CONTENTS

Introduction

AS THE thirteenth century dawned in Europe, it was dogged by age-old unresolved conflicts and the emergence of entirely new political configurations. Alongside the enduring conflict between Christianity and Islam, and the power struggles between the papacy and the empire, regional hostilities between cities and communes intensified. Yet, beyond politics, it was the evolution of the economy—particularly the expansion of trade—that opened new horizons, especially for those who had invested heavily in the growth and defense of trade-related sectors.

With the creation of the *Stato da Màr* (Domain of the Sea), Venice, often referred to as the Serenissima, began to shift its focus toward the eastern Mediterranean as early as the thirteenth century, making this region the core of its political and economic ascent. In the wake of the Fourth Crusade (1204), Venice subjugated key territories such as Candia (Crete), Corfù, Modon (Methoni), and other islands, quickly solidifying its dominance in the Aegean. While Christian Europe remained united in its opposition to Islam, internal divisions continued to fracture the continent. The most profound changes of the century, however, were rooted in distant Asia, where new political and economic spaces emerged, enabling increased commercial activity and facilitating the acquisition of new knowledge.

The Mongol conquests, which began in the first half of the thirteenth century, ushered in new political powers ruling Asia, much of the Islamic world, and the eastern fringes of Christian Europe. These shifts radically transformed political relations and, along with them, the commercial landscape. Venetian merchants faced not only an economic and commercial revolution, but also geographical, material, and cultural upheaval. This new reality required them to adapt, testing their entrepreneurial spirit and courage. Of course, this new world also bristled with opportunities tied to a grand vision:

the integration of all trade routes, from the Mediterranean to China, in a single interconnected system, fostered and supported by innovations within the Mongol Empire.

While the full potential of this global trading revolution was only partially realized in select regions, the endeavor nonetheless involved a wide array of participants—states, individual merchants, and cultures across Eurasia. From China to India, Persia to Russia, merchants of various backgrounds—Christians and Jews, Greeks and Armenians, Muslims, Italians, and Tatars—traveled side by side along these new routes. Although we might interpret this period as one of missed opportunities, not only commercially but also politically, such an interpretation would be simplistic. Diplomatic overtures between the Mongols and European rulers, for instance, often failed to produce lasting alliances, but this should not overshadow the achievements of the era.

Venice was a central protagonist in the Mongol ambition to reinvent the world through commerce. While the Mongols provided the infrastructure, the Venetians contributed their knowledge, passion, and financial resources. Alongside their Genoese counterparts, Venetian merchants were instrumental in their wise guidance of fostering and managing these unprecedented relations with the emerging Mongol power. They skillfully employed new tools and strategies to pursue a shared goal, becoming key figures in this transformative chapter of global trade.

While Genoa and Venice were the leading rivals and key players in the European commercial expansion into Asia, their contributions, though intertwined, differed in scope and influence. These differences stemmed from internal factors unique to each city, as well as from diverging positions and objectives in international politics—although their aims were not always directly opposed. Despite their long-standing hostility, the ebb and flow of their influence in the Black Sea, as well as their attempts to expand beyond its borders, were sometimes shaped by political dynamics and historical events unrelated to their rivalry. Therefore, although Venice's relationship with Genoa is an essential part of its history, the true foundation of Venice's presence in the Black Sea lies in its interactions with the Mongols. Even when filtered through other interests and intermediaries, Venice's relationship with the Mongols was its raison d'être for its presence on the Black Sea.

If Venice (like Genoa) had not maintained its foothold on the Pontic coasts, the collapse of the Mongol Empire would likely have spelled the end for its settlements. These outposts would have been severed from international

routes and left vulnerable to political turmoil, rendering trade unfeasible. Instead, both Tana, Venice's principal base on the Black Sea, and Caffa, the capital of the Genoese colonial network, managed to endure as vital commercial hubs for decades. Their continued existence attracted investments that would have been unlikely had there been a complete political and economic collapse. Thus, the end of the *pax mongolica* did not mark the demise of Venetian relations with the Mongol and Tatar lords, who vied for the remnants of the Golden Horde. While there was indeed a political retrenchment and a decline in trade, the foundations established during earlier periods proved resilient, and these Venetian and Genoese outposts were only uprooted with the Ottoman conquest of Crimea.

