OF ONIONS, DEEP HISTORY, AND "THE MEDIEVAL MAN"

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In a 10th century description of Sicily, the Arabs are harshly criticized for eating onions. The article discusses the origin and evolution of the tradition that connected this diet with the Jews.

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Sometime around 977 AD Ibn Hawqal, a merchant by occupation and an intrepid traveler, writer, and savant by vocation, composed a vast geographical opus describing a good part of the then known world accessible to a Muslim Arab (Kramers 1939). He had a keen eye for detail, an ability to distill the principal traits of a culture in a few sentences, and an ample store of theoretical knowledge in geography, climatology, and ethnography to think through his experiences from some twenty years of travel. He was also a gifted writer, who knew how to spin good yarn and weave his pithy observations in an amusing story that would keep the reader turning the pages. A good deal of his appeal comes from his style, but the abundant information he supplies for the interested in hard facts must have been no less valuable for the curious reader stocking up on practical advice. Then again, as a man of his time Ibn Hawqal had his preferences and was not a dispassionate observer of the ilk of the modern ethnologist or anthropologist. He passed judgment where he felt like it. In all fairness, though, one must point out that his appraisal of foreign mores was no harsher than that of his fellow Muslims' whenever he deemed them not really up to the standards of refinement achieved by the sophisticated Arab civilization of the tenth century.

An intriguing example of the latter is in his description of Sicily, which he is supposed to have visited in 973 AD. Although the conquest of the island by the Aghlabids of North Africa had been only recently completed, most of it had been in Muslim hands for over a century. Settlement of Middle Eastern and North African Arabs, Berbers, Muslims from al-Andalus and the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant followed quickly on the heels of the conquerors, adding to the local mix that included vestiges of the indigenous sub-Roman population, Greeks, Vandals, Goths, Jews, and assorted Mediterranean types that resist classification. It

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was a real mixed-salad bowl. The Muslim conquerors followed the practice of the great caliphs of yore and tolerated the *dhimmi*'s religion and customs thus allowing for the existence of a true mosaic of religious and cultural arrangements. Inb Hawqal was quick to notice that diversity and praise the Muslim rulers and managing classes for preserving the natural fertility of the land-Sicily had been one of Rome's "bread baskets" for long centuries back-and improving upon it with the spread of Islam, urbanization, the introduction of an advanced administrative system, and the intensification of agriculture through techniques developed in al-Andalus and the import of several cash crops that spurred up the economy and provided for those with a more refined taste.

Against such a positive backdrop, which goes on for pages in Ibn Hawqal's *Surat al-Ard*, it is a startling incongruity that he considers the population of the island, his fellow Muslims included, as mostly deficient. These were, he felt, people puffed up with pride, ignorant, rough, irreligious (despite the fact, which he himself points out, that everyone who was anyone in Muslim Sicily had a mosque built), dull, hypocrites, tricksters, and cowards. Their minds and religious beliefs were corrupted, and "the dirt in their houses is beyond the filth of the Jews". Since cleanliness is next to godliness in Islam these folks had clearly separated from God (Kramers 1939, 118–31). The incompatibility between the island's natural endowment and prosperity, on the one hand, and the shortcomings of its population (again, most of those targeted by Ibn Hawqal unsympathetic comments were Muslim), on the other, is unmistakable. To him, these were clearly "others," and a lower-ranking class of that component of humanity to boot. Ibn Hawqal might have wanted to stress the success and superior abilities of the Sicilian rulers, who managed to subdue and govern such an intractable crowd, and account for the frequent revolts that the locals staged against Islamic rule in the course of the tenth century. There are a number of other reasons that would account for his attitude of course, but on close scrutiny they fail to fully justify it. The theological argument that Muslims who settled among unbelievers away from *Dar al-Islam* in insufficient numbers and dispersed communities risked falling away from the one true faith and jeopardized the integrity of the *umma* had been largely settled by the late tenth century, political exigencies rendering the Islamic jurists' point moot. There was the climatic theory inherited from the ancient Greek geographers that suggested that humankind's natural propensities in terms of morals and intelligence depended on the climatic belt they inhabited. That point too largely fails the causality test, since as far as Sicily might have been from that pinnacle of the civilized world, the climatically moderate axis of Baghdad-Egypt, which was most conductive for the cultivation of superior qualities of intellect and ethics, it was still, geographically speaking, within the same climatic zone. Ibn Hawqal, a cultivated Baghdadi himself and a man refined by travel may have disliked uncaught provincials but he was well aware where Sicily fell within the perceived implications of climate. Be that as it may, the modern critic would not fail to notice that his perception of the local types, strongly tinged by Islamic theology and ancient climatology, was most

