THE GOLDEN AGE OF GENOA'S EASTWARDS TRADE (13^{TH} – 15^{TH} CENTURIES)

Valeria Fiorani Piacentini*

Abstract:
It is remarkable how little attention has been given to a period of great significance in the evolution of Eastern–Western relationships, and their individual / intertwining history and culture. During the 12^{th} century new developments took place, which deeply affected Europe and Central Asia, influencing – without changing the traditional basic structures – the attitude of their societies. On the Eastern Quadrant we witness the rise of new potentates and dominions, and the reorganisation of the regional political asset under new balances of power and institutional forces. On the Western Quadrant, new forces came to the fore: the Italian City-States. Gradually, a stronger, well-organised asset sprang up from the ruins of the past. But its vitality stemmed from a new synthesis between different values and concepts which swept through the Mediterranean Sea, heralding the end of Byzantium and its system, and introducing a new world order with its cosmopolitan knowledge and learning and its closely intertwining cultural and mercantile interests. Despite the competition from Venice, whose policy aimed at controlling the eastern waters of the Mediterranean Sea and achieving the monopoly of Euro-Asian trade by diverting its flow through the Red Sea, Genoa had succeeded in putting into practice a pragmatic policy, which allowed the republic to build up the most extensive and impressive political-institutional and financial-commercial edifice of the time. A skilled nautical experience and technology had brought a series of innovations both in sailing and warfare that soon significantly modified the traditional picture of maritime warfare developing combat methods that would give Genoa unprecedented superiority at sea and on the seas. It was in this span of time that an important trade-route to/from the Black Sea grew up, and significant commercial relations were opened up by the peoples settled in the Central Asian spaces with Genoese quarters (a sort of little "city-states") and their advanced bases of the Black Sea.

Keywords:
Genoa, Constantinople, Cyprus, Europe, Central Asia, Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Euro-Asian trade.

Introduction:

The State Archives of Genoa[1] give a clear perception that, in the latter half of the 13^{th} century, direct trade between Genoese bases and the East

* **Chairperson, History and Institutions of the Muslim World, Faculty of Political Science, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy.**

[1] The documents I am dealing with are in the State Archives of Genoa, Milan - Sforza Fund, Venice and Rome (Italy). The missives refer to major and minor episodes. They are of notable relevance. ASMi - FS / Fondo Ducale Sforzesco, *Carteggio"Potenze Estere"*; ASVe: *Senato*, *Deliberazioni*, *Secreti*; *Senato Mar*; *Consiglio dei Dieci* et alia; ASGe: "*Notai Antichi"* (*Acta Notoria et Rogationes*) ; *Liber Gazarie* et alia ; Biblioteca Marciana, Civico Museo Correr. We had access to this correspondence and charts through the kindness of Dr. A. Corongiu, Dr. B.

was well established and was taking place on a regular base. Setting off from Genoa, Genoese galleys (*galerae*) sailed to Rhodes, Cyprus, Constantinople. Thence, imposing and well equipped ships sailed eastwards coasting the southern shores of the Black Sea to Caffa and Tana – Genoese commercial eastward outposts in the Crimean Peninsula. Caravans, frequented overland routes, crossed the southern valleys and mountains of the Taurus, cut to the north through the vastness of the steppes pushing eastwards to the rich markets of Central Asia, or crossed the steep ranges rimming to the south the Black See, and from Trebizond and Van set up for Persia. Tabrīz was the principal market of north-west Persia by reason of its strategic position along the main north-south / west-east routes from and to the Black Sea.

The Great Seljuqs' Interlude:

In the 11th and 12th centuries, the Caspian provinces had often served as a corridor for the passage of nomads from Central Asia.[2] Infiltrations from Khwārizm and Transoxiana must have began in the 9th century with the disruption of the Sāmānid power, when a powerful force, that of the Qarakhānids, streamed northwards all along Iranian territories. The fall of Gaznavids opened the way to the Seljuqs (al-'Utbī). The great cities of Khurāsān surrendered to the Seljuq brothers, Tughril Beg and Chaghrī Beg Dā'ūd, in 1037 (Merv), 1038-1039 (Herat and Nishāpūr)[3]. The lands farther west were now laid open to Seljuq attacks. On taking over

---

Baldi, Dr. M. Vignola, and Prof. Dr. M. Milanesi, who brought to our attention some significant documents and marine charts. To them goes our deep gratitude for their helpfulness here. These relevant sources are under publication within the framework of a specific project sponsored by the Centre of Research on the Southern System and the Wider Mediterranean, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milano, Italy.

2 There, the infiltration of Turkish elements had begun much earlier. According to 8th – 11th Arab historians and geographers, in the 7th-8th centuries the region was already a battlefield, where the Iranian rulers were fighting for their survival against the Arab invaders from the south-west, and Turkish groups from the north-east, the Chinese keeping a watchful eye on the events taking place in the Central Asia.

3 It was around 1025 that the first Türkmen bands are mentioned as entering Khurāsān, raiding Afghanistan, and laying waste to both countries as far as Guzgān, Tukharistān and Sistān, harassing caravan trade and depredating those rich regions (pastures, cultivated fields and cities). It lasted around seven years. The Ghaznavids alternated punitive costly expeditions with attempts at conciliation and new *pacta* with the Seljuq leaders; See V. Fiorani Piacentini, "Dandānqān (AD 1040): the Pitched Battle Which Opened the Iranian Soil to the Turkic Dominion: Negotiations and Agreements, new Balances of Power", in Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Turkic Civilization, Bishkek, October 4-6, 2004, *'Role and Place of Turkic Civilization among the World Civilizations'*, Bishkek 2005, pp. 189-224.

