, and fragile paper for private acts and administrative records, was maintained in the second half of the thirteenth century, when Spanish paper first began to be exported in significant quantities to Palermo. The earliest evidence for the import of “paper of Murcia”, “*zarf* (i.e. from Arabic *šaraf*, fine, literally “noble”?) paper”, and paper from Barcelona comes from the 1260s and '70s. But after 1282, when King Peter III of Aragon seized Sicily, the trickle of Spanish paper swelled to a flood. Much, like the seven boxes (56,000 sheets) of paper delivered to the king at Messina in 1283, was imported directly by the royal administration. But as early as 1285, the crown granted a Valencian merchant leave to import thirty boxes (240,000 sheets) of paper to Sicily. It is no mere coincidence that the earliest surviving notarial register on paper from Sicily — the *Protocol of Adamo de Citella* in the Archivio di Stato in Palermo — dates from the following year, 1286-1287. The paper of this register has not recently been examined, but the description of it published in 1981 is broadly consistent with contemporary Spanish paper.

The new history of paper in Norman Sicily proposed by *Documenting Multiculturalism* as a working hypothesis may be summarised as follows. Until at least the late tenth century, the Kalbid emirs used for their official documents papyrus made locally by the ancient Egyptian technique — a distinctly old-fashioned practice, but one wholly consistent with the conservatism demonstrated throughout Ifrīqiya towards the use of paper. In the mid eleventh century, small quantities of paper were imported to Palermo from Egypt, but it is not known whether or not paper was ever adopted by the Kalbid chancery. At this time, and until at least the mid twelfth century, parchment was still being used in Sicily for private correspondence and business accounts. The vast majority of documents issued by the early Normans, first on the mainland and then in Sicily, were written on parchment. While Norman leaders and churchmen would have been familiar with the use of parchment north of the Alps, it was universally used throughout the territories that they seized in Italy, and in no sense did they introduce the use of parchment and replace that of paper. A handful of documents issued between 1090 and 1109 by Count Roger I, Adelaide and their two sons, were written on paper, including Adelaide’s bilingual mandate of 1109 which alone survives. There is no reason to think that these early paper documents reflect the continuation of the practice of the Kalbid chancery. On the contrary, there is strong reason to suspect that they may attest to a short-lived experiment that was for some reason associated with a few Greek monasteries in northeast Sicily and Calabria, especially San Filippo di Fragalà. This experimental use of paper ceased before 1112, when Adelaide moved the administrative capital from Messina to Palermo, and Roger II assumed sole rule. Thereafter, throughout the Norman and Hohenstaufen period and, indeed, under the Angevin and Aragonese kings, virtually all public acts continued to be written on parchment. Only after [Sicily was seized by the Crown of Aragon](#) in 1282 did paper begin to be imported in significant quantities from Spain. This ready availability of Spanish paper, and the fiscal interests of the crown, held back the development of papermaking in Sicily until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Seen in this light, Adelaide’s mandate of 1109, the earliest surviving public document from a European chancery to be written on paper, assumes a new significance. No longer does it demonstrate the inheritance of the practices of the Kalbid chancery by the first Norman rulers of Sicily; no longer does it attest to the transfer of technology from the Islamic world to the Christian West; no longer does it stand at the beginning of “the paper revolution in Europe”. Instead it is the sole surviving guinea-pig from the short-lived and unsuccessful experiment, that came about, at a very particular time and place, apparently because the early Norman rulers of Sicily were especially devoted to the Greek monastery of San Filippo di Fragalà, at a moment when their scribes, or perhaps even the monks themselves,

happened to have access to a small consignment of paper from the Mašriq, which had arrived in Messina, either directly from Egypt, or possibly from Constantinople or one of the Tyrrhenian ports.

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