likely determined by the disturbing diversity and heterogeneity of religious belief and practice on the island. The variety of Islam there may well have compared to the variety of Christianity practiced in Sicily and southern Italy during the period as a whole, a condition that has prompted a modern observer to note that the population was not really aware which rite or idea was, in fact, Christian and which was Muslim (Ramseyer 2006). Most likely, Ibn Hawqal's position therefore reflects the deep suspicions that orthodox Islam of the principal branches, Sunni or Shia, harbored in cases of religious exposure.

Our writer, however, would have none of that. His explanation of the decadence of the Sicilians was quite simple. It hinged on a component of the ancient climatic theory nicely summed up in the dictum "you are what you eat." The cause of the locals' degradation, he declared, was nothing else but their excessive consumption of onions. "There is nobody among them," he says "of whatever class, who does not eat onion everyday and no house in which it is not eaten morning and evening. This, he states with the typical Arab flourish, clearly "has corrupted their imagination, harmed their brains, confused their senses, altered their intelligence, diminished their understanding, stultified their perceptions, spoiled their complexions, and so disturbed their constitutions that they see things, or at any rate most things, as quite the opposite of what they really are" (Kramers 1939,129, translation Lewis 1987, 92–3). The social order was shot through with the negative impact of the onion. The upper classes were barbaric and the commonality not above bestiality, all that because of the onion. Perhaps sensing that he was weighing too heavily on the diet to the detriment of other factors, Ibn Hawqal reports that he had sought a second opinion on the issue. To make it objective, he selected an expert from the opposite side of the religious spectrum of the medieval Mediterranean, a Christian physician. Drawing on a note of Yusuf ibn Ibrahim's *History of Physicians*, he brings in the testimony of a Christian Damascene doctor, Isa ibn al-Hakam, who concurred with the diagnosis. The property of the onion, the Christian stated, "is to induce corruption in the brain." Evidently that was why, as Ibn Hawqal observed, there was no one in the great city of Palermo "who was intelligent, worthy, really competent in any branch of learning, manly, or religious" (Kramers 1939, *ibid*.). The generation of the worthy ones who had led the island's long and hard fought-out takeover had died out after the conquest, presumably before succumbing to the temptation of the onion with which the land was so abundantly supplied.

The "onion effect" as we may term Ibn Hawqal's dietary determinism, shared across the principal religious divide of the Mediterranean cultures and rooted in ancient lore as it was, is somewhat startling nonetheless. Onions, or *Allium cepa*, a species of the lily family that includes leek and garlic as well, are edible staples of long standing among the plants domesticated by humans. They are well documented in the ancient Levant, plentifully in Egypt and elsewhere as well. At the time when Ibn Hawqal and his Christian authority issued their damning sentence on the pungent plant that tickles the palate and irritates the eyes, the record

of the use of onions went back at least three millennia, if not earlier than that. It is very likely too that onions may have been cultivated first in our authors' homeland, ancient Mesopotamia. For as long as it can be ascertained, onions have been a part of the Middle Eastern and Levantine cuisine. Moreover, all members of the family, garlic most prominent among them but onions a close second have been a well-known medicinal substance and natural antibiotic. There was so much to commend the onion that Ibn Hawqal's connection between onions, "others," and inferiority calls for an explanation.

