



Neapolitan *Pastiera* and the Religious Significance of Wheatberries

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Introduction

Little known outside Italy, one of the most beloved dishes of Naples and Campania is a sweet preparation that traditionally is closely, almost exclusively, associated with the celebration of Easter: *pastiera* is a pie made with a pastry crust and filled with sweetened and well-scented ricotta, eggs, candied fruit, and, in its most prized and presumably most traditional version, cooked whole wheatberries. This inclusion of whole wheatberries is striking, for their use in Italy's cuisines is very limited and typically has decidedly rustic associations. Yet *pastiera* is a dish that has belonged to the culinary repertoire of elite circles associated with Naples at least since the Angevin period (1266-1442), a relationship clearly reflected in the origins of the dish's usual name. Direct textual evidence for the cookery of the non-elite is typically lacking before the nineteenth century, but earlier indirect, literary evidence shows that *pastiera* has for centuries been a dish popular with the lower echelons of society and, as I demonstrate here, its ultimate origins surely lie in their culinary culture. Indeed, the characteristic use of whole wheatberries fits into a pattern with other dishes all bearing religious significance in various places in southern Italy, the ancient *Magna Graecia*, and in turn these dishes have close analogues in Greece and other lands which through the Orthodox religion have undergone Greek cultural influence. The history of *pastiera* thus offers us a striking instance of the role of solemn festivities as a contact point between high and low socio-cultural strata in a strongly hierarchical society.

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Pastiera in Naples and Campania in Recent Times

A central part of the traditional culinary culture of Naples is acceptance of communally established and generationally transferred recipes, and the generally accepted limits on variation which a given recipe admits. This attitude does not stifle culinary creativity, which always has room for expression in many contexts, but it does make it possible to maintain a core culinary base with which the community identifies and takes deep pride in; in this way, culinary change is hardly precluded, but it is slowed down. As argued in previous work, nowhere in a cuisine are the brakes on change stronger than in the area of foods associated with solemn festivities (Buccini 2013: 97, 2015a:



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334). In general – and especially for the lower ranks of society – joyous festivities strongly tend to be occasions where a cuisine is particularly open to innovation and the incorporation of new or alien foodstuffs and dishes. *Pastiera* is a dish associated with Easter, the most important and joyous of holidays in southern Italy, but, as I demonstrate below, it is an extraordinary dish in that it is also closely tied to the last days of Lent, the most solemn days of the Christian calendar. It is worthwhile to bear these points in mind during the following discussion.¹

Pastiera in its ‘Classic’ Form

As one would expect, there is a core recipe for *pastiera tout court* (also referred to as ‘*pastiera napoletana*’) which admits relatively little variation if it is to deserve the name in the eyes of most Campanians.

The pie is made with a *pasta frolla* crust, traditionally with lard, though butter has gradually entered into the recipe as an acceptable alternative. One of the three principal ingredients of the filling is fresh ricotta, typically made with the whey from sheep’s milk though in areas where ricotta is produced from other kinds of milk (e.g. buffalo milk), that is also used. Eggs reinforced with a couple of extra yolks are another central ingredient. The third main ingredient is the most characteristic one, namely cooked whole wheatberries (*grano cotto*) of the common variety (*grano tenero*, *triticum aestivum*). A fairly recent accommodation to the pace of modern life is the use of *grano cotto* purchased in jars, but to be true to tradition one prepares the grain oneself, a process which involves two to three days of soaking and cooking the grain until it is tender but still whole; the soaking is long, with multiple changes of water, and the cooking is then reasonably short, though with dry grains of wheat the times vary according to various factors. Some recipes call for soaking and then cooking in two stages, first in water and then in milk; the cooking in milk sometimes includes also other ingredients such as lard, sugar, and vanilla. If one purchases pre-cooked grain, one proceeds directly to cooking the wheatberries in milk.

Preparation of the filling involves beating the ricotta with a good dose of sugar until it is smooth, further mixing with the eggs and cooked grain and the flavourings. Of these the essentials are grated lemon and/or orange zest; candied fruit, especially *cedro* (citron), orange, and/or *cucuzzata* (squash); and a dose of orange blossom water. A pinch of cinnamon is included by many cooks. A recent development employed by some is the further addition to the filling of some *crema pasticcera* (custard) made with milk/cream, flour, egg yolk, sugar, and vanilla, which is acceptable to traditionalists as a supplement to, but not as a replacement for, the ricotta.

