

The Black Sea: Trade and Navigation (13th–15th Centuries)

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›The Black Sea, focal point of international trade‹ was the title used by the great Rumanian historian Georges Bratianu for one chapter of his book about the Black Sea posthumously published in 1969¹). It invites us to investigate the role played by the Pontic regions in the vast network of international trade woven by Italian merchants from the thirteenth century onwards²). First question: under what conditions were they able to penetrate into the Black Sea and to assure their almost total domination of trade, not only to and from the Mediterranean, but also in the Pontic hinterland? Clearly the relations between the Italian maritime republics, particularly Genoa and Venice, and the Mongol khanates played a part in the merchants' control over the resources of the countries bordering the Black Sea and also over the goods which arrived via the great intercontinental trade routes. Second question: between the first steps in the creation of Italian trading stations on the shores of the Black Sea and their conquest by the Ottomans at the end of the fifteenth century, conditions of trade had changed considerably. The Mongol khanates were shaken by xenophobic revolts which also attacked the Italians settled there. The rivalry between maritime and overland routes, which terminated at Alexandria, had a profound effect on the »Mongol silk and spice roads«³). Finally, after the establishment of the Ming dynasty, China closed all relations with the West, and thus ended a trade which had proved itself particularly fruitful from the times of Marco Polo to the 1350s. The

1) Georges I. BRATIANU, *La mer Noire. Des origines à la conquête ottomane*, München 1969, pp. 225–249.

2) Roberto S. LOPEZ, *L'importance de la mer Noire dans l'histoire de Gênes*, in: *Genovezii la Marea Neagra in secolele XIII–XIV, colocviul româno-italian*, Bucarest 1977, pp. 13–33; Michel BALARD, *Gênes et la mer Noire XIII^e–XV^e siècles*, in: *Revue Historique* 270 (1983), pp. 31–54, republished in: ID., *La mer Noire et la Romanie génoise XIII^e–XV^e siècles*, London 1989, vol. 5, pp. 31–54.

3) Robert-H. BAUTIER, *Les relations économiques des Occidentaux avec les pays d'Orient au Moyen Age. Points de vue et documents*, in: *Sociétés et compagnies de commerce en Orient et dans l'océan Indien. Actes du 8^e Colloque international d'Histoire maritime (Beyrouth 1966)*, ed. by Michel MOLLAT, Paris 1970, pp. 263–331; Roberto S. LOPEZ, *Su e giù per la storia di Genova (Collana storica di Fonti e Studi diretta da Geo Pistarino, 20)*, Genua 1975, pp. 83–186; Michel BALARD, *La Romanie génoise (XII^e–début du XV^e siècle)*, 2 volumes (Befar 235), Rom-Genua 1978, here vol. 2, pp. 858–862.

question, therefore, is to what extent had the Black Sea retained its position in international trade at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century? The political circumstances of the coastal regions imposed an economic redeployment with numerous consequences, which have to be taken into account.

These century-long changes are explained by the historical geography of the countries concerned, as Dimitri Obolensky emphasized several decades ago⁴). Throughout the Middle Ages, the Black Sea constituted a frontier zone between the world of pastoral nomads, trying to reach its shores, and the sedentary empires, situated further south, which wanted to create colonies on the Pontic coastland. The confrontation of these two civilizations imposes a rhythm on the history of the inland sea. If the nomads advance below the Danube or the Crimean Mountains, the Byzantine Empire seems immediately weakened and its food supply threatened. If on the other hand, Byzantium implants colonies on the northern shores of the sea, this pushes back the steppe peoples, assures Byzantine domination on the entire Pontos, while maintaining the indispensable commercial relations with the nomads.

A second factor is of great importance: the fate of the Straits. The Pontic regions could only acquire a major role in the international economy if the passage of the Straits – Bosphoros and Dardanelles – was freely open to merchandise from all places, and could permit the dual movement of agricultural produce, animal and steppe goods to the Mediterranean and Mediterranean manufactured goods to the Pontic regions. If the Straits are closed by the power which controls them, then the Black Sea reverts to a secondary status, its commerce declines and its merchants disappear. In order for it to become fully integrated into the world economy, three conditions must be met: first, the presence of stable societies in southern Russia which appreciate the advantages of trade; second, the establishment of communities specialized in commercial activities and in regular contact with Balkan and Mediterranean societies in the Crimea; and third, the ability of the coastal populations of the Mediterranean to absorb the surplus of steppe products and to provide the steppe peoples with their own manufactured goods by the control of the major trade routes.

Before the Fourth Crusade, the Black Sea had no international economic importance⁵). The principal routes between Asia and the Mediterranean passed through Baghdad or through the Red Sea and ended at the ports of Egypt and of the Near East⁶). The Pontic

4) Dimitri OBOLENSKY, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, London 1971.

5) Maria NYSTAZOPOULOU-PELEKIDIS, *Venise et la mer Noire du XI^e au XV^e siècle*, in: *Thesaurismata* 7 (1970), pp. 15–51; Margaret E. MARTIN, *The Venetians in the Black Sea: A General Survey*, in: *Byzantinistica* 3 (1993), pp. 227–248; Serguei P. KARPOV, *La navigazione veneziana nel Mar Nero, XIII–XV sec.*, Ravenna 2000; Id., *Latinskaja Romanija*, Sankt Petersburg 2000.

