

MONGOLS AND MERCHANTS ON THE BLACK SEA
FRONTIER IN THE THIRTEENTH AND
FOURTEENTH CENTURIES:
CONVERGENCES AND CONFLICTS

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For some years, historians of Europe and Asia have showed that zpe-
riods dominated by nomadic invasions were not merely traumatic
blackouts that sent civilization back to “square one,” but rather times
in which scorched earth and pillage were at least partly counter-
balanced by positive achievements. This historiographical tendency
maintains that a definite contribution should be first and foremost
acknowledged in the contacts and connections across Eurasia that
the nomads allowed to take place and develop. This is particularly
evident in the century following the Mongol conquest, when Turco-
Mongol courts, armies, and administrative *apparati* dictated the terms
and conditions that regulated the flow of people and goods from
China to the Mediterranean. The world became more open, remote
lands more accessible, and knowledge increased as a result of trav-
els and cultural exchange.

Openness was also, largely, the result of a built-in necessity of
nomadic empires to feed themselves, with trade being an obvious
producer of revenues and commercial communities being requested to
pay taxes and tributes.¹ Rulers needed commercial income (among
other types of revenues) to offset the expenditures of large court com-
plexes, personal bodyguards and standing armies, and the kind of
“lifestyle” to which rulers and their extended families were accustomed.
Merchants were also, relatively, uncomplicated partners, since a com-
mon language could be found regardless of linguistic, religious or
political barriers. On the other side, the Mongols’ attitude to gov-
ernance was marked by a distinct propensity towards the employment

¹ For the argument that access to and control over various “economic zones” is
vital to explain the survival or success of Mongol policies see J.W. Dardess, “From
Mongol Empire to Yuan Dynasty: Changing Forms of Imperial Rule in Mongolia
and Central Asia,” *MS*, 30 (1972–73), pp. 122–29.

of loyal foreigners and the flow of goods and merchants.² In 1270 the Mongol khan of the Golden Horde in his correspondence with Grand Prince Iaroslav Iaroslavich stipulated free passage for the merchants and guaranteed their protection.³ There is therefore agreement, at least in principle, that the role of the Mongols was central to the commercial efflorescence that, in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, allowed Europe and Asia to come closer and know each other better than ever before.

But this network of exchanges and connections did not come into existence randomly as a result of a generic greater openness. Rather, following the argument persuasively presented by Thomas Allsen in his recent study of Sino-Iranian relations at the time of Mongol rule, the increased volume of “cross-cultural exchanges” (a phrase borrowed from world history literature) was closely connected with Mongol agency.⁴ In a nutshell, the point eloquently argued by Allsen is that the flow of people, ideas, and goods across Asia was determined, to a large extent, by what the Mongols liked, needed and were interested in. Chinese and Western Asian scientists did not get together at the Mongol courts because of a spontaneous desire to compare notes, but because the Mongols wanted to test the effectiveness, utility, power of persuasion and relative value of different cultural traditions; this applied to fields as diverse as religion, cuisine, astronomy, or mechanical engineering. “Cross-cultural” relations were, therefore, subject to a process of filtering and adaptation within which the Mongol rulers occupied the most central and critical position. They controlled it inasmuch as they created the conditions for *certain* things and people to travel across Eurasia more quickly and in greater numbers than others.

From this analytical vantage point, even a cursory examination of

² On the attitude of Mongol courts towards foreigners we should register, however, two opposite tendencies. One was exclusive and tended to neglect foreigners, and the other was inclusive, cosmopolitan, and open to employing people of different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. With Qubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294), and especially after his death, during the period from 1295 to 1368, the latter tendency held sway and many foreigners, especially of Turkish extraction served in the Yuan government. See I. de Rachewiltz, “Turks in China under the Mongols: A Preliminary investigation in Turco-Mongol Relations in the 13th and 14th Centuries,” in *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th–14th Centuries*, ed. M. Rossabi (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 281–310.

³ D. Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304–1589* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 114.

⁴ T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 189–211.

the vast literature on the Black Sea as the most important *trait-d'union* between Europe and Asia, which has been described as the “lazy Susan” of international trade, reveals that the role played by the Mongols—especially the Golden Horde—may be in need of a better definition.⁵ My impression is that the role of the Mongols is sometimes underestimated and sometimes overestimated. A degree of underestimation can be detected in the notion that European expansion in terms, for instance, of increased naval power and more sophisticated business organization, propelled in the thirteenth century Italian maritime powers to extend their reach to the Black Sea and beyond.⁶ This particular viewpoint sets its focal centre firmly in the European theatre, and tends to look at the emergence of Venice and Genoa as commercial and military powers, and at their interaction with the Byzantine empire and the many other European and Middle Eastern protagonists: the Pope, the Muslims, the northern European powers, and so on. As eminent historians have pointed out long ago, however, even though the treaty of Nymphaeus (1261) gave Genoa commercial monopoly east of the Bosphorus, it was the Mongols who allowed them to “set up shop” in the Crimea.⁷ What the Mongols wanted, how they conceived this relationship, and how they allowed it to develop, are questions that need to be delved into, also in light of our knowledge of Mongol attitudes to governance, international relations and commercial agreements.

What appears sometimes to be overemphasised is the negative impact of the end of the *Pax Mongolica* on international trade, coupled with the perceived closure of Ming China to foreign merchants.⁸ After

⁵ The literature on Black Sea trade is too large to be reported here, but in my study of a good portion of important as well as minor works I have been unable to find any in which the Mongols (or “Tatars” which is a more convenient term since it combines Turks and Mongols under a single term) take a central position, and their actions are given the consideration that they deserve. This distortion is to a large extent inevitable once we consider the nature of the sources, which are quite rich on the “Latin” side and very scant of the side of the Golden Horde.

⁶ J.R.S. Phillips, *The Medieval Expansion of Europe*. 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1998), pp. 96–114, sums up the argument. Phillips’ book provides a level-headed picture of the European factors that permitted the growth of eastern trade, which of course played a very important role and should not be dismissed as figments of a “Eurocentric” imagination.

⁷ See, among others, N. Iorga, *Points de vue sur l’histoire du commerce de l’Orient au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1924), p. 92.

⁸ On the term *pax mongolica*, cf. R.S. Lopez: “L’extrême frontière du commerce de l’Europe Médiévale,” *Le Moyen Âge*, 69 (1963), p. 480. See also L. Petech, “Les marchands italiens dans l’empire mongol”, *JA*, 250/4 (1962), pp. 549, 558. On the

all, the Italian commercial bases continued to operate until the Ottoman conquest, and Italian interests were not completely eradicated even after that.⁹ Secondly, serious difficulties in dealing with Mongol rulers had been experienced even before the collapse of unified and effective leadership in the Golden Horde. Thirdly, although the relative safety ensured by the Mongols' control over trade routes was replaced after about 1360 by a climate of greater insecurity and increased risks, trade in the Black Sea did not come to a halt. In fact, an argument could be made that the Genoese were more effective in imposing their conditions over Black Sea trade from around 1360 onwards exactly because the weakened authority of Mongol rulers and the internecine wars within the Golden Horde made the Mongols concede vast tracts of land and trading rights. Conversely, in Europe in the second half of the fourteenth century, a congeries of factors were militating against investments in long-distance trade. Among these we may mention the crisis in confidence among Genoese and Venetian merchants that set in during the second half of the fourteenth century, possibly related to the collapse of the Mongols in Persia and to the Black Death.¹⁰ Wars fought in 1350–1355 and later by Venice and Genoa both between themselves and against other enemies consumed capitals that would otherwise have been invested in commercial pursuits.¹¹ Another sign of the “crisis” of the investment in international trade was the increased difficulty, in the late fourteenth century, to arrange *mude* (commercial maritime convoys) for the Black Sea.¹² And probably most importantly, trade practices changed, and international business came to be conducted by relying more on local (and stationary) overseas agents and

decadence of international trade due to its end, see M. Nystazopoulou, “Venise et la Mer Noire du XI^e au XV^e siècle”, in *Venezia e il Levante fino al secolo XV*, ed. A. Pertusi, vol. i (Firenze, 1973), p. 571.

