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The Black Sea in the Middle Ages

The *Pontos euxeinos* was a Byzantine Sea in the Middle Ages. In the Byzantine millennium, its shores and waves were culturally, politically, and economically dominated by the successors of Eastern Rome. But while initially the Black Sea area was open only to the Mediterranean and, to a limited extent, to Asia, a new epoch began with the advance of the Rus in the ninth century, when the north-south connection to the Baltic was opened up. The conquest of Constantinople in 1204 and the expansion of the Mongol Empire placed the Black Sea in a new context in which people and goods circulated globally until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 turned the Black Sea into an Ottoman Lake.

1 From the End of Antiquity to the Appearance of the Rus

At the end of antiquity, the Byzantine Empire under Emperor Justinian I controlled almost the entire Black Sea coast, starting from Pontus, Paphlagonia, and Bithynia in the south and across the Bosporus and Thrace to the mouth of the Danube in the west and then to Crimea—surrounded by sea and barbarians—in the north and finally at least partially to the territories of Zichia and Lazica in the east.[1]

In the south, the centres of Byzantine power, apart from Constantinople at the junction of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, were initially Trebizond (today: Trabzon), Sinope (today: Sinop) and Amastris (today: Amasra). The entrance to the Black Sea through the straits was guarded by the city, fortress (and customs station) of Hieron. On the west coast, the ancient coastal cities such as Anchialos (today: Pomorie), Mesembria (today: Nesebar), Odessos (today: Varna), Tomis (today: Constanța), and the Danubian city of Silistra continued to exist for the time being. Crimea was controlled from Chersonesus (known as Cherson in the Byzantine era and located near today's Sevastopol) and Bosporos (today: Kerch); and on the opposite side of the Cimmerian Bosporos (i. e. the Kerch Strait), Phanagoria remained under Byzantine sway. The east coast saw varying degrees of Byzantine influence in Sebastopolis (today: Sukhumi), Nikopsis, Pitsunda, and Anakopia (today: New Athos/Akhali Atoni).

1 Alexandru Madgearu, "The Byzantine Expansion in the Black Sea Area," *Revista de istorie militara, spec* (2008): 22–31; Peter Schreiner, "Das Schwarze Meer in der byzantinischen Geschichte und Literatur," in *Orbis Byzantinus: Byzanz und seine Nachbarn. Gesammelte Aufsätze 1970–2011*, ed. Peter Schreiner and Simon Alexandru (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române: Muzeul Brăilei Editura Istros, 2013), 315–25; Dan Ruscu, "The Black Sea in the Historical Writings of Late Antiquity," in *Advances in Ancient Black Sea Studies: Historiography, Archaeology and Religion*, ed. Victor Cojocaru, Ligia Ruscu, Thibaut Castelli, and Annamária-Izabella Pázsint, (Cluj-Napoca: Mega Publishing House, 2019), 143–64.

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However, only the southern coast and the coastal region of Crimea remained almost continuously Byzantine until the conquest of Constantinople in 1204. The Arab invasions between the seventh and ninth centuries had no long-term consequences for the Black Sea region, except for the administrative reorganization into the *themata* Armeniakon, Opsikion, and Thrace, which were later further subdivided (into Chaldia, Paphlagonia, Bukellarion, and Optimatoi). Only occasionally did Arab troops reach the Black Sea coast.

Trebizond was added to the Armeniakon *thema*, from which Chaldia was spun off as a separate *thema* around about 840, becoming the nucleus of the late medieval Empire of Trebizond. Located on the border with the Persian Empire, Trebizond always played an important military and commercial role. Justinian I used it as a base in the campaigns against the Persians. In 654 Trebizond was conquered by the Arab commander Ḥabīb ibn Maslama, who had defeated the Byzantine forces at Dvin and pursued them to the Black Sea. Later, its function for long-distance trade should be emphasized, as evidenced by a remarkable variety of seals of Kommerkiarioi (i. e., fiscal officials).[2] Arab geographers of the tenth and eleventh centuries state that numerous Muslim merchants transshipped their goods at the market there.[3]

No less important was Sinope. The city, which also belonged to the Armeniakon *thema*, was a substantial base of the Byzantine Black Sea fleet until the twelfth century. It was from here that the fleet set out against Bosporos in 580 or against Cherson in 711, for example. As a trading port, it was significant for trade with the Mediterranean, and pottery from Sinope can be found everywhere in the Black Sea region. Even in the so-called "Dark Ages," it did not lose its importance, although the volume of trade decreased.[4] During underwater archaeological research, several ships of the fifth–sixth centuries were found off Sinope, underlining the supra-regional character of the port.[5] The city and its region repeatedly came into the focus of the Arabs: e. g., in 863 the emir of Malatya Umar al-Aqta moved to Paphlagonia, devastated the subjects of Armeniakon, sacked Sinope, and also conquered the city of Amisos (today: Samsun).

Amastris was the only major port of the Paphlagonian Black Sea coast; the fleet of the Paphlagonian *thema* was probably stationed there. Its *katepano*, appointed directly by the emperor, is attested between the ninth and the eleventh centuries. The Bukellarion fleet was based at Heraclea, the only significant port of this *thema.* In the tenth

2 Pantelis Charalampakis, "Remarks on the Prosopography of the Byzantine Administration in Northeastern Asia Minor (7th–11th c.)," *Journal of Balkan and Black Sea Studies* 3 (2019): 71–96.

