Albrecht Fuess

Black Sea Pirates and Bandits—until 1475

1 Pirates

Pirates have been part of human history since the beginning of seafaring and naval trade. If you have something valuable to transport, there will always be someone who is ready to take it away from you. Traders thus needed personal protection or a secure infrastructure. Pirates for their part needed escape routes and the opportunity to sell stolen goods to merchants who whitewashed them and brought them back into legal circulation.

On the sea, sometimes a combination of both was to be found, i. e., the merchant-pirate. Merchant-pirates were willing either to loot or to trade, depending on which seemed to be more lucrative under the given circumstances. A good example of this type would be Genoese seafarers of the late Middle Ages or the Vikings in earlier periods.

The close connection between trade and buccaneering was already noticed by Homer and in ancient Greek myths in which the "peirates" are mentioned as a constant threat to Hellenic shores, and the first historiographical work by Herodotus opens with a book on piracy.[1]

Piracy first entered history primarily as a coastal business. Small boats were used to attack larger ships near the shore or surprise anchoring ship crews on land. It was not before the appearance of the Trireme ("three rower") with three banks of oars around the first half of the first millennium BC that robbery on the high seas and the pursuit of enemies over a longer distance became possible.

However, the capture of mercantile ships on the open sea was quite dangerous and less lucrative than attacking settlements or anchoring ships along the coast. The part-time pirate operating on a smaller scale on a seasonal basis was a known phenomenon as early as antiquity. Part-time pirates would usually loot a shore with up to twelve vessels, looking for undefended or unfortified port towns that promised greater booty than capturing a ship on the high sea. Moreover, in harbors pirates could also capture women and children for the slave market, as this human "commodity" was seldom

Created within the framework of the DFG SPP 1981: Transottomanica: Eastern European-Ottoman-Persian Mobility Dynamics (project number 313079038), accessed February 2, 2024, www.transottomanica.de.

1 Robert Bohn, *Die Piraten* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005), 10.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110723175-032

found on merchant ships.[2] If no opportunity presented itself to the pirates, they switched back to their merchant identity and traded.

As for the terminology, the Greek word "pirate" (from peirān/πειρᾶν, "to undertake, to scout") seems to have been in usage in Greek and Roman sources; however, we cannot find it in Early Arabic or Islamic sources, which describe sea robbery activities as *ghazwat fī 'l-baḥr* ("sea raid") and the pirate as *liṣṣ al-baḥr* ("sea thief"). From the ninth century on, Islamic sources start to use the word *qurṣān* for a pirate, which derives from Latin *cursus* ("raid for booty").[3] With the word *qarṣana* (piracy) Muslim and non-Muslim societies around the Black Sea then shared a common word for freebooters. In late medieval times these terms became associated with pirates who held a *letter of marque* from their state authorities which officially allowed the looting of ships belonging to enemy countries.

2 The Black Sea and its Geography

The Black Sea is connected to the global ocean systems only by the very narrow strait of the Bosporus, the Sea of Marmara, and the Dardanelles. As it is the only way out by sea into the Mediterranean, control of the Bosporus became vital for any seafaring, including large buccaneering enterprises. No pirate could escape through the Bosporus if hostile forces controlled it. Three important waterways pour water into the Black Sea: the Danube in the west, the Dniester and Dnipro in the northwest and the Don from the northeast, which enters into the Sea of Azov. From there, the Sea of Azov continues through the Kerch Strait into the Black Sea. These waterways could lead marauding people like the Vikings into the Black Sea but were difficult to navigate because of the currents and natural obstacles in the rivers.

The coastline is usually low and habitable, and living conditions are manageable and not particularly harsh. The Anatolian south coast and the east coast are near very high mountain ranges, which render travel and smuggling of stolen goods more difficult and complicated than on the western and northern shores. Important for pre-modern seafaring are the peculiar currents and winds of the Black Sea, which separate the western and eastern inner parts in specific cycles and pre-dictate ways of moving inside the sea with larger fleets. "For this reason, the Black Sea was regarded as a double sea in antiquity," says Gergerly Csiky.[4]

---

2 Amir Gilan, "Pirates in the Mediterranean – A View from Bronze Age," in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum: Piraterie, Korsarentum und maritime Gewalt von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit,* ed. Nikolas Jaspert and Sebastian Kolditz (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013), 52–53.

3 *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, s.v. "Ḳurṣān," by Charles Pellat, Colin H. Imber, and John B. Kelly, accessed July 29, 2021, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0546.

4 Gergerly Csiky, "Sinope in the Early Medieval Economy of the Black Sea Region (Questions and Problems)," *Antaeus*, 33 (2015): 319.

As direct crossing was quite unpredictable, seafaring often followed the coastlines. Naval activities through the ages had a clear inclination towards the western half of the Black Sea. In the west, the building of settlements was easier due to geographical settings than in the east, where more regions are mountainous.

The economy of the Black Sea has been described by Fernand Braudel as a command economy due to the demand for grain in the densely populated areas at the Bosporus Strait. Other authors have stressed periods of free trade and have depicted the region as comprised of small regional micro-economies.[5] In any case, interregional trade had to pass the straits in the southwest on the way to the Mediterranean or the north in order to reach the Don region.

More interesting targets to loot were to be found in the Western area, reaching an historical climax in later medieval times, when the western Black Sea regions witnessed an immense rise in the international slave trade. Merchant fleets moved from Crimea to the Bosporus, mostly along the western coastline. The main reason for this inclination towards westwards naval activities in the Black Sea is of course due to the fact that the only way out is situated in its very southwestern corner.

3 Pirates on the Black Sea in Antiquity

The actual emergence of Piracy in the Black Sea region is difficult to trace, as most of the peoples and tribes settling there prior to the Greek colonization from the seventh to the sixth century BC onwards have not left written sources. The Scythians who dominated the Eurasian steppe above the northern Black Sea were well-known nomadic horse riders and are known to have had unfriendly relations with Greek settlers. They might certainly have taken the opportunity to attack Greek harbors or boats, but nobody wrote about it as far as we know.