Khurasan, the Seljuq leaders became rulers and acted as territorial sovereigns, they were no longer chiefs of nomadic bands. The intercourses they had had with settled peoples, traders, city-rulers had taught them how to negotiate and gained knowledge of the administrative traditions, practised in settled and urban states. It implied to change model of life, acquiring political responsibilities on a wider range and different scale.[4]

Chaghrī Beg's responsibilities in the East must not be underestimated. His campaigns were harsh and hard. But he succeeded in putting up effective resistance to the pressure of the Qarākhānids (who would be definitely humbled by Malik Shāh - 455/1063-465/1072) and the Qipchaqs, turning then towards the Ghaznavids, his main concern, and their renewed westward aspirations in Sistān and Khwārizm. The Ghaznavids' ambition was countered. Between ups and downs, according to Ibn al-Athīr, Jūzjānī and the *Tārīkh-i Sistān*, Seljuq suzerainty was at last firmly established in the second half of the 11th century. The local administration of the Sistān province remained in the hands of the Saffārid Abu al-Fadl, who stood faithful to his Seljuq masters until his death in 1073, when his sons took over.

After the surrender of the "Great Cities" of Khurāsān, this province had been taken over by the combined forces of Tughril and Chaghrī (1042), who then turned to Khwārizm, defeated Malik Shāh and drove him from this province. Malik Shāh fled to Kirmān and Makrān (1040s), but he was unable to return to his former territories in the Oxus delta because they had been occupied by the Qīpčaqs.[5] The region was placed under Seljuq governorship.

Thus, in the decade between 1050 and 1060, the whole upper Oxus valley was under Seljuq control. In the course of these campaigns, the

---

4 The sultans (Tughril, Alp-Arslan and Malik Shāh) adapted themselves (to some extent) to the Islamic-Iranian "monarchical" tradition, which implied: (a) to increasingly rely on the Iranian bureaucracy and their officials, (b) to adapt themselves to the settled model of life (irrigation systems and agriculture based on irrigation systems, which meant good relationships with the landed aristocracy), (c) to come to terms with the merchant-families and provide security along the main caravan routes leading to "markets" and maritime outlets. It was a difficult process, which witnessed more than one rebellion even from the "old" members of the family. With regard to the Türkmen bands, though they could enjoy a better status than that enjoyed when they raided in the steppes, though now nominally Muslims, nevertheless their attitude was incompatible with any settled model of life and government, attracted westwards and southwards by greed and desire/prospects of plunder.

5 It would seem that Malik Shāh was captured in Makrān by Er-Tash, who, in the meantime, had been securing Sistān for the Seljuqs; Malik Shāh was handed over to Chaghrī Beg, who put him to death.

"Amīr of the Qīpčaqs" submitted to Chaghrī Beg, converted to Islam and married into Chaghrī's family.[6] To the East, the Ghaznavid empire – despite internal feuds and counterattacks – at last concluded a formal peace-treaty with Chaghrī Beg and Ibrahīm ibn Mas'ūd's long reign marked a period of prosperity and consolidation for the Ghaznavid empire, and the frontier with the Seljuqs remained essentially stable during his life.[7] By that time, Seljuqs' dominions in Central Asia had reached their "natural limes".

The vastness of these territories were united under the rule of one energetic character and his "governors", rapidly evolving into a hierarchically organised model of statehood, supported by an Iranian bureaucracy, a "multinational" army under Turkish slave commanders and tribal local contingents, a powerful Iranian mercantile class and landed owners with their "villages".

Chaghrī's rule marked the stabilisation of Central Asia and the frontiers with the Turks of the steppes and neighbouring empires. For the Great Seljuqs, trade with Central Asia and the Qīpčaq steppe remained a central goal to be pursued and steadily defended. And there is no doubt that this objective was facilitated by the long, exhausting campaigns carried out by Tughril and Chaghrī Beg and the ensuing Seljuq firm rule and order, which alternated the use of force (when needed) with understandings and matrimonial alliances.

The final blow to Seljuq power would come in the second half of the 12th century from the Khwārizm-Shāhs, a new and aggressive power that arose in the north-eastern Iranian territories. A struggle with the Ghūrids had prevented the Khwārizmians from spilling into Khurāsān. However, after Sanjār's death, they became virtually independent, subject only to the Qara-Khitai's suserainty. It was only in the last years of the 12th century that the last Seljuq sultan was vanquished, and the Khwārizm-Shāhs could advance. But the distant pressure of the Mongols was already in the air, being well perceived and felt not only all along the borders of Transoxiana and Khwārizm.

This was the panorama, as unanimously recorded by written sources, which would be destined to play a central role also on the

---

6 The main sources are still Ibn Funduq, Ibn al-Athīr and Mīrkhwānd. Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*, Ed. C. J. Tornberg, 13 vols., Leiden 1851-1876, specie Vols. 9 and 10; Ibn Funduq, *Tārīkh-i Bayhaq*, Ed. A. Bahmāniyār, Tehrān 1317 A.Hg. / 1938; Mīrkhwānd, *Rawdat al-Safā'*, Ed. Ridā Qulī Khān, 6 vols., Tehrān 1270-1274 / 1853-1856.