3 Andrew C. S. Peacock, "Black Sea Trade and the Islamic World Down to the Mongol Period," in *The Black Sea: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Gülden Erkut and Stephen Mitchell (London: British Institute at Ankara Monograph, 2007), 65–72.

4 Gergely Csiky, "Sinope in the Early Medieval Economy of the Black Sea Region (Questions and Problems)," *Antaeus* 33 (2015): 315–44.

5 Sean A. Kingsley, "Mapping Trade by Shipwrecks," in *Byzantine Trade, 4th–12th Centuries: The Archaeology of Local, Regional and International Exchange. Papers of the thirty-eighth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, St John's College, University of Oxford, March 2004,* ed. Marlia Mundell Mango (Aldershot: Ashgate Pub., 2009), 31–36.

century, the two commands were merged, at least temporarily, and apparently had the mission to intervene in Cherson as well, if necessary.[6]

As the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, Constantinople was also of central importance for the Black Sea region and the hinge to the Mediterranean. This is where the administrative threads came together, where extensive consumption and production took place. From here, trade and warships sailed through the Black Sea region, but it was also from that region that one of the heaviest attacks on the capital was launched, when the Slavs, allied with the Avars, came across the Black Sea with their boats in 626.[7]

On the west coast, Byzantine rule was much less stable. Although the coast, in contrast to the hinterland, could be held for a long time, the Avars and later the Bulgarians plundered the coastal towns so thoroughly that the cities and their surroundings remained deserted for a long time. But the ports of Anchialos and Mesembria remained in the long term as Byzantine naval bases, and the mouth of the Danube also remained Byzantine for the time being.[8] Eighth-century seals of Kommerkiarioi indicate that the Black Sea ports continued to be active. The coastal area was a constant bone of contention between Byzantium and Bulgaria. As early as 707, Justinian II had to cede Zagora to Bulgaria. Constantine V was able to recapture some territories in 763 after a concerted naval and army campaign at Anchialos, but they were soon lost again. With the Bulgarian victories under Khan Krum, Byzantium lost Anchialos and Mesembria. Debeltos was divided and became an important hub for trade between Bulgaria and Byzantium. It replaced Mesembria, where an *apothekē* (a kind of customs-depot or warehouse) had existed since 690.[9] Territories that Basileios I (867–86) was able to regain for Byzantium were already lost again under Tsar Simeon I (893–927). It was only with the end of the Bulgarian Empire that the coastal area became Byzantine again.[10] But even though Bulgaria's tsars were quite keen to dominate the coastal cities, they did not establish a navy. Byzantium, on the other hand, could always use its fleet to support its operations against Bulgaria.[11]

The area to the north between the Danube and the Dnipro was only sparsely populated. The ancient cities like Tyras (today: Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi) and Olbia remained

6 Klaus Belke, *Paphlagonia and Honorias* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996).

7 Critical of the tradition of the attacks: Martin Hurbanic, *The Avar Siege of Constantinople in 626: History and Legend* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 133–36.

8 Grigori Simeonov, "The Region of the Danube Delta in the 7th to 10th Century and the Case of the so-called Lykostomion Maritime Province," in *Seasides of Byzantium: Harbours and Anchorages of a Mediterranean Empire*, ed. Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, Taxiarchis G. Kolias, and Falko Daim (Mainz: Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, 2022), 235–56.

9 Florin Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1250* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Panos Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria, 775–831* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 54.

10 Peter Soustal, *Thrace (Thrakē, Rodopē and Haimimontos)* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1991), 355–59.

11 Dimitar V. Dimitrov, "Simeonova Balgaria i moreto," *Bulgaria Mediaevalis* 8, no. 1 (2017): 373–430.

abandoned.[12] The next Byzantine post was not until Cherson, which for centuries was largely unchallenged as the most important Byzantine city in Crimea. Despite its remote location, the city was closely linked politically, economically, and culturally with the southern Black Sea coast.[13]

The relations of Cherson and the surrounding area to the Khazars who immigrated at the end of the seventh century are interpreted differently. The city itself was probably always subject to Byzantium, while the Khazars sent a representative (Tudun) at most. The extent of the Khazar Empire's influence on Crimea is disputed; some speak of complete dominance, others of a mediating "condominium hypothesis," and still others of the insignificance of the Khazar Empire.[14] Khazar immigrants may have come to the peninsula especially after the lost Arab-Khazar war of 722–37. They soon settled and adopted Byzantine customs, so that here we can speak of a provincial Byzantine culture which differed only in degree from the culture in "Gothic" Dory (Mangup).[15] Bosporos also remained, as is now assumed, Byzantine and was not conquered by the Khazars.[16] The same seems to be true of Phanagoria, situated on the Taman Peninsula. Traces of a Khazar population can hardly be found here, nor can the previously assumed presence of Bulgarians be confirmed.[17] Tamatarkha/Tmutarakan, on the other hand, was a Khazarian foundation of the seventh century in which the Saltovo culture (an early medieval culture of the Pontic steppe region) played an important role, but which was also influenced by Greeks, Alans, Jews, etc. Located at the end of the Silk Road, Tmutarakan played a certain role for the Black Sea trade; in any case, the trade in naphtha, which was used for Greek fire (a kind of flamethrower), was of importance.[18] The numerous coin hoards found in the Kuban area may have

12 Florin Curta, "Ethnicity in the Steppe Lands of the Northern Black Sea Region During the Early Byzantine Times," *Archaeologia Bulgarica* 23 (2019): 33–70; Florin Curta, *The Long Sixth Century in Eastern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 158.

