MALTA, SCIACCA AND THE PEROLLO FAMILY,
1461-1499

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References to Sciaccia in medieval Maltese sources have hitherto been rather fragmentary. It is known that a family from Sciaccia, the Perollo, held a number of properties in Malta and was even represented in the island’s municipal council or universitas. While Sciaccia was one of the main outlets for grain in western Sicily, no trace of Maltese commercial activity there has been encountered thus far, in contrast to Agrigento, Terranova, Licata and Syracuse, where the universitas was represented by consulates. The purpose of this investigation is to draw attention to some notarial documents from the State Archives of Sciaccia which throw further light on the involvement of the Perollo in Malta and to a number of connections between the two places, including commercial exchanges involving cotton, cloth and grain, as well as the presence in the countryside outside Sciaccia of Maltese and Gozitan migrant workers.

Sciaccia, some 60 km from Agrigento, was one of the main urban areas of medieval Sicily. In the mid-fifteenth century it had a population of about 10,000 including a sizeable and well-established Jewish community. Sciaccia’s port was one of the chief outlets for the agricultural products of the val di Mazara – Sicily’s breadbasket – and the town’s economy was closely tied to the agrarian resources of surrounding areas. Large quantities of wheat, barley and cheese were shipped through its carricatore to other parts of the island, to cities in mainland Italy (especially Genoa), and to the territories of the Aragonese crown. Notarial contracts, which contain many references to vineyards in the vicinity of the town as well as massarie or grain-growing estates and mandre, lands for animal husbandry and the

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production of cheese, testify to the agrarian basis of Sciaccà’s economy. In addition, herds of sheep and cattle provided raw materials for the local manufacture of orbace, a coarse, impermeable woolen cloth for everyday use, and for the leather industry, which in Sciaccà was almost entirely in the hands of Jews.

The land around Sciaccà was largely controlled by the feudal nobility, among them the powerful Peralta clan, who held the county of Calabellotta, and the Tagliavia, lords of Castelvetrano. However, rather than administer all their lands directly, the nobility generally preferred to rent or sometimes dispose of some of them to prominent families from nearby towns to whom they were most likely linked through kinship ties or simply through common interests. The Perollo were, from at least the later fourteenth century, one of a group of client families of the Peralta in Sciaccà. This association was reflected in the purchase of the feudo of San Bartolomeo, near Sciaccà, by Giovanni Perollo from the Peralta in 1398, at a time when the latter were forced to sell property to fund their struggle against the Catalans. It is possible, although there is no evidence to demonstrate this, that the Perollo may also have obtained their properties in Malta in a similar manner. The feoff of San Bartolomeo was in turn split up into several plots, which were then sub-leased to many individuals from Sciaccà. The Perollo were, in fact, one of the principal landlords in the terra of Sciaccà. In 1434 nobile et egregius dominus Dominicus de Perollo granted two feudi, called la salina and la culla, to his son Andrea, who was about to get married. The latter is most likely the same Andrea Perollo who is mentioned several years later in connection with the family’s properties in Malta. Three other feuds, called beltripuri, massaria vecchia, and li dunzelli belonged to the noblewoman Serena de Perollo in 1435-1436. Other relations owned massarie and mandre and often appear in notarial contracts seeking to employ labourers or to establish partnerships with someone who was prepared to invest labour and capital in their enterprise. Like other fief-owners, the Perollo employed a number of individuals including gabellotti, charged with collecting rents, massari, who administered their grain-growing estates, as well as others who were responsible for their herds of cattle. Economic and political influence went hand in hand, and it is not surprising that members of the family were also active in municipal affairs as officials of the universitas of Sciaccà. Jacopo Perollo, legum doctoris, served as a judge in the middle years of the fifteenth century, and Andrea Perollo was a jurato in 1473-74. As in other universitates, political influence opened the door to profitable activities such as the right to collect gabella (municipal taxes levied on certain commodities or activities) which were farmed out by the jurati to one or more individuals. Thus 1473-74, while Andrea Perollo was serving as one of the town’s jurati, he and another nobleman also controlled - in spite of laws that specifically prohibited such conflict of interest - the lucrative gabella vini levied on the sale of wine in Sciaccà.