The Thracians on the other hand, on the Western shores of the Black Sea, encountered Greek colonies in the Danube region around the same time or a little earlier, i. e., the eighth and seventh centuries, were described as being notorious for their tendency towards piracy. That the Thracians resorted to robbery can be explained of course, as they were "less advantaged populations that resided in barren coastal regions bordering crucial sea lanes."[6]

In the sixth century BC, the Iranian Achaemenid Empire expanded under Darius I (r. 521–486 BC) to the west and crossed the Bosporus, where it transformed the Black Sea into a veritable *mare nostrum* for almost half a century. During this period, pirate activities seemed to have ceased under the control of a more centralized government, although Achaemenid sources stay very silent in this respect and Scythian resistance to

5 Csiky, 316.

6 Nicolas K. Rauh, *Merchants, Sailors and Pirates in the Roman World* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003), 189.

the Persian advance is reported.[7] In general, we do not know how the Persian government was organized around the Black Sea. That would give us a better indication of their control of naval activities. It seems though that they incorporated the region of the Black Sea into satrapies, but maybe only as "additional lands."[8]

As is known, the Persian Empire was ended by the conquest of Alexander, whose empire fell into pieces after his death. One of its pieces was the Kingdom of Pontus on the southeastern shore of the Black Sea. It would seem that it prospered, partly because it controlled trading routes and offered resistance against the expanding Roman Empire.

Most notorious in this context was King Mithridates VI (r. 135–63 BC). Having secured power in his home region, he conquered almost the entire coastal region of the Black Sea. In 88 BC he ordered a massive massacre of Roman and Italian settlers (some sources speak of 80,000 deaths) in West Asia and entered into several wars with the Romans. What is important in our context is that, because he lacked a vast navy, he resorted to using several pirate principalities to sustain his war against Rome. Most famous were his relations with the pirates of Cilicia in southeastern Anatolia, who helped him in the Aegean and the Black Sea. However, counselors apparently warned him that relying on pirates was dangerous, as they had the tendency to turn against a patron when the money stopped flowing.[9]

The heavy piracy on many shores of the Mediterranean by Mithridates' allies and others moved the Romans to appoint Marcus Antonius, the father of the future triumvir, as extraordinary naval commander to get rid of the maritime threat. Later the Romans would block the Bosporus so that neither Mithridates nor his allies could travel from the Black Sea to the Aegean; moreover, any merchant caught sailing towards the Black Sea was threatened with the death penalty.[10] This meant that the economic situation within the Black Sea region and the Kingdom of Pontus deteriorated and those pirates lost their targets and income. Mithridates fled to Crimea, where he then apparently died in 63 BC.

What this episode does highlight is that in the first century BC we observe piracy developing into full-fledged enterprises led by mercenaries or local regencies that transformed their naval know-how into money and could even operate against the Roman Empire, as they were backed by a substantial regional power that could foster and hide them.

---

7 *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, s.v. "Black Sea," by Rüdiger Schmitt, accessed July 30, 2021, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_7010.

8 Maria Brosius, "*Pax Persica* and the Peoples of the Black Sea Region: Extent and Limits of Achaemenid Imperial Ideology," in *Achaemenid Impact in the Black Sea: Communication of Powers,* ed. Jens Nieling and Ellen Rehm (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010), 32.

9 Duane W. Roller, *Empire of the Black Sea: The Rise and Fall of the Mithridatic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 172–73.

10 Roller, 175, 207–8.

However, the activities of pirates did not end with the fall of Mithridates. The Greek geographer Strabo (d. 24 AD) from Asia Minor reports in his *Geography* that the sea's eastern region, especially Colchis, had developed into a hotbed of Black Sea piracy:

> Next to Sindica, and Gorgipia upon the sea, is the sea-coast inhabited by the Achæi, Zygi, and Heniochi. It is for the most part without harbours and mountainous, being a portion of the Caucasus. These people subsist by piracy. Their boats are slender, narrow, light, and capable of holding about five and twenty men, and rarely thirty. The Greeks call them camaræ. […] They equip fleets consisting of these camaræ, and being masters of the sea sometimes attack vessels of burden, or invade a territory, or even a city. Sometimes even those who occupy the Bosporus assist them, by furnishing places of shelter for their vessels, and supply them with provision and means for the disposal of their booty. When they return to their own country, not having places suitable for mooring their vessels, they put their camaræ on their shoulders, and carry them up into the forests, among which they live, and where they cultivate a poor soil. When the season arrives for navigation, they bring them down again to the coast. Their habits are the same even in a foreign country, for they are acquainted with wooded tracts, in which, after concealing their camaræ, they wander about on foot day and night, for the purpose of capturing the inhabitants and reducing them to slavery. But they readily allow whatever is taken to be ransomed, and signify this after their departure to those who have lost their property.[11]

In this passage, several important aspects of piracy and pirates are mentioned: It was a part-time seasonal job. In autumn and winter pirates turned back into peasants. One might find corrupt agents in big harbor cities for help or officials who let them through the Bosporus. They looted and enslaved people but were quite happy if the ransom was paid right away, as this reduced the risk of being caught or the need to return later. In this context, Vincent Gabrielsen mentions the famous Greek Philosoph Aristitoteles (d. 322 BC), who in his work *Politics* divided all economic activity into two classes. The first was that which derives from trade and bargaining and the second is that which consists of collecting the fruits of nature via "pastoralism, agriculture, piracy, fishing and hunting." In addition, a combination of two activities such as agriculture and piracy was possible.[12] In the one you collected vegetables and fruits, in the other human slaves.

After the fall of Mithridates, the Roman Empire consolidated its naval activities from the harbors in the southeastern region of the Black Sea.[13] The Greek cities on the Kerch Strait in the vicinity of Crimea, which had been under Pontian rule, then formed the Bosporan Kingdom. As such, the cities became Roman clients. They pros-

---

11 Strabo, *Geography, Literally Translated, with Notes, in Three Volumes*, ed. H. C. Hamilton and W. Falconer (London: George Bell & Sons, 1903), accessed July 30, 2021, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0239%3Abook%3D11#note-link25.

12 Vincent Gabrielsen, "Warfare, Statehood and Piracy in the Greek World," in Jaspert and Kolditz, *Seeraub im Mittelmeer*, 149.

13 Jakob Mund Højte, "From Kingdom to Province: Reshaping Pontos after the Fall of Mithridates VI," in *Rome and the Black Sea Region: Domination, Romanisation and Resistance,* ed. Tønnes Bekker-Nielsen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2006), 15–17.

pered by trading wheat, fish, and slaves and had their own naval forces to fight off pirates threatening this trade.[14] Their most important harbor was Chersonesus near present-day Sevastopol in the Crimean Peninsula.