The pie is decorated with strips of the same dough used for the base, arranged most often to form a diamond-pattern lattice top (a straight cross pattern is sometimes used) before it is cooked in an oven. A widespread final touch to the cooked pie is a dusting of powdered sugar.



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For many Campanian families the preparation of *pastiera* and other (especially savoury) pies that are part of the Easter celebration is very much part of the overall holiday experience. Of course, one can also buy traditional versions from pastry shops, and, not surprisingly, many shops offer *pastiera* not just at Easter but also at other times of the year. Professional pastry chefs commonly offer versions that are less traditional, for example, adding chocolate bits to the filling or using *crema pasticcera* as a principal element in the filling.

Other variants on the classic recipe include replacing the wheatberries with rice or farro (which refers actually to three ‘ancient’ grains: spelt, emmer, einkorn). Barley is also used nowadays to make otherwise traditional *pastiere* in many emigrant communities, e.g. in the United States.

Related Dishes Bearing the Name ‘*Pastiera*’

Throughout Campania there exists alongside *pastiera napoletana* a closely related family of dishes: *pastiera di pasta*, though that appellation is relatively rarely encountered. More usual are names in which the qualification specifies the form of pasta used: *pastiera di tagliolini*, *tagliatelle*, *maccherone*, *fedellini*, etc.

The most striking difference between the two families of *pastiere* is the use of whole grain (wheat, rice, barley) in the one and the use of a boiled form of dough in the other, a change which not only renders the two very different with regard to flavour and texture but also, as discussed below, alters the symbolic character of the dish. Ricotta is not used in the pasta-based *pastiere*; rather, the boiled pasta sits in a bath of milk and beaten egg which is largely absorbed before the final baking. The flavouring agents, however, are generally similar to those used in the classic *pastiera*: an ample amount of sugar, candied fruit, lemon and/or orange zest, vanilla, cinnamon, and a flower-based essence (orange blossom water or *millefiori*).

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Grano cotto: A Matter of Life and Death

As mentioned above, the use of whole grain – wheatberries and farro – have long been associated with rustic cookery or cookery of the poor; one thinks, for example, of the dish *mesc-ciua* of the mountainous area of eastern Liguria.² Use of whole grains has surely survived in some dishes in part because their flavour and texture are highly appreciated, but, from a practical point of view, the energy saved in not milling the grain is offset by the longer preparation times required for soaking and cooking. In Italy, a land where porridges of cracked or milled grain, bread, and pasta have been staples since classical antiquity, the choice – in effect – to go back in time and consume whole grain, especially the more slowly prepared wheatberries, is in some sense an extraordinary act. While some wheatberry dishes, such as *mesc-ciua*, may owe their survival primarily to aesthetic considerations or their value in representing local identity, others have or once had (in addition) a strong religious motivation, and in southern Italy the religious connection is particularly strong.





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Other Wheatberry Dishes of Southern Italy

A wheatberry dish still popular in parts of Puglia (especially in and around Foggia) is called *grano dei morti*, 'grain of the dead', or in dialect *cicc cuott*, 'cooked kernels'. Typically this dish contains boiled wheatberries, pomegranate seeds, walnuts, and bits of chocolate, and is dressed with sugar and sweet, syrupy *vincotto* (greatly reduced and caramelized grape juice). *Grano dei morti* is traditionally consumed on All Souls' Day.

