

# The Black Sea, the “plaque tournante” of the Euro-Asian Trade during the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a synthetic approach to the history of the Black Sea between 1204 and 1453, when the area served, according to the famous phrase of Romanian historian Gheorghe Brătianu, as the “plaque tournante” of the Euro-Asian trade. After centuries of Byzantine control over its trade and shipping, the prospects of this sea completely and rapidly changed after two historic events that occurred in the thirteenth century: the conquering of the Straits by the Italian maritime republics after 1204, and the territorial expansion of the Mongol Empire. The authors present the international context that allowed the transformation of the Black Sea into the contact area between Mediterranean merchants and Eastern goods that came along the Silk Road, the veritable backbone of this commerce, as well as the continuous conflicts between the regional powers interested to take control of these profitable exchanges: Venice, Genoa, the Golden Horde, the Byzantine Empire, other local rulers, etc. After the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the Black Sea eventually became once again the economic appendix of the empire that controlled the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.

Two powerful expansions that took place in the Euro-Asian area during the thirteenth century created momentum for intercontinental trade and, subsequently, for the world economy. The first one came from the Italian maritime republics which, after having acquired in the previous century significant positions in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea in the favourable context of the crusades, succeeded in the early thirteenth century in conquering the Straits of the Black Sea, which were jealously guarded by the Byzantine Empire. Venice and Genoa were the main actors of this vigorous consolidation of the Italian republics’ trade. The second great expansion with major consequences was that of the Mongol Empire founded by Genghis Khan, which spanned across a vast area from the Pacific Ocean to the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The encounter of these two forces in the Black Sea – the Italian merchants (creators of commercial colonies) and the Mongol nomads

(creators of empires) – and their cooperation for exploiting the great commercial routes which connected Asia and Europe resulted in the considerable development of Euro-Asian trade, with crucial economic and political repercussions.

The Mongol expansion, as envisioned by the founder of the empire and pursued by his successor, aimed at conquering the entire territory between China and the Near East, up to the Mediterranean Sea. The accomplishment of this aim would have granted the imperial leadership complete control over the Silk Road, the main route not only for carrying this precious textile merchandise, but also for other goods – spices, medicines, pearls, etc. – highly demanded in Europe. The evolution of the political and military situation in the Near East – which the Mongol forces in Iran were getting ready to incorporate and thus open their way to the Mediterranean – did not allow the completion of this plan. Defeated in

the battle of Ain Jalut in September 1260, the Mongols permanently lost the direct connection with the Mediterranean Sea, an event that granted to the Black Sea a prime position in the Euro-Asian trade.

For many centuries, the Black Sea was a reserved area of the Byzantine Empire, which imposed rigorous control over the Straits of Dardanelles and Bosphorus, and secured its exclusive right to exploit for its own interests, its rich human (i.e., slaves) and material resources, including the goods brought from the East. The trade between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean was unavoidably conducted by Byzantine middlemen (both state officials and merchants) who derived significant profits from this position. But the gradual decline of the imperial power during the twelfth century and its accentuated dependence on foreign merchants (mainly Venetians), exposed Byzantium to the increasing pressure of foreign powers. In 1204, after events not sufficiently clarified yet by historians, a strong squad of crusaders supported by the Venetian fleet besieged Constantinople, which eventually became the capital of a Latin empire. Venice reserved for itself a prevalent role in the commerce of the new empire; after centuries of exclusive Byzantine domination, the Black Sea was now available to Mediterranean traders (Venetians in this early stage). The road for direct contact between the Mediterranean Sea and Asia was thus open.

For more than half a century, as long as the Venetians controlled the Straits (1204–1261), the Black Sea and its resources were gradually discovered by entrepreneurs from the Italian maritime republics and, on their footsteps, by Catholic missionaries. Their memoirs confirm the presence of a great colony of Italian merchants (Giovanni da Plano Carpini) in Kiev in 1246–1247 and in Soldaia (Crimea) in 1253

(Guillaume de Rubrouck). A Venetian trading contract concluded in Constantinople in 1232 refers to businesses carried out “across the whole large sea” (*per totam marem majorem*); by this date, the commercial horizon of the Black Sea had been thoroughly explored by the Venetians. Not long before the dissolution of the Latin Empire from Constantinople in 1261, two Italian merchants, Niccolo and Matteo Polo, whose names were to become famous thanks to Marco, son to one of them, sailed from Constantinople to Soldaia (today Sudak), in the “Greeks’ Sea” (*Mer Greignor*) or the “Large Sea” (*Mer Majour*) “in order to earn money and make profit”.