7 Husaynī, Ibn al-Athīr, Jūzjānī. Husaynī, Sadr al-Dīn 'Alī, *Akhbār al-Dawlah al-Saljūqiyyah*, Ed. Muhammad Iqbāl, Lahore 1933, pp. 59-61, 63 et infra; Jūzjānī, *Tabaqat-i Nāsirī*, Ed. 'Abd al-Hayy Habībī, 2 vols. Kabul 1342-1343/1963-1964, Vol. 1.

opening up of the rich markets of the region to Genoese enterprising initiative. The geo-morphological configuration of the Iranian plateau never seriously countered or hindered the passage of armies and other peoples from the steppes. The invaders were mostly nomadic/semi-nomadic communities/groups, linked to a pastoralist economy, whose peoples, flocks and herds had to live according regular cycles summer/winter from winter grounds to summer pastures, and vice versa. Thus, the terrain of Iran seemed quite well suited to their traditional style of life, the oases and rich pastures providing excellent camping for their armies and grazing grounds for their flocks. But the coastal lands of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea were unfamiliar to these bands and not suitable for any permanent settlement: the damp and malarial climate of the Caspian region, its dense vegetation and forests are mentioned by more than one Muslim geographer as "the graveyard of the people from Khurāsān".[8]

Thus, when Genoese merchants arrived to the Black Sea, they could soon sense the danger. To trip across the Caspian Sea was generally stormy and the boats unsuited. Dysentery and plague were commonplace; robbers and marauders were always in a stronger position. Hampered by these risks, they considered overland routes far more secure. Moreover, the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204 had also afforded the Sultans of Rum an opportunity to re-establish their power. Antalya and Sinope were seized, and the port of Alanya (or 'Alā'iyya, thus called after Sultan 'Alā' al-Dīn Kay-Qubādh I) was constructed. Because of this well established control of the coasts, by the start of the 13th century Genoa firmly oriented its policy to north-eastern transit-routes either coasting the Black Sea or crossing the Anatolian plateau to Tabrīz, and thence pushing eastwards through the Khurāsān.

Despite the competition from Venice, whose policy aimed at controlling the eastern waters of the Mediterranean Sea and achieving the monopoly of Euro-Asian trade by diverting its flow through the Red Sea, Genoa had succeeded in putting into practice a pragmatic policy, which allowed the republic to build up the most extensive and impressive political-institutional and financial-commercial edifice of the time. A skilled nautical experience and technology had brought a series of innovations both in sailing and warfare, which soon significantly

[8] Tha'ālibī, *Latā'if al-Ma'ārif*, p. 113. See also the *Hudūd al-'Ālam* by Anonymous writer, Ed. V. Minorsky and W.W. Barthold, E.G.W. Gibb Memorial Series, Oxford University Press, Luzac and Co. publs., London, 1937, specie pp. 94-101, 131-137; Al-Muqaddasī, *Ahsan al-Taqāsīm fī Ma'rīfat al-Aqālīm*, Ed. M. J. de Goeje, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, Leiden, 1906, pp. 353-373 et infra. The latter, in particular, provides valuable information.

modified the traditional picture of maritime warfare developing combat methods that would give Genoa unprecedented superiority on the seas.

During this period an important trade-route to/from the Black Sea grew up, and significant commercial relations were opened up by the Turkic people settled in the Central Asian spaces with Genoese quarters (a sort of little "city-states") and their advanced bases of the Black Sea. There, in these quarters, the Genoese behaved as independent condottieri and shrewd merchants retaining freedom of action, sovereigns on distant provinces crucial to the state of affairs of their motherland, with which they maintained regular contact. They soon learned to negotiate with the rulers of other settled states, with tribal elements and still unsettled, nomadic/semi-nomadic princes. They gained knowledge of the administrative, traditional techniques practised in those remote lands. They acquired a new ability and political responsibility, adapting themselves in some measure to the local practices and to the Iranian-Islamic settled models of sovereignty, authority and power still very strong in some Central Asian regions. Thence, with their naval superiority and political strength secured, they could push eastwards through the lands of the steppes where these merge into the "lands of the Tatars" and China, or southwards to Tabrīz. From Tabrīz, they could push to the very heart of the Iranian plateau (Lār and the Lāristān up to Harmuz as far south as the Gulf itself), or to the east, as far as Nīshāpur, Herat, Merv, Bukhārā and Samarqand – the "pearls" of the Silk Route.[9]

By the start of the 13th century, Ibn al-Athīr records that the sense of security and prevailing justice at the time were such that people dared openly to display their wealth.[10] By the same time, the Genoese had established a solid trade network.

---

9 M. Balard, *La Romanie génoise(XII – debut du XV siècle)*, 2 vols., Paris 1980; *Idem*, *Génois et Pisans en Orient (fin du XIII-debut du XIV siècle)*, in "Genova, Pisa e il Mediterraneo tra Due e Trecento. Per il VII centenario della battaglia della Meloria", pp. 179-211. See also G. Costamagna, *Cartolari notarili genovesi (1-149)*, *Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato*, Vols. 1-2, Roma, 1961 (this inventory has allowed the compilation of a list of Genoese notaries who wrote their acts outside Genoa, in the "eastern colonies", such as Famagosta, Soldaia di Crimea, Savasto, Laiazzo d'Armenia, Pera, Tiro, Tarso). Cfr. also A. L. Lewis, *Nomads and Crusaders*, specie pp. 170 ff. Toqta Khān (1291-1312) was a ruler of the Golden Horde, successor to Töle-Buqa (1287-1291). Before his accession, he had launched two large-scale raids across the Caucasus against the Īl-Khānids' Iranian territories: cfr. in this respect Barhebraeus, *The Chronography of Gregory Abû'l Faraj*, 2. vols., tr. and Ed. E. A. W. Budge, London, 1932.

10 Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh*, Ed. C. J. Törnberg, 13 vols., Leiden 1851-1876, vol. X, pp. 30 et infra.

