

MALTA, SCIACCA AND THE PEROLLO FAMILY, 1461-1499

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References to Sciacca in medieval Maltese sources have hitherto been rather fragmentary. It is known that a family from Sciacca, the Perollo, held a number of properties in Malta and was even represented in the island's municipal council or *universitas*. While Sciacca was one of the main outlets for grain in western Sicily, not 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 Sciacca 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 Sciacca of Maltese and Gozitan migrant workers.

Sciacca, 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. Sciacca'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.¹ 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.² 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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1. I. Scaturro, *Storia della città di Sciacca e dei comuni della contrada saccense fra il Belice e il Platani*, 2 vols. Naples, 1924-6 is now dated but remains the only study of medieval Sciacca; C. Trasselli, 'Società ed economia a Sciacca nel XV secolo' in C. Trasselli, *Mediterraneo e Sicilia all'inizio dell'epoca moderna*. Cosenza, 1977, 230-88, originally in A. Daneu Lattanzi and C. Trasselli, *Mostra Storico-Bibliografica di Sciacca*. Palermo, 1955 was based on a brief examination of the extensive collection of notarial registers in the *Archivio di Stato di Sciacca*.
2. C. Trasselli, 'Sull'esportazione dei cereali dalla Sicilia negli anni 1402-7', *Annali della Facoltà di Economia e Commercio dell'Università di Palermo*, 11, 1957, 217-52, repr. in Trasselli 1977, 331-70; O. Cancila, *Baroni e popolo nella Sicilia del grano*. Palermo, 1983, 15-20.

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

The land around Sciacca was largely controlled by the feudal nobility, among them the powerful Peralta clan, who held the county of Caltabellotta, 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 Sciacca.³ This association was reflected in the purchase of the *feudo* of San Bartolomeo, near Sciacca, 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.⁴ 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 fief of San Bartolomeo was in turn split up into several plots, which were then sub-leased to many individuals from Sciacca. The Perollo were, in fact, one of the principal landlords in the *terra* of Sciacca. 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.⁵ 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 fiefs, called *belripayri*, *massaria vecchia*, and *li dunzelli* belonged to the noblewoman Serena de Perollo in 1435-1436.⁶ 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.⁷ 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 Sciacca. Jacopo Perollo, *legum doctoris*, served as a judge in the middle years of the fifteenth century, and Andrea Perollo was a *jurato* in 1473-74.⁸ As in other *universitates*, political influence opened the door to profitable activities such as the right to collect *gabelle* (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 Sciacca.⁹

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 archives of Malta through the records of the *universitas*.¹⁰ Additional brief references are also found in the two recently published registers of the Maltese notary Giacomo Zabbara.¹¹ The municipal material reveals that the Perollo had established their presence in Malta on two fronts: as holders of fiefs 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 Sciacca), 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.¹² 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.¹³ There is no

3. H. Bresc, *Un monde méditerranéen: économie et société en Sicile, 1300-1450*, 2 vols. Rome-Palermo, 1986, II, 868n. This relationship lasted at least well into the fifteenth century. In 1473 the brothers Petrus and Dominicus Perollo were witnesses to the marriage of Philippus Peralta. ASS ND 22: G. Liotta, 10.6.1473. Bresc has argued that the family's roots in Sicily may extend back to the twelfth century: H. Bresc, 'La feodalizzazione in Sicilia dal vassallaggio al potere baronale' in *Storia della Sicilia*, 10 vols., ed. R. Romeo. Naples, 1979-81, III, 1980, 508; Bresc 1986, II, 868. Another client family of the Peralta were the Bondelmonte. The two lineages engaged in a series of violent incidents in the 1450s and 1460s: Bresc 1986, II, 901; C. Trasselli, *La "Questione Sociale" in Sicilia e la Rivolta di Messina del 1464*, Palermo 1955, 113.
4. V. D'Alessandro, *Politica e società nella Sicilia aragonese*. Palermo 1963, 269n.; Bresc 1980, 518.
5. Archivio di Stato, Sciacca, Notai Defunti [henceforth ASS ND] I, not. A. Liotta: 6.11.1434, 6.11.1434. This Andrea Perollo is almost certainly the same individual who is mentioned years later in connection with Malta.
6. ASS ND 2, not. A. Liotta: 11.9.1435, 17.1.1436, 19.1.1436. Serena, married to Matheo de Perollo, inherited the fiefs from her family, the Ferrario: G. L. Barberi, *I Capibrevi*, 3 vols (Palermo, 1888), III, 45.