⁹ G. Veinstein, “From the Italians to the Ottomans: The Case of the Northern Black Sea Coast in the Sixteenth Century,” *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 1/2 (1986), pp. 221–37. See also K. Fleet, *European and Early Islamic Trade in the Early Ottoman state: The Merchants of Genoa and Turkey* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 134–41.

¹⁰ B.Z. Kedar, *Merchants in Crisis. Genoese and Venetian Men of Affairs and the Fourteenth-Century Depression* (New Haven and London, 1976), p. 1.

¹¹ A description of the effects of protracted wars on the merchants ability to invest overseas can be found in G. Luzzatto, “L’Economia,” *La civiltà veneziana del Trecento*, eds. J. Ortega y Gasset *et al.* (Firenze, 1956), pp. 97–101.

¹² On the *mude* see: F.C. Lane, “Fleets and Fairs: the Functions of the Venetian Muda,” in *Studi in onore di Armando Sapori* (Milano, 1957), pp. 649–664; and M. Berindei and G. Veinstein, “La Tana-Azaq de la presence italienne a l’emprise ottomane,” *Turcica*, 8 (1976), pp. 172–94.

less on the initiative of travelling merchants and ship captains.¹³ In sum, even though the Black Sea colonies were still regarded as pillars of the Italian commercial networks, there was a general entrenchment that reduced greatly the Italian merchants' ability and willingness to penetrate more distant markets.

The aim of this paper is to examine some aspects of the Mongols' role in favouring or inhibiting the profitable establishment and continuation of commercial and political relations between Italians and Mongols in the Black Sea. There are many levels of analysis that should be considered in this regard, namely, the official relations between "states" and the relations on the ground, as it were, that developed among authorities and merchants. It should also be kept in mind that the Venetian and the Genoese establishments on the Black Sea and relative position with the Mongols were different in terms of origin, geopolitical interests, commercial influence and legal status. However, based on the assumption that the relationship between merchants and Mongols involved, above all, mutual interests to be pursued through a series of agreements and adjustments, I have subsumed these levels of analysis within the two overarching categories of "convergences" and "conflicts," focusing specifically on political and economic relations.

Convergences

Naturally, the main point of convergence between Mongol and "Latin" interests concerns the mutual willingness to engage in a business relationship that involved profits made through the exchange of goods. The analysis of the articulation of this relationship from the Mongol side should consider direct and indirect benefits. Among the direct factors we can mention the revenues from trade exacted by the political powers; the involvement of Mongol and "Tatar" merchants in international trade, including partnerships with European merchants; and, the participation of "rank and file" Golden Horde subjects in small-scale trading. Among the less direct factors, we can mention the revenues from the "transaction costs" incurred by merchants

¹³ R.S. Lopez, "Les méthodes commerciales des marchands occidentaux en Asie du XI^e au XIV^e siècle," in *Sociétés et compagnies de commerce en Orient et dans l'Océan Indien*, ed. Michel Mollat (Paris, 1970), pp. 343–48.

trading abroad, inclusive of renting pack animals and labour, and paying storage and transiting fees. These could amount to a sizeable sum that during the period of more intense long-distance trading—the early decades of the fourteenth century—must have contributed to the local economy along the commercial routes. The expansion of trading networks also contributed to urban development in Mongol-ruled lands, and centres such as Sarai, Urgench, and Tabriz became commercial hubs of international import, whose markets were frequented by merchants of every provenance and ethnicity.¹⁴

The commercial fees (*commercium* from the Gr. κομμερκιον) collected by the Golden Horde from Italian trading colonies were fixed at a low rate of 3% of the value of the merchandise, later raised for Venice to 5%.¹⁵ A land tax (*terraticum*) was imposed on the Venetian settlement in Tana with the treaty of 1333, which granted Venice the privilege to establish a commercial colony (or “*comptoir*”) there.¹⁶ Control over these taxes was exercised by the Mongol governor in the Crimea, who resided in Solgat, who was in charge of keeping orderly relations with the sometimes unruly Italians, and in some cases acted as the Khan’s representative in diplomatic negotiations. The Italian colonies, especially Caffa, developed a complex local bureaucracy that assisted in the collection of fees and regulation of trade, although details are not entirely clear.¹⁷ Caffa also paid a tribute to the khan, the *canlucum* in recognition of the khan’s sovereignty.¹⁸ The treaties were negotiated and signed directly with the Khan of the Golden Horde, whose authority as the main political power in the region was not truly challenged even when Genoa, in the 1380s, managed to extract full control over a large portion of the Crimean coastal areas. Other

¹⁴ B. Grekov and A. Iakoubovski, *La Horde d’Or: La domination tatarre au XIII^e et au XIV^e siècle de la Mer Jaune à la Mer Noire* (Paris, 1939), pp. 140–47.

¹⁵ E.C. Skržinskaja, “Storia della Tana,” *Studi Veneziani*, 10 (1968), pp. 8, 13. *Diplomatarium Veneto-Levantinum, sive Acta et Diplomata res venetas graecas atque levantis illustrantia. Pars I: a. 1300–1350*, ed. G.M. Thomas (Venetiis, 1880), p. 261.

¹⁶ Skržinskaja, “Storia della Tana,” p. 13. n. 25.

¹⁷ There are several studies on this subject; for Genoa, see G. Astuti, “Le colonie genovesi del Mar Nero e i loro ordinamenti giuridici,” in *Colloquio Romano-Italiano, I Genovesi nel Mar Nero durante i Secoli XIII e XIV—Colocviul Româno-Italian, Genovezii la Marea Neagră în secolele XIII–XIV*, ed. S. Pascu (Bucarest, 1977), pp. 87–129. See also P. Saraceno, “L’amministrazione delle colonie genovesi nell’area del Mar Nero dal 1261 al 1453,” *Rivista di storia del diritto italiano*, 72–73 (1969–1970), pp. 177–266.

¹⁸ R.-H. Bautier, “Les relations économiques des occidentaux avec les pays d’Orient, au Moyen Âge, points de vue et documents,” in *Sociétés et compagnies de commerce en Orient et dans l’Océan Indien. Actes du huitième colloque internationale d’histoire maritime*, ed. M. Mollat (Paris, 1970), p. 273.

taxes were imposed arbitrarily, as we can see from a complaint lodged by the Venetian Consul in Tana on 4 August 1333, according to which the officials of the Mongol aristocrat "Tatamir"¹⁹ tried to extort additional taxes from some merchants.²⁰

Trade

While the Black Sea Italian *comptoirs* were terminal points of both local (Pontic, South Russian, Anatolian, and Caucasian) as well as international trade with Central Asia, Persia, China, and even India, it is the former that was more important in both economic and strategic terms, although the relative importance of each has been debated for some time (see below). Local trade consisted chiefly of grain, pastoral and hunting products such as hides and furs, fish and caviar, and slaves. International trade consisted mainly of silk and spices, pearls and precious stones.²¹ Famines in Europe had been at the root of Venice and Genoa's search for alternative sources of staples, and the coastal Black Sea region, together with the Bulgarian maritime region, and the territory north of Tana provided supplies that would satisfy the European demand, at the relatively low cost of naval transport. Access to these supplies would not only enrich those who controlled them but also constitute a powerful strategic weapon that both Genoa and Venice were keen to exploit, even though they had already developed an extended Mediterranean network for the importation of wheat. In the words of the chronicler Martin da Canal we can see that the famine of 1268 gave Venice a sense of its vulnerability and spurred it to seek additional sources of grain in the vast producing lands around the Black Sea.²²

Hides were important in the medieval economy, and it is no coincidence that the leather workshops in Giudecca island in Venice became internationally known for the quality of their manufacture

¹⁹ It is uncertain who this person was, but a Tashtemür later served as a general under Toqtamish, and it is not impossible that this may be the same person; see B. Spuler, *Die Goldene Horde: die Mongolen in Rußland 1223–1502* (Leipzig, 1943), p. 270.