The Mongol Period; Not for Trafficking Alone:

The 14th century was also a period of great expansion of knowledge in artistic, scientific, and geographical spheres. Nature had placed human beings upon a stage to be actors, not mere spectators, where they could learn to know and contact new worlds, where Mongols and Turks were not as "barbarous" as travellers and historians had formerly depicted them. Then, let us complement the records from the National Archive of Genoa with other sources (such as chronicles in Arabic and in Persian, commercial codes of the time, geography, numismatics, etc.), and we have a vivid, realistic fresco of the extent of Genoa's cultural interactions and economic and commercial business.

Special mention deserves Rashīd al-Dīn Fadl Allāh of Hamadān – eminent historian, rich merchant and celebrated politician of the 13th century and his "Correspondence" (the *Mukātabāt-i Rashīdī*). We get vivid glimpses of Tabrīz, its lifestyle, its role as one of the main junction-cities of the time, its grandeur characterised by monumental architecture, private and public buildings such as imposing religious and ceremonial edifices, a city provided with civic amenities as baths, gardens, orchards and market-places, centre of arts and culture, and, above all, its bazaar always replenished with all sorts of merchandise from the East and the West, it's beautiful storehouses and caravanserais, and the lucrative traffics heading there. Rashīd al-Dīn revealed great talent and won respect as administrator who built his own quarters, in Tabrīz and Hamādān, (*Rub'-i Rashīdī*) with houses and palaces, gardens and baths, libraries, hospitals, religious bodies and institutions, caravanserais, storehouses, mills, bazaars, shops and workshops where one could meet craftsmen, artisans, men of learning, excellent calligraphers from every town and country in the world.[11] He was also a great patron of arts, letters and sciences. Retaining his office until Abū Sa'īd's reign (1316-1335), his commitment did not, however, save him from court intrigues, acrimonious disputes, suspicion and jealousy. Discredited by his enemies, he was accused of having poisoned the Īl-Khān's father, Öljeytü, and alleged to have personally administered the poison. On July 17th, 1318, being then over seventy years of age, he was put to death.

---

[11] Rashīd al-Dīn, Fadl Allāh of Hamādān, *Mukātabāt-i Rashīdī*, Ed. Muhammad Shafi', Lahore, 1947, specie letter n. 51. In a letter to his son Sa'ad al-Dīn, governor of Qinnasrīn, he describes the completion of the *Rub'-i Rashīdī* at Tabrīz, and the magnificence of the city with its 24 caravanserais, 1,500 shops and 30,000 houses, with its gardens, baths, stores, workshops and mint, its workmen and artisans brought there from every town and country, its 6,000-7,000 students, its 50 physicians from India, China, Egypt and Syria, each of whom was bound to give instructions to ten pupils, the hospital with its oculists, surgeons and bone-setters, to each of whom were assigned as pupils five of the writer's servants.

But Tabrīz was also one of the main Genoese quarters and route-junctions to the East. The first Genoese merchants had settled in Tabrīz in 1280, -an active community that would reach the apex of its prosperity at the start of the 14th century. Therefore, no wonder that we have a vivid picture of this bazaar in the *Cartolari notarili genovesi*, which will complement the "international" image given by Rashīd al-Dīn.[12]

Rashīd al-Dīn invested his enormous fortune in trading enterprises and journeys, to learn, to improve his scientific knowledge and his capacity as administrator and statesman, in his writings he records interviews with the most famous scientists of his times. During an interview with the famous scientist Qutb al-Dīn Shīrāzī in the Vān area, during the late summer 1290, the latter showed him a map of the Mediterranean coast. He also refers about embassies and envoys despatched to European rulers (Pope Honorius IV[13], Pope Nicholas IV, Edward I of England, Philippe le Bel of France).[14]

His numerous works, written in a comparatively simple style, deserve special attention for the extensive field of interests they cover, and the originality and conception of history. Rashīd al-Dīn, himself a bureaucrat from the middle class and firm supporter of the centralised policies of the Īl-Khāns, had at his disposal all the state archives and the services of those who were most learned in history. In his great chronicle, the *Jāmi'al-Tawārīkh* ("Compendium of Histories"), he provides us with a wealth of information on personalities, facts and events of the Mongols' era, drawing on Chinese sources (written and oral), Turkish accounts, Persian, Mongol, Arabian and European materials, lingering on the social and economic matters of the Mongol rulers, their cosmopolitan attitudes, their connections with such differing cultures as those of Christian Europe on the one hand, and Turkic

---

12 See for example G. Costamagna, *Cartolari notarili genovesi 1-149*, in "Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato", Vol. 1.2, Roma, 1961, and V. Polonio, *Notai genovesi in oltremare. Atti rogati a Cipro da Lamberto di Sambuceto (2 luglio 1300 – 3 agosto 1301)*, Genova, 1982, pp. 479-480, "cloths of *tela Alemanna* to be traded in Tabrīz (*Taurisium*)".

13 A Latin version of the letter sent by the Īl-Khān Arghun to Pope Honorius IV in 1285 is preserved in the Vatican Archives. Cfr. A. Mostaert and F.W. Cleaves, Trois documents Mongols des Archives secretes vaticanes, in "*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*", Vol. XVII, 1954, pp.3-4. On this issue there is an extensive literature. I. de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans*, London, 1971; D. Bigalli, *I Tartari e l'Apocalisse. Ricerche sull'escatologia in Adamo Marsh e Ruggero Bacone*, Firenze, 1971; J. Richard, *La Papauté et les Missions d'Orient au Moyen Age (XIIIe-XVe siècles)*, École Française de Rome, Paris – Torino 1977; Cl. Cahen, *Orient et Occident au temps des Croisades*, Aubier, Paris, 1983.