6) BAUTIER, *Les relations économiques* (as n. 3), pp. 263–331; Mohamed T. MANSOURI, *Les communautés marchandes occidentales dans l'espace mamlouk (XIII^e–XV^e siècle)*, in: *Coloniser au Moyen Age*, ed. by Michel BALARD/Alain DUCCELLIER, Paris 1995, pp. 89–102 and pp. 107–111.

regions, under fairly loose Byzantine control, did no more than provide Constantinople with agricultural products, grain, fish, and salt. The Straits were closed to western ships. The chrysobulls issued by different emperors for Venice and Genoa in the twelfth century did not authorize entrance to the Black Sea, which remained an internal Byzantine lake⁷. No Venetian or Genoese notarial contract names the Black Sea as the target of a commercial expedition. Everything would change with the Fourth Crusade which made the Venetians masters of the Latin Empire, Constantinople and the Straits, while the Byzantine Empire was dismembered⁸. The imperial capital, even with a reduced population, still needed the resources of the Pontic lands for its food supply. Under Latin domination therefore, the continuation of commercial links established prior to 1204 would be expected⁹.

But according to the documentary evidence in the Venetian archives, the activity of Venetian merchants in the Black Sea seems to have been very modest, judging by the surviving commercial contracts. From the 25 contracts drawn up in Constantinople before 1250, only three make reference to the Black Sea¹⁰. Also, the investments they mention were made in relatively modest sums: 100, 25 and 1.6 hyperpera. The merchants concerned used ships of small tonnage, a *sandalum*, for example, and collaborated with foreign traders. This evidence does not indicate a special effort by the Venetians to establish a monopoly of trade with Pontic regions. In 1206, Zaccharia Stagnario, a member of a merchant family well-known in Venice, made a contract with a merchant from Ancona to trade at Soldaïa on the Crimean Riviera with capital worth 100 hyperpera. But in 1260, the Polo brothers left Soldaïa on their long journey to China, because (as Marco wrote): »there was no hope for their trade in that city«¹¹. We must add that the »Partitio Romaniae« of 1204 mentions only five coastal towns in the Black Sea, all of them attributed to the Latin emperor and not to Venice. All this evidence proves that in the first half of the thirteenth century, the Pontic regions offered western merchants very little hope of

7) Ralph-J. LILIE, *Handel und Politik zwischen dem byzantinischen Reich und den italienischen Kommunen. Venedig, Pisa und Genua in der Epoche der Komnenen und der Angeli (1081–1204)*, Amsterdam 1984.

8) Jonathan PHILLIPS, *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople*, London 2004; *Urbs capta: The Fourth Crusade and its Consequences (Réalité byzantine 10)*, ed. by Angeliki E. LAIOU, Paris 2005; *Quarta Crociata: Venezia – Bisanzio – Impero latino*, ed. by Gherardo ORTALLI/Giorgio RAVEGNANI/Peter SCHREINER, Venedig 2006; *The Fourth Crusade Revisited*, ed. by Pierantonio PIATTI, Città del Vaticano 2008; *The Fourth Crusade: Event, Aftermath and Perceptions*, ed. by Thomas F. MADDEN, Aldershot 2008.

9) David JACOBY, *The Economy of Latin Constantinople*, in: *Urbs capta* (as n. 8), pp. 195–214.

10) *Documenti del commercio veneziano nei secoli XI–XIII*, 2 volumes, ed. by Raimondo MOROZZO DELLA ROCCA/Antonino LOMBARDO Torino 1940; *Nuovi documenti del commercio veneto dei secoli XI–XIII*, ed. by Antonino LOMBARDO/Raimondo MOROZZO DELLA ROCCA, Venedig 1953.

11) Marco POLO, *La description du monde*, ed. by Louis HAMBIS, Paris 1955, p. 3; *Id.*, *Le devisement du monde*, ed. by Philippe MENARD, Vol. 1, Genf 2001, p. 119.

profit and that the Venetians did not really try to obtain a monopoly on the exploitation of Black Sea trade.

However, in a recent study, David Jacoby tried to demonstrate that the economy of Latin Constantinople remained flourishing, even if the finances of the Latin emperor were weak, and that Venetian merchants profited directly from the opening of the Black Sea¹². Constantinople found itself at the intersection of two commercial networks: one, in the hands of the Venetians, linked Constantinople with the West, the other was controlled by the Greeks and the Seljuks, who both made treaties with Venice. In 1219, the Greeks accorded the Venetians exemptions from taxes in the Nicaean Empire and in 1207, 1214, and 1220, Venice signed treaties with the Seljuks. The Venetians in Constantinople thus became the intermediaries between two networks without themselves having the obligation of penetrating into the Black Sea. This avoided a dispersion of their forces in a time when they had to set up their domination over the Aegean and Morean territories granted to them by the ›Partitio Romaniae‹ of 1204. The surviving notarial contracts in no way reflect the volume, nature, and level of merchant activity in the Black Sea.

The explanation is ingenious, but the examples chosen mainly concern the period after 1250. Now, at that moment, the Mongol conquest, which had been consolidated along the northern coasts of the Black Sea, opened new opportunities for Italian merchants and greatly expanded the field of their commercial operations. As Bratianu emphasized, the meeting of Italian traders and the Mongols is a seminal event in the thirteenth century¹³. It established direct trade routes and maritime links between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and led to the integration of these two previously distinct networks. The *pax Mongolica* protected the movement of goods in the world of the steppe and allowed Italian merchants to establish their trading stations on the shores of the Black Sea at the terminus of the two silk and spice routes.