13 Stefan Albrecht, "Cherson als Zentralort auf der südwestlichen Krim (6.–10. Jahrhundert)," in *GrenzÜbergänge: Spätrömisch, frühchristlich, frühbyzantinisch als Kategorien*, ed. Ivan Bugarski et al., (Remshalden: Verlag Bernhard Albert Greiner, 2016), 355–84; Stefan Albrecht, "Die Krim und Cherson: Byzantinischer Vorposten im Norden des Schwarzen Meeres," in *Die Höhensiedlungen im Bergland der Krim: Umwelt, Kulturaustausch und Transformation am Nordrand des Byzantinischen Reiches*, ed. Stefan Albrecht, Michael Herdick, and Rainer Schreg (Mainz: Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, 2013), 447–70.

14 Iurii M. Mogarichev, Sergei B. Sorochan, and Andrei B. Sazanov, *Krym v "khazarskoe" vremia (VIII–seredina X vv): Voprosy istorii i arkheologii* (Moscow: Forum: Neolit, 2019).

15 Stefan Albrecht, Michael Herdick, and Rainer Schreg, "Neue Forschungen auf der Krim: Geschichte und Gesellschaft im Bergland der südwestlichen Krim – Eine Zusammenfassung," in Albrecht, Herdick, and Schreg, *Die Höhensiedlungen im Bergland der Krim*, 471–97.

16 Vadim V. Maiko, "Istoriia izucheniia saltovo-maiatskoi kultury Kryma v XXI veke," *Materialy po arkheologii, istorii i etnografii Tavrii* 23 (2018): 589–614.

17 Viktor N. Chkhaidze, *Fanagoriia v VI–X vekakh* (Moscow: Triumf print, 2012).

18 Viktor N. Chkhaidze, "Tmutarakan (80-e gg. X v. –90-e gg. XI v.) ocherki istoriografii," *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkheologii Severnogo Kavkaza* 6 (2006): 139–74; Chkhaidze, "Khazarskaia tamatarkha:

served, at least in part, as subsidy money with which to play the steppe peoples off against each other and to relieve the Byzantine frontiers.[19] Coin hoards of the late eighth century probably date back to the Khazar–Arab wars.[20] These wars led, among other things, to the creation of the independent kingdom of Abkhazia on the eastern Black Sea coast from the remains of Lazica, which had been subjugated by Justinian I. In 737, King Leon I was able to stop the advance of the Arabs at Anakopia, the capital of the kingdom, which was located directly on the sea. Even after Leon II (780–828) had moved the capital away from the Black Sea to the newly acquired interior of Kutaisi, the interest in the Black Sea coast remained, as can be seen, for example, in the cathedral of Pitsunda built by Bagrat III (978–1014).[21]

2 Pontos Euxeinos, Sea of the Rus, Sea of Sinope?

With the Rus/Varangians, the ninth century saw the entry to the Black Sea region of players who, like the Byzantines themselves, had a strong interest in seafaring, so much so that some Arab geographers even called the Black Sea the "Sea of the Rus."[22] The Rus, who assimilated Slavic culture and language,[23] connected the Black Sea region with the Baltic Sea region on the "route from the Varangians to the Greeks." The most important route was the Dnipro, but the Dniester was also used. The first written account of the Rus was in 839, when they were reported to have traveled from Constantinople to the court of Emperor Louis. In 860 a fleet of the Rus plundered the area around Constantinople. Further attacks followed in 907/911. In 941 Prince Igor led a fleet of 10,000 "Monoxyla" (logboats) against Constantinople, Bithynia, and Paphlagonia, where it is said to have destroyed numerous towns and monasteries. Later attacks by the Rus on Byzantium were recorded as late as 1024 and 1047, but they were repulsed and had little impact. In the tenth century, however, Byzantium was forced to make several treaties with the Rus to regulate navigation and trade in

kulturnyi sloi Tamanskogo gorodishcha VII–X vv." (Candidate of science thesis, Russian academy of Science, Institute of Archeology, Moscow, 2007).

19 Daniel Syrbe, "Reiternomaden des Schwarzmeerraums (Kutriguren und Utiguren) und byzantinische Diplomatie im 6. Jahrhundert," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 65, no. 3 (2012): 291–316; Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 159.

20 Mikhail G. Abramzon and Sergey N. Ostapenko, "A Solidus of Leo III the Isaurian from Phanagoria," *Journal of Historical, Philological and Cultural Studies* 1, no. 63 (2019): 171–85.

21 George Hewitt, *The Abkhazians: A Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2013); Liudmila G. Khrushkova, *Vostochnoe Prichernomore v Vizantiiskuiu Epokhu* (Kaliningrad: Rost-Doafk, 2018); Khrushkova, *Les Monuments Chrétiens de La Côte Orientale de La Mer Noire: Abkhazie. IVe–XIVe siècles* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

22 Alexander Soloviev, "Mare Russiae," *Die Welt der Slaven* 4, no.1 (1959): 1–12; Henryk Paszkiewicz, "Mare Russiae," *Antemurale* 9 (1965): 133–62.