14 A. Mostaert and F. W. Cleaves, *Les Lettres de 1289 et 1305 des ilkhan Aryun and Öljeytü à Philippe le Bel*, Cambridge – Mass, 1962, pp. 56-57.

peoples living in the Central Asian vastness, China, India and the Far East on the other.[15]

No less remarkable are other works by Rashīd al-Dīn, amongst which particular attention should be given to a collection of letters, the above mentioned *Mukātabāt-i Rashīdī*, 53 dispatches and letters mostly on political and financial matters, addressed to his sons and others who held various offices under the Mongol government.[16] These letters – whose authenticity has been confirmed by scholars – are of extraordinary interest not only on account of the light they cast on the character and manifold activities of this personality and the range of his activities, but for the world they depict and illustrate, with its mobility, curiosity, knowledge and learning: a frantic, cosmopolitan, globalised world. They are a real mine of information, which, once again, perfectly matches and complements Genoese archival records on this period.

Despite warfare, intrigues and internal struggles for power, the Īl-Khānid period was a prosperous one, which witnessed a reconciliatory process between the Mongol-Turkish ruling class and the Persian subjects. It also witnessed European emissaries and ambassadors, responsible for relations with the Turkish and Turkish-Mongol world and its culture. The Īl-Khānid capitals of Tabrīz and Marāgheh became great centres of learning, with the natural sciences and historical studies particularly favoured, within a fresh intellectual, commercial and artistic atmosphere.

The Italian City-States were the first European potentates to engage directly in this trade, and to go to the roots of these civilisations and to deal with their peoples and rulers. During the decades of the "Mongol period", there was considerable hostility and rivalry between Genoa, Venice and the Aragonese, which often took the form of naval engagements. But none of them was able to eliminate the others from any particular trading area. Conversely, by the 14th century a curious pattern developed. Within this pattern, Genoa was predominant in trading goods, like "mastic" (*luban*), silks, precious stones, horses, furs, which the republic was in use to sell to all Europe. Genoa's "Notarii" were also renowned for their competence and skill, so that even the Arabs were in the habit to request their services.[17] Undoubtedly, the Īl-

---

15 Rashīd al-Dīn, Fadl Allāh of Hamādān,, *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, Ed. A A. Alizade, Baku, 1957.

16 Rashīd al-Dīn, Fadl Allāh of Hamādān, *Mukātabāt-i Rashīdī*; Cfr. also E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 4 vols., Vol. III, Cambridge, 1956, pp. 80-86.

17 These documents even tell us of Arabian presence in Caffa through the mention of a certain "Assanus Sirianus burgensis Caffe" who settled there and possibly owned a house. In particular, see Iacobo de Guisulfo from Camal Tacmagi, June 14th, 1289, "Notai Antichi" 124/ II, c.75r-v.

Khānid period marks a magic moment for Genoa. Pera, Caffa and Tana along the Black Sea were amongst its main colonies, as many little "Genoas" in their architectural and institutional organisation. Wealthy Genoese communities were also settled and prospered at Sinope and Trebizond. By that time, Tabrīz hosted a "Genoese Quarter", a major market of its time and a central route-junction of this prosperous trade.

Details of the commercial structure of Trebizond (Trabzon - *Trapezundae*) and Tabrīz (*Taurisium*) as the main starting points of Genoese eastwards expeditions across Iranian and Turkic controlled territories go back to the "Treaty of the Ninfeo" (1261) signed between Genoa and the Emperor of Byzantium, Michael III Palaeologus.[18]

The *Regesta* and the *Acta Notoria* (*Notai Antichi – Notai Ignoti*) studied by Dr. Marco Vignola provide a wealth of information where goods are concerned and capitals are moved (payments, remittances, quantities of pure silver sent eastward, etc.).[19] In the *Acta Notoria et Rogationes* we can also find a long list of *notarii*, well known and reputed for their talent, who acted in eastern bases: Lambertus de Sambuceto, Dominicus de Oddonis de Quarto, Donatus de Clavaro, Laurencius Calvi, Iohannes scriba, Fredericus de Platealonga, Bartolomeo de Fornari, Corrado di Castello, Petrus de Bargono, Manuel Locus, Johannes de Rocha, Benvenutus de Bracellis and many other. This documentary evidence gives further knowledge of the strong, articulated mercantile contacts that Genoa held with the Eastern world through Damascus, Aleppo and Alexandria of Egypt (15th century AD), and the durable mercantile contacts between Genoese colonies along the Black Sea region and Tabrīz.

The *Liber Gazarie* – a register of rules and regulations issued by the *Officium Gazarie* (which office, based in Genoa, supervised any commercial activity) – is the main source in this respect. Obviously, the markets where such goods could be found, and bought, are kept secret. Nevertheless, these registers give a precise picture and excellent

---

[18] Details of the commercial structure of Trebizond (*Trapezundae*) and Tabrīz (*Taurisium*) can be found in the pages of the *Liber Gazarie*, which contains a list of regulations imposed on Genoese merchants trading in that region: the golden age of Genoa eastwards trade. See also the archival records at the State Archive of Genoa, in particular the folders "Notai Antichi".