7. ASS ND23, not. G. Liotta: 16.9.1486: Dominicus de Perollo, acting on behalf of his brother Petrus, leases '*la massaria di la dulfina*' located in the *feudo* Calatamauro to a man from Sambuca for one year '*ad medietatem fructus*.'
8. Bresc 1986, II, 866; ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 7.1.1474.
9. ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 24.9.1473, 16.6.1474.
10. *Acta Iuratorum et Consilii Civitatis et insulae maltae*. Associazione di Studi Malta-Sicilia/Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani, ed. G. Wettinger. Palermo, 1993.
11. *Documentary Sources of Maltese History. Part I, Notarial Documents. No. 1: Notary Giacomo Zabbara R494/1 (I) 1486-1488*, ed. S. Fiorini. Malta, 1996; *Documentary Sources of Maltese History. Part I, Notarial Documents. No. 2: Notary Giacomo Zabbara R494/1 (II-IV) 1494-1497*, ed. S. Fiorini. Malta 1999.
12. Wettinger 1993, doc. 179, 242, 243, 245, 565.
13. ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 17.3.1474. Johannes also asked his father to collect rents due for the fiefs of Gumerin and Behirru.

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 sia periculosa' or else the council itself would do this and force them to pay the costs.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 *onze* from Andrea, named as one of the 'rendatarii li quali su in Sichilia', as his contribution towards a general tax (*collecta*) of a thousand *onze*.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*.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 viceroy acknowledged that the *gabellotti* of Maltese fief-holders who lived abroad had the obligation to pay their respective contributions.¹⁷ The communication made specific reference to *misser* 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 viceroy 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.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 Jeorgio Pachi, *gabellotto* for the fief of Buleben, who

was requested to pay the sum of 3 *onze* and 27 *tari*.¹⁹ The other correspondence is addressed to Laurenzu Farruge, 'cabellotu di li jardini et territori . . . vocati lo Gomerino, lo Sammati, Beb Irrue et Bunuchale', holdings on which the total payment due amounted to 4 *onze*, 27 *tari* and 15 *grani*.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 jardinum*, evidently reserved for growing fruits and vegetables.²¹ It was then being managed by notary Laurencius Falzon, 'principalis gabellotus bonorum de li Pirollj sistencium jn Insola Melite', who sub-leased it to Lucas Tabone for four years at fourteen Sicilian *onze* annually. In the contract, Falzon stipulated that Tabone should plant fifty new trees in it each year and to 'bene colere, servire et jrrigare 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.²² The 1398 document confirmed that the rights to the fief belonged to Antonellus de Sancta Sophia, whose family benefited from several royal concessions in Malta during the second half of the fourteenth century.²³ Gumerin was purchased in 1318 by Guillelmus de Ragusia, of whom Antonellus de Sancta Sophia claimed to be a descendant, and one year prior to that was held by Guillemus Surdi. Rosario Gregorio, writing in the eighteenth

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

20. Wettinger 1993, doc. 973. Gomerino or Gumerin, also known as Ghemieri, a fief north-west of Rabat: Wettinger 2000, 222-3; A. T. Luttrell, 'The sale of Gumerin on Malta: 1318', *Estudios Historicos y Documentos de los Archivos de Protocolos*, 6, 1978, 167-77; reprinted in A. T. Luttrell, *The Making of Christian Malta. From the Early Middle Ages to 1530*. Aldershot 2002, essay XIII; Beb Irrue: Wettinger 2000, 31 notes various versions of this name, including *terrae Beburue* mentioned in an act of notary Amati de Messana of Sciacca dated 4.11.1485 and identifies the location with a fief on the outskirts of Rabat; *Bunuchale* or *Bunuhhala*: a fief in north-central Malta near Bingemma per Wettinger 2000, 73 who also notes a reference to it in a copy of an act of notary Amati de Messana of Sciacca dated 4.11.1465.

21. Fiorini 1999, doc. 162. Wettinger 2000, 321 lists various fields by this name in different locations.

22. The document was published in Luttrell 1978. It has recently been republished with a related document in *Documentary Sources of Maltese History. Part II. Documents in the State Archives, Palermo. No. 1. Cancellaria Regia: 1259-1400*, ed. S. Fiorini. Malta, 1999, doc. 194 and 195.