Another sweet dish featuring cooked whole wheatberries is associated most often with Sicilian cuisine and called *cuccia*, but dishes bearing the same name are encountered in many communities in the continental south, throughout Calabria and on into Basilicata to the northeast and southern Campania to the north. In Sicily there are several sweet variants, ranging in richness from just wheatberries sweetened with sugar and grape must to a preparation in which the grain is cooked in milk or cream to a version, popular in Palermo, in which ricotta is a central ingredient. Savoury versions bearing the name '*cuccia*' that are traditional in some communities are in essence wheatberry and legume soups. On the continent, both sweet and savoury versions are found in Calabria, but in southern Campania and in Basilicata it seems the savoury preparations (resembling the aforementioned Ligurian *mesc-ciua*) are the norm.³ In this connection, we should also note that in the surviving Greek dialects of southern Italy (today all moribund), such wheat and legume soups bear a different but clearly very old name, namely, '*purvia*' or '*porgia*' which derives from *πολφία* (Rohlf 1930: 133, 208); cf. Classical Greek *πολφός* 'farinaceous food', *πολφοφάκη* 'soup of *polphós* and lentils' (Montanari 2015: 1719), where '*polphós*' was almost certainly a form of pasta.

In the east of southern Italy, we find that the term '*cuccia*' there does not designate any cooked dish but is found in some of the surviving Greek dialects of Otranto province in the south of the Salento peninsula as the word for 'fava bean' (Rohlf 1930: 133). In southern Puglia, we do, however, find sweet preparations with wheatberries that resemble some of the sweet versions of *cuccia* in Sicily and Calabria and are very much the same preparation described above for northern Puglia, '*grano dei morti*'; in Salento, the dish is called *colva*, while in Bari and Foggia the form of the name is *coliba*, though it seems in Foggia this name is dying out (Gaspardo 2013).⁴

We have already noted that in Puglia, *grano dei morti* or '*colva/koliba*' is a dish eaten on All Souls' Day. In Sicily, *cuccia* is closely tied to the Feast of Saint Lucy on December thirteenth and so falls on a holiday traditionally associated with the winter solstice and thus with the start of lengthening days, the return of the sun that brings renewed life. In Calabria, *purvia/porgia* is also traditionally consumed on Saint Lucy's Day, though in some places it is part of the celebration of Saint Nicholas's Day the week before (6 December); finally, in at least some places in Basilicata, the savoury *cuccia* with wheatberries and legumes is eaten on May Day and thus surely can be regarded as a food associated with fertility (see Rohlf 1930: 133, 208).

Taken altogether, these various wheatberry dishes generally show association with days of overt (Christian: All Souls', Saint Lucy's, Saint Nicholas's) or covert (residual



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pagan: May Day) religious significance and are all associated with commemorations/celebrations of death or the renewal of life after death – in this regard, Campania's Easter dish of *pastiera* fits in very well. But the other southern Italian wheatberry dishes all have through their names clear connections to Greek culture, whereas *pastiera* does not.

The Relationship between Southern Italian and Greek Wheatberry Dishes

Though many Italian writers have mentioned the ties between Italian and Greek symbolic uses of wheatberries in relation to specific dishes, I am aware of no broader treatment of the topic. Outside of Italy, the Greek facts are relatively well-known and, while ties between Greek culture and the cultures of the Middle East, Balkans, and eastern Europe in this regard have been discussed by many, the southern Italian evidence seems to have gone largely under scholarly radar.⁵

The occurrence of the names '*coliba*' and '*colva*' in Puglia represents the most obvious connection to Greek tradition and the composition of these dishes is strikingly close to that of Greece's *kollyva* (κόλλυβα): with many variations in details, the basic recipe for the Greek preparation includes cooked whole wheatberries, sweetened with honey or sugar and augmented with whole and crushed nuts, dried fruit, sesame seeds, parsley, and pomegranate seeds. The dialect names of the dish in Puglia are clearly and straightforwardly derived from the Greek name just cited: with the accent on the initial syllable, the southern Pugliese form '*colva*' shows syncope of the unstressed medial vowel and the form '*coliba*', with -b-, may reflect the partial b/v merger that obtains in some southern Italian dialects (further research here is required). Comparing the occasions on which the Greeks and other Orthodox communities consume wheatberry dishes (e.g. Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania; Feeley-Harnik 2015: 160) the match continues: while the Orthodox tradition famously uses *kollyva* in connection with funerals, the dish is also consumed on other occasions that commemorate the dead, including All Souls' Day, as in Puglia.