23 On the early Rus cf. Serhii M. Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10–48.

the Black Sea.[24] The conquest of Cherson by Vladimir I (988) was decisive for Rus; it was there that it received its baptism. But the events leading up to the conquest brought some longer-term changes for the Black Sea region: The establishment of the Varangian Guard in Constantinople led to a steady influx of Varangians into the Black Sea region, who were present not only in the capital but even in Georgia.[25] As traders, the Rus also left traces of a permanent presence on the Black Sea, namely at the mouth of the Danube, on the island of Berezan at the mouth of the Dnipro, and in Tmutarakan. Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos recorded voyages by the Rus as far as Mesembria.[26]

On the lower Danube, we know of the presence of traders or warriors of Rus, for example, in Dinogetia, Păcuiul lui Soare, and Nufăru, which is believed to be that very Pereiaslavets conquered by Sviatoslav of Kyiv in 968 and which he made his capital for a short time.[27] The island of Berezan, known as St. Aitherios in the tenth century, was an important stopover on the way to Constantinople with a small settlement.[28]

Of greater long-term importance was the settlement of the Rus in Tmutarakan, which they had taken over from the Khazars at the end of the tenth century:

There has been much discussion about the extent of Slavic settlement and rule on the peninsula, despite insufficient sources. A picture was drawn of a powerful and extensive Rus principality with a Slavic population that stood between Kyiv and Byzantium. Today, however, it is assumed that the Rus presence in Tmutarakan was probably limited to the prince, his retinue and some merchants. Otherwise, Kasogians, Alans, and above all Greeks lived in the Byzantine-influenced city. Of the Rusian princes, only Mstislav (988–1036) and Oleg (1083–94) remained there for any substantial amount of time. On the one hand, they were to keep this important trade route under control for Kyiv or Chernigov (today: Chernihiv); on the other hand, they established close contacts with Byzantium and were thus able to gather cultural and symbolic capital in the competition for rule in Kyiv or Chernigov. Whether Tmutarakan

24 Jana Malingoudi, *Die russisch-byzantinischen Verträge des 10. Jahrhunderts aus diplomatischer Sicht* (Thessaloniki: Vanias, 1994).

25 Fedir Androshchuk, Jonathan Shepard, and Monica White, eds., *Byzantium and the Viking World* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universiteit, 2016); Peter Halfter, "Franks and Varangians in Georgia and Armenia in the Early and High Middle Ages," *Le muséon* 129 (2016): 133–98.

26 Elena Aleksandrovna Melnikova, "Rhosia and the Rus in Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos' De administrando imperio," in Androshchuk, Shepard, and White, *Byzantium and the Viking World*, 315–36.

27 Ion Tentiuc, "On the Viking Enclaves and Their Relations with the Inhabitants in the Carpathian-Dniester Region between the 9th and the 11th Centuries," *DACIA* 62–63 (2019–2018): 249–86; Valeri Yotov, "Data about Northmen's Presence in the Lower Danube Area," in *Studia Romana et Medievalia. Miscellanea in Honorem Annos LXXX Peragentis Professoris Emeriti Dan Gh. Teodor Oblata,* ed. Dan Aparaschivei and George Bilavschi (Bucharest: Editura Istros, 2018), 467–76.

28 [Anon.], "Karl," in *Prosopography of the Middle Byzantine Period Online* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), https://www.degruyter.com/document/database/PMBZ/entry/PMBZ25831/html, on the runestone with further reading.

was under Byzantine rule in the twelfth century is a matter of controversy given the difficult source situation.[29]

Further east, at Anakopia and Soteroupolis, a Byzantine *strategos* resided for half a century, after, around 1033, the second wife of Giorgi I of Georgia Alde had fled to Constantinople with her son Demetre, half-brother of Bagrat IV, and handed over her inheritance to the emperor. The aim of Byzantine policy may have been to occupy this stretch of coast where spurs of the Silk Road reached the Black Sea. From here Byzantium also maintained traditionally good relations with the Alans, who were important for regional balance.[30] Until the catastrophe of Manzikert in 1071, the area remained Byzantine.[31]

After this battle, the decline of Byzantine rule over large parts of Asia Minor began. The Seljuks soon extended their power to the Black Sea coast and were even able to briefly conquer Sinope in 1085. But participants of the crusade of 1101, who were on the run after a defeat by Danishmend Gazi, reached Byzantine territory again in Bafra and Sinope and were able to start the journey to Constantinople partly by ship and partly by land along the coast. In 1124/7 and 1139 Danishmend's successor, Amir Gazi, invaded the coastal area of the Black Sea. And despite all his efforts, thereafter John II Komnenos failed to keep more than just the coastal strip under Byzantine control.[32]

The western coast was, after the conquest of the Bulgarian Empire, again firmly in Byzantine hands at the beginning of the eleventh century. Here, between the Danube and the Black Sea coast, there existed, among others, the *thema* Paradunavon,[33] joined southward along the coast by the *thema* Thrake, from which in 1087 Alexios I Komnenos spun off the *thema* Anchialos with the cities of Anchialos and Mesembria, which

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29 Jonathan Shepard, "Closer Encounters with the Byzantine World: The Rus at the Straits of Kerch," in *Pre-Modern Russia and Its World: Essays in Honor of Thomas S. Noonan*, ed. Kathryn Louise Reyerson (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 15–78; Viktor N. Chkhaidze, *Tamatarkha: rannesrednevekovyi gorod na Tamanskom poluostrove* (Moscow: Taus, 2008); Constantin Zuckerman, "The End of Byzantine Rule in North-Eastern Pontus," *Materialy po arkheologii, istorii i etnografii Tavrii* 22 (2017): 311–36; Viktor N. Chkhaidze, "Matarkha-Tmutarakan – mezhdu Vizantiei i Rusiu: Problemy politiko-administrativnogo statusa," *Vostochnaia Evropa v drevnosti i srednevekove* 30 (2018): 337–41.