The Black Sea was now evolving towards its most significant function in its existence. The full acknowledgement of this role was determined by two historic events which took place in the Near East in a short period of time: the fall of Acre in 1258 which was followed by the end of Genoese hegemony in the Eastern Mediterranean; the defeat of the Mongols at Ain Jalut in September 1260 and their complete failure in controlling the Silk Road up to its Mediterranean end. The Black Sea was the main beneficiary, as it was the convergence area after the reorientation of the main commercial routes of the two powers defeated in the Eastern Mediterranean. For two centuries the Black Sea was to remain the “*plaque tournante*” of the Euro-Asian trade.

The preliminary step in the new direction of Genoa’s commercial expansion was to conclude an alliance with the Byzantine Empire, exiled in Nicaea, but striving to return to Constantinople. To achieve this goal a naval force able to face the Venetian fleet was absolutely necessary, Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos concluded this alliance with Genoa, Venice’s main rival. The agreement was signed on 13 March 1261 at Nymphaion and included in a

treaty that modified “the entire political and commercial map of the Levant” (Roberto Sabatino Lopez). By this act, Genoa gained full commercial freedom in the Byzantine Empire and ousted all their Italian competitors (except for the merchants of Pisa) and even the Greek merchants from the Black Sea; only imperial ships and their cargoes were allowed to sail in the Black Sea. With these provisions in the treaty concluded with Byzantium, Genoa laid the foundation of their merchants’ privileged commercial status in the Black Sea.

Backed by this treaty, the Genoese traders started to massively exploit the great commercial resources provided by the Black Sea and its intercontinental connections. A decisive step was to set up their own commercial centres in strategic coastal points, autonomous settlements that later gained full sovereignty. The most important centre was Pera (Galata), a borough of Constantinople on the Bosphorus, and excellent outlook point for the passage of ships from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean. On the western Black Sea coast, the Genoese settled in the main centres regained by the Byzantines; in the Lower Danube, they conducted important trade in the Byzantine metropolitan centre of Vicina, wherefrom the documents instrumented in 1281 by a Genoese notary have survived.

The Mongols, who after the great invasion of 1240–1241 dominated vast portions of Eastern and Central Europe, also controlled the territories stretching northwards and eastwards of the mouths of the Danube. Separated from the great empire created by Genghis Khan, this Mongol branch established its own political entity, the Golden Horde, with the capital in Sarai on the Volga River. One of its most significant sources of power derived from exploiting the customs operations of Euro-Asian trade, which the Mongols con-

stantly strived to redirect towards their own territories. Genoese merchants were granted the right to settle in some of its key positions, where they established their own autonomous centres. This helped to secure the interests of the new Mongol state. Among the most important Genoese autonomies were Chilia on the Danube, Cetatea Albă at the mouth of the Dniester River, Caffa (in the Crimea) and Tana at the confluence of the Don River with the Sea of Azov. On the southern shore of the Black Sea, the Genoese settled in Trabzon, the capital city of one of the states that survived after the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1204 and a junction point for the Indian Ocean, Central Asia and the Black Sea. The Genoese had also been settled for a long time along the southern coast at Amastris and Heraclea Pontica. In all their settlements of vital commercial significance, the Genoese succeeded in becoming autonomous from the local authorities and even establishing their own communes, some of the settlements being fortified. This network of autonomous or even sovereign commercial centres allowed the Genoese to defeat the resistance of their competitors and enemies (Venetians, Byzantines, Tartars, Trabzonites) and to instate in the Black Sea the mercantile status that was most convenient for their own interests.