The years 1250 to 1265 witness this complete transformation. As early as 1246, a letter of Pope Innocent IV condemned Venetian, Genoese and Pisan traders who devote themselves to the trade in Greek, Bulgar and Ruthenian slaves, transported from the region of Constantinople to the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem to be sold to the Saracens¹⁴. This is the beginning of the Pontic slave trade, which went on to develop in the fourteenth century with the arrival of Tartar slaves in eastern and western markets. The following year, John of Plan Carpini, one of the first missionaries sent by the papacy to find out who the Mongols are, met Constantinopolitan merchants in Kiev who were going to Russia: a Genoese, a Venetian and an inhabitant of Acre of Pisan origin¹⁵. They can only have come to Kiev via the Black Sea. In 1253, the Venetians set up a small trading base at

12) JACOBY, *Economy* (as n. 9).

13) BRATIANU, *La mer Noire* (as n. 1), pp. 204–224.

14) Elie BERGER, *Les registres d'Innocent IV.*, Paris 1884, vol. 1, p. 316, n. 2122.

15) Jean de PLAN CARPIN, *Histoire des Mongols*, ed. by Jean BECQUET/Louis HAMBIS, Paris 1965, p. 132.

Soldaia, where William of Rubruck arrived on a Venetian ship on his exploration of Mongol territory by Saint Louis' order¹⁶). Four years later, a Venetian fleet of a dozen ships occupied the port of Mesembria on the Bulgaria coast and removed the body of Saint Theodore, which was then transferred to the church of San Salvatore in Venice. And it is well-known that the Byzantine general Alexios Strategopoulos was able to take advantage of the departure of the Venetian fleet for the little island of Daphnusa to recapture Constantinople, on Michael VIII Palaiologos' behalf, while the city was left without defenses¹⁷). It is clear that during the years that precede the turning point of 1261, the Venetians had acquired a certain familiarity with Pontic countries.

These voyages predict the density that relations between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea went on to gain in the 1260s. Two significant developments intervene, however. In 1258, the Mongols captured Baghdad and destroyed it. The trade in oriental products which used to go through Iraq is diverted towards the Black Sea, resulting in a change to the major intercontinental trade routes. The division of Mongol territories into two rival khanates, the Il-khans in Persia and the Golden Horde, both equally open to western merchants, stimulated competition which grew after 1260¹⁸). The other major event is the complete opening of the Black Sea to western merchants. The treaty of Nymphaion (March 1261) authorized the Genoese to develop their trade there without hindrance, on the condition of giving free rein to Pisan activities¹⁹). It is certainly at that time that the latter established Porto Pisano in the Sea of Tana, a little trading station sadly lacking in documentary evidence. In 1268 the Venetians in their turn were authorized by Michael VIII Palaiologos to trade in the Black Sea.

The meeting of Italian merchants and the Mongols presumes two conditions: the existence of easily practicable, grand intercontinental itineraries and the establishment of western trading posts at their termini, posts which serve as entrepôts and intermediaries between the Mediterranean and Asian networks. The *pax Mongolica* guarantees the security of merchants along the two major routes which lead from the Black Sea to the heart of Asia²⁰). One of them leaves Trebizond, goes by the mountain pass of Zigana, the valley of Harsit, Bayburt and then crosses the Kop Dag to Erzerum, Tabriz, capital of the Il-khans of Persia, and continues south of the Caspian Sea to Samarkand and Almaliq, finally to reach Khanbalig (Beijing). The other is the famous route to Cathay described by Pegolotti: it leaves Tana, at the delta of the Don, goes through Sarai, then Astrakhan on

16) Maria NYSTAZOPOULOU, *La ville de Sougdaia en Chersonèse taurique* (in greek language), Athens 1965, p. 19.

17) Deno J. GEANAKOPOLOS, *Emperor Michael Palaeologus and the West 1258-1282*, Harvard 1959, pp. 97-99.

18) Bertold SPULER, *Die Goldene Horde. Die Mongolen in Russland (1223-1502)*, Wiesbaden 1965.

19) GEANAKOPOLOS, *Emperor Michael Palaeologus* (as n. 17), pp. 87-91; BALARD, *La Romanie génoise* (as n. 3), vol. 1, pp. 44-45.

20) Chantal LEMERCIER-QUELQUEJAY, *La paix mongole*, Paris 1970.

the Volga, across the northern edge of the Caspian to Almaliq, centre of the Mongol khanate of Turkestan, where it joins on to the first route and diverge either towards Karakorum or Khanbalig. According to Pegolotti, it took a total of nine and a half months to traverse desert and steppe, the high plateaus of Pamir and the burning stretches of the Gobi desert²¹).