The connections linking the abovementioned Andrea Perollo and his son Johannes with Malta in the latter half of the fifteenth century are discernible in the records of the universitas. Additional brief references are also found in the two recently published registers of the Maltese notary Giacomo Zarraba. The municipal material reveals that the Perollo had established their presence in Malta on two fronts: as holders of feuds and as officials of the municipal council. In this latter role they were one among several families of Sicilian origin who were prominent in the Maltese political scene throughout the fifteenth century. According to the minutes of council meetings, Andrea Perollo was present on at least one occasion in 1461, four times in 1463, and once in 1474 (when he was also a jurato in Sciaccà), after which no further attendances by him are recorded. In contrast, there is no indication that Johannes Perollo ever attended council sessions or held municipal office in Malta. This possibly explains why in 1474, the last year when Andrea Perollo is known to have sat in council, he was asked by his son to sell a ‘palaciocto’ which they owned in Mdina. There is no
indication whether these instructions were carried out, but three years later the jurati requested the Perollo's gabellotto - the person in charge of managing their estates and collecting rents (gabelle) due in Malta, Jacobo Hakim, to undertake necessary repairs to a house belonging to the family 'in forma ki non sta periculosa' or else the council itself would do this and force them to pay the costs.\textsuperscript{14} Could it be that the Perollo had by then decided to abandon whatever personal association they may have had with Malta, choosing instead to operate only through local agents and representatives?

The question of the residency status of the Perollo in Malta was raised frequently in the municipal council due to the efforts on the part of the universitas to obtain from both Andrea and Johannes payment of their portion of taxes levied on property owners on the island. On 26 September 1462 the jurati demanded ten once from Andrea, named as one of the 'rendatarii li quali su in Sicilia', as his contribution towards a general tax (collecta) of a thousand once.\textsuperscript{15} On 6 October, however, the council met again to discuss the refusal by Andrea Perollo and another absentee nobleman to pay this tax: the officials in the end resolved to confiscate the equivalent quantity of cotton held by the family's gabellotto.\textsuperscript{16}

This state of affairs was however destined to repeat itself. In December 1468 the jurati discussed a letter sent to them the previous September by their representatives in Palermo in which the vicerey acknowledged that the gabellotti of Maltese fief-holders who lived abroad had the obligation to pay their respective contributions.\textsuperscript{17} The communication made specific reference to missier Andria de lu Perollu and to his son Johanni as well as to Pinu de Manuelli who was possibly their agent. The same provision was reiterated by the vicerey ten years later, this time referring only to Johannes Perollo, but indicating that the basis for that provision lay in the ancient customs of Malta which specified that foreigners who held assets there were expected to contribute their share just like Maltese citizens.\textsuperscript{18} It appears from this second document that Johannes had claimed that he should be exempted from contributing as he was already paying taxes in Sciacca. These documents do not elaborate on the nature of the property for which the Perollo were being taxed but this is revealed in two other documents dated April 1499. They are letters sent by the universitas to two gabellotti of the Perollo in Malta along with the name of the properties that were being assessed and the amount payable in that regard. One letter is addressed to Jorgi or Georigo Pachi, gabellotto for the fief of Buleben, who was requested to pay the sum of 3 onze and 27 tari.\textsuperscript{19} The other correspondence is addressed to Laurenzu Farruge, 'cabellotto di li jardini et territori . . . vocati lo Gomerino, lo Samnati, Beb Irrue et Bumachile', holdings on which the total payment due amounted to 4 onze, 27 tari and 15 grani.\textsuperscript{20} The two dispatches state that the sums payable represented fifteen per cent of the income derived annually from these properties which would therefore indicate that the Perollo's income from Buleben was estimated at 26 onze and that for the other estates at nearly 31 onze. In 1495 the Perollo also held another piece of property called Il Humeri which in a contract drafted by notary Zabbara is described as a 'viridarium sive jardum, evidently reserved for growing fruits and vegetables.\textsuperscript{21} It was then being managed by notary Laurencius Falzon, 'principalis gabellottus honorum de li Firolli sistenici in Inquila Melite', who sub-leased it to Lucas Tabone for four years at fourteen Sicilian once annually. In the contract, Falzon stipulated that Tabone should plant fifty new trees in it each year and to 'bene colere, servire et irrigare ac ortilicia arborybus nociva non facere.'

The references to Gumerin are of particular interest given the earlier history of this fief, first described in the sixteenth century by Gian Luca Barberi in his Capibrevi. In that work Barberi referred to a privilege issued by Martin I of Sicily in 1398, which included the texts of earlier privileges.\textsuperscript{22} The 1398 document confirmed that the rights to the fief belonged to Antonellus de Santa Sophia, whose family benefited from several royal concessions in Malta during the second half of the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{23} Gumerin was in 1318 by Guillelmus de Ruggia, of whom Antonellus de Santa Sophia claimed to be a descendant, and one year prior to that was held by Guilem Longo Surdi. Rosario Gregorio, writing in the eighteenth

