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The Merchants of Genoa and the Diffusion of Southern Italian Pasta Culture in Europe

Pe-i boccoin boin se fan e questioin.
Genoese proverb

1 Introduction

In the past several decades it has become received opinion among food scholars that the Arabs played the central rôle in the diffusion of pasta as a common food in Europe and that this development forms part of their putative broad influence on culinary culture in the West during the Middle Ages. This Arab theory of the origins of pasta comes in two versions: the basic version asserts that, while fresh pasta was known in Italy independently of any Arab influence, the development of dried pasta made from durum wheat was a specifically Arab invention and that the main point of its diffusion was Muslim Sicily during the period of the island's Arabo-Berber occupation which began in the 9th century and ended by stages with the Norman conquest and 'Latinization' of the island in the eleventh/twelfth century. The strong version of this theory, increasingly popular these days, goes further and, though conceding possible native European traditions, posits Arabic origins not only for dried pasta but also for the names and origins of virtually all forms of pasta attested in the Middle Ages, albeit without ever providing credible historical and linguistic evidence; Clifford Wright (1999: 618ff.) is the best known proponent of this approach.

In AUTHOR 2013 I demonstrated that the commonly held belief that lasagne were an Arab contribution to Italy's culinary arsenal is untenable and in particular that the Arabic etymology of the word itself, proposed by Rodinson and Vollenweider, is without merit: both word and item are clearly of Italian origin. In this paper I address the core question of the basic theory, that dried pasta was invented and diffused by the Arabs from medieval Sicily, a view that is also in my opinion without merit. The historical and linguistic evidence points clearly to there having been an indigenous pasta culture throughout southern Italy, as well as Sicily, and its diffusion to points north having been the work of northern Italian merchants, especially the Genoese; indeed, these same northern Italian merchants and later also their Catalan counterparts can be credited with having played a key rôle in the expansion of pasta consumption both in Spain and North Africa.

2 The Basis of the Arab Theory

The basis of the Arab theory of the origins of pasta in the West resides first and foremost in the references to pasta products in several cookbooks from around the Arab world before any such texts appeared in medieval Christian Europe; the first such European text appeared only around 1300. The Arabic term *itriyya*, a form of pasta, is attested in texts from the eastern Arab world starting in the ninth century and later also in texts from the western Arab world. The occurrence of related terms in southern Italy already in the Middle Ages, *tri* or *tria*, has then been explained as a result of Arab influence. There is much more to say about *itriyya* than is possible in the space available for this paper, so for now it must suffice to say that the word is unquestionably of Greek origin and appears already in late antiquity as the name of a form of pasta in both Greek and Aramaic sources — the occurrence of the word and item in Sicily and parts of southern Italy with large Greek-speaking populations resident, is more easily explained as reflecting directly Italo-Greek culture and the intermediacy of the Arabs is hardly necessary: when the Arabs brought their *itriyya* to Sicily, they surely found the Sicilians already eating their own *tria* (Romance) and *itria* (Greek). That said, that the Arabs knew and produced and consumed this early form of pasta, *itriyya*, is undeniable and it is furthermore undeniable that the appearance of the word in the Romance dialects of Iberia is due to Arab agency, where the form appears widely as *alatría/aletría*, with the Arabic definite article fused to the noun.

But there is one textual reference to *itriyya* in Arabic which is regarded as particularly important by those who support the Arab theory: in 1154 there appeared a geography written by Al-Idrisi, a scholar working at the court of the Norman King Roger of Sicily in Palermo, and in that work the author comments on a town near Palermo, Trabia, where *itriyya* were produced in considerable quantities and thence exported “to Calabria and other Muslim and Christian lands.” This passage has been taken uncritically as direct proof of the Arabs’ rôle in the development of pasta culture in Sicily and for their alleged invention of dry pasta and its large-scale manufacture. A more superficial interpretation of the text’s significance is hard to imagine. First, one notes that while Al-Idrisi’s employment at Roger’s court certainly reflects an abiding Arab presence in Sicily, the text appears at a point in time more than eighty years after the conquest of Palermo from the Arabs by the Normans and less than 80 years before the removal of the last Muslims from the island. This raises important questions, first about who it actually was in Trabia who was making what the author refers to in Arabic as *itriyya*, Arabs or ‘Italians’, and second and more importantly, who it was who had organized the manufacturing and who then was carrying out the export business. These questions are addressed in the following section of this paper.