What we refer to as "the plan" is key to understanding the historical role of the Mongol Empire—a role centered on creation and construction, which contrasts sharply with the image of the Mongols as a purely destructive force during their initial invasions. While the devastation caused by their early conquests is undeniable, the simplistic portrayal of the Mongols as an unstoppable and brutal human avalanche that shaped the conquest of Rus', China, eastern Europe, and the Islamic world has been increasingly challenged by historians over the past three decades. This newer perspective emphasizes the Mongols not just as conquerors, but as rulers who facilitated cultural exchanges and drove social and economic transformations across the territories they controlled. Although their arrival was not always welcomed, most regions saw the establishment of new forms of accommodation and mediation. This process often included the Mongols' own religious and cultural conversions, as well as the incorporation of local elites into their administrative and governmental systems. This shift from conquerors to rulers required significant effort and intelligence, and it is reflected in the widespread admiration and respect for the Mongol khans found in European accounts—from the writings of Franciscan Giovanni di Pian del Carpine to the chronicles of Marco Polo and beyond.

The relationship between Venice and the new Eurasian power developed during a mature phase of Mongol governance across various parts of the empire. By this time, the initial shock and apocalyptic fears that had accompanied the Mongols' early conquests were long past. Rather, this relationship was the fruit of positive efforts by European powers to establish diplomatic, mutually beneficial ties, often driven by political calculations. Many diplomatic missions aimed to enlist Mongol military support against Islamic forces, though these attempts ultimately failed. One key reason was the growing internal

divisions within the Mongol political world, which would later become insurmountable. Nevertheless, the Mongol rulers shared a common interest in promoting trade, providing merchants with favorable conditions that helped them to navigate political barriers. Commerce was not just encouraged—it was essential, as it constituted a major source of fiscal revenue for Mongol governments.

As mentioned earlier, contemporary historians have re-evaluated the active role of the Mongols in facilitating the exchange and movements of people, goods, and ideas within their vast empire. These studies, which we will explore in greater detail later, suggest that "the plan" inherent to the Mongols' approach to commercial transformation was far more complex than a mere well-meaning or accommodating attitude. Rather, it was a carefully designed and far-sighted strategy with multiple layers. Within this framework, we can identify at least four different levels: logistics, finance, production, and legal structure.

Logistical support for merchants was provided by the extensive network of postal stations established across the empire, a system already in place during the initial conquests. Merchants who held special *laissez-passers* were granted access to these support structures, allowing them to travel efficiently. They also found market cities that offered hospitality services tailored to meet their specific needs. Additionally, local governments, acting under the authority of the central Mongol leadership, ensured general safety by removing the threat of bandits and marauders from trade routes.

From a financial perspective, the large-scale introduction of paper money in China (and the attempt to extend this innovation to Persia) as a universally accepted means of exchange, guaranteed by political authority, was nothing short of revolutionary. Had this system been successfully implemented across the entire Mongol Empire, it would likely have had a seismic impact on the global economy. Although this did not come to pass, the quest to develop financial tools capable of supporting commerce between diverse regions and trading networks became a common endeavor among Mongols, Europeans, and Muslims alike.

On a productive level, the Mongols greatly incentivized the production of commercial goods that were in high demand, both within their territories and internationally, promoting their export. A prime example is the production of silk in China, a commodity sought by markets across the world, which in turn stimulated long-distance trade. The Mongols' appetite for exotic and precious goods, along with the creation of universal standards—which could be termed

a "court culture"—acted as a significant driver and filter for Eurasian trade over vast distances.