In the south, the Black Sea region under direct Roman control, the *lex Gabinia* of 76 BC, had been introduced for Pompey's command against pirates. It stipulated that Roman control should always cover a coastal region up to fifty miles (eighty kilometers) inland, as pirates were never on the sea for long, operating from their land base.[15]

The third century AD witnessed the advent of a strong group of bandits and pirates when the Goths arrived from the northwest and took advantage of the crises besetting the Roman Empire. They ransacked cities on the western shores of the Black Sea and threatened trade there. After 256, they installed themselves in Crimea, whence they launched marauding naval expeditions, even into the Mediterranean. Trebizond and Pityus were taken in the eastern Black Sea region and for twenty years, it seems that Gothic Black Sea pirates and seafarers remained extremely dangerous for trade and local people. They operated, besides from their base in Crimea, from the old pirate hotspot of Colchis mentioned by Strabo. It seems that the last major naval assault on Anatolia was carried out by the Goths around 275. However, Emperor Tacitus crushed them militarily in 276, which earned him the title *Gothicus Maximus.*[16] Subsequently, in the course of the fourth century, the Goths seem to have been increasingly Romanized. In Crimea, the Crimean Goths acted as successors of the former Bosporan Kingdom and behaved in accordance with Rome while officially remaining independent. In addition, many Goths entered into Roman military service. Roughly a hundred years after the Goths ceased large-scale plundering activities on the Black Sea, new invaders arrived from Central Asian step around the late fourth century: the Huns, who subdued the land to the north of the Black Sea, incorporating former Gothic territory and pushing other nations and tribes to the west. Still, we do not hear of any pirate activity by Huns, although that does not mean that pirates and bandits stopped operating. One would suggest that in uncertain times piracy could have been on the rise but as trade was possibly lower too, banditry might have been less lucrative.

4 The Early Medieval Period

After the famous partition of the Eastern and Western Roman Empires in 395, the Black Sea region remained under the control of the Eastern part of the Roman realm. The capital Byzantium/Constantinople was situated at the very entrance to the Black Sea, controlling trade and naval activities. As the Bosporan client Kingdom had finally fall-

14 Everett Wheeler, "Roman Fleets in the Black Sea: Mysteries of the 'Classica Pontica'," in *Acta Classica* 55 (2012): 120.

15 Wheeler, 128.

16 Alan Bowman, Averil Cameron, and Peter Garnsey, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History,* vol. 12, *The Crisis of Empire, AD 193–337* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 53–54.

en under attack from the Huns in the 370s, the Eastern Roman Empire attempted to re-establish control over southern Crimea to ensure trade routes and make them safer against the Central Asian nomads who dominated the steppe. However, it was not until the sixth century that the Byzantine Empire took a firm grip over the southern part of the peninsula under Emperor Justinian I (r. 527–65). With Crimea under Byzantine control, the trade routes to Anatolia and Byzantium became safer. Moreover, we might assume that the subsequent nomadic realms on the northern shore after the decline of the Huns, be it the Bulgars or the Khazars, did not engage too much in naval activities and might have been satisfied with the opportunity to sell through the Crimean harbors and receive tribute payments from settlements on the coast.

At about the same time as the Byzantine Empire expanded to Crimea and into the western Mediterranean, they were confronted with a challenge from the east, when control over the Kingdom of Lazica, in the former Colchis region on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, came under heavy pressure from the Sasanian Empire. The rulers of Lazica, long well-known as hotbeds of piracy, tried to balance their trade interests between the Roman and Sasanian Empires. Several wars were fought in the sixth century until a peace treaty in 562 left control of the region to the Byzantines in return for a high annual tribute to the Sasanians.[17] After Arab Muslim armies' conquests in Central Asia and the Caucasus in the seventh century, the region of Lazica briefly came under Arab control, but they retreated after being fought off by Lazica with Khazar assistance. The Kingdom of Abkhazia was then founded there by 780. It would later integrate into the Kingdom of Georgia in 1008. However, little is known about pirate activities at that time. This would certainly change with the appearance of the Vikings on the Black Sea.

5 Varangians / Vikings / Rus

> Sometimes before the year 300/912–13, ships carrying thousands of men reached al-Andalus by sea and raided the Atlantic coasts. The people of al-Andalus claimed that these enemies were one of the nations of the *majūs*,[18] who came to attack them by sea every two hundred years and that they reach their country by means of a channel, which communicates with the Ocean. […] Personally, I think—but God best knows the truth—that this channel communicates with the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea and that the attackers were those Rūs we have already mentioned, since they are the only people who sail those seas that communicate with the Ocean.[19]

This is what the Arab geographer and traveler al-Mas'ūdī (d. 957) has to say about the Vikings and their attacks on al-Andalus. It is remarkable that he sees a clear connection

17 Erich, Kettenhofen, "Justinian I," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (London: Routledge, 2011), 15/3:260.

18 In the Islamic tradition, the *majūs (magicians)* are usually identified with Zoroastrians but the term can also denote "foreign people."

19 Ibn Fadlān, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 143.

between the people attacking in the western Mediterranean and the Vikings (Varangians) he knows from the Black Sea. He assumes that there must be a connecting channel. However, it is more of a connecting area of origin in Scandinavia, which explains the common feature of the Nordic pirates, whom al-Masʿūdī identifies as the *Rūs*, who in 300/912–13 reached the sea of Pontus (Black Sea) with 500 ships via the river of the Khazars.[20]

This of course was an important change for piracy and banditry in the Black Sea region. Large pirate fleets now came from the north and threatened Byzantine harbors in southern Crimea. They were strong enough even to reach and threaten the capital Constantinople. These pirate raids were no longer restricted to quick attacks and subsequent hiding. The Varangian Rus certainly brought with them a military naval technology that challenged the Byzantine navy and was superior to that of all other neighboring peoples.[21]

The question as to where the Rus/Varangians/Vikings originated is still a matter of debate, as is the derivation of the name Varangians.[22] It seems that Norse people from southern Sweden wandered and sailed down the large East European rivers in order to merge with local Slavs to form a new entity. This merger of people would then form the Rus, and with this name the also appear Arab chronicles.[23]

The Rus controlled east-west and north-south trade routes from strongholds such as Kyiv. The most important was the Dniester route from Kyiv to the south into the Black Sea. An alternative route used by the Norsemen was the Dnipro route to the west. Further to the east was the Don route to the Black Sea via the Sea of Azov and to the Caspian Sea. The technological advantage of the Viking longship was the shallow draft, which allowed navigating in waters only a meter deep and enabled the Vikings to transport their boats over land in order to bypass rapids and other obstacles. With the help of these ships, the sailor-pirate-merchants went south, where they had to pass Khazar territory and fought other nations of the steppe, such as the Pechenegs.