Perhaps the superficiality of the historical analysis supporting the Arab theory has gone unnoticed on account of the widely perceived strength of the etymological evidence that its proponents have adduced. Indeed, key elements in discussions of the putative Arab rôle in the spread of pasta in Italy are the etymologies for two early names of pasta. The first of these involves the Italian word *lasagna*, which Rodinson and Vollenweider have argued is a loanword from Arabic, somehow derived from the well-attested medieval Arabic word *lawzinaj*, an almond-paste confection that according to those scholars was cut in rhomboid shapes and became in the European languages both the heraldic term, *lozenge*, and the culinary term, *lasagna*, *loseyn*, etc. As mentioned above, however, this theory is, in a word, wrong (AUTHOR 2013).

The other etymology is more important in that it has direct bearing on the specific question of the diffusion of dried pasta and in this case, food scholars universally embrace an Arabic origin for the word and the item known in Spanish as *fideos* and Italian as *fidellini* etc. Virtually all recent writers on the history of pasta have accepted blindly a bogus etymology for the word which derives it from the Arabic *fidawsh*; the real etymology of the word and its remarkable spread along trade routes will be addressed in section 4 below.

3 Al-Idrisi and the Pasta of Trabia

The ninth century A.D. was a period of extreme turbulence throughout southern Italy, in which there was a general political and socio-economic destabilisation due in large measure to attacks from the Arab world, as well as to the related power struggles between all the southern Italian states, namely, the Lombard states of Salerno, Benevento and Capua, the Byzantine region encompassing large sections of Apulia, Lucania and Calabria, and the formerly Byzantine independent territories in Campania of Gaeta, Naples and Amalfi. This period coincides with the period during which the Arabo-Berber forces of Ifriqiya carried out the principal part of their conquest and colonisation of Sicily (827-902). During the ninth century and on into the early tenth century, Arab coastal attacks were also carried out along the central and northern coasts of the Tyrrhenian Sea and along the Ligurian Sea, often with devastating effects, as in the sacking of Rome (846) and Genoa (934).

Not surprisingly the Arab predations in Italy provoked responses which manifested themselves in significant developments in the maritime military and associated resources for maritime trade; in addition one sees with increasing frequency real cooperation between small Italian states to confront and eliminate the Arab threat on and around the Italian mainland and even to carry the fight to Muslim-held lands in Sicily and North Africa. In this regard, a clear turning point is reached already in the second half of the tenth century, by which time the southern Italian states had eliminated not just the Arab raiding-bases on the

mainland but by and large even the threat of further coastal raids; in these efforts, the Campanian coastal cities – Gaeta, Naples, Amalfi and Salerno – played central rôles. To the north, in Tuscany and Liguria, the coastal cities of Pisa and Genoa led the way in developing navies that were superior to those of the Arabs, as evidenced by their string of naval victories in the tenth and early eleventh century.

With the elimination of the Arab raids and a reduction in the level of internecine wars, southern Italy achieved a level of stability able to support gradual demographic and economic growth, which manifested itself in the expansion of agriculture to areas that had been depopulated and neglected (marked in some areas by the process of *incastellamento*, Martin 2002: 22) and to an expansion in trade (Wickham 1981: 149ff.). A key rôle in the growth of trade was played by the already active city of Amalfi, which had long been involved in the movement of luxury goods from Byzantine and Arab lands to the West, but Gaeta, Naples and Salerno, as well as several Adriatic cities in Apulia, also played their part in the general upswing of mercantile activity. Though there are signs of some modest development of industry (e.g. linen in Naples), agricultural products were the main elements of southern Italian production for export, especially lumber, nuts and other tree materials, wine and grain.

Moving further into the eleventh and early twelfth century, there is an intensification of trade between southern Italy and the northern trading centres of Genoa and Pisa, as well as Venice; Genoa is particularly engaged in the south, with regular close ties to the southern trading towns of Gaeta and Salerno. It is noteworthy that Amalfi, long specialized in the movement of luxury goods, begins to fade in importance, being eclipsed in this trade by the northern cities. In northern and north-central Italy, with the initial phases of the urbanization and industrialization of the High Middle Ages underway, the agricultural products of continental southern Italy were in great demand to help feed the new concentrations of population, especially in Genoa, a city with hardly any agricultural hinterland of its own. Though the textual evidence for trade in this period is quite fragmentary, it is clear that there was a northward movement of grain along both the west and east coasts of Italy and on occasion we even see evidence of the shipment of grain to Muslim lands from the continental south, for example, from Byzantine Calabria to Muslim Sicily in the tenth century (Kreutz 1991: 144-5). Indeed, during the period before the Norman conquest of Sicily in the second half of the eleventh century, there seems to be no evidence whatsoever of the export of grain from that island to Christian lands but rather clear indications that the continental south did have exportable surpluses of grain which were regularly shipped north.