Finally, let us turn to the legal frameworks: the treaties and concessions that carefully defined the rights and responsibilities of foreign merchants, including tariffs, duties, and the size of commercial settlements. These agreements were guaranteed by Mongol authorities and upheld by various diplomatic bodies. However, this does not mean that these relationships were straightforward or without friction. While agreements established clear jurisdictions, any perceived violations of these accords was seen by the Mongols as an affront to their sovereignty and often led to diplomatic breakdowns or, in some cases, armed conflict. Despite these tensions, the Mongols often sought to smooth over and limit the reasons for conflicts, a stark contrast to prevailing trends in Europe, where religious wars were more common. In Mongol-ruled territories, such as the Venetian colonies and other European settlements, potential religious conflicts were often diffused through a policy of coexistence. The Mongols' approach to religion was marked by tolerance (or at least indifference), allowing Christian missionaries, for example, to operate freely as long as they did not interfere with other faiths. In general, a pragmatic ethos prevailed, prioritizing compromise over religious zealotry, particularly when commercial interests clashed with papal directives.

The Mongol conquest can be seen as the catalyst that reshaped Eurasian trade, offering European merchants unprecedented opportunities to establish cities, build *fondaci* (warehouses), and turn these into key hubs in foreign territories, allowing access to previously unreachable markets. For European merchants, new horizons opened—both real and imagined—motivating them to invest, explore, and seek common ground with populations and rulers who were no longer considered threatening hordes but reliable intermediaries, business partners, local administrators, and political counterparts. In this transformed landscape, the Venetian experience—perhaps even more so than that of the Genoese—can be divided into two distinct spheres: the state and the merchant. This distinction is crucial to understanding both the limits and objectives of the relationship between Venice and the Mongols.[1]

The Venetian expansion into the Black Sea did not originate from the daring initiative of merchants seeking to discover new shores but rather from the state's pressing need to secure vital supplies of wheat, essential for the survival of the

1. Di Cosmo, "Mongols and Merchants on the Black Sea Frontier," pp. 402–6; Di Cosmo, "Black Sea Emporia and the Mongol Empire," pp. 99–106.

Republic. The damage inflicted on Venetian interests by the combined forces of Byzantium and Genoa, culminating in the Treaty of Nymphaeum in 1261, posed an existential threat to Venice. This challenge demanded a resolute response, leading to the mobilization of military and diplomatic resources to break the blockade imposed by its adversaries, just as the political landscape of the Middle East and Europe was undergoing irreversible changes. From bases in Constantinople and Anatolian ports, Venetian merchants began to explore new routes and territories, while the state pursued a strategy of alliances and warfare on a constantly shifting chessboard involving Catholic and Orthodox kingdoms, Islamic powers, and local potentates—from Italian communes to the kingdoms of Trebizond and Lesser Armenia. The Venetian state was tasked with securing these routes, ports, and markets to ensure the profitability of its merchants, whose activities were the lifeblood of the Republic. Thus, the state's institutions and offices took on the political, strategic, and military leadership of Venice's expansion, defending its interests and guiding its territorial growth.

Venice's political and economic power was significantly influenced by its aristocratic and merchant class; hence, the state was obligated to support commercial activity. This involved outfitting galleys, launching military interventions to defend the Republic's interests, and engaging in diplomacy to expand Venice's influence and secure favorable conditions and protection for its citizens. The Venetian model of state-driven expansion clearly defined the scope and limits of public authority's involvement in managing the community's interests in Mongol territory. This model also justified investments in defense and strong diplomatic presence.

East of Constantinople, the scope of Venice's state intervention was concentrated on the Black Sea, a natural endpoint for navigation, as well as key outlying markets, most notably Tabriz, where Venice set up consular representation. The state did not simply follow the merchants in their efforts to establish relationships with the Mongols and other powers, but rather acted in parallel, often with different priorities. While merchants sought profit, the state focused on defending national interests. Venice's strategic expansion toward Asia was driven by several factors: the loss of its commercial monopoly in Byzantine territory in 1261, the growing political and military threat posed by Genoa, and the increasing vulnerability of its wheat supply, given the politically volatile hinterland.