Part of it may be the fact that the ancient medical sages' position on the curative effect of onion, garlic, and leek consumption was ambiguous. While stressing the family's positive action on the human organism, they also thought that they were harmful. Onions and garlic might have enabled a surge of physical strength but they were not good for refined upper class people, and above all for those involved in religious and spiritual duties. They were "flesh food," inappropriate to higher callings and standing. Priests of a number of Greek cults were either officially prohibited from consuming them or excluded them from their diet in practice. Some Egyptian priests detested onions and avoided them (Simoons 151). This ambiguity, and especially its negative connotations, carried over in the Christian centuries, when it was adopted within the early Christian cannon and like so much else developed a strong religions symbolism hinging on the flesh-spirit dichotomy. There had already been a Levantine precedent, the classical and Hellenistic Greek and Egyptian traditions having vested a heavily religious symbolism of both sacrality and avoidance of onions and garlic. The early Christian theorists seized on the negative connotations. No less a man than Gregory the Great, in his hugely influential *Moralia in Job*, appears to have been the authority behind fixing the symbolic, and from there the dietary, implications of onion consumption as well as its image as a health hazard (Kaske 1959). Gregory apparently built on a long ancient tradition, of which the Damascene doctor in Ibn Ibrahim's *History* might have likely partaken, but he or perhaps an earlier, unidentified Christian polemist added a crucial twist. For Gregory, onions, garlic, and leeks were associated with sin, carnal desire, mortal preoccupations, and an unsavory attachment to the things of this world that obstructed salvation; and if one sought a good example of that perverse love of onions one needed look no further than the habits of the Jews. For as the Old Testament had it in Numbers 11:5, during their exodus from Egyptian slavery the Israelites led by Moses to the Promised Land and fed on manna not only did not appreciate the diet and the prospect but came to murmur that they would rather be back in Egypt, where they partook freely of fish, cucumbers, melons, and notably, onions and garlic and leeks. Gregory seized on that line to proclaim onion consumption the sign of the unjust, and brand their attachment to the tears-inducing bulbous food as an expression of a spiritual condition rooted in earthly desire and deprived of spirituality. For how else would one explain the fondness for a substance that causes so much physical discomfort but with a predilection for eternal death? Gregory and those before him who have labored on

the issue might or might not have been aware of the ancient Hebrew lore, attributed to Ezra, and the rabbinical tradition of Babylonian times, that recommended the use of garlic on Sabbath evening because it was an aphrodisiac and satiated desire (Simoons 149), thus strengthening the already established link between onions, Jews, carnality, sin, and perdition. Further in the vein of onions and worldliness, an early medieval exegetical text of uncertain provenance but closer in time to Ibn Hawqal and his Christian authority, the eighth-century *Clavis Scripturae*, succinctly put it this way: "Onions and garlic, corruptions of mind, the pungent taste of sin, of which the more is eaten, the more it torments with sorrow" (translation Morrall 2002, 138). The key phrase, "corruption of mind" echoes precisely the words of Ibn Hawqal and the Damascene Christian physician, "the property of onion is to induce corruption in the brain". It is not impossible that the Damascene had, in fact, been cognizant of the tradition on which the Western exegete drew, for it may well have been rooted in Levantine authorities. An almost exact contemporary of Ibn Hawqal, bishop Liutprand of Cremona, documented the same typological connection between onions and lower-ranking peoples on civilizational terms in 968 AD, reflecting with an ill-disguised insult that ranked him higher on the Byzantine emperor's habit of indulging in onion-, garlic-, and leek-stuffed dishes-even though he tried them himself (Becker 1915, 197). Later Christian learned tradition, medical and theological, made the "onion effect" on the one hand, and its connection to Jews, on the other, a thought staple. Several texts stressed the especial vulnerability of the stomach and the skin, for the onions were said to disturb the former and cause alopecia of the latter. Outward expression of internal conditions is another medieval staple, the link between leprosy and sin prominent in that aspect. As the Middle Ages wore on, the effect of the consumption of onions and garlic acquired similarly negative characteristics of a comparable proportion, documented in a host of texts ranging from Gregory the Great to *Clavis Scripturae* to Liutprand to thirteenth- and fourteenth-century theological authorities such as Peter Riga and Peter Bersuire to Chaucer (Kaske 1959). It is not a coincidence that Boccaccio's infamously blasphemous, immoral, and irreligious character in the *Decameron*, Ser Ciappelletto, bears the name of the plant (Decameron, I/1). The influence seeped in art and popular culture. Late medieval and early modern representations of the spirituality inherent in Christianity and the alleged carnality of Judaism employed the same symbolism of the onion and garlic family to hammer the message that has been documented from Gregory the Great onwards through visual terms. Folklore, at least as documented in the German-speaking areas and the Low Countries, and most likely much wider geographically, testify to the same link (Morrell 2002, 136–7).