²⁰ *Le Deliberazioni del Consiglio dei Rogati, Serie "Mistorum,"* vol. ii: *Libri XV–XVI*, eds. R. Cessi and M. Brunetti (Venezia, 1961), p. 204, n. 161.

²¹ For a comprehensive treatment of the products traded in the Black Sea, see M. Balard, *La Romanie Genoïse*, vol. ii (Roma-Genova, 1978), pp. 717–868.

²² Martin da Canal, *Les Estoires de Venise. Cronaca Veneziana in lingua francese dalle origini al 1275*, ed. A. Limentani (Firenze, 1972), pp. 324–25. See also Berindei and Veinstein, "La Tana," pp. 130 and 135–136.

at a time when large quantities of hides were being imported from the Golden Horde.²³ But the area in which the Mongols (or “Tatars”) seem to have been also very active was the slave trade. It is well known that this was one of the most thriving commercial activities. People who were not necessarily merchants engaged in it, and could sell slaves, sometimes their own family members, to European merchants for the Mediterranean markets as well as for employment in the houses of the Italian residents in the Crimea. Mamluk Egypt imported Central Asian male youths to employ as slave soldiers, whereas their chief employment in Europe was as domestic help, concubines and rarely anything else.²⁴ A large portion of slave sales recorded in notary documents concerns young females between the age of 12 and 18. In this respect there are, among the Italians, professional slave dealers who went inland to procure their “merchandise” that they later sold in Caffa, Tana, and other colonies to merchants who carried them to Italy or to the agents of Italian-based buyers. But we have also examples of “Tatars” who sold their slaves directly.²⁵ Many slaves were not Tatars but Russians, Circassians, Hungarians, and other nationalities captured in raids. An example of a raid is provided in the colourful narrative by Josafat Barbaro, who joined a party of Tatars who decided to attack a passing caravan of Circassian peoples. Undoubtedly a fearless Mongol of the type befriended by the Venetian would find it attractive to sell the proceeds of a raid to the local slave dealers.²⁶ One Arabic writer from the Mamluk Sultanate, al-‘Umarī, indicates that famine within Mongol-ruled territory caused people to sell their own children in slavery. Other similar sources—Baybars al-Manṣūrī and al-Nuwayrī—state that children

²³ G. Luzzatto, *Storia economica di Venezia dall'XI al XVI secolo* (Venezia, 1995), p. 56.

²⁴ Genoa played a central role in the Mamluk sultanate's acquisition of Central Asian slaves; see A. Ehrenkreutz, “Strategic Implications of the Slave Trade between Genoa and Mamluk Egypt in the Second Half of the Thirteenth Century,” in *The Islamic Middle East, 700–1900: Studies in Economic and Social History*, ed. A.L. Udovitch (Princeton, 1981), pp. 335–45.

²⁵ The sources provide many examples of Tatars selling slaves. See for instance O. Iliescu, “Nouvelles éditions d'actes notariés instrumentés au XIV^e siècle dans les colonies Génoises des bouches du Danube—Actes de Kilia et Licostomo,” *Revue des Études Sud-Est européennes*, 15 (1977), p. 119; C. Verlinden, “Le colonie vénitienne de Tana, centre de la traite des esclaves au XIV^e et au début du XV^e siècle,” in *Studi in onore di Luigi Luzzatto*, vol. ii (Milano, 1949), p. 8; L. Balletto, *Genova Mediterraneo Mar Nero (secoli XIII–XIV)* (Genova, 1976), p. 199.

²⁶ L. Lockart, R. Morozzo della Rocca, M.F. Tiepolo (eds.), *I Viaggi in Persia degli ambasciatori Barbaro e Contarini* (Roma, 1973), pp. 81–82.

and women were sold into slavery in the aftermath of civil war among the Mongols; even Özbeg Khan (1312–40) was not averse to selling people captured in war or plundering raids.²⁷ It is not surprising that the presence of buyers ready to supply the European and North African markets at the Golden Horde's doorstep was welcomed by the Mongols.

Periods of political and military tension did not stop trade, as we can see from the accusations levelled by Venice to Genoa for not respecting the terms of the *devetum* (the prohibition to trade) the two cities agreed on at the time of the war against the Golden Horde (1343–1347).²⁸ They explicitly mentioned a Mongol military commander in charge of a certain area of the Crimea who allowed trade through regardless of the hostilities and mutual embargo, while levying a personal tax on the eager Genoese merchants. This document hints at a submerged economy of gifts and bribes that undoubtedly “greased the wheels” of the relations between Mongol military and civilian officers and Italian residents.

Transit fees

A description of the fees and duties that merchants had to pay during their journey in Asia is presented by Pegolotti in his description of ordinary expenses to carry goods from Ayas to Tabriz by land. From the entry point to the land of the Ilkhan Abū Saʿīd (1316–1335) to Tabriz a series of entry, transit, night storage and guarding fees were levied that amounted to the considerable sum of 209 aspres (Italian *aspri*) per animal load.²⁹ As a term of comparison, we can

²⁷ On al-ʿUmarī, see Klaus Lech (ed. and tr.), *Das mongolische Weltreich: Al-ʿUmarī's Darstellung der mongolischen Reiche in seinem Werk Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār* (Wiesbaden, 1968), p. 73 (Arabic text), 140 (translation). On Baybars al-Manṣūrī, see W. de Tiesenhausen, *Recueil de matériaux relatifs à l'histoire de la Horde d'Or*, vol. i: *Extraits des ouvrages arabes* (Saint Pétersburg, 1884), pp. 91 and 114 [= Baybars al-Manṣūrī, *Ḍubdat al-fikra fī taʾrīkh al-hijra*, ed. D.S. Richards (Beirut, 1998), 347]. On al-Nuwayrī, see Tiesenhausen, vol. i, pp. 140 and 162 [= ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī, *Nihyat al-arab fī funn al-adab* (Cairo, 1923–97), vol. 27, pp. 374]. Cf. also Grekov and Iakoubovski, *La Horde d'Or*, pp. 116–17.

²⁸ R. Morozzo della Rocca, “Notizie da Caffa,” in *Studi in onore di Amintore Fanfani*, vol. iii (Milano, 1962), pp. 289–95.

²⁹ Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La Pratica della Mercatura*, ed. A. Evans (Cambridge, MA, 1936; rpt. New York, 1970), pp. 28–29 and 389–91.

mention that a house in Caffa could cost as little as 400 *aspri*, although most houses were considerably more expensive.³⁰

On the route from Tana to China, Pegolotti indicates another order of expenses, concerning salaried people (interpreters, guards, guides, and others), victuals and animals. Considering that he recommends that from Tana to Sarai the route is less safe than elsewhere, and it would be appropriate to form a caravan of sixty people for mutual protection, we can see that the income drawn by the Mongol states in payments for services and fees must have been considerable.³¹

Other advantages

We should not neglect to mention that the Italian cities were not only centres of trade, but also of handicraft and manufacturing, and that artisans were available (soldiers sent to Tana were also artisans).³²

Expert knowledge on matters that were important to Mongol rulers could also be acquired. An example of this can be found in the acts of Lamberto di Sambuceto. On 11 May 1290, the falconer Johanes de Rayna was hired by Pietro de Braino until August of the same year to accompany him to the court of emperor Argun.³³ The falconer would be paid 800 aspres plus expenses if he reached the court (Horde) of the emperor. However, the document does not specify what the duties of the falconer were. A reasonable assumption is that Pietro planned to use the falconer's skills to gain access to Argun and possibly secure a commercial agreement. However, no additional information can be found, except that a few days earlier a group of merchants had been partially compensated by emissaries of Argun for the losses incurred when robbed by a Jurzuchi. At this time the relations between Argun and the Genoese were good, and the compensation might have been seen a signal of the Ilkhan's intention to protect foreign merchants, thus inviting merchants to his lands.³⁴

On occasion, the Latins even served as mercenaries in Mongol

³⁰ Balard, *Romanie Génoise*, i, p. 286, doc. 730.

³¹ Pegolotti, *Pratica*, pp. 15, 21–23.

³² B. Doumerc, "La Tana au XV^e siècle: comptoir ou colonie?" in *État et colonisation au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance*, ed. M. Balard (Lyon, 1989), p. 253.