[19] With regard to this subject, of special relevance are the *Acta Notoria* drawn up by the notary Lamberto di Sambuceto, and the *Collana Notai Liguri dei secoli XII-XV*, still preserved in the National Archive of Genoa: NA 124/II, cc. 70 r-v, 75 r-v, 86 r, 88 r, 125 v; NA 125, c. CCXXI r-v.; *Antico Comune* – sec. XI-1528; *Galearum marinariorum rationes*; *Notai Antichi; Liber Gazarie*; *Banco di San Giorgio*; the private collection of manuscripts and documents referring to Genoa's financial affairs and business: *Documents of the Maona of Chio*; etc.

information on the expansion of Genoese mercantile economy. At the same time, they become precious indicators of the wide range of affairs of Genoese merchants, their main markets, intermediaries and sources. Within this general panorama, the Eastern world and Central Asian markets appear as Genoa's main commercial partners.

Trebizond and Tabrīz stand out as two of the most relevant intermediaries of the time and prospered as great trade centres and main route-junctions throughout most of this period. Byzantium continued to flourish as the centre par excellence (the "metropolis") of Hellenism and Christendom, enjoying a vigorous intellectual life; bulky administrative structure, it was front line and "buffer" between East and West, crucial trade centre and communication crossroads. Genoa had full control over markets of Trebizond and Tabrīz, and the main caravan route connecting them was "the outpost" of Genoa towards Central Asia, the Gulf and all Genoese intercourses with the Iranian/Arabian world and the lands of the Gulf on the one hand, and with the Turko-Mongol courts and their dominions on the other.

Despite the breakdown of the Īl-Khānid empire (second half of the 14th century) and new waves of invasions from the north-eastern steppes, which laid waste in the region, the Genoese Government reacted and – by negotiations and signing truces – maintained and consolidated its positions. Giorgio Stella does not fail to report about Al-Ashraf's Ambassadors to Genoa (Giorgio Stella's *Annales*). At Genoa, the Genoese merchants elected a *Consul* as their representative to the Eastern "colonies", supported by a Council of 24 (sometimes 25) Genoese personalities. At Tabrīz, this cluster of far-travelling merchants had a quarter of their own, with a local Council of at least 12 members, one notary, houses, storehouses, and caravans always ready to start their way towards the rich markets attended by these businessmen.[20]

Although the markets were kept secret, the variety of goods and craft-products mentioned in the *Acta Notoria* reflect a network of inter-regional trade and/or exchange well established between the Genoese communities and regional markets. In this respect, Genoese sources well match and integrate Oriental sources in Persian and Arabic, providing precious side-views on Central Asia and its world and culture.

This reality is wonderfully mirrored in contemporary chronicles, which linger at length on internal struggles and fierce rivalries between

[20] The most precious source shedding some light on Genoese presence in Tabrīz is the so-called "Liber Gazarie", which contains information related to the regulations imposed on any Genoese merchant who settled in Trebizond and Tabrīz. This document is preserved in the State Archive of Genoa ("Manoscritti Membranacei", III, cc. 31 r – 32 r).

various groups and family members, the growing pressures of new invaders and incursions from nomadic peoples, the continual attacks along the borders with the steppes, the various waves of conquest sweeping the region up to the emerging power of the Tīmūrids. Despite internal feuds, banditry, robbery and a hostile environment – the image of Tabrīz as a flourishing city, and of Trebizond and the other Genoese advanced bases along the Black Sea as prosperous colonies and regional markets, show a fully developed and urbanised society, which was based on agriculture and trade under the military umbrella of Turkish armies.

Once again, contemporary literary sources in Persian and Arabic and Genoese archival records unanimously mirror a lively picture of the busy world of the time. Eastwards, the lands of the Turks stretch. There, horses, silks, furs, precious semi/precious stones, "girfalchi", "giovinetti" and "giovinette", ornamental small objects (like fibulae, bracelets, cameos, mirrors, little chests for jewels …) could be found and bought. They are minutely listed in the *Acta Notoria*, Arab geography does not fail to register these items as the main products of the "peoples" of the steppes. Only a few decades later, the same are recorded in the *Sforza Fund* (Milan, State Archives), as much wanted by the local court.

The Tīmūrid Upheaval:

The Tīmūrid upheaval did not spare the Black Sea and Tabrīz, too for which contemporary sources are confusing and often appear to be contradictory. Apart from court historiography – I refer in particular to the two "Book of the Victory" or *Zafar-nāmah*, respectively the chronicles of Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī and Nizām al-Dīn Shamī – interesting information may be gleaned from 'Abd al-Razzāq Samarqandī (15th century), Hāfiz-i Abrū, Mīr Khwānd and the *Fārs-nāmah-i Nāsirī*.[21] However, in certain respects, the greatest historical

[21] Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī, *Zafar-nāmah*, Ed. Muhammad 'Abbasī, 2 vols., Tehrān 1336 AH sh./1958-1959 AD; Nizām al-Dīn Shāmī, *Zafar-nāmah* , Ed. Felix Tauer, Prague 1937; Hāfiz-i Abrū, Shihāb al-Dīn, *Zubdat al-Tawārīkh*, Ed. Khān Bābā Bayānī, 2nd Ed. Tehrān, 1971 (of this author's life not much has been recorded. Born in Herat, he was educated in Hamadān. His proper name is generally assumed to have been *Khājji* Nūr al-Dīn Lutfullāh. Tīmūr showed him marked favour; after Tīmūr's death, Hāfiz-i Abrū attached himself to the court of his son and successor, Shāh-rukh, and his grandson, Prince Bāysunqur, for whom he wrote his great history, concluded in 829 or 830 AG / 1426 or 1427 AD. Hāfiz-i Abrū accompanied Tīmūr in several of his campaigns and was with him at the taking of Aleppo and Damascus. Beside his history, Hāfiz-i Abrū also compiled a great geographical work. The author's style is simple and direct, very detailed is the part dealing with events of that period. Free use of his work has been made by the younger contemporary, 'Abd al-Razzāq of Samarqand). Mīr Khwānd, Muhammad Ibn Khwāndshāh Ibn Mahmūd (m. 1498), *Rawdat al-Safā' fī Sīrat al-Auliyā wa al-*