Consumption of onions and their family, therefore, and the cultural factors embedded in it since Antiquity and fixed for certain categories of people and peoples (classified on national, or religious, or class-based principles) became a universal rank-classifying phenomenon in a complex medieval cultural hierarchy, with a stress on sophistication (spiritual, cultural, or other) and the lack thereof.

The phenomenon was Western European- and Mediterranean-wide (and possibly wider in scope and territory) and transcended national, cultural, religious, and civilizational divides. Among Christians it was most commonly deployed to rank the medieval Jews, but snippets like those of Liutprand and Ibn Hawqal testify to its universality in the pre-modern West and the Mediterranean. In some quarters, it still holds good today, especially on public occasions and in polite society. Whence the popularity across cultures and religions directly opposite in their dietary principles-Muslims adhering to dietary prohibitions, Christians espousing the dictum that what pollutes a person is not that what goes in but that what comes out of his/her mouth? In recent times, the trendy notion of "hybridity" has gained traction. In cases like ours, however, "hybridity" as currently deployed may turn out to be a heuristic trap. The reigning paradigm of hybridity is predominantly culturally defined, while notions of organicity and the operations of universals are banned from the discourse since culture is, well, context specific (and cultural inertia-laden) even in conceptual areas as large as Western Europe and the Mediterranean with the Levant. The trend does not seem apposite in our case. It is one thing to experience disgust and recoil from the substance and person associated with onions, leeks, garlic and the like, but it is another matter altogether to make that person a lower-ranking category of humanity, context and temporal boundaries notwithstanding. Another methodology appears more applicable, that of the recently proposed "deep history and the brain" (Smail 2008, Shryock 2011). The disgust with onion and garlic cannot be dietary, nor was it due to the preservation impulse, for they were widely cultivated, ubiquitously consumed, and with proven health- and medicinal effects. The negative connotations were based on the principle of distaste, based on the strong odor emitted by the disturbed substances and the persons who have consumed them. It is a phenomenon that reflects a blending of biological and cultural factors (Simoons 157). To understand why a temporarily specific, biologically-cultural "onion effect" once enjoyed the status of a universal (largely eschewed today, although lingering due to inertia) one must consider both factors and position them accordingly, space-, time-, and culture-contextually.

Thanks to advances in the related if not directly overlapping fields of neurophysiology and neuropsychology, the deep history biological dimension of the "onion effect" is not hard to pinpoint. Since we are concerned with a socio-cultural and therefore a relational phenomenon, the principal factor is odor. Taste, which inspired Gregory the Great to make to connection between onions, sin, and Jewishness, cannot be conveyed to others and does not serve as an agent of external, vicarious, and involuntary ranking and classification of "others". Visual sensory perception does matter (perceiving the tears of those consuming onions conveys meaning) but tears have a discrete symbolism and its coding within the "onion effect" is determined by the meanings of the primary factor, odor. Among the host of findings of the neuroscience and neuropsychology of olfaction the following bear directly on our subject matter. First, on a fundamental level,