Varangians had reached the Black Sea around 830 where they looted and traded on the more densely populated western shore. The Byzantine Crimean city of Chersonesus called for help and as the grain trade was vital, Emperor Theophilos (829–42) sent a garrison there and equipped a fortress at the lower Don to protect the Imperial frontier in the east and help the Khazars against the Vikings.[24]

---

20 Ibn Fadlān, 144.

21 See also Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus 750–1200* (London: Routledge, 1996).

22 Sigfūs Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium: An Aspect of Byzantine Military History*, trans. and rev. Benedikt S. Benedikz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 6–9.

23 The Scandinavian Varangians increasingly integrated into the Slavic environment and as such became known as Rus, see Serhii M. Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

24 Plokhy, 32.

Nevertheless, the looting continued and intensified over the next century. In 860, the Varangians even attacked Constantinople. Emperor Michael III (r. 842–67) hurried back from the Anatolian front, where he was fighting back the Arabs and managed to defeat the Vikings. However, peace negotiations were opened, which facilitated Varangian trade in the Byzantine Empire and troops of the Rus were contracted to serve in the Byzantine army and navy.[25] Thereafter, Rus mercenaries and soldiers developed into a common feature of the Imperial army. That does not mean that the southward looting by the Rus did stop. They intensified their raids towards the Khazar realm after Prince Oleg took control of Kyiv, coming from Novgorod, around 879. The Rus were henceforth named Kyivan Rus. As an organized regency they now presented a more serious threat to trade in the south and neighboring people of the Black Sea. In 911 and 934 the Kyivan Rus looted the shores of the Caspian Sea and in an alliance with their Oghuz Turk allies attacked the Khazar capital of Atil, which they conquered around 969, severely damaging the Khazar regency.[26] It was through these raids that took place near the Abbasid Empire that the Rus increasingly entered into the works of Arab-Islamic historiography and travel accounts as fierce pirates and warriors.[27]

The Byzantines began to employ Varangian mercenaries in the times of Basil I (867–86). Hiring of Varangians as skilled naval warriors was logical, as they could fight other Rus forces and pirates using their knowledge of their armaments and tactics. In addition, they could be used in other naval encounters. Byzantine sources speak of seven hundred Rus (*Rhosi*) who took part in an attack on Arab Crete in 902. Taming pirates by hiring them or through settlement agreements thus seems to have been an often-used strategy to integrate invaders into one's own society.

This tactic did not prevent large-scale expeditions by Kyivan Rus against Constantinople, however. A first, somehow obscure, attack was led by Prince Oleg around 907 and apparently led to a new peace and trade agreement in 911. More dangerous for the Byzantine Capital was the expedition led by Igor (r. 915–45), the ruler of Kyivan Rus, in 941. His assault took place when great parts of the Byzantine navy were deployed against the Arabs in the eastern Mediterranean and hence initial resistance was weak. The Kyivan fleet plundered and looted the western shore of the Black Sea, where the cities of the First Bulgarian Empire suffered a lot, but even the remaining Byzantine boats inflicted heavy damage with the use of Greek fire (a mixture of petroleum and sulphur which could not be put out by water). The Rus retreated, looting on their way home. In 945, a new treaty stipulated again peace and trade agreements and declared both powers to be eternal allies.[28]

Afterwards it seems that large-scale attacks by Kyivan Rus on the Byzantine capital ceased for a while. However, by defeating the Khazars and the Bulgars, Prince Sviato-

25 Plokhy, 33.

26 *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, s.v. "Rūs," by Peter B. Golden, accessed August 23, 2021, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0942.

27 See Ibn Fadlān, *Ibn Fadlān*.

28 Blöndal, *The Varangians*, 36–37.

slav I (r. 943–72) opened up direct access for his realm to the Black Sea and came into territorial conflict with the Byzantines over rule of the Balkans. But Sviatoslav I was killed by the Pechenegs in 972, which ended his dreams of a long-lasting conquest of the northern shore of the Black Sea. His son Vladimir I (r. 980–1015) would have more success. He raided southern Crimea and conquered the Byzantine harbor of Chersonesus, handing it back only when a Byzantine princess was sent to marry him. We thus see that piracy pays off, but in return, Vladimir had to convert to Christianity.[29]

Within the tenth century and the first half of the eleventh century, a considerable rise of the Varangian element in the Byzantine army took place. They were used on a variety of fronts in southern Italy and the eastern Mediterranean by the Byzantine Emperors.[30] One of the leaders of these troops was Harald Sigurdsson, a Norwegian noble who had fled to Byzantium and after years of service returned to Norway to become Norwegian king. His fate is well known, as he would be killed at the battle of Stamford Bridge in England in 1066.[31]

The eleventh century seemed the heyday of Varangian and Viking mercenaries and rulers around the Atlantic, the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea. Their system of warfare and naval raids represented the highest technological level at the time and was apparently hard to defend against. Therefore, they entered the service of regional rulers, who engaged them to fight off fellow Vikings. Still, rulers were careful about how to use their Varangian guards. When in 1043 the navy of Prince Iaroslav (r. 1019–54) attacked Constantinople and looted Black Sea shores for the last time in the history of Kyivan Rus, the Byzantines had apparently sent all their Varangian guards from the capital to distant frontier provinces to prevent them merging with the invaders. The Kyivan Rus had to retreat due to the use of Greek fire but caused considerable damage on their way back.[32] Thereafter, the Rus were still present in the Black Sea for some time, but the region witnessed the arrival of new occupants very well versed in land raids, i. e., the Seljuks in Anatolia and the Kipchaks in the Pontic steppe.

6 Kipchaks and Seljuks

One of the main features of the Black Sea is the subsequent waves of influx of Nomadic people from Central Asia into the Pontic steppe to its north. From their control of the Crimea, these steppe people supplied, looted, or taxed Black Sea regional trade.