While derivatives of Gr. '*kollyva*' ('*koliva*') appear only in Puglia, '*cuccia*' (with some variant forms) is found as the name of wheatberry dishes in a much larger area, extending from Basilicata westward to southern Campania and Calabria and on across all of Sicily. As noted above, there is at once greater variation in the Italian dishes so named and also greater deviation in the recipes from the Greek and Pugliese *kolliva/coliba*. The *cuccia* family of dishes are, it seems, also not associated with All Souls' Day but in many cases are linked to the Feast of Saint Lucy, bearing an unmistakable though less direct association with the dead and death. It should also be noted that whereas Pugliese *coliba/colva* is a dish suitable for the strictest fast days, including by Greek standards where even the use of olive oil is prohibited on the most solemn occasions, the dishes bearing the name '*cuccia*' vary in this regard, from extremely (no animal products nor olive oil) to less austere (with dairy in sweet preparations and olive oil in the savoury dishes).⁶

'*Cuccia*' derives from an old Greek word (sg. κουκκίον, pl. κουκκιά) meaning both



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'kernel' and 'bean' (especially 'fava') and in the plural took on a collective sense of 'a dish of kernels/wheatberries' or, as in the savoury versions discussed above, 'a dish of wheatberries and beans'. Regarding the historical relationship between the two Greek-derived names of wheatberry dishes in southern Italian dialects, Rohlf's provides a precious piece of data. In his entry for 'cuccia' he notes: '*Brei aus Weizenkörnen ist in Griechenland eine weitverbreitete Speise; dieser Brei (sonst τα κόλυβα) heißt auch in Arkadien τα κουκκιά*' (1930: 133). This Greek dialect evidence viewed together with the Italian evidence gives us an insight into the relative chronology of the spread of the Greek names for wheatberry dishes into Italy. The simplest explanation is that the Arkadian κουκκιά represents a relic form, likely replaced elsewhere in Greece at some point by the innovation κόλυβα, a word which also spread on across the sea to Puglia but not further; the rest of southern Italy maintained the older 'cuccia' < κουκκιά. The distribution of reflexes of κουκκιά and κόλυβα in Orthodox lands seems to reinforce this view: the innovation κόλυβα spread to the Balkan lands but the further-flung Ukraine and Russia (as well as Catholic Poland) have forms of the *kutia* type, reflexes of the older name κουκκιά.

A more detailed study of this material is needed, but for now we can suggest that southern Italian 'cuccia' most likely dates to, at the latest, the early Middle Ages – probably before the Arab conquest of Sicily in the ninth century and possibly dating further back to antiquity, when much of Sicily and all of the coast and much of the interior of continental southern Italy was a zone of prolonged and intimate contact between Greeks (with many Greek settlements dating back to the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.) and the local Italic peoples.⁷

As with many elements of Christian practice, the symbolic use of wheatberries in Greek Orthodox tradition is widely recognized as an adaptation of older pre-Christian practice. Specifically, the basic form and use of *kolyva* and *kutia* undoubtedly continues the form and use of *panspermia*, 'all seeds', in pre-Christian Greece. The *panspermia* was an offering that was prepared with boiled grain, but it was not consumed, being instead reserved for symbolic consumption by the dead. Though it was associated with several occasions in the Greek religious calendar, it was a central part of the *Anthesteria*, a three-day festival celebrated in what for us would be late February; *panspermia* was offered by the celebrants specifically on the third day of the festival; the parallel in Roman religion was the *Ferelia*, also celebrated in February (Harrison 1912: 326). In Harrison's view, *Anthesteria* was, in effect, the pre-Christian All Souls' Day, and the *panspermia* was not just an offering to the dead but also given to them so that they could take the offering back into the earth and bring the whole seeds and grain to fruition for their return in the autumn, as represented by the *pankarpia*, 'all fruits'. She describes this festival thus: 'The *Anthesteria* was then a feast of the revocation of souls and the blossoming of plants, a feast of the great reincarnation cycle of man and nature' (1912: 294).