Just as political fragmentation and instability had exacerbated the Arab raids in southern Italy in the ninth/tenth century, Muslim Sicily was similarly weakened from within in the eleventh century. In the context of the growing military and

economic strength of the Italian states, both the Genoese and Pisans and the increasingly powerful Normans of southern Italy saw Sicily as a vulnerable and attractive place for expansion, leading to the relatively rapid conquest of the island under Norman leadership in 1061-1092, even before they had fully consolidated their control over the southern mainland. And there was little if any lag in time before the northern Italians and most especially the Genoese began to exploit the commercial opportunities that Norman control offered.

There are two key socio-economic aspects of northern Italian participation in the 'Latinization' of Sicily under the Normans. First, as was normal in the Middle Ages, regular trade with a given target city involved the establishment of a merchants' colony there, with its *fondaco*, church and dwellings; thus we find Messina early on fully Christian with a local Greco-Italian population and merchant colonies of Genoese, Florentines, Pisans, as well as Amalfitans and others. In Palermo, already in the early twelfth century, there are similar merchant colonies and the rapidity with which the Ligurians took on the central position in long-distance trade from Sicily is clearly indicated by the fact that already in 1116 they begin to receive privileged legal and commercial status on the island (Abulafia 1977: 62ff.), a development which bespeaks a preceding period of activity and accumulated good-will.

Second, in east-central Sicily we find the establishment of a noteworthy number of agricultural towns – the so-called Gallo-Italic settlements such as Aidone, San Fratello and Piazza Armerina – whose colonists were primarily drawn from western Liguria and neighbouring southern Piemonte, territories under the control of the Aleramici family, to which belonged Adelaide, wife of Count Roger I and mother to the first Norman Sicilian king, Roger II; the initial establishment of these colonies may well date to the period of Adelaide's regency from 1101 to 1112, after her husband's death and before the maturity of Roger II. These colonies filled the dual purpose of exploiting underused land and helping to drive the Sicilian Arabs further to the south and west. The agricultural aspect of these settlements must, however, be viewed in relation to the overarching economic interests of both the Normans and the northern Italian merchants, for it is already in this period that we see the beginnings of a move toward monocultural farming geared toward the production of large quantities of grain and cotton for export (Abulafia 1993: 21ff.). This process is attested in the twelfth century also for the area around Palermo, made capital during Adelaide's regency, as can be seen by the development of the massive land-holdings of Monreale Cathedral, just south of the city (Bercher et al.: 1979). In this context, we should also note the mention of the 'estate of a Genoese' in the province of Palermo from the 1180s and from the period 1131-1148 there is mention of an estate owned by a Piemontese near Patti on the north coast between Palermo and Messina (Peri 1978: 36). Though Arabs still formed a significant part of the Sicilian population

in the period, especially in the west and interior of the island, and Arab merchants still formed part of Palermo's make-up, by the early to mid-twelfth century the northern Italians dominated not only the long-distance trade of Sicilian (as well as southern Italian) goods to northern Italy and elsewhere but they had even insinuated themselves into the local trade of Sicily, as demonstrated by a document in Arabic from about 1150 which shows that a voyage along the north coast of Sicily by Muslim merchants was actually financed by an Italian and likely Genoese merchant (Abulafia 1993: 21).

It is against this socio-economic backdrop that we must read Al-Idrisi's mention of the export of pasta from Trabia around 1150. Trabia lies directly on the coast, about 30 km. to the east of Palermo, squarely in the part of Sicily that during the first half of the twelfth century was the scene of both agricultural and commercial exploitation by the Genoese. We can be reasonably certain that the actual export of Trabia's pasta was carried out by the Ligurians and have very good reasons to believe that the production not only of the pasta itself but probably even the grain from which it was made may have been organized by Genoese colonists.