19. Wettlinger 1993, doc. 972. G. Wettlinger, Place-Names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800, Malta 2000, 72 identifies two locations by this name: a fief between Tarxien and Zebbug in the vicinity of Qawra. A pheudum Politiber is mentioned in a copy of an act drawn up by notary Antonio de Messana of Sciacca on 4.11.1465.


century, noted that it was still in the hands of the Sancta Sophia in 1408.\textsuperscript{24} It is unclear how control over the fief passed from the latter family to the Perollo who, as noted above, may have acquired it through the Peralta. During the interregnum in Sicily the Peralta, counts of Caltabellotta, were allies of the powerful Chiaramonte faction, who were enfeoffed with the county of Malta in 1366.\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, in 1390 Malta and Gozo were willed by Manfredi Chiaramonte to his daughter Elisabetta, who was also the wife of a certain Niccolò Peralta.\textsuperscript{26}

The sources from Sciacca provide some further information on the activities of the Perollo as landlords of Gumerin and also of Bebrirru and Polibin (Buleben). It is evident from these records that the responsibility for administering the fiefs in that period fell upon Johannes (sometimes also referred to as Johannes Andrea) Perollo, son of Andrea, and that the family’s principal agent and gabellootto for those same fiefs was a certain Bonfiglio Pachi. The latter was quite likely a relative (perhaps the father) of the abovementioned Jorgi or Georgio Pachi, gabellootto of Buleben in 1499. Bonfiglio appears to have had a good relationship with the Perollo for only once does he not appear as their sole agent in Malta. In July 1473 when he was confirmed as Johannes’ representative for Gumerin along with another Maltese, Petrus Inglish.\textsuperscript{27} Thereafter, one sees Pachi exercising his function of trusted agent or gabellootto on three occasions. In November 1473 he sub-leased the fief of Bibrirru to Jacobo de Malta for four years at eight onze per annum.\textsuperscript{28} The following January Pachi was required to pay 2 once and 20 tari to Thommoe Pisano of Malta out of the gabelle collected from Gumerin. This sum represented part of a payment due to Pisano, following his sale of one cantaro and 26 rotudi (100 kg) of spun cotton (cactus filato) to Johannes Perollo at 5 once per cantaro.\textsuperscript{29} And Pachi was evidently still in his post as late as February 1487 when he deposited 14 once 18 tari with Johannes Andrea Perollo in respect of gabelle and spun and unspun cotton obtained from Gumerin.\textsuperscript{30} By then other Maltese were also transacting business on behalf of the family, such as Petrus Bercaux, who may have been responsible for their herds of cattle, and Inblay Michola, who appointed Don Nicolaus de Falseno as holder of the benefice of ua Misra, near Rafal Qormi.\textsuperscript{31}

In other instances the relationship between Pachi and the Perollo appears less than between employer and employer and more of two parties conducting business with each other. Thus on 25 November 1473 Pachi sold a black female slave to Johannes Perollo for 12 once 15 tari, payable out of the gabelle from Gumerin and Bebrirru.\textsuperscript{32} Then on the 29th of the month Pachi purchased 15 salme (41.25 hl) of wheat from Perollo for seven once, at a price of 14 tari per salme, payable mostly in Maltese cotton.\textsuperscript{33} On the same day the two men made another contract that brought to a conclusion a two-year old agreement whereby Pachi (here identified as curatarius - a term usually associated with the supervisor of the mandra - of the Perollo) had lent 30 once to Perollo who in return handed over ‘pro arrendamento’ to Pachi for one year the fief of Poliben in order to recover the sum of 24 once.\textsuperscript{34} Accordingly Pachi now declared himself satisfied and thus gave the fief back to Perollo. The remaining six once which Perollo owed to Pachi were possibly paid via a prior contract that saw Perollo forgive the Maltese the rent due by the latter on a field in Malta.\textsuperscript{35}

It should be evident by now that the connections between Malta and Sciacca in the later fifteenth century also incorporated sustained commercial exchanges. Not surprisingly, the commodities involved included two items typical of the areas, wheat from Sciacca and Maltese cotton but other items are also in evidence. If the figures quoted above are representative of a general trend, considerable quantities of Maltese cotton were being sent to Sciacca at the time, possibly to be re-shipped to other destinations in Sicily but perhaps also to be utilized by the local cloth industry.\textsuperscript{36} Maltese Jews were actively involved in the sale of cloth in Malta throughout this period, some of which was probably manufactured by them.\textsuperscript{37} A few seem to have extended their activities to Sciacca for on 3 June 1468\textsuperscript{38} a Maltese Jew by the name of Joseph de Missina sold cloth of various colours to a Jew of Palermo. Cheese features in another contract, dated 21 January 1474, which records the purchase by Henrico Bonavia of Malta of an impressive fifty cantara (about 3,968 kg) of the product, valued at 11 tari per cantara, from two Jews of Sciacca.\textsuperscript{39} For his part, Bonavia sold to these saccenti four rotudi of cotton (a little over 3 kg) costing 2 once and 12 tari per cantara. This Henrico Bonavia is perhaps the same individual who was named in a meeting of the universitas in 1468 as one of several ship owners (patronis bergantinorum) ferrying merchandise between Malta and Sicily and who was later an arbitrator in a commercial dispute.\textsuperscript{40}