23. Fiorini 1999.

14. Wettinger 1993, doc. 694.

15. Wettinger 1993, doc. 218.

16. Wettinger 1993, doc. 219.

17. Wettinger 1993, doc. 305.

18. Wettinger 1993, doc. 700. It was thus customary that 'li feudotari quantuncunqu furisteri contribuxinu et paganu pro rata di li beni et renditi ki teninu in la dicta insula una cum li chitatini'.

century, noted that it was still in the hands of the Sancta Sophia in 1408.²⁴ 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 1366.²⁵ 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.²⁶

The sources from Sciacca provide some further information on the activities of the Perollo as landlords of Gumerin and also of Bebirrue and Poliben (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 *gabellotto* for those same fiefs was a certain Bonfiglio Pachi. The latter was quite likely a relative (perhaps the father) of the abovementioned Jorgi or Jeorgio Pachi, *gabellotto* 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 Inglisa.²⁷ Thereafter, one sees Pachi exercising his function of trusted agent or *gabellotto* on three occasions. In November 1473 he sub-leased the fief of Bibirru to Jacobo de Malfa for four years at eight *onze* per annum.²⁸ The following January Pachi was required to pay 2 *onze* and 20 *tari* to Thommeo 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 *rotuli* (100 kg) of spun cotton (*cuctonis filati*) to Johannes Perollo at 5 *onze* per *cantaro*.²⁹ And Pachi was evidently still in his post as late as February 1487 when he deposited 14 *onze* 18 *tari* with Johannes Andrea Perollo in respect of *gabelle* and spun and unspun cotton obtained from Gumerin.³⁰ By then other Maltese were also transacting business on behalf of the family, men such as Petrus Bercax, who may have been responsible for their herds of cattle, and Inblay Michola, who appointed Don Nicolaus de Falsono as holder of the benefice of *ta' Misraħ*, near Rahal Qormi.³¹

In other instances the relationship between Pachi and the Perollo appears less that between employee 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 *onze* 15 *tari*, payable out of the *gabelle* from Gumerin and Bebirrue.³² Then on the 29th of the month Pachi purchased 15 *salme* (41.25 hl.) of wheat from Perollo for seven *onze*, at a price of 14 *tari* per *salma*, payable mostly in Maltese cotton.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 *onze* 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 *onze*.³⁴ Accordingly Pachi now declared himself satisfied and thus gave the fief back to Perollo. The remaining six *onze* 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.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.³⁶ Maltese Jews were actively involved in the sale of cloth in Malta throughout this period, some of which was probably manufactured by them.³⁷ A few seem to have extended their activities to Sciacca for on 3 June 1468³⁸ a Maltese Jew by the name of Josep 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 *cantaro*, from two Jews of Sciacca.³⁹ For his part, Bonavia sold to these *saccensi* four *rotuli* of cotton (a little over 3 kg) costing 2 *onze* and 12 *tari* per *cantaro*. 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.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

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.

25. Document of enfeoffment by Frederick IV of Sicily published in Fiorini 1999, doc. 18.

26. A. T. Luttrell, 'Approaches to Medieval Malta' in Luttrell 1975, 46.

27. ASS ND 22, not. G. Liotta: 5.7.1473.

28. ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 25.11.1473.

29. ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 26.1.1474.

30. ASS ND 23, not. G. Liotta: 4.2.1487.

31. Fiorini 1996, doc. 154 (23.3.1487), 217 (12.7.1487), 311 (30.12.1487).

32. ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 25.11.1473.

33. ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 29.11.1473.

34. ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 29.11.1473.

35. ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 26.11.1473.

36. S. R. Epstein, 'The textile industry and the foreign cloth trade in late medieval Sicily (1300-1500): a "colonial relationship"?' *Journal of medieval history*, 15 (1989), 178n.

37. G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages*. Malta 1985, 46-8.

38. ASS ND 21, not. G. Liotta: 3.6.1468.

39. ASS ND 25, not. A. Liotta: 21.1.1474.

40. Wettinger 1993, doc. 208, 610.

sea between the two islands in search of work. Waged labour was not uncommon in those 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 Bilcarcara*, one from *casali Chalcutin* 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 Sciacca, dated 1486, reveal two Maltese working in Sciacca. In the first document, Alfonso la Balistera from Gozo was employed by nobile Frederico de Maurichio of Sciacca to work in his *massaria* and vineyard for one year (September through August) in return for a salary of 2 *onze* 12 *tari* 'ad scarsam', 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 furnimentis' 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 Sciacca 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 Sciacca 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.

41. Bresc 1986, I, 120-1; C. M. Rugolo, 'L'organizzazione del lavoro nelle campagne siciliane del tardo Medioevo', *Quaderni medievali*, 15, 1983, 53-79.

42. Bresc 1975, 133, 133n.

43. *Documentary sources of Maltese history*, III, *Documents of the Maltese universitas I: Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Miscellanea 33: 1405-1542*, ed. J. Del Amo García, S. Fiorini and G. Wettinger. Malta 2001, doc. 30 (d. 1481).

44. ASS ND 23, not. G. Liotta: 23.9.1486.

45. ASS ND 23, not. G. Liotta: 12.10.1486.