³³ M. Balard, *Gênes et l'Outre-Mer*, vol. i: *Les actes de Caffa du notaire Lamberto di Sambuceto, 1289–1290* (Paris-The Hague, 1973), p. 192, no. 513.

³⁴ Balard, *Gênes et l'Outre-Mer*, i, pp. 181–82, no. 459.

armies. Genoese troops, for instance, fought at the side of Mamai, ruler of the Golden Horde, in his campaign against Grand Duke Dmitri of Moscow and with him were defeated at the momentous battle of Kulikovo Pole on September 8, 1380.³⁵

A World market?

M.I. Finley's sharp critique of the idea of a "world market" in the ancient world remains an important caveat against overgeneralizations. "To be meaningful," he stated, "a 'world market,' a 'single economic unit' must embrace something considerably more extensive than the exchange of some goods over long distances; otherwise China, Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula and India were also part of the same unit and world market. One must show the existence of interlocking behaviour and responses over wide areas [. . .] in the dominant sectors of the economy, in food and metal prices, for example, and one cannot, or at least no one has."³⁶

For the Black Sea and Mediterranean economy of the post-Nympheus treaty period (1261), scholars have provided ample evidence of the existence of "interlocking behaviour and responses." Venetian and Genoese merchants developed networks of agents and informants that allowed them to predict market behaviour over the short term over an area that covered Europe, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Black Sea.³⁷ What has yet to be proved convincingly is that merchants were able to operate at the same level even beyond those areas.

This takes us to the question of how important long-distance trade with India and China (and even Iran) really was. The most prominent, persuasive, and enthusiastic promoter of the importance of the Far Eastern connection has been Roberto Sabatino Lopez. In numerous studies he has shown that, from the middle of the thirteenth century until the early second half of the fourteenth, and possibly beyond that, there was a vigorous, regular, and well regulated flow

³⁵ B.Z. Kedar, *Merchants in Crisis*, p. 69.

³⁶ M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (London, 1973), p. 34.

³⁷ On the Venetian merchants' tendency to base their business decision on short-term forecasting see U. Tucci, "Alle origini dello spirito capitalistico a Venezia: la previsione economica," in *Studi in onore di Amintore Fanfani*, vol. iii (Milano, 1962), pp. 547-57.

of goods from China, and he brought to light the names of many Italian and especially Genoese merchants who were active in this long-distance trade buried in wills, notarised sales, or court cases. Additional support for a regular exchange with the Far East has been found in the detailed information found in Pegolotti's manual: what to sell and buy, exchange rates, routes and many other practical matters that the merchant needed to know are included in his treatise. This was not a unique piece, but a particular, sophisticated and systematic example of a type of merchant's manual of which others (possibly many) existed, such as the one partially published by Robert-Henri Bautier.³⁸

On the other hand, Bautier has argued for a far more limited, occasional, inconstant, and economically scarcely relevant Far Eastern exchange. Bautier's argument is based essentially on the scarce quantities of spices that came through the continental route of Tana and the rest of the Black Sea from faraway provinces.³⁹ On the western side, there was little that the Europeans contributed, since the main European export, cloth and fabrics, could be easily sold either in Black Sea ports or at intermediate markets, such as Sarai and Urgenj in central Asia. A number of expeditions to India and China, moreover, do seem to be "one-off" ventures, in which the parties involved tried to collect "gifts" from fabulously wealthy Oriental rulers in return for "donations" of European mechanical marvels, such as the fountain and clock brought to the Sultan of Delhi by a group of Venetians.⁴⁰ Other prized and unique things can also be found, such as the horses and glass objects probably brought to the Chinese emperor by the Genoese Andalò da Savignone. The question is whether the argument that can be constructed for a considerably more relevant and regular Far Eastern trade, which essentially would be based on Lopez's assumption that large imports of cheaper silk justified the existence of a regular and robust traffic.⁴¹ This is a seri-

³⁸ Bautier, "Les relations économiques," pp. 311–31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 278–310.

⁴⁰ R.S. Lopez, "Les méthodes commerciales des marchands occidentaux en Asie du XI^e au XIV^e siècle," in *Sociétés et compagnies de commerce en Orient et dans l'Océan Indien*, ed. Michel Mollat (Paris, 1970), p. 346. On Mongol support to Venetians travelling from Ürgench to Ghazna, see also P. Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge 1999), pp. 252–53.

⁴¹ R.S. Lopez, "L'importance de la Mer Noire dans l'histoire de Gênes," in *Colloquio Romano-Italiano*, pp. 13–33.

ous point, but based mostly on an argument *ex-silentio*, that is, on the assumption that the silk used in Italy was largely of Chinese provenance although such a provenance was not specified.

With accumulating knowledge of Genoese and (to a lesser extent) Venetian commercial interests in the Far East, the weight of evidence has shifted towards the assumption that international trade in the early decades of the fourteenth century had become more regular, and that proper merchants, not just adventurers, were making a living by frequenting the most remote marketplaces in Beijing and Quanzhou (Zaiton). Names like Vivaldi, Stancone, Bonaccia, Spazzapetra, Ghisolfi, Bestagno, Savignone, Vegia, Malrasi, Gentile, Ultramarino, Adorno, Basso and more testify to the involvement of individuals and families in Far Eastern trade. According to Michel Balard, the Central Asian route to China through Pera-Caffa-Tana-Sarai-Urgench became the standard route after the fall of the Ilkhans and the withdrawal of Italian trade from Persia after 1340 due to harassment and robberies that had taken place in Tabriz.⁴² Tabriz had been the most important centre of Italian commercial presence in continental Asia from 1290 to 1340. However, the Mongol route through Central Asia only operated until the Ming dynasty overthrew the Mongol empire in 1368 and virtually closed its borders to international trade.

Yet we have very little information regarding the type and volume of traffic, and the evidence, regardless of the number of families that were indeed making a living (and often dying) by trading in such remote areas is not sufficient to claim that we have an integrated market between the Mediterranean and China. That is, the penetration of commercial interests to farther Asia, albeit significant, did not constitute a structural modification of international trade consistent with the type of "colonization" that we see in the Black Sea. This was promoted by a mixture of private and state interests, was sustained by diplomatic agreements and political decisions at the government level and protected by the force of arms. Instead, Far Eastern ventures remained the domain of private individuals and merchants, and did not represent an attempt to penetrate distant markets as a critical goal of the Italian maritime republics. Access to the products of India and China remained in the hands of Muslim intermediaries, and the

⁴² M. Balard, "Les Gênois en Asie Centrale et en Extrême-Orient au XIV^e siècle: un cas exceptionnel?" in *Économies et sociétés au Moyen Âge. Mélanges offerts à Edouard Perroy* (Paris, 1973), pp. 681–89.

North African ports remained the main markets for spices and other products from south, south-east and east Asia.

That the Ming were unwilling, as mentioned above, to support the activities of Italian traders need not, by the way, be construed necessarily as a *tout court* closure to foreign trade.⁴³ Maritime trade flourished under the early Ming, as is well known from the navigational feats of Admiral Zheng He. It is rather more likely to assume that the Ming reacted to the presence of Westerners who had enjoyed so many privileges under the Mongols at the expense of the Chinese. The personal liaisons that Genoese and Venetian merchants had been able to forge with Mongol rulers in China probably were, in the end, their undoing. But this pattern is different from what happened on the Black Sea, where Venetians and Genoese persisted in sending missions and seeking diplomatic and commercial agreements even after centralized rule in the Khanate of Qipchaq collapsed and was replaced by a chaotic and unstable political situation. This means, in my view, that long-distance trade between the Mediterranean and China functioned only because it was actively supported by the Mongol states, and this condition was the pre-eminent factor that made the presence of Italian merchants in the Far East possible at all, together, of course, with their own personal initiative. The end of the *Pax Mongolica* is especially significant, then, in the sense that since Mongol state support was no longer being available, the Italian merchants found themselves unable to promote and protect their interests with the incoming powers.