contributions with specific regard to our subject are still provided by Nīmdihī, Ja'farī and Natanzī.[22] At this point, one precious European work also comes to our aid, the "Travel-journal" of the Spanish Ambassador to Tīmūr, Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo (referring to the years 1403-1406). The latter presents interesting pictures of the world and life of the time, providing a faithful description of the Tīmūrid administration, and invaluable details regarding the evolution and development of the institutional structure of the Tīmūrid empire.[23] One last but no less precious source is the famous *Shāh-nāmah* – a work in prose and verse – composed by one of the most glorious and unusual princes of Harmuz, Fakr al-Dīn Tūrānshāh II, patron of the arts and poet himself, who reigned approximately from the 1436 to the 1470-1471. Although his original version is sadly lost to us, we know the contents thanks to Pedro Teixeira and his *Relaciones.*[24]

Mulūk wa al-Khulafā', lithografed Ed. 10 vols., Tehran 1960 (of Mīr Khwānd's life very little is recorded. His father was a native of Bukhārā, who migrated to Balkh. Mīr Khwānd spent most of his life at Herat under the protection and patronage of the *mecenate* of the moment, Mīr 'Alī Shīr Navā'ī. His monumental history is divided in seven books, of which the fifth covers the Mongols and the Tartars down to Tīmūr, and only the sixth refers to Tīmūr and his successors (873/1468-9), whilst the seventh – continued by another hand – deals with a much later period. Beyond the florid and verbose style, the three last books, since they deal with author's period, are of historical worth and authority); Samarqandī, Kamāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Matla'u al-Sa'dayn*; *Khājji* Mīrzā Hasan, *Fārs-nāmah-i Nāsirī*, lithografed Ed., Tehrān 1313 / 1895-6. Cfr. Also, "The Timurid and Safavid Periods", *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. VI; P. Jackson and L. Lockhart Eds., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge – London – New York - New Rochelle – Melbourne – Sidney, 1986, specie H.R. Roemer, *Timur in Iran* vi, pp. 42-97.

22 Natanzī, Mu'īn al-Dīn, *Muntakhabāt al-Tawārīkh-i Mu'īnī*, partial Ed. J. Aubin, *Extraits du Muntakhab al-Tawārīkh-i Mu'īnī*, Tehrān 1957; Jafarī, Ja'far Ibn Muhammad Husaynī, *Tārīkh-i Ja'farī*, Ed. V.V. Barthold from a Leningrad ms., in "Zapiski Inst. Vost. Akad. Nauk S.S.S.R"., 5 (1935), pp. 5-42 – see also E. Hinz Ed., *Harmuz*, in "Quellenstudien zur Geschichte der Timuriden" – "Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft", 90, pp. 373 on*;* Nīmdihī, 'Abd al-Karīm, *Tabaqat-i Mahmūdshāhiyyah*, Ed. e comm. J. Aubin, in « Revue des Etudes Islamiques », 34 (1966).

23 Ruy Gozales de Clavijo, *Embajada al Gran Tamorlan*. Few notices of this embassy occur in the Persian historians, a brief mention is made in Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī's *Zafar-nāmah*, pp. 598, 633.

24 Pedro Teixeira, *Relaciones de Pedro Teixeira d'el origen, descendencia y succession de los Reyes de Persia, y de Harmuz, y de un viage hecho por el mismo autor desde la India oriental hasta Italia por tierra*, Hakluyt Society Publ., London 1902, repr. and En. tr. W. Sinclair and D. Ferguson, *The Travels of Pedro Teixeira, with the "Kings of Harmuz" and extracts from his "Kings of Persia*", Hakluyt Society Publ., 2nd series, n.9. Teixeira's book was first published at Antwerp in 1610. In the Sinclair-Ferguson edition we have also a second summary of a "Shāh-nāmah" by Tūrānshāh, which is probably the work of Gaspar da Cruz, a Dominican

Scholars today unanimously agree that the conquering campaigns of Tīmūr were, in a certain sense, different from a merely disorganised series of invasions followed by pillage, horrifying massacres and devastation of entire countries (they were sadly known for the pyramids of severed heads which Tīmūr raised and left in his wake as a fearsome sign of his power).[25] Undoubtedly, they marked a halt, involution and ruin for more than one country (including Mesopotamia and Syria). Once flourishing cities were reduced to rubble, their populations' decimated and traditional activity in tatters (Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus…). Routes once frequented by caravans and travellers were closed for ever, the caravanserais destroyed, wells and cisterns dried up. However, apart from these undeniable atrocities, historians today see Tamerlane's action as forming a precise intent which went against neither politics nor economics: that of re-drawing the geopolitical map of his time on the basis of "his" reign, the very heart of "his" empire: Inner Asia, with its marvellous capital cities Bukhārā, Samarqand and Herat. Inner Asia had never known such a fame, such a glory and prosperity, such literary and artistic splendour, scientific vitality or economic wealth and power.

In this light, the systematic destruction of those cities which could threaten or compete with the Central Asian jewels may be explained to a certain extent, as may the more or less forced deportation of entire populations, of artists, craftsmen, scientists and writers, and the systematic closure of old transit routes which could have diverted mercantile traffic from Tīmūrid Inner Asia. Not to mention the devastation of the caravanserais and the activation of new "imperial" routes, this converged on the new political and economic centre of the empire. In this context, there is also an explanation for the closing of the "roads of the north" and the re-opening of the "southern caravan routes": a policy aimed at further elevating the heart of this new dominion towards which immense quantities of booty and riches of all kinds flowed unceasingly, together with artists, scientists, writers, merchandise and precious goods from all over the world.