Not many Italian merchants ventured on these long itineraries, although Marco Polo had some imitators, known thanks to some notarial documents. Most of them stopped at the first stage of these routes especially in the Pontic staging posts, which the two great maritime republics have either created or obtained by negotiation with local powers, at the end of the thirteenth century²²). These are Caffa on the Crimean shore, granted to the Genoese by the khan of the Golden Horde between 1270 and 1275, Vicina and later Kilia and Licostomo at the mouth of the Danube, Tana, the major trade centre for the Genoese from 1289/90 and for the Venetians officially from 1332, and, finally, Trebizond, frequented by Genoese merchants from the 1280s and later the seat of Genoese and Venetian quarters and set up in 1314 and 1318. These large western establishments were surrounded by secondary ones: Moncastro to the west of the Black Sea, Cembalo and Soldaia on the Crimean littoral, Vosporo, Matrega and La Copa near the Straits of Kertch, Savastopoli on the eastern side, Samastri, Sinope, and Simisso on the northern coast of Anatolia. At these trading posts, local products were collected and later brought to the principal Black Sea entrepôts of Genoa and Venice. The long-distance trade organized by western traders was thus completely connected with the coasting-trade undertaken by indigenous merchants, Greeks, Armenians or Tatars.

At the end of the thirteenth and in the early fourteenth century, the flourishing state of these western staging posts facilitated exchange between the Mediterranean world and the Mongol steppe. But does this mean that it was constant? That the nature of the trade hardly changed during the two centuries of western domination of the Pontic regions? To claim this would not take account of political, military and economic factors, which hinder or favour the movements of goods. While the acts of the Caffa notary Lamberto di Sambuceto permit a description of this trade from the 1280s²³), relations between the Pontic regions and central Asia became more fragile after the conflict in 1290 between the Golden Horde and the Persian state of the Il-khans, which cut communication between the two *ulus*. Three years later the Venetian-Genoese war extended the Mongol conflict

21) Francesco BALDUCCI PEGOLOTTI, *La pratica della mercatura*, ed. by A. EVANS, Cambridge (Mass.) 1936 (Reprint New York 1970), pp. 21–23.

22) Freddy THIRIET, *La Romanie vénitienne au Moyen Âge. Le développement et l'exploitation du domaine colonial vénitien (XII^e–XV^e siècles)*, Paris 1959; BALARD, *La Romanie génoise* (as n. 3), vol. 1, pp. 130–162; Serguei KARPOV, *L'impero di Trebisonda, Venezia, Genova e Roma, 1204–1461. Rapporti politici, diplomatici e commerciali*, Roma 1986.

23) *Gênes et l'Outre-mer, I. Les Actes de Caffa du notaire Lamberto di Sambuceto 1289–1290*, ed. by Michel BALARD, Paris-La Haye 1973.

and affected all trade activities of both rival cities until 1299. Then, in 1307, the Genoese were chased out of Sarai and from Caffa the following year, to return only in 1313. The northern Mongol route terminating at Tana suffered from these blows. So it is hardly surprising that among the 903 documents left by Lamberto di Sambuceto we find only five mentioning transactions concerning the trade in silk and even those are in small quantities from Merv Chaigan in Central Asia. Spices are also poorly represented, even though at the same time Alexandria, the traditional market for Far Eastern products, was partly cut off from its suppliers by the conflict between the Il-khans of Persia and the Mamluks. After the fall of Acre and the loss of the Latin states in Syria-Palestine in 1291, the papacy forbade all commercial relations with Egypt. The first half of the fourteenth century is therefore the acme of the trade in the Pontic area.

What are the naval instruments used by the merchants? We must notice that we do not know, except for the fifteenth century, what exactly was the part played by Greeks or Armenians in coasting-trade; the sources document almost exclusively the ships owned by Western businessmen. As in the Mediterranean, we find two classes of boats in the Black Sea: galleys and round ships. Among the galleys, Venice, for instance, used only light galleys »at the measure of Romania« in the *mude* sent to Trebizond or to Tana²⁴). The orders issued by the Genoese *Officium Gazarie* in 1339 imply also the navigation of light galleys to the Pontic area, with a crew of 176 oarsmen and sailors, protected by 12 crossbowmen²⁵). Among the round ships, we may distinguish the *naves* of the thirteenth century, equipped with lateen sails and side rudders, from the cogs with square sails and sternpost rudder that were used from the twenties of the fourteenth century onwards. This shift characterizes »the nautical revolution« described by Frederic Lane²⁶). In the Black Sea, intermediary types between galleys and cogs were also very common: *taride* equipped with one lateen sail and two side rudders, bearing a maximum of 200 tons, *ligna de bandis* and *ligna de teriis*, the first one moved by sails, the second by oarsmen, while barks and *gripparie* are not often mentioned, because their chartering does not need a draft of a written agreement.

In the Black Sea area, the small ships were used mainly for the internal maritime routes from one shore to another. For instance, according to Lamberto di Sambuceto's notarial deeds, the Genoese fleet of Caffa in 1289–1290 consisted of 21 *ligna*, 15 *taride*, 15 round ships, 10 galleys and 4 different boats. Only one *lignum* would cross the Straits going to Smyrna and only one *tarida* would go beyond Abydos, providing that it would pass the

24) KARPOV, La navigazione veneziana (as n. 5), p. 25.

25) Vito VITALE, Le Fonti del Diritto Marittimo Ligure, Genoa 1951, pp. 113–121; Giovanni FORCHERI, Navi e navigazione a Genova nel Trecento, Genua 1974, pp. 78–79.