The Venetian state ensured the stability and protection of its settlements on the Black Sea, but consistently refrained from extending beyond those borders. Public authorities and their representatives rarely ventured farther than

the ports where the Venetian ships docked. Merchants who chose to negotiate routes toward Persia, China, or central Asia did so independently, relying instead on the support, assistance, and protection of the Mongols. In practical terms, they entered relationships of dependency, similar to those formed by all merchants operating on Mongol-controlled territory, regardless of nationality. This limited state involvement may explain why so little is known about Venetians' and other Italian merchants' activities beyond the Black Sea. Most of the notarial records, senate decrees, and diplomatic treaties pertain to the Pontic region, beyond which an almost impenetrable curtain falls, and any documentation becomes a precious commodity. However, other sources, such as wills, provide evidence that many Venetians operated beyond Tana and Trebizond, albeit rarely. What is certain is that these merchants, whether traveling alone or in groups, could only rely on their own strength and the protection of Mongol commanders and rulers as they ventured along the Asian trade routes.

The other side of the coin, as we have noted, is represented by the merchant, whose symbiotic relationship with the state is clearly evident. The thirteenth-century Venetian merchant embodied the model of economic development centered on commercial expansion. Many families that rose to prominence in the late twelfth century, such as the doge's nobility, had mercantile origins (for example, the Mastropiero and the Ziani) and were regularly engaged in commerce along with other aristocratic Venetian families (e.g., Morosini, Michiel, Badoer, and Contarini).[2] However, the space occupied by the merchant was defined by private interests that did not always align with those of the state. Merchants often operated in close connection with family and business networks and were the spearhead of Venice's eastward expansion. Ship captains were not only entrusted with vast financial fortunes but also with the responsibility of seeking and exploiting trade opportunities. The dynamism of the Venetian merchant, along with his ability to move, invest, and spend long periods abroad in pursuit of profit, was crucial to the success of the state's strategy—where the merchant was its primary representative. Hence, the success of Venetians on the Black Sea cannot be understood without acknowledging the structural changes that both preceded and resulted from the expansion. The growth of enterprises brought about a qualitative shift in trade activities, which saw the inclusion of new actors such as assistants, accountants, and local agents. This period also saw the emergence of banks, letters of

2. Caravale, "Le istituzioni della Repubblica," pp. 304–5.

exchange, and, by the fourteenth century, the first forms of insurance. In practice, the Venetian merchant increasingly became a modern entrepreneur, at the helm of a complex and multifaceted business operation.

While the Venetian state halted its expansion at the ports of the Black Sea—such as Tana, Trebizond, and as far as Tabriz—individual merchants ventured beyond these limits. These merchants gained new financial knowledge and learned new languages, developing a linguistic and commercial lingua franca that facilitated trade. We know that the Polos communicated in Turkic and Persian, and the *Codex Cumanicus* included a lexicon in Latin, Turkic, and Persian, all essential languages for navigating the routes that extended from the Black Sea. An interesting case is that of Giosafat Barbaro, who, while in Venice, recognized two Tatar slaves by the language they spoke—one he himself knew. Although multilingualism was common in the cosmopolitan spheres of eastern markets, professional interpreters and translators, such as *turcimanni* (interpreters) and *dragomanni* (dragomans), were still indispensable. These figures worked in the chancelleries of Venice, Tana, and other cities, drafting documents, attending legal proceedings, and accompanying ambassadors on diplomatic missions and merchants on their journeys.