The main goal of the Genoese was to control as much as possible of the Black Sea trade and exchanges with the Mediterranean. Thus, they strived to concentrate the regional trade into their autonomous and sovereign settlements, an action beneficial both for their merchants and for the customs taxes they received. These intentions inevitably triggered reactions from neighbouring powers – the Golden Horde, the Byzantine Empire and the Trabzon Empire, but also from their main Italian rivals, the Venetians. On several occasions

such commercial rivalries turned into armed conflicts aimed at eliminating competition and constraining it either to leave the area or to move their commercial activities towards the centres dominated by the opposing power. When the Genoese considered the Venetians' autonomous activity on the road that linked the Golden Horde to China as unacceptable, they tried to compel their competitors to purchase Chinese silk from Caffa, a colony under their control, and not from Tana, a port dominated by the Golden Horde. The *quod non iretur ad Tanam* provision, which the Genoese eventually succeeded to enforce, aimed at concentrating the whole trade of this valuable commodity – Chinese and Caucasian silk – in their settlement from Caffa. Similar commercial policies were manifest in all the Black Sea centres where the Genoese had established their own fortified colonies. The most famous case is that of Pera, which eventually surpassed Constantinople in the trade between the Mediterranean and Black Sea in both directions. The outcome of this shift was that the taxes collected by the Genoese from Pera were considerably greater than those collected by the imperial customs in Constantinople. The Black Sea was on its way to becoming a commercial appendix of Genoa.



Ancient map of Black Sea (circa 1559) by Diogo Homem

In the Black Sea, the Genoese traded both local products supplied by the neighbouring areas and luxury goods from the Caucasus or from deeper into Asia. At a local level, especially around the mouths of the Danube and in the Crimea, the Ligurian merchants purchased grains (exported towards Byzantine territories and to various ports of the Mediterranean), honey, fishery products, but also slaves, highly valuable goods sold either in Egypt for the Mamluke army or as domestic slaves for wealthy families from Italian cities. From the Far East, especially from China, the Genoese brought silk, which was not the highest quality, but cheap (*seta catuya*). High quality silk was brought from Gilan, a region near the Caspian Sea, while from Trabzon they purchased various spices, pepper, precious gems brought in large quantities from Central Asia or the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. From Asia Minor, the Genoese purchased alum, a valuable material highly demanded for the textile industry which was developing at that time in Italy.

The Genoese merchants usually made all these acquisitions in the Black Sea port cities. However, some traders willing to increase their profit margins ventured towards inner Asia, in order to acquire the valuable goods demanded in the Mediterranean world at smaller prices from their original markets. After the first explorations of the land routes towards the Far East, they identified the most suitable itineraries and drafted travel guides. In the first decades of the fourteenth century, against the background of an advanced stage of discovering Asia by European explorers (most of them merchants), Francesco Balducci Pegolotti published a manual, *La pratica della mercatura*, an excellent guide for the merchants who wanted to establish direct trading relations with China. The guide mi-

nutely indicates all the stages of this itinerary through the territories of the Golden Horde and farther to China, the means and costs of transportation, the possibilities to engage in trade on the road, the possible dangers and necessary precautions. It is relevant that the author of this guide, although a Florentine, makes use of Genoese units of measurement, which suggests that his main target readers were Ligurians. The safe travelling conditions provided by this route indicate that the rulers of the Golden Horde were interested in supporting the transit of goods and of merchants through their lands, as this was a great source of income for the khans in Sarai.

Equally significant is the fact that during the same period, Italian entrepreneurs, especially Genoese, but also Venetians, settled in China, some for a long time. This enabled them to manage the purchase and delivery of good towards the Black Sea ports. Recently, Latin inscriptions on the graves of Genoese deceased in China have been identified not far from Nanking.