Kyivan Rus had been helped against the Khazars from time to time by Turkish Oghuz tribes from the Caucasus, who had settled there since the ninth century. Al-Ma-

29 Blöndal, 44.
30 Blöndal, 38–53.
31 On his time in Byzantine service, see Blöndal, 54–102.
32 Blöndal, 104.

s'ūdi recalls for the tenth century that the nomadic Oghuz Turks often used the frozen waterways in winter to raid the Tatar land on the northern shore of the Black Sea.[33] One can understand that this was hard on the Khazars. The Oghuz came down on them in winter from the south and the Kyivan Rus in summer from the north and the west. Hence the Khazars weakened and their place was taken subsequently by the Pechenegs in the eleventh century and then the Kipchaks after the twelfth. These subsequent Central Asian Turkish tribes relied on a nomadic lifestyle and raided their conquered lands in order to gain booty and enslave captured people to sell them, via the Crimean ports, to the Byzantine Empire and the wider Mediterranean world. As they also resorted to internal warfare, Kipchaks were sold to the Muslim realm and as Mamluks ([white] military slaves), they formed a core element of Muslim armies from the twelfth century onwards. This profitable trade triggered a rise in demand and raids to capture slaves became a common feature to the north of the Black Sea.

In the meantime, the Varangians' riverine trade route from Scandinavia to the Black Sea lost its importance, as the European crusades brought Italian seafaring nations into the eastern Mediterranean after 1099. The Italians and others dried up parts of the Varangians' eastern trade by bringing goods directly to Europe from the east.

The Seljuks (a tribal part of the above-mentioned Oghuz Turks) then defeated the Byzantines at the battle of Manzikert (today: Malazgirt) in Eastern Anatolia in 1071 and swept through the Anatolian plateau, but were yet to conquer the coast, where Byzantium, with the help of its fleet, still possessed Trabzon and other important harbors. Although the Seljuks did briefly manage to conquer harbors like Nicomedia (today: İzmit) in the Sea of Marmara and the coastal region around the mouth of the Sangarios River (today: Sakarya River), they did not succeed in holding them.[34]

At the time the Seljuk advance ended, it had not reached much of the Anatolian shores. The Seljuks could not pursue their conquests, as they were now confronted with a new foe, i. e., the Crusaders. In 1096 the knights of the First Crusade arrived in Constantinople and their successful advance through Anatolia and Syria successfully diverted the Seljuk forces from the Byzantine shores. The Black Sea coast in the eleventh century was therefore very much controlled by the Byzantines in the south and in Crimea and by Kipchak and other Turkish tribes in the steppes.

According to Michel Balard, the international importance of Black Sea trade was then minimal. East-West Trade was mainly carried out at Egyptian ports and in the Levant, where the goods had arrived from further east. In the Levant they were taken by the Italian trading nations, which had become vital for the Crusading states, and transported across the Mediterranean. He therefore states: "The Pontic regions, under fairly loose Byzantine control, did no more than provide Constantinople with agricultural

33 Ibn Fadlān, *Ibn Fadlān,* 144.

34 Alexander Daniel Beihammer, *Byzantium and the Emergence of Muslim-Turkish Anatolia: ca. 1040–1130* (London: Routledge, 2019), 283.

products, grain, fish, and salt. The straits were closed to western ships. The chrysobulls[35] issued by different emperors for Venice and Genoa in the twelfth century did not authorize entrance to the Black Sea, which remained an internal Byzantine lake."[36] It seems these must have been dull times for pirates too, but things were again about to change.

7 Crusaders and Mongols after 1204—Shifting Trade Routes

The main turning point for trade and piracy concerning the Black Sea in the medieval period was the year 1204 and the conquest of Constantinople by the re-directed Fourth Crusade, which established, with much help from the Venetians, the Latin Empire in Constantinople. With the straits of the Bosporus and the Dardanelles under the control of Venice, the Black Sea opened up for Italian merchants, as the Venetians apparently did not forbid the Genoese to trade there as well. However, Venice initially left the Black Sea trade mainly in the hands of local Greeks and Seljuks with whom they concluded trade arrangements. They themselves concentrated on the transport of goods from Constantinople to the west.[37]

Meanwhile, the Rum (Anatolian) Seljuks had used the disorder of the fall of Constantinople in 1204 to conquer Sinope in 1214 and now possessed their own harbor for the naval trade in Anatolia towards the northern shore of the Black Sea.[38] To its east, the Empire of Trebizond still flew the flag of the Byzantines, as did the Empire of Nicaea in Western Anatolia, which then managed to bring Constantinople under Byzantine control again in 1261. However, even after 1261 the Black Sea did stay open for the Italians and trade would really take off there after the middle of the century. The restored Byzantine Empire was not able to close the Black Sea again to external competitors.

The rise in trade that now followed had to do mainly with another world-shaking event, the Mongol advance of the thirteenth century. The Mongols conquered the Pontic steppe and after the split of the Mongol Empire in 1260, the Mongol regency of the Golden Horde installed itself on the northern shores of the Black Sea.

Some historians, like Gheorghe I. Brătianu, argue that it was the meeting of the Italian traders with the territories of the *Pax Mongolica* in the thirteenth century

35 Chrysobulls or golden bulls were decrees issued by the Byzantine emperor.

36 Michel Balard, "The Black Sea: Trade and Navigation (13th–15th Centuries)," in *Maritimes Mittelalter: Meere als Kommunikationsräume,* ed. Michael Borgolte and Nikolas Jaspert (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke, 2015), 182–83.