One further connection between Malta and Sciacca from this period concerns the mention in the town’s notarial acts of some Maltese who crossed the stretch of

\textsuperscript{24} H. Bresc, 'The 'secrezia' and the royal patrimony in Malta: 1240-1450' in Medieval Malta. Studies on Malta before the Knights, ed. A. T. Luttrell. London 1975, 152.
\textsuperscript{25} Document of enfeoffment by Frederick IV of Sicily published in Fiorini 1999, doc. 18.
\textsuperscript{26} A. T. Luttrell, 'Approaches to Medieval Malta' in Luttrell 1975, 46.
\textsuperscript{27} ASS ND 22, not. G. Liotta: 5.7.1473.
\textsuperscript{28} ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 25.11.1473.
\textsuperscript{29} ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 26.1.1474.
\textsuperscript{30} ASS ND 23, not. G. Liotta: 4.2.1487.
\textsuperscript{31} Fiorini 1996, doc. 154 (23.4.1487), 217 (12.7.1487), 311 (30.12.1487).
\textsuperscript{32} ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 25.11.1473.
\textsuperscript{33} ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 29.11.1473.
\textsuperscript{34} ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 29.11.1473.
\textsuperscript{35} ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 26.11.1473.
\textsuperscript{37} R. Wettering, The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages. Malta 1985, 46-8.
\textsuperscript{38} ASS ND 21, not. G. Liotta: 2.6.1468.
\textsuperscript{39} ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 21.1.1474.
\textsuperscript{40} Wettering 1993, doc. 208, 610.
sea between the two islands in search of work. Waged labour was not uncommon in these parts of Sicily, such as the south-western part of the island, where agricultural activity was integrated into a well-established market economy. Sicilians and even southern Italians from Calabria and beyond regularly sought seasonal or year-round, specialized and unspecialized, employment in the many vineyards, and particularly in the *masserie* and *mandre* that characterized the countryside of western Sicily.41

The presence of Maltese workers in Sicily in the fifteenth century was noted some years ago by Henri Bresc, among them two men from *casali* Bilarcarra, one from *casali* Calcutin and another from *casali* Surrici, employed as fishermen in Palermo in 1454, vineyard workers, as well as others whose trade was not recorded.42 These migrant workers were part of a larger expatriate community of Maltese in Sicily, including some who sought refuge there as a result of war or economic hardship; their numbers were large enough to warrant discussions in council meetings to make them return to Malta.43 Two notarial acts from Sciaccia, dated 1486, reveal two Maltese working in Sciaccia. In the first document, Alfonso la Balistira from Gozo was employed by nobile Frederico de Mauricio of Sciaccia to work in his *massaria* and vineyard for one year (September through August) in return for a salary of 2 onze 12 tari *ad secrum*, that is without any additional payments in kind such as food or clothing.44 In the other contract, drawn up in October, Andrea Perollo, perhaps utilizing his connections with Malta, employed Bartholomeo Baldacchino from Malta until the middle of March.45 No details of the work to be performed were given, but it was possibly fairly skilled labour or one that was particularly in demand for, in contrast to Balistera, Baldacchino was to be paid an annual salary of 3 onze 18 tari *cum furnimentos* which is comparable to salaries paid by Perollo to other labourers working in his *massarie* and *mandre*.

The evidence presented in this paper testifies to the manifold and consistent links that existed between Malta and Sciaccia and between Malta and Sicily generally in the late Middle Ages. The role of Sicily as a chief source of imported foodstuffs in Malta is once more confirmed as is the key place of cotton in Maltese trade abroad. Those commercial exchanges, as the evidence on the Perollo demonstrates, also had their counterparts in the personal ties that connected elements of Maltese and Sicilian societies. Lastly, the examples of Maltese travelling to and from Sciaccia in search of work, to transact business with their associates, or as *gabellotti* of Sicilian landlords offer a contrast to the perception projected through other sources of medieval Malta as an isolated outpost on the Muslim-Christian frontier.

42. Bresc 1975, 133, 133n.
44. ASS ND 23, not. G. Liotta: 23.9.1486.
45. ASS ND 23, not. G. Liotta: 12.10.1486.