Thus the nerve-centre of Euro-Asian commerce shifted from Baghdad to Central Asia without traffic being virtually interrupted. Instead, the commercial network created by Tīmūr could depend on an

---

monk who stayed for three years at Harmuz on his way back from China around the year 1565: see C.R. Boxer Ed., *South China in the sixteenth century, being the narratives of Galeote Pereira*, Fr. Gaspar da Cruz O.P., Fr. Martin de Rada O.E.S.A. (1550-1575), Hakluyt Society Publ., 2nd series, n. 106, London, 1956, specie pp. 228-239: "Relation of the Chronicle of the Kings of Ormuz".

[25] See on the subject J. Aubin, "Comment Tamerlan prenait les villes", *Studia Islamica*, Vol. XIX ,1963, pp. 83-122.

exceptional organisation which gave further impetus to the movement of goods, even though they travelled along new routes. Severe instructions were issued to the effect that all foreigners travelling to or through Tīmūrid territories were to be treated with respect, themselves and their goods going unmolested. To this goal, a special police force was even created – the famous *qarāsūrān* – which had the task of accompanying and protecting all travellers. According to his biographers, Tīmūr was equally effective in building new and well-kept roads and constructing – or re-building – bridges, viaducts, caravanserais, wells and cisterns. An efficient and rapid postal-service was even introduced. The revival of certain urban centres – along the routes radiating out from the heart of the Tīmūrid empire – was also undertaken, which brought to a revival of arts and craftwork.

Tabrīz did not escape the devastation suffered by many other centres.[26] It was sacked twice, underwent wreckage, pillaging, massacres, but retained its beauty and economic power. According to some disquieting reports by Genoese officials, the Genoese Quarter and its storehouses were not spared the sad fate of a conquered city: they were devastated, pillaged, and the Genoese officials massacred. Despite the horror and the severe human and financial loss, the Council at Genoa deliberated not to indulge in impossible revenges or abandon this base of definitely primary importance as head-bridge towards the Turkic world and its wonders. A policy between "wait and see" and "tiresome, endless negotiations" was also deliberated. And soon, Genoa won its award.

All in all, the image of this pre-Ottoman world is alluring. Its cultural/mercantile dimension comes to the fore. Little space is left to military action and campaigns. Losses are registered; the conquest of new markets with all their magnificence is enhanced.

The Tīmūrid rulers and their "allies" could provide a new military order over the conquered regions. Under their military umbrella, transactions could still – if not better – take place. Genoese officers and officials were well trained to face new realities and dial with new comers. It was a challenge, and the *Concilio* (the Council) of the Republic decided to face it. The new Tīmūrid geopolitical and geo-economic framework (i.e. the tax-system and other administrative dues) gave renewed impulse to the city of Tabrīz and gravitating on territories.

It was in these years that Tabrīz rose to the role of main route-junction of the empire, the most striking feature being the continuity of its cultural development. "Not for trafficking alone": fine arts flourished again, the main palace and mosque "were so well built" that a

[26] Yazdī, Sharaf al-Dīn ʻAlī, *Zafar-Nāmah-i Yazd*, Vol. 2, pp. 266 on.

contemporary Venetian merchant regarded them as "outstandingly beautiful". Thus, this city enjoyed unprecedented significance and centrality, becoming the arrival and meeting point of travellers, merchants, caravans – and goods – from Anatolia, central-eastern Europe and the Mediterranean to the Turkic world. Thence, a network of caravan routes linked Tabrīz with – to the east – the Inner and Central Asian regions, to the south-west with Baghdad and Aleppo to the west, with Alexandria of Egypt to the south-west, with Shīrāz and Isfahān to the south-east and, still further, with Harmuz.

The minute inventory of goods listed in the Genoese *Acta Notoria* represents a significant pointer to the spirit and reality of Tīmūrid dominion. Harmuz duly paid its *rasm-i shihanjī*, *dārūghagāna* and *muqarrarī* dues to the Tīmūrid governors of the various cities and districts on the Iranian landmass, as well as other levies to Türkmen local rulers, tolled along the land routes.[27] Accordingly, the Genoese Quarter in Tabrīz and its merchants regularly paid without reservation their *tamghā* and the various taxes *de jure* and de facto exacted on a regular basis. Both enjoyed an unprecedented de facto prosperity.

By the second half of the century, the flow of trade still persisted and flourished. Ceramics and textiles were produced in Persia. Golden fabrics, vests of cloth, cloths of gold and silver, velvets, silks, pearls, diamonds and rubies could also be bought. The latter – the famous *yāqūts* – were highly in demand on European markets for their special colour, the "star rubies" and rubies from Badakhshān were also particularly valued. Carnelians, lapis-lazuli and turquoise, emeralds and sapphires from the lands of the Turks were increasingly fashionable as personal ornaments or to adorn little precious objects. Central Asian horses and furs were the special symbols of the European courts' regal power.

Under the military and financial order of Tīmūrid and Türkmen princes and governors, caravans, merchants and precious goods passed along the routes to/from Tana and Caffa. Genoese *notarii* based at Trebizond and Tabrīz regularly registered transactions.

[27] See B. Fragner, "Social and Internal Economic Affairs", *The Cambridge History of Iran – The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, pp. 491-567. See also, Part IV.