30 Andrei Vinogradov, *Istoriia i iskusstvo khristianskoi Alanii*, (Moscow: Publisher, 2019); Szilvia Kovács, "Alan Women in the Neighboring Foreign Courts in the Eleventh-Twelfth Centuries," *Chronica: Annual of the Institute of History, University of Szeged* 7–8 (2008): 134–43.

31 Werner Seibt and Ivan Jordanov, "Stratēgós Sōtēroupóleōs kaí Auakoupías: Ein mittelbyzantinisches Kommando in Abchazien (11. Jahrhundert)," *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography* 9 (2006): 231–40; Szabolcs Polgar, "Notes on the Role of Alania in International Trade in the Early Middle Ages (Eighth–Tenth Centuries) on the Basis of Written Sources," *Chronica. Annual of the Institute of History, University of Szeged* 7–8 (2007): 178–83.

32 *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, s.v. "Ḳarā Deniz," by Xavier de Planhol, accessed March 22, 2021, http://dx-doi-org.uaccess.univie.ac.at/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0441.

33 Vasile Marculet, *Thema Paristrion – Paradunavon: c.1018/1020–c.1200/1202, istorie, evoluție, rol* (Medias: Editura Samuel, 2008); Alexandru Madgearu, *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube, 10th–12th Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 85.

were important naval bases. At the same time, the Pechenegs moved from the grass steppe east of the Dnipro to and across the Danube border, from where they advanced far into the Byzantine Empire on several occasions. When they attacked Byzantium at the request of the Emir Tzachas of Smyrna, they were crushed at Lebounion in 1091 by Byzantine troops and the following Cumans.[34] These Cumans had been the new masters of the Pontic-Caucasian steppe since the middle of the eleventh century. In the Balkans, they led raids into the Byzantine territory and became allies of the new Bulgarian dynasty of the Asenids, who themselves probably had Cuman roots. In Crimea, they had bases of their own, such as Yalta, from where they traded with Byzantine Cherson. If the information of the *Tale of Igor's Campaign*, composed around 1186 (?), is historically accurate, then at the end of the twelfth century they ruled the area from Cherson to Tmutarakan.[35]

3 From the Conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders to the Conquest by the Ottomans

The conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders of the Fourth Crusade and the Venetians and the advance of the Mongols into the Black Sea area not only changed the political order permanently. Economic relations also radically expanded, as the Black Sea now became a transit area for international trade between Spain and China and between the steppe and Mamluk Egypt.[36] At the same time, the Mongols temporarily disrupted the Baltic-Black Sea trade, which was later conducted mainly via Poland,[37] and in which the Black Sea Armenian diaspora played a major role.[38] Not only trade and politics changed considerably. The incomparably denser written tradition, especially

34 Marek Meško, "Pecheneg Groups in the Balkans (ca. 1053–1091) according to the Byzantine Sources," in *The Steppe Lands and the World Beyond Them: Studies in Honor of Victor Spinei on his 70th Birthday*, ed. Florin Curta and Bogdan-Petru Maleon (Iaşi: Editura Universităţii "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", 2013), 179–205.

35 Andrei A. Zalizniak *"Slovo o polku Igoreve": vzgliad lingvista*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Rukopisnye pamiatniki Drevnei Rusi, 2008).

36 Virgil Ciocîltan and Samuel P. Willcocks, *The Mongols and the Black Sea Trade in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

37 Henryk Samsonowicz, "Die Handelsstraße Ostsee-Schwarzes Meer im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert," in *Der hansische Sonderweg? Beiträge zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Hanse*, ed. Stuart Jenks and Michael North (Cologne: Böhlau, 1993), 23–30.

38 Alexandr Osipian, "Practices of Integration and Segregation: Armenian Trading Diasporas in Their Interaction with the Genoese and Venetian Colonies in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea (1289–1484)," in *Union in Separation: Diasporic Groups and Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean (1100–1800)*, ed. Georg Christ and Franz-Julius Morche (Rome: Viella, 2015), 349–62.

of the richly flowing Italian sources, changes the perspective and makes the period after 1204 appear as a new epoch, as the actual Middle Ages.[39]

It is true that the Italian trading cities had already received and used privileges for trade on the Black Sea from the Byzantine emperors before 1204. But it was not until the fall of Constantinople in 1204 and the expansion of the Mongols' power over the Black Sea area, whose coasts they largely controlled directly or indirectly, that this region became interesting for Italian merchants. The Venetians opened their first offices in Crimea, including in Cumanian Sudak, as early as 1206, and it was here that the Maffeo brothers and Nicolo Polo, Marco Polo's father, stopped off on their way to the Mongol Empire in 1255. After the Treaty of Nymphaion, in which Genoa received extensive privileges in the Black Sea from Byzantium in 1261 for its aid against Venice, the latter moved its trading bases to Trebizond and Tana (today: Azov), while the Genoese established themselves in Crimea. From Caffa (today: Feodosiia), acquired from the Mongols around 1266 or a little later, a large administrative apparatus was used to control or co-administer numerous other Genoese settlements in the Black Sea area. These included the settlements in the port cities of Bulgaria up to Moncastro, where on the one hand grain was shipped from the interior of the country, but on the other hand, the way to Central Europe was open.[40]