26) Frederic C. LANE, Progrès technologiques et productivité dans les transports maritimes de la fin du Moyen Âge au début des temps modernes, in: Revue historique 510 (1974), pp. 277–302.

winter in Pera; all the other *ligna* and *taride* would be used inside the Black Sea, from Caffa to Tana, Pera or Trebizond. In contrast, the round ships and the galleys were reserved for distant trade, for carrying alum, wax, hides and grain to Syria, Tunis or Genoa²⁷). Similarly, for their trade within the fourteenth century Black Sea, the Venetians had at their disposal 10 *ligna*, 1 *pamphylos*, 2 round ships, 2 cogs, 2 galliots, that is to say a predominance of medium-size ships. According to their number, the small and medium ships used for maritime trade within the Pontic area prevail over the great tonnages. As it was noticed by the great Byzantine chronicler George Pachymeres these ships handled well at sea even during the winter months. The domination of the *taride* in the Genoese commercial shipping would explain the rapid trading success of the Ligurian businessmen, while the Venetian were more devoted to the regular movement of the merchant galleys between Venice and the Black Sea.

Great round ships and galleys dominated on the maritime routes from the Black Sea to the West. The merchant galleys, whose navigation is organized by the Senate, left Venice in July and are supposed to come back for Christmas or at the beginning of January. The Venetian Senate endeavoured to synchronize it with the other *mude* going to Barbaria or to Flanders, at the beginning of spring, in order to accelerate the circulation of liquid assets and commodities. Unfortunately, the regularity of the *mude* going to the Black Sea was linked to political, military and economical conditions. They were suspended during the three »colonial wars« between Venice and Genoa, and on the occasions of internal struggles inside the Pontic area (destruction of Tana in 1395 by Tamerlane, for instance). The acme of the traffic took place in the first half of the fourteenth century: from 1320 to 1340, Venice sent an average 7.6 ships every year to Tana or Trebizond. From 1320 to 1350, 168 Venetian galleys have visited Trebizond and 59 Tana, where a Venetian consul was established only in 1332. After a stop from 1350 to 1356 owing to the war of the Bosphorus and its consequences, 58 galleys have gone to Trebizond and 125 to Tana between 1356 and 1399. In the first half of the fifteenth century, the Venetian navigation to the Black Sea slackens a bit: 53 galleys to Trebizond and 110 to Tana. But each *muda* is henceforth composed of an average of only 2.8 ships. A recovery of the trade between 1437 and 1452 does however not reach the level of trade at the beginning of the fourteenth century²⁸). But, according to what Frederic Lane wrote about shipping during the commercial revolution, »the bulk of the Venetian merchant marine was composed of round

27) Michel BALARD, Notes sur l'activité maritime des Génois de Caffa à la fin du XIII^e siècle, in: Sociétés et compagnies de commerce (as n. 3), pp. 375–386, republished in: Id., La mer Noire (as n. 2), vol. 2, pp. 378–379.

28) Serguei P. KARPOV, The Southern Black Sea Coast in the System of Economic Relations between East and West 13th–15th Centuries, in: Βυζαντιακά 6 (1986), pp. 47–55.

ships« and the cargo they carried was certainly much larger than that carried by the state merchant galleys, though in Venice, free navigation was less important than it was in Genoa²⁹). The navigation of the round ships to the Black Sea was not entirely free: the Venetian Senate strived for the organization of convoys, prevented the overloading of the ships, and took care of the recruitment of sailors. Unfortunately, the number of the round ships sent to the Pontic area is not known. The list drawn up by S. Karpov demonstrates that the *naves* were going mainly to Tana, and brought back heavy cargos of grain, hides and also slaves, though the Senate forbade the transport of slaves from Tana to Anatolia³⁰). It seems that in the first half of the fifteenth century the decline of the *mude* system to Trebizond and Tana is balanced by an increase of the free navigation of round ships, at least before the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which led to a relative closure of the Black Sea.

The Genoese navigation in the Pontic area was quite different: more intense along the northern shores of the sea, particularly between Caffa and Tana, more compounded of round ships than of galleys, and more devoted to the transport of heavy cargos, grain, fish, salt, hides and slaves. The financial investments of the Genoese settled in Caffa demonstrates that the regional trade with smaller vessels, particularly the supply of Trebizond and Constantinople, was more important for them than the commercial relations with the West where convoys of galleys and of cogs were used³¹). According to the registers of the *Caffa Massaria* in the fifteenth century, the navigation between Caffa and the southern shores of the Black Sea was very intense, specially for the transport of slaves: 28 round ships in 1423, half of them owned by Genoese, half by Greek or Tatar-Turkish shipowners; 10 *navate*, 1 *griparea*, and 1 bark in 1426, that is to say ships of medium or small tonnage. The documents of the *Massaria* also reveal the growing participation of Tatars and Turks, called *Sarraceni*, and of Greek shipowners in the transport of slaves from Caffa to Simisso and Sinope, always with *navate*, *griparee*, only rarely with galleys. The Venetian sources confirm the domination of round ships in the Pontic navigation: 56 *naves* and only 2 galleys and 3 *griparee* for the Genoese, 25 *naves*, 6 *griparee*, and 5 galleys for the Greeks, 22 *naves*, and only 2 *griparee* and 2 galleys for Turks and Tatars³²).

As regards the navigation of other nations, the documentation is rather scarce. The Pisans had established only a little settlement in the Pontic area, called Porto Pisano, but their defeat by the Genoese at the battle of Meloria (1284) cut down their navigation to

29) Frederic C. LANE, Venetian Shipping during the Commercial Revolution, in: Venice and History. The Collected Papers of Frederic C. Lane, hg. v. a Committee of Colleagues and Former Students, Baltimore 1966, pp. 5–7.