In search for the precious Oriental goods, the Genoese also headed to inner Asia from the southern coast of the Black Sea. From Trabzon they entered the Ilkhanate territories, to the great commercial centre of Tabriz, where the presence of a large Genoese colony governed by a consul is attested in early fourteenth century. In the following years, the Genoese in this important crossroads of Euro-Asian commercial routes issued a statute, *Ordinatio Taurisii*, aimed at reserving to their co-nationals the privileges they had previously obtained from the local authorities. The Genoese merchants headed from Iran via the Persian Gulf to India and China in search for the precious Oriental goods and greater profits by their sale. A contract concluded in 1343 between an Italian merchant and a commoner who was

to accompany him in his voyages specifically specified that the latter was bound to serve the former “in every corner of the world” (*in quibuscumque mundi partibus*).

The Genoese tendency to concentrate their regional and intercontinental trading activities in their numerous Black Sea autonomous settlements faced the resistance of the other powers involved in the commerce of this market. Byzantium was the first actor that strived to oppose the Genoese hegemony in the Black Sea, which they had acknowledged by signing the Treaty of Nymphaeon. Aware of the wide concessions made in favour of the Genoese in 1261, Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos tried in 1268 to attenuate their effects by allowing Venetian merchants in imperial trading activities, especially in the Black Sea basin. Assuming the role of mediator between the two Italian thalassocracies, the emperor considered himself redeemed from the complete dependency on Genoa that had been accepted seven years before. Also pursued by Andronikos II Palaiologos, son and successor of Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, Byzantium’s anti-Genoese resistance fell to pieces at the end of the thirteenth century in the great vortex of events produced by the ousting of the Venetians from Acre, the reorientation of their main commercial interests towards the Black Sea and their successive conflicts against Genoa for dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The signposts of Venice’s presence and activity in the Black Sea multiplied in the last decade of the thirteenth century, concurrently with the increasing difficulties encountered by the republic in the Eastern Mediterranean. At the beginning of 1292, the Venetian Senate authorised the free purchase of Oriental goods from the Byzantine Empire and the Black Sea. Simultaneously, diplomatic demarches meant to ensure that the Venetian merchants’ access



to the Asian trade was pursued at the court of the Tartar khan from Sarai and at Trabzon. The Genoese, whose interests were thus jeopardised, engaged their military forces to defend their privileged commercial positions established in the previous decades. The outcome was a vast armed conflict. Beginning in the Mediterranean Sea, where the Venetian fleet suffered great damage and multiple defeats, the confrontation between the two maritime powers then moved to the Black Sea, at Bosphorus and the Crimea, at Caffa, where there were “all the goods and all the wealth of the Genoese”, according to a Venetian history. The decisive battle took place in 1298 in the Adriatic Sea, at Curzola, and ended with the victory of Genoa. The peace treaty of Milan concluded on 25 May 1299 drastically limited Venetian trade in the Black Sea: for almost two decades, Venice did not even try to establish any settlements in the area.

Genoa took full advantage of the elimination of the Venetian competition after the Peace of Milan and consolidated its position in the Black Sea. This prestige was most visible in the three main Genoese commercial centres in the area: Pera, Caffa and Trabzon. At Bosphorus and in the remains of the Byzantine Empire, the Genoese succeeded in exploiting the increasingly obvious weakness of the imperial power: a new privilege was granted by Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologus, allowing them to expand their settlement from Pera (an indication of demographic growth and prosperity of the Genoese colony) and, what is more, to fortify their dwellings, which eventually led, despite a legal interdiction, to the fortification of the entire colony. Under these circumstances, the Genoese managed to gradually transfer from Constantinople to Pera the customs control and exploitation of ships and goods passage through the Black Sea Straits.

Their great success at the Straits encouraged the Genoese to extend the regime settled at Pera over the entire trade of the Black Sea. This became particularly obvious in 1300, when they appointed a “representative of the commune of Genoa in the entire Byzantine Empire and in the Black Sea”. The Genoese from Caffa soon followed the example of their co-nationals from Pera and built a wall around the city, thus turning it into a stronghold. Aware of the danger which this fortified settlement represented for his empire, the khan in Sarai, Tokta, initiated a large military campaign and put the walls of the Genoese city to the ground. The danger was thus removed, but only for a short while. By instating a commercial boycott (*devetum*) on the territories of the Golden Horde, the Genoese leadership forced its ruler to give in and accept its conditions. The power of trade proved stronger than the armed one. Caffa became once again a stronghold meant to control the entire trade in the northern Black Sea area. The new status Genoa drafted in 1316 for Caffa compelled all ships sailing in the northern Black Sea region to stay at least a day in Caffa harbour. Following the pattern applied at Pera and Caffa, the Ligurian merchants tried to impose similar conditions in Trabzon. After repeated unfruitful negotiations and several armed conflicts, the imperial leadership conceded to allow the Genoese to settle in a borough of the city and to carry goods towards the Ilkhanate, but did not grant them the much required tax exemptions.