37 Balard, 184.

38 *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, s.v. "Sīnūb," by Johannes H. Kramers and Suraiya Faroqhi, accessed August 25, 2021, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1086.

that changed the world economy profoundly.[39] It linked Inner Asia directly with the rich Mediterranean and European countries, to the benefit of both. Therefore, the Golden Horde allowed the Italian nations to open up trading stations on the shore of the Black Sea at the end of the silk and spice routes. Moreover, the Mongols had collected huge numbers of captives in their advances and continuous raids towards neighboring territories. Kipchak men, for example, were in high demand in Mamluk Egypt as military slaves, as mentioned above, and Caucasian women were sought after in Italy and other regions of Southern Europe.[40]

How exactly the first contacts of the Italian cities with the Mongols came about is difficult to know, but the Genoese apparently became part of an anti-Ilkhanid[41] alliance of the Golden Horde in 1263, as the Northern Mongols needed someone to transport commodities and raw materials by sea, having no navy.[42]

The Genoese could not be described as staunch ally of the Golden Horde, however. They simply searched for the best way to prosper from commerce and booty and used the rivalry between the two Mongol realms. Then, when in 1285 the Mamluks coming from Syria subjugated the Cilician Kingdom of Lesser Armenia, trade in the local harbor of Ayas became more difficult for Genoa. They therefore attempted to transform the oriental Tabriz-Ayas spice trade into a Tabriz-Trebizond trade that would allow the Genoese to transport the goods to and from Italy without the interference of the Mamluks. Trebizond, which had fallen under Ilkhanid suzerainty, became even more attractive for the Genoese, as they could transport Ilkhanid goods from there to Crimea to the Golden Horde and as such they acted as inter-Mongolian traders despite the political rivalries of the two entities. In 1290, these activities even went so far that Vivaldo Lavaggio, a Genoese naval commander, was hired by Ilkhan Arghun to patrol Black Sea waters with a war galley to secure the Trebizond trade against local piracy. His success in this role seems to have earned him a Genoese command post in Caffa (today: Feodosiia).[43]

However, the relationship between the Genoese and the Golden Horde also depended on secure trade routes to the Mamluks as one of the main customers for Crimean goods and slaves. The Golden Horde used their strong position in the slave trade as a political tool to bargain with the Mamluks of Egypt. When the Mamluks were reluctant to enter into a coalition against the Mongol Ilkhanids from Persia, the khan of the Golden Horde had the main slave transporters, the Genoese, expelled from Caffa in 1308. The Mamluks then apparently offered an alliance, but things only returned to

39 Balard, "The Black Sea," 184.

40 On this aspect, see Hannah Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2019).

41 The Ilkhans had formed a Mongol regency in today's Iran and became enemies of their Golden Horn "cousins."

42 Virgil Ciocîltan, *The Mongols and the Black Sea Trade in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 153.

43 Ciocîltan, 116, 158.

normal when the new khan Özbek (1313–41) converted to Islam, re-opened Caffa to the Genoese, and strengthened his ties with the Mamluks.[44]

Özbek's successor, Janibek (1342–57), became far more hostile towards the Genoese. Apparently, he no longer needed the Mamluk alliance, as the Ilkhanid Empire had ceased to exist and the plague within the Golden Horde made it difficult to enslave sufficient people to sell them. Perhaps he wanted to control the trade himself. He expulsed the Venetians from Tana (today: Azov) in 1343 and besieged Genoese Caffa, in vain, from 1343 to 1346.[45] Around 1344 the Mongols even initiated a naval building program in the Crimean western ports, but a fleet that had come from Genoa in 1345 swiftly destroyed these boats.[46] It was during the long siege of Caffa that Mongol troops seem to have infected the Genoese with the plague. The Black Death then reached Alexandria on board a Genoese slave ship in 1347.[47] In 1347 Khan Janibek conceded his defeat, concluding peace treaties with Venice and Genoa.[48] Afterwards, trade could go on, and the slave trade in particular regained its former importance.

Although Pope Innocent IV (1243–54) and his successors condemned Italian traders for taking slaves to the Muslims to bolster infidels' armies, the slave trade continued to flourish as the Italian seafaring nations found ways to cover their traces. They took the slaves from Crimea to Trebizond or the Georgian realm on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, where Mamluk slave merchants would take them and transport them further over land. In other instances, they even brought them directly to customers in Syria or Egypt.

Despite some bumpy times in the relationship of the Golden Horde and its successor the Crimean Khanate from 1441 onwards, trade with the Mongols proved highly lucrative, especially for Venice and Genoa. It has been described by Michel Balard as "colonial" due to its specific nature: "The westerners brought finished products to acquire foodstuffs and natural products from the Black Sea."[49]

Caffa in Crimea had been the main trading post of the Genoese since the last quarter of the thirteenth century. Moreover, they had almost a dozen additional trading posts on the shores of the Black Sea to purchase silk, spices, and slaves, and Venice later had fixed trading posts too, establishing one in Trebizond in 1319 and one in Tana at the site where the River Don flows into the Sea of Azov.[50]

These trading arrangements remained in place after 1250 for almost two hundred years and fierce competition evolved between Venice and Genoa over this trade, with

44 Ciocîltan, 171–82.
45 Ciocîltan, 204.
46 Ciocîltan, 210.
47 al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. M. Ziyāda (Cairo: Maṭbʿat al-kutub al-miṣrīya, 1958), 2/3:776.
48 Ciocîltan, *The Mongols*, 215.
49 Balard, "The Black Sea," 191.
50 Balard, 192.

different approaches and ships.[51] It is remarkable that both cities managed to keep other Southern European nations out of the Black Sea, although they quarreled fiercely between themselves. There were several large naval conflicts between the two cities fought in the Black Sea between 1250 and the beginning of the fifteenth century. The conflict between the two escalated first around 1256 over influence in the harbors of the Holy Land, especially Acre. In 1261, the Genoese helped the Byzantine Empire of Nicaea to reconquer Latin Constantinople while the Venetian fleet patrolled away on the Black Sea. Further wars were to follow, especially after the fall of Acre and the end of the Crusader states in 1291. Venice attacked the Genoese in Cyprus and in 1296 raided Genoese posts in the Mediterranean, on the Black Sea, and in Constantinople.[52]

The fourteenth century increasingly saw the development of state-financed naval plunder activities and the distinction between pirate and corsair emerged.[53] Corsairs received an official letter of marque for their acts, whereas pirates looted on their own account. An example is the case of a Venetian fleet which in 1306 received the order to fight pirates in the Levant but at the same time was asked "to plunder profitable Byzantine territories in the Aegean."[54] Plundering, piracy, and counterpiracy therefore became a regular part of the naval game played by Genoa and Venice between Tana, Caffa, Trebizond, and Pera in the first half of the fourteenth century. Usually, Genoese pirates sacked Venetian ships and then a Venetian response would follow.[55] This was related to the way the Genoese and Venetians organized their naval activities: Whereas Genoa relied on a loose network of semi-independent merchant-pirates, Venice opted for larger convoys under state control, which were less flexible when it came to acts of individual piracy. They thus had to retaliate with special corsair fleets.