30) KARPOV, La navigazione veneziana, (as n. 5), pp. 192–194.

31) BALARD, La Romanie génoise, (as n. 3), vol. 2, pp. 849–857.

32) KARPOV, La navigazione veneziana, (as n. 5), p. 36.

the Pontic area, almost reducing it to some individual cases³³). More important was the participation of the Florentines, who, after the capture of Pisa in 1406, tried to install a *mude* system, similar to the Venetian one. In 1429, Florence sent her first galley to Constantinople and thirty years later, one of the Florentine galleys went beyond Istanbul to Trebizond in order to draw some commercial profit, while the Venetian *muda* was interrupted after 1452. Florence could carry out the same expedition every year till 1462, but was obliged to give it up after the fall of Trebizond to the Ottomans³⁴).

Two other great powers would have tried to push their ships through the Straits to the Black Sea: the duke of Burgundy and the Catalans. The Burgundian fleet was sent in 1444 to help the Varna Crusade, but arrived at Constantinople too late. Its admiral Waleran de Wavrin advanced through the Straits to Mesembria, Licostomo and Moncastro, laid hands on three Turkish ships on the way to Caffa, and then entered into the Danube river till Nicopolis, while the other captain Geoffroy de Thoisy took some other Turkish ships on his way to Trebizond. However, these expeditions seem more like episodes of piracy, which otherwise seems to have been less frequent in the Pontic area than in the Mediterranean, except during the struggles between Genoa and Venice. The duke of Burgundy seems not to have had a clear commercial purpose when ordering the expedition into the Pontic area, but just a crusader's attitude in relation with Venice, the papacy and the Hungarian army³⁵). As regards the Catalans, their maritime expansion stopped at Constantinople, as has been noticed by Mario del Treppo, who demonstrated that from 1390 to 1417, among 100 maritime travels to the Levant, only eight concerned Romania, and especially Constantinople. In fact, the Catalans neglected any penetration into the Black Sea waters. These remained the domain of the Genoese and of the Venetians in fierce commercial competition during two centuries.

What was the character of their trade? From the last quarter of the thirteenth century, Caffa was the main trading post for the Genoese. It attracted the products of the Russian plains, of the Crimea and the regions bordering the Sea of Tana to send them to the West; it brought western manufactured goods to distribute throughout the regions of the Black Sea. Cereal crops were highly sought after by western merchants. Martino da Canale reminds us that from 1268, a general famine in Italy pushed the Venetians to go and buy grain from the Tatars, Alans, Circassians, Russians, Turks, Armenians and Greeks³⁶).

33) Michel BALARD, *Génois et Pisans en Orient (fin du XIII^e–début du XIV^e siècle)*, in: *Genova, Pisa e il Mediterraneo tra Due e Trecento. Per il VII Centenario della battaglia della Meloria (Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria. N.S. 24/2 = 98/2)*, Genoa 1984, pp. 179–209; ID., *Pisa e l'Oriente bizantino*, in: *Pisa e il Mediterraneo. Uomini, merci, idee dagli Etruschi ai Medici*, ed. by Marco TANGHERONI, Milano 2003, pp. 229–233

34) M.E. MALLET, *The Florentine Galleys in the Fifteenth Century*, Oxford 1967, pp. 86–87, pp. 117–118, and pp. 166.

35) Jacques PAVIOT, *La politique navale des ducs de Bourgogne 1384/1482*, Lille 1995, pp. 117–120.

36) Martino DA CANALE, *Les estoires de Venise*, ed. by A. LIMENTANI, Firenze 1972, p. 328.

Lamberto di Sambuceto registered huge deliveries of cereals to the West, but also to Trebizond, especially wheat, millet and barley, objects of a seasonal trade with the capital of the Grand Komnenoi, to fill the need. Then come fish and salt from the sea of Tana and its salt pans. Temporary markets linked to the seasonal migration of sturgeons were set up at the mouths of the Kouban and the Don, where western merchants went to provision the principal cities of the south coast of the Black Sea and Constantinople. They resumed the functions exercised by Greek merchants before 1204 for the supply of sea products for their capital. From the north, furs from the Russian countries arrived to be prepared at Caffa, where there was a large number of furriers; leather, which served as a measure of value in exchange trade with Genoa; honey and wax from Gazaria. From the south came a few *botte* (barrels) of wine transported from Kerasont and especially alum from Coloneia (Karahissar) which was in the hands of Paolino Doria, son-in-law of Benedetto Zaccaria, the lord of Phoea and of its alum, this crystalline substance essential to the dyeing of cloth and the fixing of colours in the Middle Ages³⁷.

It is impossible to forget the slaves, who became commodities in a very busy trade from 1275 onwards: Circassians or Zygians, Abkhasians, Laz from Daghestan, Cumans, Turks transported from the Black Sea to the West or to Egypt, where they constituted the bulk of the Mamlûk forces. In Genoa at the end of the thirteenth century, Tatars formed a third of all known slaves. The currency of exchange constituted of a few alimentary products – wine, carobs and oil, but essentially by-products of the textile industry of the West, cloth from Champagne and Lombardy, linen from Ypres and Poperinghe and Châlons. The disequilibrium in payments required some compensation, in the form of silver bars from Genoa, the only precious metal appreciated by the Mongols. Thus at the end of the thirteenth century, the structure of the Pontic trade was of a »colonial« nature: the westerners brought finished products to acquire foodstuffs and natural products from the Black Sea. Luxury eastern products still count for little in this exchange³⁸.