As Mongol power collapsed and political authority fragmented, conditions became more difficult for merchants, who could no longer rely on stable structures for support. Faced with new challenges and shifting political configurations, Venice recalibrated its interests and strategies. Although Venetian outposts stubbornly persisted even after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, by this final phase, they had already lost much of the significance they had once held. While this was undeniably a period of decline, culminating in Venice's eventual withdrawal from the Black Sea, the underlying themes of this story—such as the interdependence between the state and merchants, the ability to operate in often hostile territories, and the creation of colonies and trade networks—foreshadowed a new chapter in world history. The Atlantic powers, soon to dominate the oceanic trade routes, would redefine and bring to fruition the unfinished vision of the Mongol Empire—the largest empire ever realized—and the most advanced forms of European trade.

Historiography

The story of Venice and the Mongol Empire is characterized by historiographical complexity, shaped by several overlapping areas of scholarship. On the one hand, there is the immense bibliography, spanning over a century, that

focuses on Italian trade in the Black Sea. On the other hand, in the past twenty-five years, new trends in Mongol studies have shifted away from its conquests to focus on the Mongol Empire's contribution to fostering exchanges, relationships, and international trade. Additionally, there is the figure of Marco Polo and the vast ocean of Polo-related studies. This book lies, if not at the heart, then certainly in dialogue with these three significant historiographical fields. Therefore, it seems appropriate to offer an overview of each, with the understanding that this will not cover every single aspect. The goal is simply to trace their evolution and highlight the most important contributions.

The father of studies on Italian trade in the Levant, including the Black Sea, is undoubtedly Wilhelm Heyd. As early as 1885, Heyd laid the groundwork for subsequent scholarship with his extensive work on medieval trade and its sources. Around the same time, Georg Martin Thomas compiled a collection of documents on "Veneto–Levantine" diplomacy, a project later completed by archivist Riccardo Predelli, who was Trentino by birth but Venetian by adoption. This collection, which spans the years 1300 to 1454, covers not only Venice's relations with Byzantium but also its interactions with powers farther east.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the pioneering studies of Romanian scholar and politician Gheorghe Bratianu shifted the focus of research definitively toward the Black Sea. Two of his most notable works are *Recherches sur le commerce génois dans le mer Noire au XIIIe siècle*, published in 1929, and *Les Vénitiens dans la mer Noire au 14e siècle: la politique du sénat en 1332–33 et la notion de la latinité*, published in 1939. Bratianu famously described the Black Sea in the fourteenth century as the *plaque tournante* (turntable) of international trade—a hub where products from different regions and trade circuits were amassed and redistributed. His research was groundbreaking, establishing the Black Sea as a critical area of historical analysis for understanding the European Middle Ages. Like many scholars of his generation, Bratianu operated in the intellectual shadow of, and in reaction to, the dominant influence of Nicolae Iorga, a politician and intellectual of great stature who had also studied the history of the Black Sea. Additionally, Bratianu was the first to examine Genoese notarial sources from Caffa, which led to the publication of the first series of acts by Lamberto di Sambuceto in 1927 and the masterful posthumous work *La mer Noire* (1969).

In the postwar period, the field of research expanded to include numerous archival and documentary studies. Notably, the French scholar Freddy Thiriet's *La Romanie vénitienne au Moyen Age: le développement et l'exploitation du*

domaine colonial vénitien, XIIe–XVe siècles (1959) made a major contribution. Thiriet's surveys in the State Archives of Venice in the 1950s led to the publication of registers of senate resolutions (1958–61) and records of Venetian assemblies concerning Romània (from 1966). Following in the footsteps of Bratianu's research, many other scholars contributed substantially to advancing the study of Venetian and Genoese commerce on the Black Sea. Among them was Charles Verlinden, whose research on medieval slavery directly engaged the Black Sea and Tana. Additionally, the works of Bernard Doumerc and Jean Claude Hocquet on trade and navigation in the eastern Mediterranean remain indispensable for anyone exploring this field.