Another long-term armed conflict between the two lasted from 1349–55 at the height of the outbreak of the Black Death and the above mentioned attempt by Khan Janibek of the Golden Horde to drive the Italian seafaring nations out of Crimea. As outlined above, Venice had been pushed out of Tana by the Golden Horde in 1343 over trading conflicts in the town. Therefore, Genoa and Venice agreed that trade could be carried out by Venice in Genoese Caffa. However, when Venice returned to Tana, Genoa saw this as a breach of contract and started a corsair war in the Black Sea and other regions against Venice, which led to a full-fledged conflict ending only in 1355.[56]

---

51 Balard, 186–92.

52 Gerhard Rösch, *Venedig: Geschichte einer Seerepublik* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000), 75; Steven A. Epstein, *Genoa and the Genoese: 958–1528* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 182.

53 Irene B. Katele, "Piracy and the Venetian State: The Dilemma of Maritime Defense in the Fourteenth Century," *Speculum* 63, no. 4 (1988): 865.

54 Katele, 872.

55 See for several cases Katele, 884–85.

56 Rösch, *Venedig*, 77.

The war of Chioggia of 1376–81 between Venice and Genoa was triggered by a conflict about the control of the Island of Tenedos near the Strait of Gallipoli at the entrance to the Dardanelles. In fact, the conflict had much to do about the control of Black Sea trade. During the war years, both sides resorted to piracy and plunder as measures of war. A Venetian fleet raided Genoese strongholds in the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea and Genoese pirates retaliated.[57] In the end, Venice and Genoa agreed to leave the island of Tenedos with the Genoese, who were not allowed to fortify it and leave it accessible to the Venetians. That meant that Black Sea trade was still possible for both of the powers and Genoese Famagusta in Cyprus remained still open to Venetian trade as well.[58] Due to other developments in Europe, this would be the last war fought between Venice and Genoa over trade in the Levant and control of the Black Sea.

At around the same time, the Ming Dynasty in China had ended Mongol rule there and closed the inner-Asian trade routes. The Black Sea trade therefore regionalized again and piracy between the European seafaring nations became less lucrative.[59] This development went in favor of the Venetians, who had their outposts in the Black Sea, but were on much better terms with the Mamluk Empire. They could trade more easily than the Genoese, who had had a more hostile approach towards the Mamluks at the harbors of Beirut and Alexandria, where goods from the Far East such as spices and silk were now traded again, to the detriment of the northern Silk Road, which Ming China had closed.[60] However, the rich years and decades of the Black Sea trade of the fourteenth century had not only deepened the Venetian and Genoese rivalry and increased inner-Italian piracy, but had also attracted other Black Sea residents to invest and become involved in the looting business.

For example, on the Sea of Azov and the eastern shores of the Black Sea (the old pirate coast of Strabo) north of the Kingdom of Georgia it seems that the Circassians, as the people of the northwestern Caucasus were increasingly designated in contemporary European and Arab sources, had become more belligerent. By expanding to the north they became more active in the buccaneer business and raided the sea. This brought them into conflict with the Golden Horde, which then sold its Circassian prisoners as slaves to the Mamluks. Circassian military slaves would therefore form the bulk of the Mamluk elite soldiers from the fourteenth century onwards, replacing former Kipchak slaves. According to Balard, Genoese corsairs were very active in the Sea of Azov by the mid-fourteenth century, either attacking and looting Venetian galleys or chasing local Circassian pirates, whom they could then sell as well.[61]

---

57 Rösch, *Venedig*, 79; Epstein, *Genoa,* 238.

58 Epstein, *Genoa,* 241.

59 Balard, "The Black Sea," 193.

60 See Albrecht Fuess, "Why Venice, not Genoa? How Venice Emerged as the Mamluks' Favourite European Trading Partner after 1365," in *Union in Separation – Diasporic Groups and Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean (1100–1800)*, ed. Georg Christ et al. (Rome: Viella, 2015), 251–66.

61 Michel Balard, *La Romanie Génoise: XII–XVe siècle* (Rome: Ecole Française, 1978), 1:156–57.

8 Ghazi Pirates and Ottomans

Some Turcoman pirates had already shown up in the aftermath of the battle of Manzikert with shipyards and fleets in the years 1080–97 on the Aegean and the Marmara coast but they disappeared shortly after the success of the First Crusade.[62]

The heyday of Venetian and Genoese Black Sea commerce initiated a new age of Turcoman piracy. As mentioned above, the Rum Seljuks conquered Sinope on the northern shore of Anatolia in 1214. With this harbor under their control, they could become seaborne and now had their own harbor for the naval trade from Anatolia towards the northern shore.[63] In southeastern Anatolia, Alanya and its region fell into Seljuk hands between 1207–26, which led to a naval headquarters there, but its policy was not aggressive towards their Christian neighbors at that point.[64]

It would take until 1269 for the first *pirate-ghazi*[65] principality to be founded by Menteşe Bey in southwestern Anatolia. Shortly afterwards, Turkish pirates also settled a little further north, at Ephesus.[66] In the following years, many Western Anatolian harbors were taken over by Turkish post-Seljuk regencies. The strategic advantage was obvious, as the wooded mountains in the hinterland could be used to fell the trees for shipbuilding and the mountains themselves could be used as refuge by pirates too.

Ships' crews quite often consisted of old Byzantine seafarers who had been left unemployed after the dismantling of the Byzantine navy in the thirteenth century as the dominance of Venice and Genoa made it obsolete.

While the ships' crews of these early Turcoman navies comprised Greeks, the soldiers on board were the Ghazi Turks, who were also deployed in the land forces. The Greek-Turkish combination apparently worked well and new harbor societies emerged on the Western Anatolian coast. However, the navies of the Italian cities were still too powerful to be attacked in open battle, but the Turcoman principalities did harm the trade through their corsair activities, pillaging the islands of Rhodes, Chios, and Mytilene. This triggered a response by the Genoese and the Hospitallers. Chios was taken by the Genoese and Rhodes by the Knights of St. John in 1308. At that time, naval suprem-

62 Halil İnalcık, "The Rise of the Turcoman Maritime Principalities in Anatolia, Byzantium, and the Crusades," in *The Middle East and the Balkans Under the Ottoman Empire: Essays on Economy & Society,* ed. Halil İnalcık (Bloomington: Indiana University Turkish Studies Department, 1993), 310.