Nilsson explicitly connects the ancient *panspermia* to the modern Greek *kolyva* and adds that the modern term, well attested in the Middle Ages, is recorded already in late



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antiquity 'as an offering of cooked wheat and fruit' (1972: 31). If my suggestion above is correct that southern Italian *cuccia* represents an older term, replaced in Puglia by a new name emanating from Greece in Byzantine times, it seems possible that *cuccia* dates back to at least very early Christian times, when there were still enclaves of Greek speakers in southern Italy and a larger Greek community in Sicily, or back even further to the pre-Christian period when Greek was still widely spoken in both southern Italy and Sicily.⁸

The Religious Symbolism of *Pastiera Napoletana*

In light of the preceding discussion, it is clear that *pastiera* in its classic form fits well into the widespread use of wheatberries in southern Italy and Greece. Its relationship to the *coliba/colva* dishes of Puglia and the similar simple sweet *cuccia* preparations of Calabria and Sicily is to stand at the opposite end of a continuum: the simple dishes, much closer to the Greek *kolyva*, are sober, strict fast-day foods, contrasting with the more celebratory and richer versions from Sicily which employ dairy products (milk/cream or ricotta). At the far end of the continuum, we have *pastiera napoletana*, which not only includes dairy products (butter, milk for the cooking of the grain, and ricotta) but also eggs and, at its most traditional, even lard: *pastiera* is then a full-blown festive fat-day dish, befitting the celebration of Christianity's most joyous holiday.

And yet *pastiera* has in my view an essential tie to the simpler, sober versions at multiple levels. First, at its core it is a wheatberry and fruit dish, with the fruit present in the citrus zest and the candied fruit; the orange blossom water also calls to mind the transformational process from seed to new life. Overlooked in discussions of *pastiera* is, however, the fact that, at least when the pie is made in the traditional way, starting with dry grain, the process spans the whole three-day process of Christ's death and rebirth: the cooking of the grain, first in water, starts on Holy Thursday (Last Supper, betrayal) or Good Friday (trial and crucifixion); the final cooking of the grain in milk and the preparation of the other ingredients and assembly of the pie take place on Holy Saturday, and consumption of the pie can occur only after the resurrection on Easter Sunday. Thus encapsulated in the dish is the entirety of the passion and resurrection, and with it a reflection of the old practice of *Anthesteria*, also a three-day period, bringing together the commemoration of the dead and the celebration of rebirth.

The History of *Pastiera*

Though *pastiera*, both the dish and the name, are now known throughout Italy, both the dish and the name are clearly a long-standing part of regional culinary culture only in Campania (and to some degree neighbouring Molise). As we have shown above, the essence of the dish fits perfectly into the cultural and culinary landscape of southern Italy and Sicily with their very old but still clear ties to Greece: Naples and many of Campania's coastal towns trace their history back to Greek settlements founded long before the rise of Rome. Yet, unlike the majority of southern Italian wheatberry preparations, the dish



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does not bear a Greek name. Rather, the name '*pastiera*' is a coinage that dates to the Angevin period in southern Italy.

What we can say for certain about this name is that its suffix, *-iera*, is a borrowing from a language of France, either French itself or Provençal, into Neapolitan (appearing also in other Italian dialects). The royal court of the Kingdom of Sicily under the Angevins was located in Naples and, given that the Angevins were themselves French-speakers with holdings in northern France, French was one of the languages employed at court. But the Angevins were at this time also the Counts of Provence, and so many of the trusted administrative and military figures in Naples were native speakers of Provençal; the court was then a place where French, Provençal, and Neapolitan (and other Italian dialects) were all spoken. This court was also a place in which culinary matters were certainly taken seriously, as can be seen from the *Liber de coquina* which, in the version we have, was surely at least in part composed under the Angevins.⁹

No recipe for *pastiera* appears in the *Liber de coquina*, but the dish as known today would certainly not have been out of place in the final section of the book in which a number of elaborate pies are described. That *pastiera* dates back to this period is, however, demonstrated by the very first attestation of the word in reference to a food: it appears in a text produced by the *Curia Romana* – the papal administration – in 1337, when the Pope resided in the Provençal city of Avignon. That the papacy moved to Avignon was itself very much the work of the Angevins of southern Italy, and there were extremely close ties between the papal court and royal court of the Angevins in Naples and their Provençal court in Aix.