International trade, in order to flourish, required active state protection, and this not only to keep the roads safe, but primarily to make sure that market conditions were fair, that the property of deceased merchants were not lost, that exchange rates were reliable, and that circulation of money was sufficient for the need of transactions of considerable value. All of this could not exist without formal agreements and treaties with the local regimes. Both Genoa and Venice exerted themselves to a great degree to promote the existence of these conditions in their treaties with the powers they were dealing with, including the Byzantines, the Mamluks, the Greek rulers of Trebizond and, of course, the Mongols in Russia and Persia. However, the Italian states never tried to initiate formal relations with China,

⁴³ Petech, "Les marchands italiens," p. 558.

and withdrew from their involvement with Persia after attempts to ensure the protection of trade by the successors of the Ilkhans failed.⁴⁴

The mission of Andalò da Savignone to promote diplomatic contacts between the Yuan dynasty and the maritime republics received lukewarm consideration by the Venetian Senate. What the Mongol khan of China Toghon Temür wanted from the West is spelled out very clearly in the diplomatic correspondence with European powers brokered by the Genoese merchant Andalò da Savignone: horses and others marvellous things (*alia mirabilia*). He proposed to acquire in Venice between five and ten horses worth two thousand florins together with crystal “jewels” (*iocalia*) also valued highly, between one and two thousand florins.⁴⁵ Moreover, with a diplomatic move meant to reassure the Venetian Senate, he promised to leave on a Venetian vessel. We do not know whether this request was satisfied, but we do know that Andalò left on a Genoese vessel which landed first in Naples and then proceeded for Caffa, whence the caravan with the gifts proceeded on the route to China. At least one of the Italian horses made it to Peking, presumably with its Italian escorts.⁴⁶

The Mongol request is, I think, quite revealing of the type of contacts sought by the Yuan emperor. Clearly the type of “gifts” requested from the West are consistent with the tributary exchanges that China entertained with multiple independent polities. The Italian delegation carrying horses and marvellous things would have appeared, once it reached the Yuan court, as a tributary mission from a faraway tributary nation, thus adding to the prestige of the imperial court of China.

The relationship between Toghon Temür and the West was surely guided by the double objective of “receiving tribute”—in the Chinese tradition—and opening the door to official relations with the foreign countries. On the Western side, however, this chance was not exploited. The responsibility of presenting the exotic gifts was left to individuals, while the Venetian or Genoese states were not tempted, apparently, to initiate official relations with faraway courts even though they were perfectly familiar with the tributary mode of diplomatic exchange, and even though there were people familiar with the Yuan court who could have easily acted as intermediaries.

⁴⁴ R.S. Lopez, “European Merchants in the Medieval Indies: The Evidence of Commercial Documents,” *Journal of Economic History*, 3 (1943), p. 183.

⁴⁵ The florin was a Florentine golden coin, which started to be coined in 1252. It weighed 3.54 gr. and was used very broadly throughout the Mediterranean.

⁴⁶ Petech, “Les marchands italiens,” p. 555.

If we consider the crucial link between state support and commercial penetration of faraway markets, we see that the farther we move from the epicentre of commercial interests (the Mediterranean and lim-trophic coastlines) the fainter the state intervention becomes.⁴⁷ Within that sphere of interest, the Venetians and the Genoese did not withdraw from the Black Sea even when seriously threatened, and continued to seek a “common ground” with the local powers while protecting fiercely their positions. Beyond this sphere, the activities of Italian merchants depended upon the Mongol governments’ willingness and ability to promote favourable trading conditions.

The collapse of the Mongol courts that had actively sustained trade coincided with the drastic decline of long-distance trade, therefore, mainly because the governments of the Italian republics had not been and continued not to be interested in pursuing diplomatic relations in the Far East. On the other hand, they continued to negotiate and fight for their positions in the Black Sea even when the meltdown of the Golden Horde’s political order made this an exceedingly difficult and risky business. Private interests, as extensive and regular as they may have been, could not survive for long in an environment in which they did not receive fair, or at least predictable, protection and legal status that only formal diplomatic agreements could have guaranteed. Let us therefore consider briefly how treaties between states regulated the presence of merchants and what guarantees they typically offered.

Diplomatic activity

The mission of the Venetian ambassador Jacopo Cornaro to Saray (between 1360 and 1362) at a time of “civil war” within the Golden Horde is a clear indication of the relentless attention paid by the Venetian senate to the promotion of good relations with whomever happened to be in charge. As the Venetian Consul in Tana, Cornaro had the possibility to study the political condition in the steppe before

⁴⁷ On this issue, see M.N. Pearson “Merchants and states,” in *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade 1350–1370*, ed. J.D. Tracy (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 41–116. Note that in his survey of “Asian empires” the Mongols are not mentioned.

undertaking his mission.⁴⁸ According to the meticulous study by Skržinskaja, the khan he met was either Hizr (Khidr) or Murād, and the same author advances the hypothesis that Cornaro's mission was meant to confirm Venice's rights in Tana, and the repayment of damages suffered by Venetian at the hands of subjects of the khan in the khan's territory.⁴⁹ But the main issue seems to have been the reduction of the commercial tax imposed on the Venetians, which had been previously raised to 5%, to 4%.⁵⁰ Cornaro must have been successful because the brief of another embassy sent to the khan Mamay in 1369 involved the negotiation for a tax reduction from 4 to 3%.⁵¹ The intense diplomatic activity undertaken by the Venetian government involved also additional expenditures, given that the salary of the Consul in Tana was raised from 70 to 110 lire *grossorum*, and the budget for administrative expenses was increased five times to allow an expansion of the personnel and of the guard.

Cornaro's mission to the khan of Qipchaq highlights the key issues that were at the basis of the diplomatic agreements between Venetian and Genoese states and Mongol rulers: territorial concessions, a favourable tax regime, and protection of the interests and possessions of their subjects. To these basic points we should add others that related to special circumstances, such as negotiating the resumption of commercial activities after a war, the repayment of damages suffered by their subjects, or the restitution of prisoners held by the khan. Again, the great chaos (the *zamyatnya* of the Russian sources) that reigned within the Golden Horde was no obstacle to the preservation of the commercial agreements.

Similar agreements are already contained in the text of the treaty between Genoa and the Mamluk Sultan Qalāwūn of 1290.⁵² Trading rights and immunities for Genoese merchants were granted throughout the sultan's dominions. No Genoese could be held hostage for

⁴⁸ According to a document of the Venetian senate, this mission was assigned to the Consul in Tana because nobody in Venice wanted to be sent as ambassador to the "Tatar emperor". See F. Thiriet, *Régestes des délibérations du Sénat de Venise concernant la Romanie*, vol. i (Paris, 1958), p. 96, no. 363.

⁴⁹ E.Č. Skržinskaja, "Un Ambasciatore veneziano all'Orda d'Oro," *Studi Veneziani*, 16 (1974), pp. 67–96.

⁵⁰ Thiriet, *Régestes*, i, p. 95, no. 355.

⁵¹ Thiriet, *Régestes*, i, p. 121, no. 476.

⁵² On this see P.M. Holt, "Qalāwūn's Treaty with Genoa in 1290," *Der Islam*, 57 (1980), pp. 101–108.

the crimes or debts of another. Upon the death of a merchant in the sultan's territory, if he were to die intestate then his possessions should be claimed by the Genoese consul or any other Genoese in that place if there were no consul. In case there were no Genoese, then the "lord of the land" would keep them until formally claimed from Genoa. Moreover, selling and buying should be free from pressures or coercion, and taxes imposed only on the merchandise that was actually sold. Loading and unloading as well as other operations should not be subject to restrictions or other fees. Other provisions indicated the import duties, which, for example, amounted to 10% for silks and woollens.

The legal procedures within the Genoese settlement were also specified. If a "Saracen" had a case against a Genoese, this would be assessed by the consul. If, on the other hand, a Genoese had a complaint against a Saracen, this would be presented to the finance officer. However, the consul had a right to address the Sultan in case a Genoese sought reparations. The treaty also included reciprocity for Muslim traders in Genoese territories, granting them essentially the same rights and privileges Genoa enjoyed in Egypt. As Holt notes, while the provisions are very similar to those of the grant by the Mamluk Sultan al-Mu'izz Aybeg in favour of the Venetians (1254), the political tone is different: the 1290 agreement is a bilateral treaty between two equivalent powers rather than a concession.