63 *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition,* s.v. "Sīnūb."

64 İnalcık, "Rise," 310.

65 The term *ghazi* denotes a holy warrior in the Turkish context and was a byname given to the Ottoman sultans; see for example Albrecht Fuess, "Ottoman Ghazwa – Mamluk Jihad. Two arms on the same body?," in *Everything is on the Move: The "Mamluk Empire" as Node in (Trans-)Regional Networks,* ed. Stephan Conermann (Göttingen: Bonn University Press 2014), 269–82.

66 İnalcık, "Rise," 311.

acy still lay with the Italians, as the fleet of Aydınoğlu Mehmed Bey from Ephesus had been completely defeated in 1319.[67]

In order to challenge the Italian maritime powers the Turks of Menteşe and Aydın then cooperated with the Catalans under Don Alfonso Fadrique, which enabled them to attack Euboea and even Crete, which especially harmed Venetian interests. After a heavy Turkish-Catalan attack on Euboea in 1327 the Venetians tried to initiate an alliance against the Turkish corsairs who were threatening their trade with Constantinople and the Black Sea. In 1329 Umur Pasha, the son of Aydın Mehmed even managed to wrest Izmir from the Genoese with his fleet. This latter incident, combined with further plundering activities by Umur Beg, convinced European powers and the Hospitallers to act together against the principalities. A powerful fleet of Venetian, Byzantine, French, Cypriot, Rhodesian, and Papal ships crushed a Turkish fleet in 1334, but Izmir did withstand an attack.[68]

Umur Pasha developed thereafter into an important regional player, his fleet being capable of threatening trade relations and military expeditions in the Aegean and the Black Sea. Apparently, Emperor Andronikos III (r. 1328–41) approached him in order to form a regional alliance against the western nations in a quest to "re-Byzantinize" the Empire. However, these plans did not take off as planned and after the death of Andronikos the Empire plunged into civil war.[69] Umur Pasha used this period and the help of Byzantine factions to loot the Balkan region with his fleets between 1341 and 1345.

A new Cypriot, Venetian, and Rhodesian alliance against the Turkish commander was then forged by the pope, and Izmir was captured by them in 1344. Umur Pasha died in an attempt to recapture Izmir castle in 1348.[70] His death did not lead to an end of pirate activities emanating from Turcoman principalities but it diminished the threat to Italian seafaring for the time being. Despite the loss of Izmir, naval raids by the sea ghazis in the Aegean continued between 1350 and 1390.[71]

The Turkish corsairs thereby took advantage of the inner Italian rivalries. Moreover, the main military threat for the Byzantine Empire and the European seafaring nations increasingly came from the Ottoman principality, which was able to install itself on the Black Sea coast and to act there. In 1369 Turkish-Ottoman forces occupied Adrianople (today: Edirne) and started to encircle the Byzantine capital Constantinople from the European and the Asian side. The Turcoman maritime principalities of Western Anatolia were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in 1390. The old pirate emirs of Menteşe and Aydın therefore sided with the winning Timurid army against the Ottomans at the battle of Ankara in 1402 to get rid of the Ottomans. This gave these emirates a lifeline for another 20 years before they were re-incorporated into the Ottoman

67 İnalcık, "Rise," 313.
68 İnalcık, 313–16.
69 İnalcık, 317.
70 İnalcık, 320.
71 İnalcık, 322.

realm by around 1425. Sultan Murad II (r. 1421–51) then conquered the Black Sea coast to the east of Samsun and occupied Germiyan.[72]

However, the most important attack for the fate of the Black Sea (and its pirates) was certainly the conquest of Constantinople by Mehmed II (r. 1451–81) in 1453. The key to success had been the construction of opposite fortresses on the Bosporus to block seafaring in and out the Black Sea. Still, the Ottoman fleet was not able to block all Genoese provisions to the city, but their mighty artillery was finally able to breach the walls.[73] The Genoese consul of Caffa Giovanni Guglielmo Longo Giustiniani had been away on pirating acts in the eastern Mediterranean when on his way back he found that the way to Caffa was now blocked by the Ottomans. The Byzantine emperor Constantine XI (r. 1449–53) promptly hired the ships and men of this able condottiere for the defense of his capital, but to no avail.[74]

The Ottoman conquest together with the end of the *Pax Mongolica* in the northern steppe region changed the game completely. The Ottomans kept the route to the Black Sea open to Genoese and Venetians due to trading agreements for a while, but, as described above, proved to be less lucrative. The Empire of Trebizond, the last Byzantine regency, fell to the Ottomans in 1461. Genoese Caffa already had to pay tribute after the fall of Constantinople, but it too was finally directly conquered by the Ottomans in 1475. With the Black Sea trade finally in one hand again and their mighty fleet constructed in the former Byzantine capital, the new masters of Constantinople, the Ottomans, were clearly able to keep piracy and pirates away from the Black Sea. At least for a limited time.

9 Conclusion

Black Sea piracy in the pre-modern era is very much bound by geography and the political control of its straits. We have some recurrent elements such as the piracy from the Abkhazian era since the time of Strabo and some unusual times like the thirteenth century with an open gateway from China to Italy, which attracted many pirate activities. In general, we perceive the Black Sea as being bound to the south and to the north. In the north were the steppe people from Central Asia, and in the south control over the straits was secured by highly centralized and urban regencies—first Rome, then Byzantium, and finally the Ottomans. From time to time, these southern Empires gained control over Crimea and thereby became masters of the Black Sea trade. In these periods, some local piracy emerged only at the edges of the Black Sea, and the southern empires had to negotiate with the northern people if the purchase of products was to proceed in peace. In two instances, we see a break in the pattern. First

72 Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire: The Structure of Power* (London: Palgrave-McMillan, 2009), 11–21.
73 Imber, 25.
74 Gábor Agoston, *The Last Muslim Conquest: The Ottoman Empire and Its Wars in Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 75.

when the Varangians arrived through the rivers from the north and challenged the supremacy of the Central Asian horse people and then when the Italian seafaring nations broke up the Eastern Roman Empire's monopoly on Black Sea trade. Both periods established new trade routes and in these periods international piracy also flourished in the Black Sea. However, the Ottomans re-established the old north-south relationship on the Black Sea again and proved to be real heirs of the Byzantines.