Through the increasingly severe regime imposed in their favour on trade and shipping in the Black Sea, which was now more than ever the “plaque tournante” of the international trade, Genoa openly aimed to effectively include this sea in its commercial empire. Venice’s refusal to accept this programme led

to the outburst of the second Venetian-Genoese War.

Starting with the end of the second decade of the fourteenth century, the Venetians reappeared in some of the main trading centres of the Black Sea, thus openly impinging on the Genoese interdictions. This tendency increased thereafter. However, as the Tartars of the Golden Horde were trying to remove the Genoese from Caffa in 1343 and the following years, an assault which gradually acquired an anti-Latin character, the Genoese-Venetian antagonism remained latent for a while. As soon as this onset failed, the Genoese, more determined than ever, decided to oust their competitors who had obtained in 1347 the right to settle again in Tana. The peace concluded in 1355, after a five-year war, re-established Genoa's trading hegemony in the Black Sea.

The Golden Horde's attempt to remove the Genoese from Caffa, a city besieged for a long time and on which they directed a 'bacteriological warfare' (they catapulted corpses of plagued people into the city, an ineffective action for the odds of the siege, but which determined the spread of the bubonic plague in Western Europe, with catastrophic demographic outcomes), ended in complete failure. Moreover, a large coalition of Central European powers, organised between 1343 and 1344, probably at Genoa's initiative, gradually pushed the Golden Horde's dependencies eastwards, from the area of the Eastern Carpathians and of the western Russian knyazates, which they had controlled since the previous century, to Dnieper and Dniester Rivers. Simultaneously, the Genoese seized the main strategic points in the Crimea, thus consolidating their control over the trade in an area still dominated (yet only by name) by the Golden Horde.

The double offensive against the khanate

of the Golden Horde – on the one hand that of the Kingdom of Hungary allied with Poland, Wallachia (*Valachia Major*) and Moldavia (*Valachia Minor*), the emerging Romanian states expanding towards the mouths of the Danube and the Black Sea and on the other hand that of the Genoese at sea – had important commercial consequences in the region. Two trade routes to Central Europe were established in the territories freed from Mongol dominance, routes which played a vital role in the economic and political evolution of the region. The Genoese settled at the maritime end of these routes: at Chilia-Likostomo, at the mouth of the Danube, a centre which they had controlled since 1359, and at Cetatea Albă (*Albicastrum*, *Maurocastrum*, *Moncastro*), at the mouth of the Dniester, thus establishing connections with Moldavia and indirectly with Poland in 1386. The first route transited Wallachia and Transylvania, leading to Hungary and Central Europe, the second crossed Moldavia towards Poland and farther to the Baltic Sea or Bohemia or Germany. The main junctions of these roads between the Black Sea and Central Europe were the cities of Brașov, in Transylvania, and Lwów (Lemberg) in Poland. In time, a flow of goods was secured from the Black Sea – where the Genoese were the suppliers of Oriental goods – towards Central Europe and in return from Central Europe towards the Black Sea basin, with the main commercial agents being represented, on the final segment, by the merchants of Brașov and Lwów. On the route from the Black Sea through Moldavia and Poland, the Genoese merchants took an active part in the exchange of goods, while on the road through Wallachia the main trading agents were the merchants of Brașov.

The importance of these two highly efficient commercial routes in the second half of the fourteenth century and throughout a

great part of the next century is obvious from the political rivalries they triggered. All this time, the issue of controlling these routes, their maritime ends and their customs policy represented an important topic in conventions and treaties and a source of conflicts in the political relations between the four continental states that profited from their proper functioning: Hungary, Poland, Wallachia and Moldavia.