The situation was transformed on the northern coasts of the Black Sea in the second decade of the fourteenth century, marked by the peaceful reign of Khan Özbek (1312–40), the return of the Genoese to Caffa, which had been rebuilt according to a rational urban plan, and the official concession of quarters at Tana and Trebizond to the Genoese and Venetians. These new conditions are illustrated by the report addressed to the Pope by Marino Sanudo the Elder in 1321. He does not hesitate to recommend a total boycott of trade with Egypt, because a better route to the Far East already exists, through Central Asia and the Black Sea³⁹. After Marco Polo, indeed, the majority of western merchants who went to Cathay travelled between 1320 and 1345. Andalò di Savignone,

37) BALARD, Notes sur l'activité maritime (as n. 27).

38) BALARD, La Romanie génoise (as n. 3), vol. 2, pp. 870–879.

39) Marino SANUDO, Liber secretorum fidelium crucis, in: Gesta Dei per Francos, ed. by Jacques BONGARS, Hannover 1611, p. 23.

Benedetto Vivaldi, Tommasino Gentile, Ingo Gentile, Leonardo Utamarino, Galeotto Adorno from Genoa, Giovanni Loredan and his relatives, Baldovino Querino and Franceschino Loredan from Venice, were among the entrepreneurial traders recorded in the notarial acts preserved who sought huge profits in the silk trade with Cathay⁴⁰). Chinese silk was inexpensive to purchase in exchange for fine linen, mechanical objects or jewels. The silk was partly woven in Caffa by Armenian, Georgian or Tatar workers. More than spices, silk seems to have been the most appreciated and most familiar Far Eastern commodity in Pontic markets up to the 1340s. This is also the high point of the trade in Tatar slaves, who overtook other victims of the trade in western markets, rising to 85 % of slaves found at Genoa between 1350 and 1408⁴¹). They were also numerous in the great towns of the West.

The Venetian position in the Black Sea trade was less favourable than that of the Genoese, who dominated almost a dozen of trading posts on the shores of the Black Sea: despite some temporary stay in Soldaïa, Provato, Moncastro and Sinope, Venice had only two major colonies in the area, Trebizond and Tana, well-studied by Serguei Karpov⁴²), but both had been created some decades after their Genoese concurrents. While the post in Trebizond was established in 1319 and the one in Tana in 1332–1333, the Genoese had had a colony in the region from at least 1289, some forty-five years earlier. But both Venetian trading posts were very active being the termini of the two great commercial routes to Central Asia and China. The competition between Genoese and Venetian traders was severe and conflicts with the local powers were numerous: in 1327–1328, in 1366, and once again between 1415 and 1418 at Trebizond, which was deserted by the Westerners from 1347 to 1364; in 1343, 1395, 1410, and 1418 at Tana, where, according to Villani, the Venetians lost 300,000 florins and the Genoese 350,000 during the Tatar attack of 1343⁴³). The War of the Straits (1348–1355) and the War of Chioggia (1377–1381), brought about by the fierce commercial competition between Genoa and Venice, interrupted the Black Sea trade, which went on again as it had only some years after the treaties of Milan (1355) and of Turin (1381)⁴⁴).

40) Michel BALARD, *Precursori di Colombo: I Genovesi in Estremo-Oriente nel XIV secolo*, in: *Atti del Convegno internazionale di Studi colombiani*, Genoa 1974, pp. 149–164; Roberto S. LOPEZ, *Nuove luci sugli Italiani in Estremo Oriente prima di Colombo*, in: *Su e giù per la storia di Genova* (as n. 3), pp. 83–135; ID., *Nouveaux documents sur les marchands italiens en Chine à l'époque mongole*, in: *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres* 121 (1977), pp. 445–458.

41) Domenico GIOFFRÈ, *Il mercato degli schiavi a Genova nel secolo XV*, Genova 1971; BALARD, *La Romania génoise* (as n. 3), vol. 2, pp. 785–832; Jacques HEERS, *Esclaves et domestiques au Moyen Age dans le monde méditerranéen*, Paris 1981.

42) KARPOV, *L'impero di Trebisonda* (as n. 22), Roma 1986; ID., *La navigazione veneziana* (as n. 5).

43) Eliyahu ASHTOR, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton 1983, pp. 63.

44) Michel BALARD, *La lotta tra Genova e Venezia per il dominio del Mediterraneo*, in: *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*. vol. 3: *La formazione dello stato patrizio*, ed. by Girolamo ARNALDI/Giorgio CRACCO/Alberto TENENTI, Roma 1997, pp. 87–126.