The Genoese also had larger colonies of their own on the southern coast, in Simisso (today: Samsun) and Samastris (today: Amasra), which fell into the hands of the Ottomans at a late stage: Samastris, for example, was not conquered by Sultan Mehmed II until 1459.[41] The Genoese also had great influence in the Empire of Trebizond, where they enjoyed considerable trading advantages, much to the displeasure of the locals. Trading posts continued to exist on the Circassian coast, where Genoa was primarily involved in the slave trade. The Genoese family of Guizolfi even managed to marry into a Circassian princely dynasty in the fifteenth century.[42] The lion's share of the lucrative slave trade, however, was conducted in Caffa, from where slaves from the Black Sea region were brought primarily to Italy and, mainly via the southern Black Sea coast

39 For Brătianu, the period before that is the "antichambre du Moyen Age." George I. Brătianu, *La mer Noire: des origines à la conquête ottomane* (Munich: Societas academica Dacoromana, 1969), 99–167; Evgeny Khvalkov, *The Colonies of Genoa in the Black Sea Region: Evolution and Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2017); Wilhelm von Heyd, *Histoire du commerce du Levant au Moyen âge* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1885).

40 Dennis Deletant, "Genoese, Tatars and Rumanians at the Mouth of the Danube in the Fourteenth Century," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 62, no. 4 (1984): 511–30; Serban Papacostea, "La pénétration du commerce génois en Europe centrale: Maurocastrum (Moncastro) et la route moldave," *Il mar nero* 3 (1998–1997): 149–58; Rossica Panova, "The Black Sea Coastal Cities in the Economic and Political Interrelations among Medieval Bulgaria, Venice and Genoa," *Études Balkaniques* 35, no. 1–2 (1999): 52–58.

41 Khvalkov, *The Colonies of Genoa.*

42 Evgeny Khvalkov, "The Guizolfi Family: Brokers in the Medieval Black Sea Space," *The World of the Orient* 3 (2019): 31–45.

and past Constantinople, to Egypt.[43] Conflicts between the Golden Horde and the Genoese and Venetians occurred several times (not only) in Caffa and Tana, and in this context, the Great Plague also reached Europe in 1346/47.[44] At the end of the fourteenth century, the Genoese were able to bring the southern coastal strip of Crimea under their rule, before the decline of Caffa began in the fifteenth century. The city was conquered by the Ottomans in 1475.

The conflict-ridden relations of the Italian trading cities in the Apennine Peninsula extended into the Black Sea region.[45] Material evidence of these disputes includes a wreck found off the coast of Crimea near Novyi Svit in 2006, which was almost certainly the victim of a conflict between Pisans and the overpowering Genoese in 1277. The cargo consisted mainly of pottery from Sinope, Amaseia (today: Amasya), and Constantinople; one purse contained small change from Trebizond. This suggests that the ship was primarily engaged in cabotage in the Black Sea area. Pottery from Caffa in the north and southeast between Moncastro and Sinope and Byzantine pottery on the west coast also indicate that the Black Sea was a common trading area.[46] Important trade goods exported over and from the Black Sea area were, apart from slaves, especially grain, honey, and furs; imports were fabrics from Flanders, pottery from the western Mediterranean, and celadon pottery from China and Persia.[47]

The conquest of Constantinople accelerated the fragmentation of the Black Sea region, as several successor empires arose on the soil of the Byzantine Empire, competing with each other and with the strengthening Bulgarian and Seljuk empires.

The southeastern Black Sea coast was initially controlled from Trebizond by the Great Comneni. With Georgian support, they managed to conquer most of the coast and advance as far as Bithynia. However, in 1214 the advance was stopped by a united army of Theodore Laskaris of Nicaea and the Seljuks. Bithynia and Paphlagonia came under the rule of Nicaea, and Sinope became an important Seljuk port city. The Empire

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43 Hannah Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Sergei P. Karpov, *Italianskie morskie respubliki i Iuzhnoe Prichernomore v XIII–XV vv.: Problemy torgovli* (Moscow: Izdatelskii dom [Tipografiia] MGU, 1990).

44 Hannah Barker, "Laying the Corpses to Rest: Grain, Embargoes, and Yersinia Pestis in the Black Sea, 1346–48," *Speculum* 96, no. 1 (2021): 97–126.

45 Serban Papacostea, *La mer Noire: carrefour des grandes routes intercontinentales 1204–1453* (Bucharest: Institutul Cultural Român, 2006).

46 Lilia Dergaciova, "A 13th Century 'Purse' from the Wreck of Novy Svet, Ukraine," *Skyllis* 9 (2009): 178–87; Sergey Zelenko, "The Trade Contacts of the Anatolian Region with the Crimean Black Sea Coast During the Late Byzantine Period," in *Atti del IX Congresso Internazionale AIECM2 (Venezia, 23–28 Novembre 2009),* ed. Sauro Gelichi (Florence: All'Insegna del Giglio, 2012*),* 208–11; Mariia Manolova-Voikova, "Importnaia vizantiiskaia sgraffito keramika iz srednevekovykh poselenii v Bolgarskom Prichernomore," in *Polivnaia keramika Sredizemnomoria i Prichernomor'ia X–XVIII vv.*, ed. Sergei Bocharov (Chișinău: Stratum Publishing House, 2017), 317–26.