Another matter that was negotiated in formal agreements regarded the protection of the possessions of merchants who died in foreign lands, and specifically on the route from Tana to China. Since death en route was always a possibility, and since merchants carried money or merchandise obtained on credit from investors at home, the ability to claim and retrieve the proceeds in case of the merchant's death was obviously an important point. According to Pegolotti, "[s]hould a merchant coming or going [between Tana and China] die on the road, everything he owned would become the property of the ruler of the place where he dies, and therefore be seized by the ruler's officials; similarly if he died in China. However if he had a brother or a friend who was said to be his brother, these could claim the goods and thus the property would be saved."⁵³ This seems to contrast with a prescription attributed to the *yasa*, the collection of laws

⁵³ Pegolotti, *Pratica*, p. 22.

traditionally attributed to Chinggis Khan, according to which, if a person died with no heirs, his possessions should not be taken by the king but given to the “man who ministered unto him.”⁵⁴ However, to apply this rule to foreign merchants in places in which a testament could not be produced, and by necessity lived outside the bounds of established social or kin networks, would have probably invited foul play. Therefore, only fellow travellers who were or could reasonably claim to be kin of the deceased could inherit, otherwise the property would belong to the khan, to whom, after all, claims for the restitution or lost or robbed goods were routinely addressed by the Venetian and Genoese authorities. In other words, it seems to me that in a situation in which it would have been obviously impossible to track down the legitimate heirs of the deceased, the provision to give the constituted authority rights over unclaimed possessions, and thus ensuring that unauthorized people would not profit from a foreigner’s death, can be seen as intended to guarantee the safety of merchants.⁵⁵

This seems to be confirmed by a provision in the Qalāwūn’s treaty, according to which unclaimed property of a deceased Genoese reverted to the local authority to be later claimed by the Genoese through formal request. That the Venetians had the right to claim the property lost by a compatriot who had died “*in partibus Tartarorum*” is confirmed by an order given to the bailo of Constantinople to take every step to recover the goods of Francesco da Canale. These goods had been kept by the local people, but clearly there was hope to recover them by sending an envoy with an official letter.⁵⁶

Territorial and commercial privileges were also granted by the Mongol khans on the basis of treaties or concessions. The first documented instance of a privilege conceded by a Mongol khan to Venice is a letter sent by the Khan of Iran, to the Venetian doge at the beginning of November 1306.⁵⁷ This letter, sent by a Sultan of the Tatars (*Soldani Tartarorum*) called Zuci, and attributed by Heyd to Öljeitü Ilkhan (1304–16), contains precious information about three

⁵⁴ G. Vernadsky, *A History of Russia*, vol. iii: *The Mongols and Russia* (New Haven, 1953), p. 107.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of this question, see R.S. Lopez, “European Merchants in the Medieval Indies: The Evidence of Commercial Documents,” p. 176.

⁵⁶ F. Thiriet, *Délibérations des Assemblées vénitiennes concernant la Romanie*, vol. i (Paris, 1966), pp. 172 and 304.

⁵⁷ W. Heyd, *Histoire du commerce du Levant au Moyen-Âge*, (Leipzig, 1885–1886; rpt. Amsterdam, 1983), ii, pp. 122–24.

aspects of the Venetian relationship with the Mongol khan. Written in Mongol language, the document was presented together with a Latin translation by the khan's envoy, whose name is not given, but is likely to be a "Latin" in the service of the Ilkhan, as we find several Italians acting in this capacity.⁵⁸ The Ilkhan, extending what could be seen as an invitation rather than a formal concession, notifies the Venetians that their merchants should feel free to come and go without fear of being harassed by locals expecting to be refunded by them for the debts left by other people. Attached to this diplomatic letter there was also another item, which explained, as a confirmation of the enactment of the khan's policy that a certain Khoja Abdullah (Khwāja 'Abdallāh) would not require compensation for the losses suffered at the hands of a certain Pietro Rodulfo, a Venetian, by holding other citizens of Venice responsible. Finally, the witnesses to this document are two Italians, Balduccio Buffeto, whose place of origin is not specified, and Tommaso Uzi of Siena, who was employed in the service of the Ilkhan as *ilduci* or "sword bearer" of the ruler. It is important to note that the opening of relations with Tabriz coincided with the establishment of peaceful relations between the khan of the Golden Horde Toqta and Öljeitü in 1304–5, a development favoured by the political intervention of the Yuan emperor Temür. This agreement resulted in a general resumption of trade throughout Mongol-ruled lands, even though relations between Toqta and the Genoese in Caffa deteriorated shortly afterwards (see below).⁵⁹

The substance and the circumstances of the letter show that the Ilkhan was keen to attract Venetian merchants by applying a rule of individual, rather than collective responsibility in case of commercial disputes. It also shows that local merchants were compliant with this policy, although we do not know whether they were being forced to comply or whether this policy was in fact something that they had supported and possibly lobbied the khan to approve. Thirdly, we see that Westerners in the service of the khan are vouchsafing for the Muslim merchant and acting, as it were, as guarantors of the stated commitment that merchants would not be held responsible for losses incurred at someone else's hands. Here we notice, first, a direct initiative of the Ilkhanate to apply accepted norms of inter-

⁵⁸ *Diplomatarium Veneto-Levanticum*, pp. 47–48. Only the Latin translation survives in the archives, while the Mongol original is lost.

⁵⁹ Vernadsky, *The Mongols and Russia*, pp. 82 and 191.

national trade (as these should be regarded given that they appear in a variety of diplomatic agreements) to attract foreign merchants to Persia. As a consequence, the Genoese and Venetian communities in Tabriz flourished for the next three decades, making the city the most important centre for long-distance trade in continental Asia until the end of the Ilkhanate. Venetians and Genoese authorities in Trebizond reciprocated, and dictated to the local rulers conditions that made regular traffic with the Ilkhanids possible. In fact, they insisted that the emperor of Trebizond granted fiscal privileges to merchants from the Ilkhanate in order to attract them to Trebizond.⁶⁰

In 1333, the agreement negotiated by the Venetian ambassadors Giovanni Quirino and Pietro Giustiniano with Khan Özbek for the establishment of their *comptoir* in Tana included a territorial concession, favourable taxation, protection for the merchants, and provisions in case of legal disputes. Commercial duties were fixed at the same rates granted to the Genoese in Caffa. An interesting point is that disputes would be addressed together by the Consul and the “lord of the land,” meaning the khan’s representative, who was probably the Mongol governor resident in Solgat. This is confirmed by the fact that a Mongol official carrying the title of *tudun* (Lat. *titanus*) was charged in 1374 with judicial responsibilities over the subjects of the khan until friendly relations were resumed between Caffa and the governor of Solgat.⁶¹ It may be interesting to note that legal disputes between people of different ethnic backgrounds were addressed under the Yuan code by holding a joint conference attended by the representatives of the ethnic groups involved.⁶²

Close and constant relations were entertained between the Mongol governor in Solgat and Genoese and Venetian governments in Tana and Caffa. Another document, dated 14 November 1381, mentions an embassy sent to “the lord of Sorgat and the emperor of Gazaria.”⁶³ This embassy had three objectives: 1. to request all the privileges

⁶⁰ S.P. Karpov, “Grecs et Latins à Trébizonde (XIII^e–XV^e siècle). Collaboration économique, rapports politiques,” in *État et colonisation au Moyen Âge*, ed. Michal Balard, p. 416.

⁶¹ Balard, *Romanie*, i, p. 286.

⁶² Paul Heng-chao Ch’en, *Chinese Legal Traditions under the Mongols* (Princeton, 1979), p. 83.