The favourable period of exchange, when the products of the Far East were united with agricultural and primary local materials, ended with the closure of Mongol routes to western merchants. Revolts of a xenophobic nature at Tabriz in 1344; the expulsion of the Latins from Tana in 1343; the Mongol sieges of Caffa in 1344 and 1346; the War of the Straits which brought the Genoese in opposition to the Venetians, the Empire of John VI Kantakouzenos and the Catalans; the commercial rivalry of the two sea republics after the temporary return of their merchants to Tana, and then the advent of the isolationist Ming dynasty in Beijing – all this turned the modalities of international trade in the Black Sea upside down. Western merchants thus retreated from the Black Sea trade and obtained permission from the papacy to return to Alexandria and Beirut, two ports which once again became the intermediaries between the Near East and the Mediterranean⁴⁵. From this point onward, in the last decades of the fourteenth century, the route of Romania and the Black Sea lost its importance, as the new one which leads to Syria and Alexandria grew once more – as the figures of the *introytus pontis et ponderis* of Caffa demonstrate⁴⁶. It also changed its nature: fewer precious goods and more agricultural and metal products circulated. At the beginning of the fifteenth century only a small trickle of trade in silk of regional origin and in spices survives in the Pontic ports, while a new current of trade was established from Bursa to Moncastro and the Moldavian route. Oriental silks exported from the Black Sea became a »curiosity« (J. Heers)⁴⁷. Regional trade from the hinterland predominated and coastal trading posts controlled most of it. Caffa became the outlet for the Russian plains, the port of cereals, fish, salt and caviar. The trade in slaves on the eastern shores of the sea survived, but fell progressively into the hands of Greeks, Armenians and Turks, although the accounts of the Venetian merchant Giacomo Badoer mention several large exports of Pontic slaves to the West as late as 1436 and 1439⁴⁸. In Trebizond, wine, nuts, oil and local metal products took the place of the products of the intercontinental transit trade. Following the damages committed by Tamerlane's armies, Tana lost most of its commercial activity at the beginning of the fifteenth century: its economic life consisted of trade in slaves, the exploitation of its fisheries and sales of leather, which was enough to attract a certain number of western merchants – 482 persons known by the Venetian notarial deeds between 1407 and 1417 – for the redistribution of local products to Constantinople and the West⁴⁹. From 1422 onwards, the Florentine

45) ASHTOR, *Levant Trade* (as n. 43), pp. 64–102.

46) BALARD, *La Romanie génoise* (as n. 3), vol. 2, pp. 685–687.

47) Jacques HEERS, *Gênes au XV^e siècle. Activité économique et problèmes sociaux*, Genua 1961, pp. 388–389.

48) Michel BALARD, *Giacomo Badoer et le commerce des esclaves*, in: *Milieus naturels, espaces sociaux. Etudes offertes à Robert Delort*, ed. by Elisabeth MORNET/Franco MORENZONI, Paris 1997, pp. 555–564.

49) Serguei P. KARPOV, *Tana – Une grande zone réceptrice de l'émigration au Moyen Âge*, in: *Migrations et diasporas Méditerranéennes (X^e-XV^e siècles)*. Actes du Colloque de Conques (octobre 1999), ed. by Michel BALARD/Alain DUCÉLLIER, Paris 2002, pp. 77–89.

government tried to send armed galleys to the Black Sea, according to the Venetian model, even after the fall of Constantinople, in 1453, but this Florentine *muda* system does not seem to have been very successful. The Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine capital in 1453 made commercial links between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean increasingly difficult. The fall of Trebizond to the Ottomans in 1461, Caffa in 1475 and then the Danubian ports in the 1470s and 80s destroyed an already languishing trade.

The Black Sea certainly was a »focal point of international trade«, but only for a limited period, the first half of the fourteenth century, when western merchants created a real economic Commonwealth stretching from London to Beijing. Silk and spices circulated along the Mongol routes, building the prosperity of the great emporia of Caffa, Tana and Trebizond. As this role as an intermediary broker between the Mediterranean and Asiatic networks weakened, regional products became dominant, as it had been the case in the Byzantine period. All the same, the Italian businessmen brought with them tested commercial techniques, a spirit of initiative and an energy, which meant that the circulation of merchandise was accelerated. All the regions of the sea were invited to add their produce to the international trade dominated by the Italians, who became the indispensable intermediaries between the various Pontic regions. In this sense only can we say that the Black Sea played an essential role in international exchanges during two centuries.

SUMMARY: THE BLACK SEA – TRADE AND NAVIGATION

The Black Sea was »the focal point of international trade«, wrote the great Rumanian historian George Bratianu. Therefore, this paper tries to investigate the part played by the Pontic region in the network of international trade woven by Italian merchants between the 13th and the 15th centuries. Three main questions are to be asked. First, in what conditions were the Italians able to penetrate into the Black Sea and to create trading posts along its shores? What were their relations with the Mongol khanates? Second, what were the changes which troubled the Asian routes and modified the conditions of the trade between the 13th and the 15th centuries? Third, after the establishment of the Ming dynasty in China, which closed relations with the West, what was the part played by the Black Sea in international trade?

The paper reconstructs the history of the relations between Italian merchants and the Mongols and recounts the Italian travellers to China who followed Marco Polo. Then comes the study of the naval instruments used by the merchants in the Black Sea and of the conditions of navigation by Genoese, Venetians and Catalans. Silk and spices gave great prosperity to the main Pontic emporia, Caffa, Tana and Trebizond, mainly in the first half of the 14th century. Afterwards, regional products became predominant, cereals, fish, furs, honey, wax and slaves. All the regions of the Black Sea added their produce to the international trade dominated by the Italians during two centuries, until the Ottoman conquest of the Pontic region.