Commerce in grain, undoubtedly including durum wheat, was not something new to the Genoese arriving in Sicily but had long been part of their commercial activities in continental southern Italy which had begun at least in the eleventh century, when trade between Muslim Sicily and the north did not involve grain. Indeed, during the Norman period itself, according to the *Registrum curiae archiepiscopalis Ianuae* of 1143, the chief points of the grain trade in the south for the Genoese were Messina and Naples, with Salerno playing a key rôle at times as well (Abulafia 1977: 71ff, Brancaccio 2001:20ff). Some of this trade from Campania surely involved transshipment of Sicilian grain but there is no reason to believe that the movement of grain from the continental south (including regions where durum wheat was produced) would have abruptly stopped with the conquest of Sicily. The absence of any linguistic evidence in northern Italian dialects for Arabic involvement in the spread of pasta culture alongside the clear and multiple connexions to southern Italian pasta terminology makes it all but certain that the trade mentioned by Al-Idrisi represented not the introduction of an Arab culinary novelty to the Ligurians, as is generally assumed these days, but rather an expansion of trade in familiar southern products to a new source.

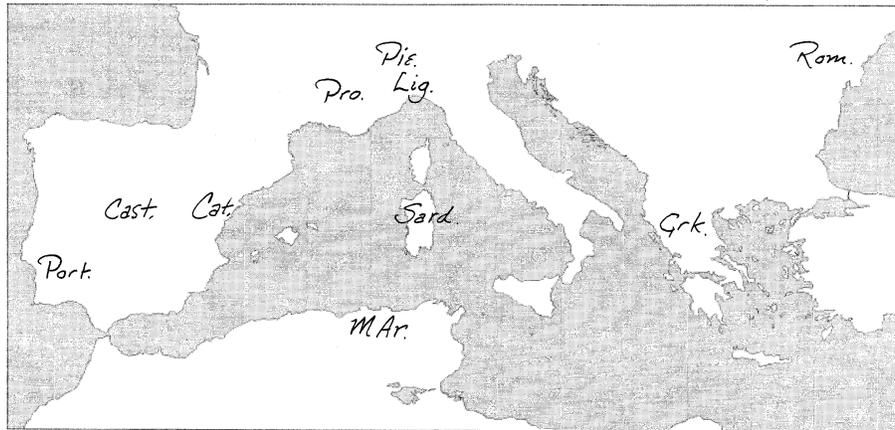
While it is safe to assume that the Arabo-Berbers who conquered Sicily knew pasta before they set out across the sea, it is equally safe to assume that it had already long been familiar to the Greco-Latin Sicilian population they encountered, as it was to the Greco-Latin population of the southern Italian mainland. And the means by which pasta culture – including durum wheat and dried pasta – diffused northward was first and foremost the result of the economic and social interactions of the northern Italians with the southern Italians.

4 The Etymology of *fidê/fideus*

The last major piece of evidence used to support the Arab theory is the etymology of another pasta word that arose in the late Middle Ages, namely, the word that appears in Catalan as *fideus*, in Arabic as *fidawsh* and in Italy as *fidei*, *fidelini*, etc.

Figure 1

Distribution of basic relevant forms cited in earlier discussions of the etymology (Flechia 1876, Schiaffini 1924, Corominas 1954).



Portuguese *fidêus*, Castilian *fideos*, Catalan *fideus*, Maghrebian Arabic *fidêuš*, *fidáuš*, Provençal *fidêous*, Piemontese *fidêi*, Ligurian *fidei*, *fidê*, Sardinian *findeus*, Greek *φιδές*, Romanian *fideà*.

In this case it is noteworthy that the received etymology among food historians today is one that was actually proposed by a distinguished historical linguist and lexicographer, Joan Corominas but, rather depressingly, it seems many of these food historians have not actually bothered to read Corominas' discussion and an egregious misreading has arisen which is now endlessly repeated in print and on the internet about this word.

Corominas' 1954 etymology of Castilian *fideos* derives the word *fideo/fideos* not directly from Arabic; rather, it was in his view "a word created in the Mozarabic Romance" (the Romance dialect of Al-Andalus), formed from the verb *fidear* 'to grow, to overflow', which itself was a form built on the borrowed Arabic root *fâḍ* 'grow, overflow' (imperative *fiḍ*). His proposal was intended to address what he saw as shortcomings of earlier attempts by linguists to explain the family of related words starting from a specifically northern Italian point of origin, to wit: 1) in his view, one cannot derive the Iberian forms from the Italian forms but the opposite is possible; 2) the earliest attestations of the word are from Al-Andalus in the thirteenth century, before the Italian forms are attested; 3) the Arabic forms *fidawsh* etc. are clearly derived from Iberian Romance and

Corominas states this most plainly; he says of them “[their] phonetic structure proclaims from a mile away their Hispanic or Romance origin.” It is in this last regard that food historians seem to have misread or not read at all Corominas, for it is a commonplace in the recent literature to claim that the Arabic *fidawsh* is original and the basis of all the Romance language forms.