⁶³ Gazaria (or Khazaria, i.e., the land of the Khazars) was a term that referred not just to the Crimea but to the whole khanate of the Golden Horde. The evolution of this term in Venetian usage is explained by Skrzinskaja in “Un ambasciatore veneziano,” pp. 91–95.

enjoyed by the Venetians; 2. to explain the conditions of the Peace of Turin, at the end of the Veneto-Genoese war, which prohibited Venice access to the Black Sea for two years; 3. to obtain the restitution of goods taken away from Venetian merchants.⁶⁴ Again, we see here how diplomatic relations continue to play an essential role in ensuring that the political environment remains favourable to trade. Lastly, we should note that these missions were expensive and the gifts presented to the khan could be sizeable. The economic burden of the diplomatic exchanges, which is often remarked on in government documents, was also carried by the state.⁶⁵

As we have seen, the Mongols' 'convergence of interests' with the Italian merchants covered many areas, and the common goal of creating an environment favourable to trade was sustained by the mutual willingness to find a common ground, establish trust, and seek mutual understanding. But this was not a risk-free enterprise, and the need to protect one's own interests, as well as incidents that were allowed to escalate, sometimes led to conflicts.

Conflicts

It is fair to say that, while the Mongols seem to have been favourably disposed towards trade, they were no "pushovers." Conflicts periodically erupted between the rulers of the Golden Horde and the Italian colonies in their territory. As a preliminary assessment of the reasons that led to the violent confrontations, we should note two general points. The first is that conflicts were not caused by disagreements over commercial issues, and peace, once restored, led to the resumption of trading conditions that were not dissimilar from those enjoyed prior to war. The second is that military engagements seem to have been caused, above all, by real or perceived infringements of the sovereign authority of the khan. Motives of conflict related to sovereignty covered mainly two areas: territorial control and offences against Tatar subjects.

In 1308, the Khan of the Golden Horde Toqta attacked the Genoese, allegedly because of their collaboration with Tabriz (notwith-

⁶⁴ Thiriet, *Régestes*, i, p. 151, no. 612.

⁶⁵ The embassy sent in 1369 carried gifts for a value of 100 *sommi*; see Thiriet, *Régestes*, i, p. 121, no. 476.

standing the general improvement of relations between the two Mongol states) and because the Genoese engaged in kidnapping of Tatar children to sell in slavery. To punish the Genoese, Toqta moved the merchants in Saray to Solgat, and seized their merchandise. Then he sent an army against Caffa. The Genoese resisted for several months but eventually set fire to the city and escaped on their ships. Toqta's troops entered and plundered the defenceless city on 8 May 1308.⁶⁶ The Genoese had supported the Ilkhan Argun during his struggle with the Golden Horde, and the victory of the latter had dealt a heavy blow to the Genoese interests on the Black Sea. Hence, it is possible that Toqta's aggressive behaviour reflected the old animosity. It is also possible that the trade in Mongol children was so blatant and was depriving the khan of so many people that it provoked a military attack. But it is also likely, as mentioned by Bratianu, that Toqta's motive was, above all, to make the brash Genoese feel "le poids de son autorité."⁶⁷ That is, to punish a behaviour that was aggressive and overbearing, a characteristic of the Genoese in the early period of their activity on the Black Sea, which was denounced from several quarters.⁶⁸

Perhaps the most important episode of conflict between the Golden Horde and the Italian colonies was the war that set Khan Janibeg against Venice and Genoa from 1343 to 1347.⁶⁹ As is well known, shortly after the emperor Janibeg in 1342⁷⁰ confirmed the privileges granted by Özbek to the Venetians, an incident in Tana brought about his armed reaction, the expulsion of Venetians and Genoese from Tana, and a state of war between the Golden Horde and the

⁶⁶ Grekov and Iakoubovsky, *La Horde d'Or*, p. 89. Spuler, *Die Goldene Horde*, p. 84. Vernadsky says that Caffa was attacked "because of a misunderstanding between Toqta and the Genoese," but does not explain the nature of the misunderstanding; see his *The Mongols and Russia*, p. 191. See also G.I. Bratianu, *Recherches sur le commerce Génois dans la Mer Noire au XIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1929), p. 283.

⁶⁷ Bratianu, *Recherches sur le commerce Génois*, p. 283.

⁶⁸ The Greek merchants often complained about Genoese brash and aggressive behavior, see A.E. Laiou, "Monopoly and Privilege: the Byzantine Reaction to the Genoese Presence in the Black Sea," in *Oriente e Occidente tra Medioevo ed età moderna: studi in onore di Geo Pistarino*, ed. L. Balletto, vol. ii (Genova, 1997), pp. 675–86.

⁶⁹ S.P. Karpov, "Génois et Byzantins face à la crise de Tana de 1343 d'après les documents d'archives inédits," *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 22 (1996), pp. 33–51.

⁷⁰ *Diplomatarium Veneto-Levanticum*, i, pp. 261–63. For a detailed study of Janibeg's decree see A.P. Grigor'ev, V.P. Grigor'ev, "Iarlyk Dzhani-beka ot 1342 g. venezianskim kupzham Azova (rekonstruktsiia soderzhaniia)," *Istoriografiia i istochnikovedenie istorii stran Azii i Afriki*, 14 (1992), pp. 33–86.

Italians that led to the unsuccessful siege of Caffa and was resolved only after years of severe political disruption. In September 1343, a Venetian merchant, Andriolo Civran, slew a Mongol aristocrat who had smacked or punched him. This was surely illegal, since, aside from the disproportionate reaction, grievances against Mongols had to be addressed along proper channels, and adjudicated by a joint panel.⁷¹ The incident triggered a popular reaction and the government's armed intervention, which caused the expulsion of all the Italians and the death of several of them, while others were wounded or captured, and their possessions plundered. The majority managed to flee on their ships.⁷² Apparently the Venetians received a formal request to hand over the culprit, which, however, was ignored.⁷³

Tension had been brewing for some time, and it is likely that Janibeg's real target was Caffa rather than Tana, i.e., the most prosperous and the most independent of the Italian colonies. The legal dispute over judicial responsibilities, therefore, screened a broader problem, namely, the extent to which these cities were going to be allowed to retain near-sovereign powers. Even though Venice had been allowed only ten years earlier the right to establish its own basis in the territory of the Golden Horde, and even though its relationship with the local rulers had been extremely cautious, the Civran incident made sure that Venice could not distance itself from the emerging hostilities between the Golden Horde and the Genoese. Instead, an uneasy alliance was forged between Venetians and Genoese to protect their respective positions on the Black Sea. Their primary goals were to resume trade and retain their bases.

This could only occur through the resumption of diplomatic negotiations with the khan, while at the same time enforcing an embargo (*devetum*) of trade within the territory of the Golden Horde. This embargo was enforced only partially, and indeed the Venetians accused the Genoese of continuing their commercial operations in Caffa and other places in violation of the agreement.⁷⁴ But it did

⁷¹ In the Yuan code of 1283 it is expressly said that if a Mongol beat a Chinese the Chinese could not react but had to present witnesses and file a suit with the local authorities. It is possible that a similar procedure was followed in the Golden Horde. See Ch'en, *Chinese Legal Traditions*, p. 85.

⁷² S. Karpov, "Venezia e Genova: rivalità e collaborazione a Trebisonda e Tana, secoli XIII–XV," in *Genova, Venezia, il Levante nei secoli XII–XIV*, eds. G. Ortalli and D. Puncuh (Venezia, 2001), pp. 270–72.