The consolidation of its position in the Black Sea after its success in the confrontations against Venice and the Golden Horde and the expansion of its trading market towards Central Europe by means of an important commercial route prompted Genoa to attempt the complete removal of Venice from the international trade. A natural ally for Genoa in this endeavour was the Kingdom of Hungary, an old enemy of Venice in the Adriatic Sea, which it had permanently tried to subject to its commercial interests and policy. Gradually expunged from the Black Sea trade by Genoa's restrictive provisions and facing the risk of losing its Central European market because of the infiltration of Genoese merchants in the region through the new routes, Venice decided to attempt a decisive strike to counterbalance the deadly threat. The best solution to attain this objective was to take over a strategic position, which could paralyse the Genoese-Hungarian plans. The entrance to the Dardanelles, in Tenedos Island, "the mouth and key of the Black Sea", was the key point chosen. The settlement of the Venetians in this strategic point, which had been ceded to them by the Byzantine emperor, threatened to paralyse the entire Genoese trading system based on the control of the Black Sea. Genoa's response managed to annul the concession made by Byzantium, but not to prevent the armed confrontation between the two maritime powers. The third Venetian-Genoese War, known as the Tenedos

War, began after a decisive naval battle took place at the starting point of the conflict in Chioggia, an island off Venice. While the conflict was in full force, Venice was attacked at sea by the Genoese fleet and on land by the Hungarian troops. The Venetians avoided heroically the fate which their enemies had prepared for them – their complete annihilation as a trading power – but they were forced to accept several severe terms in the Treaty of Peace concluded in Turin in 1381. Venice obtained the rights to trade in Tana for only two years after the conclusion of the peace, a period which Genoa was to take advantage of in order to consolidate its position in the region. Genoa remained the dominant trading force in the Black Sea up to the beginning of the Ottoman rule in Constantinople.

By mid fourteenth century, the Turkish population living in the north-western quarter of Asia Minor organised as a state under the rule of the Ottoman dynasty, succeeded to pass beyond the Straits and settled on European ground. This first step gradually led to a vast expansion on the Balkan Peninsula, with the major aim of conquering Constantinople and of taking over control over the Black Sea Straits. Unable to fight the Ottoman assaults alone, the Byzantine rulers repeatedly asked for help from the Latin West, offering them what they still had as an exchange value: their spiritual identity. The last Western armed action targeted at the Ottoman power and aimed at saving Byzantium was crushed in 1396 in the Battle of Nicopolis. A similar attempt of regional powers (Hungary, Poland, and Wallachia) ended in rout in the Battle of Varna in 1444. The road to Constantinople was now open for the Ottoman Turks who, in May 1453, conquered the city and put an end to the millennial existence of the Byzantine Empire. With this event, the free passage between the



Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea was also interrupted. The Black Sea was destined to re-become an economic appendix of the new imperial power that dominated the Straits.

Subjecting the Black Sea to the new power was one of the primary goals of the new masters of the Straits. Starting in June 1454, Sultan Mehmed II, the conqueror of Constantinople, sent emissaries to the states around the Black Sea, requesting them to acknowledge the new power and to subject to it. In order to break their resistance, he sent the following year naval squadrons with an ultimatum addressed to the main Black Sea states. Moldavia and Caffa obeyed the Ottoman request and paid tribute to and acknowledged the Turkish power. Sinope, Mangop, Trabzon and other settlements soon followed suit. In 1461, Mahmud conquered the key points on the southern coast of the Black Sea, Trabzon included. The attempt of Stephen the Great, the Moldavian ruler, to overthrow the Ottoman power with the support of a great coalition failed. In 1475, the Ottoman fleet besieged and conquered Caffa, putting an end to the Genoese presence in the Black Sea. Nine years later, a new sultan, Bayezid II, conquered the important Moldavian ports of Chilia and Cetatea Albă and thus completed his father's work.

From its former status as "plaque tournante of Euro-Asian trade", the Black Sea became once again an economic appendix of an empire that controlled the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.

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