As learned as Corominas’ attempt to explain the origins of *fideos* is, he missed the mark. First, as others such as Corriente (2008) and Toso (1993) have remarked, his derivation of the word from a marginally attested Ibero-Romance verb meaning ‘to grow or overflow’ seems semantically quite unsatisfactory as the name for a form of pasta. Second and no less important, Corominas did not examine the Italian evidence carefully and missed the fact that the considerable diversity of related dialect forms in northern Italy is impossible to explain in terms of an imported word from Iberia; and this problem is exacerbated if one considers the southern Italian dialect forms that I bring into the discussion for the first time below. Third, as a general dialectological principle, it is normal to find greater diversity of forms in the original area of an innovation than in areas to which the innovation spreads. Indeed, the complexity of the Italian dialect evidence, alongside the striking similarity across the Iberian and Arabic forms, is problematic for Corominas’ position, when we also consider what we know generally about the patterns of trade in agricultural goods and especially of durum wheat and pasta products in the western Mediterranean during the period of the first attestations: in the thirteenth century, when we first find mention of *fidawsh* in two Arabic cookbooks from southern Spain, the general movement of the durum wheat trade was from southern Italy and Sicily first to northern Italy and later also to Iberia and North Africa, and this trade, as discussed above, had originally become a large-scale business in the hands of the Genoese and other northerners in the eleventh century, with the Catalans becoming players in this trade in the late twelfth and thirteenth century, particularly after they gained control of Sardinia and Sicily.

In light of my objections to Corominas’ etymology, a reconsideration of the Italian evidence is warranted. The only way to account for all the diversity of forms we find in the Italian dialects is to posit as the original base form a southern Italian word *filati*, a word attested throughout southern Italy and Sicily in modern times referring to string-like forms of pasta, in some cases made simply, in some cases with a hole that is formed by means of the use of a reed, piece of wood or a thin metal rod, *un filo di ferro*. In the first case, the action involved in Italian is *filare* ‘to make a thread’ and the result would be then *un filato*. Similarly the result of using the *filo di ferro* can also be described as *un filato*. Note that this exact use of the verb *filare* and the use of the *filo di ferro* as a pasta-making tool are both attested clearly already in the fifteenth century in the cookbook by

Maestro Martino of Como and these turns of phrase are undoubtedly much older than that.

The key step in my etymology involves explaining the relationship between southern Italian *filati* and the range of forms we find in northern Italy. Here it is the hitherto ignored forms of Calabria that are of especial importance. These forms, *filei*, *fileja*, *fileda*, are aberrant in their general southern Italian and Calabrian dialectal contexts in that they appear to reflect two sound changes that are generally alien to the region but common in the dialects of north-western Italy, namely, the fronting of the stressed vowel *-a-* to *-e-* and the lenition of the intervocalic *-t-* to *-d-* or even to *-(zero)-*. Indeed, these forms look remarkably like the forms we would expect to see in Genoese or Piemontese dialects of the twelfth century.

An historical explanation readily comes to mind, namely, the aforementioned northern Italian trading colonies in the south, which must have also been established in some of the small port towns of Calabria, such as Tropea (in a zone where the term *fileja* is still current). And in this regard, it should also be mentioned that ‘Gallo-Italic’ (primarily Ligurian and Piemontese) agricultural communities were established not only in Sicily during the Norman and Swabian periods but also in some parts of the continental south, especially in Calabria and Basilicata; some of these maintained their distinctive northern Italian dialects into modern times while in some places, only isolated lexical reflexes still survive. In any event, it was precisely among these colonists and the northern merchants with whom they were in contact that the southern term *filati* was borrowed into northern-type dialects, in which the word was adapted phonologically, giving rise both to the Calabrian forms cited above and to the form *fidei*, which is the basis for the majority of the later attested forms in north-western Italy and Provence. In this regard, we can explain the *-d-* in northern-type dialects as an adaptation of the strongly articulated and alien intervocalic *-l-* of the southern dialects: intervocalic *-l-* in Genoese during this time was itself reduced to a weak *r*-like sound and ultimately eliminated (Old Genoese *firao* ‘filato’).

I propose in addition that the remarkable unity of all the Iberian and Arabic forms finds ready explanation through the socio-historical and economic context of the period. Corominas was right that the Arab forms are to be explained as secondary to Iberian Romance forms but the source he found, along with the proposed half-Arabic etymon, was wrong. The source was surely Catalan, and it would therefore do well to address briefly the Catalan relationship to Italy in this period.