olfactory functions seem to be the most primary and powerful mechanism of identification and distinction between "selves" and "others" in both individual and group context. The determination goes on molecular level and is transmitted to all subsequent levels of discrimination. The brain area concerned is the major histocompatibility complex (MHC) and its class I MHC molecules which, for reasons of immune defense, are enormously diverse within any given mammal species, humans included. That polymorphous complexity notwithstanding the brain is capable or pinpointing difference on individual level, displaying an astounding classificatory range. In other words, the most basic level of interaction, identification, and classification between human individuals occurs through odorant-based discrimination. The class I MHC molecule-based "knowledge" thus produced is of course coded and stored and serves higher-level grouping, mapping out classes of individuals associated with higher or lesser range of similarity between their class I MHC molecules. Second, and this should come as no novelty, the brain functions demonstrate a close association between olfactory and gustatory processing cells. Perceived odor activates bodily functions specific for the kind of food anticipated; in our case, that would mean that the brain translates odorant-based discrimination and molecular "knowledge" into bodily reaction. In the context of the "onion effect" that implies the transformation of culturally-based distaste into a biological, visceral disgust-based recoil that calls for absolute separation between the perceiving self and the odor-classified (whether biologically or culturally) object, and vice-versa. Third, in our context the most important among the brain components activated by olfaction within the larger area of the primary olfactory cortex are the piriform cortex, the amygdala, and the insula. The piriform cortex receives the largest amount of direct input from the olfactory bulbs, which makes it the primary olfactory cortex. Significantly, it is the component where associative connections occur. The activation of the amygdala indicates the strong emotive impact of odor to the detriment of brain functions that support, for example, cognitive thinking. The involvement of the insular cortex is where the impulses governing brain and mind reactions such as disgust and separation are formed. Fourth, the lighting up of the brain in olfaction indicates an overlap between the structures and circuits involved in memory processes and the pathways involved in olfaction. Memory retrieval, it appears, travels fastest on odorant-shaped circuits. Coupled with another insight, coming from the neuroscience of memory and suggesting that every recollection is also in good part if not mostly reconstruction (Schacter 2001), the overlap indicates the enormous role that a purely biological component of the brain plays in structuring culturally-generated and influenced memory formation and transformation. Next, olfactory processes, so powerful in the effect they have on the brain components structuring the mind, inhibit verbal recognition. From that, a generalization can be hazarded that in cases where olfaction-gestated processes occur, whether in real time or recalled from memory, cognition takes a second seat. The intellect all but shuts off, leaving the mind to the brain circuits determined by olfaction. Finally, the olfactory circuits are

unique in that they have direct access to the higher-order processing facilities of the brain, whereas all other pathways are mediated. Olfaction is the only sensory process that projects directly to the brain (conclusions based on the findings of Brewer 2006). To sum up the deep history architecture of the mind in olfaction: it is directly linked to associative thinking, emotive reaction, memory building and re-building, cognition-inhibition, and invites discrimination.

Distilled to its fundamentals, the cultural component of the "onion effect" as documented by our evidence is less complex than the biological impact of odor (and requires less equipment to discern-just a good mind) and suggests a strong correlation between the two factors. Three observations stand out. First, the entire cultural dimension of the "onion effect" is based on first-order associations rooted in similarity and contiguity. This of course is the cloth of the process of symbolization on all levels: reading signs, transforming signs into symbols, and connecting symbols across meaning-areas. The onion is read as a sign of the material world; the attachment makes it a symbol of spiritual void; that transformation having occurred, the symbolism blends sinfulness and Judaism or, in cases where another type of classification is needed, the distinction material/spiritual is called for. Second, the involvement of the latter immediately brings in discrimination, and within it, hierarchical ranking of the objects thus perceived and classified in the process. It is instructive to note that the hierarchical organization turns objects (individuals, groups, or classes of peoples) into "others" on the principle of presence and lack. Presence positions higher, lack ranks lower. Consuming onions is lack of intellect equated with lack of religion; lack of refinement equated with civilization and political standing; lack of spirituality deduced from the refusal to embrace the precepts of Christianity: it depends on the observer. Third, the "onion effect" depends strongly on mono-causality. Perception, attitude, and reaction flow in a mono-causal current-it's the consumption of onion (and garlic and leek) alone that determines identity, standing, and position, to the detriment of all other possible variables. A cognitive approach would have called for a wider range of considerations, but they are eschewed by our evidence. Cognition is therefore minimized or excluded; what is left is emotion.