47 Sergei P. Karpov, "Main Changes in the Black Sea Trade and Navigation, 12th–15th Centuries," in *Proceedings of the 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies. Plenary papers* (Sofia: Bulgarian Historical Heritage Foundation, 2011), 417–30.

of Trebizond was limited to the area between the mouth of the Akampsis (Turkish: Çoruh) to Amisos; Cherson also belonged to it in the early thirteenth century. After the emergence of the Mongol Empire of the Ilkhans in 1256 and the resulting change in the long-distance trade routes from Baghdad to Tabriz, Trebizond became an important trade hub between East and West. It was not long, therefore, before Genoese and Venetian merchants settled here, continuing a highly profitable trade in spices, silk, cotton, precious metals, and stones. After the crisis of the Asian trade in the middle of the fourteenth century, the trade was more limited to local products such as hazelnuts, wine, and other agricultural products. Grain was partly imported from other regions of the Black Sea. There were regular conflicts with the Italian merchants, which just as regularly ended in war-like confrontations.[48]

From the conquest of Antalya (1207) and Sinope (1214) onwards, the Seljuq Sultanate bordered two seas and was thus part of a trade route that led from Rus and the Dasht-i Kipchak via the important port city of Sudak, which is why Amir Husam al-Din Chupan also conquered the latter soon after taking Sinope.[49] After the Seljuqs' crushing defeat by the Mongols at the Köse Dağ in 1243, the Seljuq Empire began its decline, dissolving around 1308 with the death of Mesud II. Centrifugal forces had already strengthened before this and now triumphed; they included the Beylik of Canik, who had also obtained Sinope with Kastamonu in 1309. Attempts to ally with Wallachia against the strengthening Ottomans granted respite, as did Timur Lenk's triumphant march in 1402, before the area finally became Ottoman in 1461, shortly before the conquest of Trebizond.[50]

The Latin Empire, which came into being in 1204, did not play a major role as a riparian state of the Black Sea, even though it was granted in the partition treaty Eastern Thrace as far as Agathopolis (today: Akhtopol), the *themata* Optimatoi, and Paphlagonia, Sinope, and Oinoe, none which it was ever able to occupy, however.[51] The Latin Empire did not pursue an active Black Sea policy, although it did put out feelers to the Mongols to the north of the sea. In the form of coins, traces of the Latin Empire in the

48 Sergei Karpov, *Srednevekovyi Pont* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001); Anthony Eastmond, Glenn Peers, and Barbara Roggema, eds., *Byzantium's Other Empire: Trebizond* (Istanbul: ANAMED Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations, 2016); Sergei P. Karpov, *Istoriia Trapezundskoi imperii* (St. Petersburg: *Aleteiia*, 2018); Jakob Ph. Fallmerayer, *Geschichte des Kaisertums von Trapezunt* (Munich: Weber, 1827).

49 Alexander Dzhanov, "Pokhody seldzhukskikh voisk na Sugdak i v Kilikiyu v pravlenie Ala al-Dina Kaikubada I.," *Sugdeiskii sbornik* 3 (2008): 46–78; Koray Özcan, "The Anatolian Seljuk City: An Analysis on Early Turkish Urban Models in Anatolia," *Central Asiatic Journal* 54, no. 2 (2010): 273–90.

50 Nagy Pienaru, "Relatiile lui Mircea cel Batrân cu emiratul pontic Candar-ogullari," *Revista istorica NS* 7 (1996): 483–510; Nagy Pienaru, "The Timurids and the Black Sea," in *From Pax Mongolica to Pax Ottomanica,* ed. Ovidiu Cristea and Liviu Pilat (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 113–45.

51 Antonio Carile, "Partitio terrarum Imperii Romanie," *Studi veneziani* 7 (1965): 125–306; Aleksandar Uzelac, "Balduin od Enoa i 'nomadska diplomatija'Latinskog carstva," *Istorijski časopis* 61 (2012): 45–65.

Black Sea region can be traced as far as Crimea and the Mongolian Dniester-Prut region.[52]

The rulers of Nicaea, as heirs of the Byzantine Empire, were able to reconquer Constantinople in 1261. Important Black Sea ports of the re-established empire in Asia Minor and at the same time enclaves in the Seljuk territory were Amastris and Heraclea Pontica until they fell first to the Seljuks in 1360 and then to the Ottomans in 1393. The European coasts changed masters more frequently. The Bulgarian Empire, newly founded in 1185, had taken the opportunity to expand to Thrace in 1204. Under the tsars Boril (1207–18) and Ivan Asen II (1218–41) it dominated the Black Sea coast from Agathopolis to the mouth of the Dniester. Bulgaria's decline began after the Mongol attack in 1241, when it lost numerous maritime cities between Agathopolis and Mesembria to the re-emerging Byzantine Empire. Tsar Theodore Svetoslav (1300–22) reconquered them, but almost two generations later (1366), Mesembria was again seized by Amadeo VI of Savoy[53] for his cousin Emperor John V. Mesembria then became the center of the Byzantine apanage of Zagora, which the emperor assigned to his son Michael. Mesembria fell to the Ottomans shortly before the fall of Constantinople in the spring of 1453.[54]