Already in the eleventh century, the Genoese, Pisans and other Italians had commercial contacts with Catalonia and by the early twelfth century the Genoese in particular had resident mercantile colonies there. In addition, the Italians helped the Catalans in several military campaigns to reconquer lands from the Muslims

(Almería, Tortosa, Majorca) and Genoese and other Italian settlers formed a part of the subsequent Christian populations of these areas. The contacts and interactions between the Catalans and Genoese intensified throughout this period (Ferrer i Mallol 2005) and by the beginning of the thirteenth century, “there was valuable cooperation in the funding of trading expeditions to north Africa, and both Catalans and Italians were active in the grain trade out of Sicily” (Abulafia 1997: 52). Working often together in the thirteenth century, as Dauverd (2006: 46) puts it, “Catalans and Genoese infiltrated all aspects of commercial life in Sicily.”

The historical and linguistic facts dovetail perfectly. We posit that the Genoese term was borrowed into Catalan in the twelfth century, when the Genoese rendition of *filati* was almost certainly [fidædi]. Borrowed into Catalan in this period and simply adapted morphologically — fitted with the Catalan -s plural — the form would give us by well-known and datable sound change ([-d#>-w#], see Gulsoy 1977; thus [fidæd] > [fidəw]) the form attested, *fideus*, which in turn is a perfect source by which to explain the Arab form *fidawsh*.

The contrast between the diversity of Italian forms and the uniformity of Iberian and Arabic forms reflects, in my opinion, the fact that the consumption of these noodles was more restricted in Iberia, more often a question of a commercial product, whereas in northern Italy, it is clear that the family of *fidei* names refers both to fresh, home-made pasta forms, as well as to commercial products. In the context of home use, the tremendous diversity of dialect names in Italy arises naturally.

To sum up, the pasta term *filati* was borrowed from southern Italian dialects into Genoese, possibly as early as the eleventh century (before Sicily was involved) or else in the early twelfth century, leaving traces of the original contact forms in Calabria (*fileja* etc.); the phonologically adapted form, *fidei* etc., spread through the dialects of northwestern Italy but in part as a form of fresh pasta. But the Genoese clearly made a dried, commercial product that bore this name and as a long-distance trade item it was further diffused throughout the Genoese mercantile empire: to the east it went to their contacts in Greece and on the Black Sea in Romania (see figure 1), while to the west it spread already in the twelfth century to Catalonia. Subsequently, the adapted Catalan form, *fideus*, spread along their mercantile routes to the rest of Iberia, including Castilian lands (*fideos*) and Moorish Andalusia in the thirteenth century and ultimately also to North Africa (*fidawsh*). We see then that rather than being evidence of diffusion of pasta from the Arab lands to Europe as is universally claimed by food historians these days, *fidawsh* is unambiguous evidence of the exact opposite.

Conclusion

I repeat: I am not claiming that the Arabs did not know pasta in the Middle Ages nor do I deny that they were responsible for the introduction of a form of pasta, *itria* (> Spanish & Portuguese *aletria*) to Iberia. But it is striking that in Iberia, where an Arabo-Berber presence was of vastly longer duration than in Sicily, no pasta culture developed, not even in Andalucía, where Moorish influence was most abiding and deepest: pasta in Portugal and most of Spain has never been more than, at most, a secondary element of the regional cuisines. The one exception in Iberia is the Catalan-speaking lands of the east, precisely the part of Spain which had long-standing political, cultural and, most importantly, economic ties to southern Italy and Genoa in the later Middle Ages. With regard to Sicily then, it makes no sense whatsoever to attribute the existence of a strong pasta culture there to the Arabs, when Sicily shared to a great degree the same Greco-Latin cultural background that existed in continental southern Italy, a place with its own deeply-rooted and old pasta culture, from classical times on.

And with regard to the diffusion of pasta culture from its old home in the south of Italy to northern Italy and beyond, the evidence is overwhelming that this movement was the result of the northern Italian merchants' expansion into southern Italy and then Sicily in the eleventh and twelfth century. With regard to the specific issue of dried pasta, we find no evidence that the Arabs ever engaged in long-distance trade of this product; rather, the evidence of the socio-economic background of the pasta exports from Trabia and the linguistic evidence of the development of the word *filati/fidei/fideus* make it quite clear that it was the northern Italians and Catalans, and especially the Genoese, who were the real agents of the diffusion of dried pasta out of its southern Italian and Sicilian homeland.

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