The comparison of the two factors of the "onion effect," biology and culture, makes their congruity clear. Stripped down to the essentials, the latter suggests a typology of sorts. Is it unique? The question brings me to the last point, the placing of that typology on a temporal matrix. Could it be that the overlap between the biology and culture in the "onion effect" is time-specific and reflects the propensities of what can be broadly called "the medieval man?". The deep history of biology in the olfactory functioning of the brain and therefore the mind certainly transcends time restrictions. And yet, modern conditions have largely dispensed with the cultural implications of the "onion effect" even though the onion is still widely enjoyed and its powerful impact lingers as a deep history vestige in the brain. A careful scrutiny of the pre-medieval Mediterranean cultures suggests a similar disregard. I would venture, therefore, the generalization that the "onion effect' is

indeed a medieval phenomenon that reflects a specific type of trans-cultural and trans-religious mindset that was integral exclusively to the "medieval personality." The "medieval man" is the embodiment of a specific triangulation of the interaction between inflowing sensory information, the deep history coded in certain components of the brain, and the cultural constructs of the mind. In the functioning of the person before, and after, the medieval creature, other brain components rose to priority in the interaction with culture and sensory information. This is a dicey argument, but it can be made. For simplicity's sake and all other considerations aside, the "onion effect" points to three basic characteristics of the "medieval man," in comparison to the conceptual areas of "ancient" and "modern." The first has to do with the mono-causality of the monotheistic religions of the West in the medieval period. There was one truth and one way to get there; an associative observation that fully concurs with the mono-causality of the cultural component of the "onion effect" and the biological architecture of the brain that prioritized olfaction to the exclusion of any competing sensory perceptions coming in at the same time or being retrieved for processing at the same time. That stringency was there in the brain of the ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman, but the cultural component was not, and the "onion effect" did not materialize as a universal. The same applies for modernity. Second, the "onion effect" and the stress on lack it documents fits well the "horror of the void" that can be observed on many a level of reality in medieval societies across religious and cultural boundaries and across modes of expression. Boccaccio's Ser Ciappelletto is perhaps the best metaphor for that phenomenon. No matter how many layers of his personality were peeled off, there was still yet another one underneath, with no end in sight. Just like the onion to which he owed his nickname, Ciappelletto demonstrates a fundamental lack of a core. In monotheistic terms, he lacks a soul, a horrifying notion indeed, most heretical and disgusting and calling for immediate action of separation. Ancient religious mentality was not really into articulating a core on such terms. Market capitalism, democratization, and the secularization of the Western world to the extent it has been integrated with the first two variables have largely ruled out such an intense focus on core identity in modern times too. Third, the postulate of a causal link inherent in any similarity and contiguity transpiring in the "onion effect" – that like must impact like and two contiguous phenomena affect each other by the "contagion" of mere proximity – while documented for Antiquity, was not a hegemonic mode of thought and has been discredited in the modern streak of Western perception of reality.

The last statement leads me to the end, and to a caveat. Humans are never wholly modern and never wholly pre-modern (or medieval, in the narrow sense of the qualification). We exist as inter-temporalities, as complex streams of time-specific modalities deposited by biology and culture on our selves, roles, and persons that carry us through time. At some points one of them surfaces, at others, another colors the perception of observers. From deep history to the fleeting mood, layer upon layer are woven together in rainbow-like structure, liable to change at a

glance's shift. Inter-temporality, however, and all it implies, is a subject of another inquiry.

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Additional note: This article, which combines up-to-date scholarship with a vivid historical imagination allows us to use our hindsight. The same prejudice was still vivid at the beginning of the 20th century, when anti-Semitic literature in Romania invariably accused the Jews of being great onion-eaters. (Andrei Pippidi).