In the middle of the fourteenth century, a rapidly expanding principality emerged from the disintegrating Bulgaria: the Despotate of Dobruja, with the centers Karvuna (today: Balchik), Kaliakra, and finally Varna. It owned the most important Black Sea ports from the mouth of the Danube to Anchialos, and the Despotate even built its own fleet, with the help of which it fought a long war against Genoa.[55] The Dobruja fleet joined the fleets of Venice, Genoa, Savoy, or the Burgundians, and the small fleets of the Ottomans and Seljuks, as well as the Burgundian and other pirates.[56]

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52 Vera Guruleva, "Osnovnye problemy numizmatiki Kryma vizantiiskoi epokhi," in *Materialy i issledovaniia Otdela numizmatiki: po materialam Konferentsii "Sfragistika, numizmatika, geraldika srednevekovogo Kryma"* (St. Petersburg: Izdatelstvo Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha, 2018), 61–82; Andrei Crivenco and Mikhail N. Butyrskyi, "Monety Latinskoi i Vizantiiskoi imperii iz nakhodok na territorii Pruto-Dnestrovia," in *V poiskakh sushchnosti: Sbornik statei v chest 60-letiia N. D. Russeva*, ed. Mark Evgenevich Tkachuk and Georgi Georgiev Atanasov (Chișinău: Universitet Vysshaia antropologicheskaia shkola, 2019), 89–95.

53 Matteo Magnani, "The Crusade of Amadeus VI of Savoy between History and Historiography," in *Italy and Europe's Eastern Border: 1204–1669*, ed. Iulian Mihai Damian, Ioan-Aurel Pop, and Mihailo Popović (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 215–36.

54 Soustal, *Thrace*, 357.

55 Georgi Georgiev Atanasov, *Dobrudzhanskoto despotstvo: kam politicheskata, tsarkovnata, stopanskata i kulturnata istoria na Dobrudzha prez XIV vek* (Veliko Tarnovo: Faber, 2009).

56 Jacques Paviot, "La piraterie bourguignonne en Mer Noire à la moitié du XVe siècle," in *Horizons marins, itinéraires spirituels (Ve–XVIIIe siècles): Mentalités et sociétés. II: Marins navires et affaires*, ed. Henri Dubois, Jean-Claude Hocquet, and André Vauchez (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1987), 203–14.

At about the same time, and in constant conflict with Poland and Hungary, the Principality of Moldavia came into being.[57] For both countries, the ports of Moldavia were of great importance for the Levant trade, which led further west or north via Bistrița or Lviv.[58] In the fifteenth century, the princes of Moldavia attempted several times to pursue an independent "Black Sea policy," for which they tried to establish an anti-Ottoman coalition after the fall of Constantinople with the principality of Theodoro in Crimea (which had come into being in the fourteenth century), Genoa, and Trebizond.[59]

As is well known, all attempts to contain the Ottoman Empire failed. It gradually conquered more and more territories on the Black Sea, and only Constantinople stubbornly resisted. To hamper the latter's supply from the Black Sea region, Sultan Bayezid built the fortress of Anadolu Hisarı in 1394, which was supplemented opposite by Rumeli Hisarı in 1452, cutting off any relief fleet from the Black Sea. The last attempt by a Polish-Hungarian crusading army to come to the aid of Byzantium ended in disaster at Varna in 1444.[60] Thereafter, in rapid succession, the Ottomans conquered Constantinople, Trebizond, Sinope, Amastris, Caffa, and Theodoro in Crimea, and subjugated the Danubian Principalities and the Circassians, turning the once Byzantine Pontos Euxeinos into an Ottoman Lake.[61]

57 Daniel Ursprung, "Die Moldau von der Entstehung im 14. bis zur Unterwerfung unter osmanische Herrschaft im 16. Jahrhundert," in *Herrschaft und Politik in Südosteuropa von 1300 bis 1800*, ed. Oliver Jens Schmitt (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021), 327–84.

58 Zsigmond Pál Pach, "Hungary and the Levantine Trade in the 14th–17th Centuries," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 60, no. 1 (2007): 14–16; Matei Cazacu, "À propos de l'expansion polono-lituanienne au nord de la mer Noire aux XIVe–XVe siècles: Czarnigrad, la 'Cité Noire' de l'embouchure du Danube," in *Idem, Au carrefour des empires et des mers : études d'histoire médiévale et modern*, ed. Emanuel Constantin Antoche and Lidia Cotovanu (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române et Editura Istros a Muzeului Vrailei "Carol I", 2015) 313–34.

59 Stefan Sorin Gorovei, "The Principality of Theodoro (Mangup) and Stephen the Great's Moldavia: Observations and Hypotheses," in Cristea and Pilat, *From Pax Mongolica*, 146–68.

60 John Jefferson, *The Holy Wars of King Wladislas and Sultan Murad: The Ottoman-Christian Conflict from 1438–1444* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

61 Sandra Origone, "La fine del dominio greco nel mar Nero: Costantinopoli 1453, Trebisonda 1461," in *La prise de Constantinople: L'événement, sa portée et ses échos,* ed. Mohamed Tahar Mansouri (Tunis: Centre d'études et de recherches économiques et sociales, 2008), 131–54.