It is impossible today to determine who coined the name '*pastiera*' or even in which language the coinage took place; that in later times the word is known as a name of a dish only in Campania makes it likely that from the start it was in essence a Neapolitan word. There is, however, good reason to think that the name was invented in the course of interactions between Neapolitan speakers and speakers of Provençal. In Old Provençal, there already existed a well attested word *pastiera* which was one of the terms used in southern France to refer to the wooden trough used in kitchens and bakeries in which one would form and knead dough. Though '*pastiera*' could be a parallel but new formation bringing together pasta, 'dough', and the suffix *-iera*, 'tool pertaining to, container of', it seems plausible that the word in the sense of dough-making trough was extended poetically to refer to a new and elite take on an old Campanian holiday dish: in effect, it was a version of *cuccia*, enriched with ricotta and eggs and scented with costly spices, prepared as a filling for an elite-style pastry crust made from fine flour. The new coinage would then perhaps be something of a joke, with the enriched *cuccia*, with its totally unprocessed wheatberries, being the 'dough' prepared in a '*pastiera*', a poetic reference to the pie crust.

The circumstantial evidence that *pastiera napoletana* finds its origins in the humble but religiously important *cuccia* is extremely strong. But the dish as we know it now, especially in light of the etymology of its name, is surely the product of an elite kitchen



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which we can say with confidence was most likely one where Neapolitan and Provençal speakers met.¹⁰ Over time, the ennobled *cuccia* gradually became established as one of the central dishes for the celebration of Easter in Campania and for a long time has been enjoyed by all classes of society in the region.

Notes

- 1 This section is based on direct personal knowledge of Campanian culinary traditions as well as extensive reading of a wide-range of relevant cookbooks of different styles (e.g. Francesconi 2013, Bracale 2016, De Crescenzo 2016, Santasilia 2015) and of many on-line recipes posted by people in Campania and Molise.
- 2 *Mesc-ciua* is a dish comprised only of cooked wheatberries or farro, chick peas, and beans, seasoned with salt and olive oil.
- 3 For more details, see Rohls 1930: 133. Further research is needed for southern Campania and Basilicata.
- 4 Compare Sada, who gives a recipe for the version of '*grano dei morti*' a.k.a. '*coliba*' from Bari as a dish traditional on All Souls' Day; he also mentions an almond-based confection, *fave dei morti* 'favas of the dead', shaped like favas, for the same occasion which points to the conceptual connection: All Souls' Day – *coliba* – favas – *cuccia* (2013: 159).
- 5 For example, Tan gives a fine overview of the use of wheatberries in Orthodox and Muslim lands, as well as in some other places further east, but mentions only briefly Sicilian *cuccia* (2015); Feeley-Harnik, in an article on the use of sweets in relation to Christian beliefs, also only refers to Sicilian *cuccia* among Italian sweet wheatberry dishes with religious significance (2015). It is striking how little known Neapolitan *pastiera* is. The following discussion is based on Buccini (2015a).
- 6 For a detailed discussion of the contrasts between fasting in Greek and Italian traditions, see Buccini (2012).
- 7 See most recently McDonald (2015: esp. 224ff).
- 8 The fact that southern Italian *cuccia* has a fairly wide range of meanings – sweet vs. savoury, with different kinds of sweet preparations so named – bespeaks relatively greater age over-against the great similarity of all *kolyvalcoliba* recipes. Note too that savoury dishes of wheat and legumes can also be quite old and are completely consistent with the symbolic function (relating to death and rebirth) under discussion here. For the related symbolic value of beans and particularly favas in Greek and perhaps specifically in a southern Italian (*Magna Graecia*) context, see Andrews (1949).
- 9 Some of the recipes may well go back to the rule of Frederick II in the first half of the thirteenth century, as argued by Martellotti (2005), but the collection of manuscripts in which this cookbook is preserved dates to around 1300, when Charles II of Anjou ruled in Naples. See also Maier (2005).
- 10 Culinary influences between Campania and Provence in the Middle Ages were noteworthy and travelled in both directions, an exchange which bespeaks a considerable amount of face-to-face interaction of people from both places; see further Buccini (2013, 2015b, 2017).

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