⁷³ Morozzo della Rocca, "Notizie da Caffa," p. 285.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 289–95.

work in the end, as both sides were clearly suffering from the diminished trade, and Janibeg had not been able to resolve the conflict by the force of arms. The debilitating effects of the Plague, which decimated the Mongol armies besieging Caffa, is also said to have played a role in the resumption of a state of peace.⁷⁵ But it must be noted that the Venetians pursued peace with dogged determination, and in 1347 obtained conditions by and large similar to those before the war, with the exception that the commercial tax had been raised from 3 to 5%. On the other hand, the Genoese lost access to Tana until Berdibeg replaced Janibeg on the throne of the Golden Horde, in 1358. But the situation was destined to remain tense throughout this period and several times the Mongols had threatened Caffa. According to Venetian intelligence, in 1352 they had to request urgent assistance to Pera because the Mongol Khan was hostile to them and intended to attack Caffa.⁷⁶

Another sign of the tug-of-war between Caffa and the Mongols is represented by the emission of currency. The coin of current usage in Caffa and throughout the Golden Horde for most commercial transaction was the *asper baricatus* (from the name of the Mongol khan Berke, 1257–67). Together with it, there was the *sommo* (a silver ingot) for larger transactions. Until the 1380s the *aspri* in use in Caffa indicate Mongol sovereignty by the name of the khan stamped on the coins. However, probably after 1380, the same coins appear with a countermark stamped by the Caffa authorities. According to some, this was a measure made necessary by the devaluation of the currency, as part of the coins began to be produced in inferior silver. Therefore, good coins were stamped with the Genoese castle to guarantee proper value.⁷⁷

But the Caffa stamp on the verso of the khan's name and title was also a declaration of the new status of Caffa after the treaties between Genoa and the Golden Horde of 1381 and 1387, which sanctioned the territorial expansion of Genoa along the Crimean littoral and the expulsion from the same area of Mongol subjects.⁷⁸ In the early

⁷⁵ A.G. Tononi, "La Peste dell'Anno 1348," *Giornale Ligustico*, 11 (1884), pp. 139–52.

⁷⁶ M.-M. Costa, "Sulla battaglia del Bosforo," *Studi Veneziani*, 14 (1972), p. 210.

⁷⁷ O. Iliescu, "Contributions à l'histoire des colonies génoises en Roumanie aux XIII^e–XV^e siècles," *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire*, 28.1/2 (1989), pp. 25–52; *idem*, "La monnaie génoise dans les pays roumains aux XIII^e–XV^e siècles," in *Colloquio Rumeno-Italiano*, pp. 156–71.

⁷⁸ Șerban Papacostea, "Quod non iretur ad Tanam' Un aspect fundamental de

fifteenth century Caffa issued a series of coins in the name of Genoa (and then Milan) only, testifying to a fully independent status. In any case, the motives for the repeated confrontations between Genoa and the Golden Horde cannot be attributed solely to Genoa's rivalry with Venice, but more specifically to Genoa's attempts to seize forcibly territorial rights and sovereign powers from the rulers of the Golden Horde.

From the above we can see that conflicts occurred primarily when the khans of the Golden Horde thought their sovereign powers were being threatened or attacked. But in this connection we should note that Venice and Genoa operated very differently, and this difference is at the heart of our understanding of the "mode" of colonization of the Black Sea.

Colonies or comptoirs?

The reason why the Mongols had overall more conflicts with Genoa than with Venice must be sought not only in the different size of the respective colonies, but in the nature itself of their "colonization" of the Black Sea. Fundamental differences between Venice and Genoa in the respective attitudes to overseas possessions are well known. Most scholars stress the greater autonomy of the Genoese colonial governments and of the offices established to regulate them (most importantly the *Officium Gazarie* and the *Officium Romanie*) from the city's government, while Venetian overseas administration is seen as more closely controlled by the metropolitan centre. The authority of the central government was stronger in the Venetian possessions, while the Genoese colonies were more affected by the initiative of local individuals.

More important for our purposes are differences in the process of colonization. Venice contented itself with the acquisition of commercial bases throughout the Black Sea, but most prominently at Tana, Trebizond, and Soudak, which gave it access to the local markets, while at the same time being safe harbours for its ships and merchants. As long as rights of residence were granted and trade was permitted and protected, the Venetians did not resort to force unless compelled

la politique génoise dans la Mer Noire au XIV^e siècle," *Revue des Études du Sud-Est Européenne*, 12 (1979), p. 214. On the treaties between Genoa and the Tatars, see A.A. Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea* (Cambridge, MA, 1936), pp. 177–87.

to defend themselves. The settlement of Tana, so crucial to the very existence of Venice in the Black Sea, was fortified in 1424–29 only after having endured pillage and destruction several times, but only in 1442 we find a reference to a possibly autonomous and independent status of the Venetians in Tana.⁷⁹

Genoa, on the other hand, pursued a more aggressive policy of territorial expansion, following a trajectory that had first aimed at the exclusion of Venetians and other competitors from the Black Sea by diplomatic arrangements with local powers, and, when they failed, by the force of arms. During the war of 1350–55, Genoa found itself in the position of having to fight at the same time against Byzantines, Venetians, and Mongols. Facing the possibility of being denied access to the Black Sea, it opted for the imposition of full territorial control over strategic areas and commercial ports not only in the Crimean peninsula, but also along the Rumanian coasts.⁸⁰ This control was preserved only with increasing difficulties related to Genoa's own ability to provide for its colonies (and for itself!) until the Ottoman conquest. It is therefore not surprising that the conflicts between Genoa and the Golden Horde were, especially after 1350 of a different order than those between Venice and the Mongols. The different paths of colonization (if such a word can be used) represent two different readings of the political landscape. Whereas Genoa had had time to strengthen its position on the Black Sea, commanded a greater volume of trade, and therefore felt it had to protect these achievements, often by resorting to violence, Venice was weaker from the start, and therefore had to rely on the cooperation and protection of the local authorities.

Conclusion

In this necessarily cursory examination of the multisided and much debated relationship between Italian colonies on the Black Sea and Mongol states I have attempted to focus on Mongol goals, interests and active involvement. A few aspects deserve to be mentioned in the conclusions.

⁷⁹ Doumerc, "La Tana au XIV^e siècle," p. 260.

⁸⁰ Ş. Papacostea, "Un tournant de la politique génoise en Mer Noire au XIV^e siècle: l'ouverture des routes continentales en direction de l'Europe Centrale," in *Oriente e Occidente tra Medioevo ed età moderna*, ii, pp. 939–47.

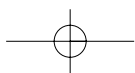
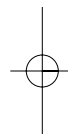
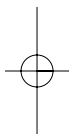
First, the Mongols had much to gain from the commercial relations with the European states. These provided vast markets for local products, paid a variety of fees, taxes, and commercial costs, and contributed to the personal purse and interests of the khan with tributes, gifts, and foreign knowledge. Any notion that the arrival of the Italians on the Black Sea shores was a phenomenon to be understood mainly within a European context—rivalry between Genoa and Venice, weakening of Byzantium, the merchants' quest for commercial opportunities in remote markets, and so on—must make room for the obvious understanding shown by the Mongol rulers for the advantages of commerce, and for the many positive steps undertaken to encourage and protect it.

The second noteworthy aspect is that international trade came to an end after the collapse of the Ilkhans and of the Yuan dynasty not only because the end of the Pax Mongolica had made the routes insecure and risks unpredictable, but because the states of Venice and Genoa had never been willing to intervene diplomatically to secure adequate agreements. Although the conditions were ripe for initiating diplomatic exchanges with Beijing, they did not translate into a policy of regular state to state correspondence. While one should resist the temptation to resort to counterfactual arguments, it is still important to give due consideration to the fact that concrete and available opportunities were missed. Tabriz marked the limit of state interests, partly made necessary by the effects that relations between the Ilkhanate and the Golden Horde had on regional stability. But once the Ilkhans fell, and conditions became less favourable, the state withdrew, forcing individuals also to forsake the Persian markets. The Mongols had indeed been exceptional in their ability to provide the infrastructure underpinning trade even when the formal backing of European states was lacking.

Lastly, we should note that the overwhelming majority of the conflicts between the Mongols and the Italian colonies was determined not by commercial matters but by issues of sovereignty and political authority. Wars were fought not to deny Italians their commercial privileges but to curb abuses that threatened the formal and factual exercise of sovereign authority by the rulers of the Golden Horde in areas they regarded as their domains. Disputes were, of course, territorial, but also invested legal and monetary matters. In this context, we have also noted that Genoa and Venice adopted strategies of "colonization" that were extremely different but both successful in



preserving their respective positions down to the Ottoman conquest. Mongols' attitudes towards governance and international agreements contributed to shaping the political environment in which Venice and Genoa had to make their choices and confirm the relevance of Mongol agency in directly affecting the extent of commercial, political, and cultural exchange between Europe and Asia at a time of "European expansion."



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