Research involving the notarial records, such as those of Lamberto di Sambuceto, opened new avenues for reconstructing the organization of Italian trade on the Black Sea and even facilitated early attempts at quantitative analysis. Interest in notarial and economic documents peaked with the work of the Genoese school led by Geo Pistarino, whose influence spurred scholars worldwide to pursue work in this area. Their contributions were crucial. Among these scholars were Anna Balletto, Gabriella Airaldi, and Giovanna Petti Balbi. While studies on individual documents and notarial documents multiplied—sometimes focusing on entire collections, and at other times on a single act—there were also many comprehensive works. French historian Michel Balard completed work initiated by Bratianu on the acts of the Genoese notary active in Caffa during the late thirteenth century (*Gênes et l'outre-mer*, 1973) and published the most thorough study on Genoese Romània (*La Romanie génoise: XIIe-début du XVe siècle*, 1978). Balard's extensive work in the 1970s gave a decisive and lasting impetus to Black Sea studies, breathing new life into many research strands that remain active today.

The Romanian school has continued to produce prominent scholars like Șerban Papacostea and Virgil Ciocîltan, who have made significant contributions to the field. Papacostea authored *La Mer Noire Carrefour des grandes routes internationales 1204–1453* (2006), and Ciocîltan followed with *The Mongols and the Black Sea Trade in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (2016). While Ciocîltan remains firmly rooted in the European tradition of studying Genoese and Venetian presence on the Black Sea, he is one of the few scholars to have expanded the scope of research to include the Asian dimension, particularly the role of the Mongols in the history of international trade.

The Russian school of Black Sea studies is dominated by the figure of Sergej P. Karpov, whose work spans numerous essays and monographs. One notable example is *L'impero di Trebisonda, Venezia, Genova e Roma, 1204–1461:*

rapporti politici, diplomatici e commerciali (1986), which provides a detailed analysis of the Venetian and Genoese presence in the Crimea and the major trade routes on the Black Sea. Karpov's contributions also stand out for his publication of previously unseen sources in the series *Pričernomor'e v srednie veka* (The Region of the Black Sea in the Middle Ages) in 1991, such as the acts of Benedetto Bianco, a notary in Tana. The Russian school continues to produce world-class scholars, including Evgeny Khvalkov, a student of Karpov's, whose recent work *The Colonies of Genoa in the Black Sea Region: Evolution and Transformation* (2018) has garnered attention. Another noteworthy scholar is Aleksandr Emanov, whose research focuses on Caffa during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Alongside archival research, broader studies have been conducted by pioneering scholars such as Roberto S. Lopez, Robert H. Bautier, Benjamin Kedar, David Ayalon, and David Jacoby, among others. These medievalists' works are essential for placing Venetian trade history in a larger economic and cultural context. Over the course of the twentieth century, the study of Italian colonies on the Black Sea emerged as a distinct research field, now occupying a significant place in medieval studies.

Studies on the Mongol Empire and its conquests, largely produced by scholars from the English-speaking world, form the second pillar of our historiographical framework, and this field encompasses various approaches. Traditional historiography has often focused on the theoretical contrast between the Mongol "impact" and the western "response," with much of the research centered on the relations between the papacy and the Mongols, as well as reports on the "Tatars" written by European missionaries and diplomats. Key figures in this area include Paul Pelliot, Jean Richard, Igor de Rachewiltz, Denis Sinor, and, among the most prolific, Peter Jackson. In addition to these excellent scholarly works, there has been extensive research on the Mongols in the Middle East and central Asia, with prominent contributions from Charles Melville, David Morgan, Reuven Amitai, and Michal Biran.

The turning point in historiography that allowed scholars to move beyond the predominantly philological focus of many early studies came with Janet Abu-Lughod's book, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350* (1989). Without dwelling on the conceptual roots of the book, which places it in a critical dialogue with Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, Abu-Lughod's work is particularly influential for positioning the Mongol Empire at the heart of pre-existing global commercial networks. Although she did not intend to directly engage with Mongol history, her book

reimagines the Mongol Empire as a central hub of a new world order, interpreting it as the driving force behind unprecedented communication and connections between hitherto isolated regions.

Thomas Allsen's studies offer the most precise and insightful historical framework for understanding the global impact of the Mongol Empire. In his landmark works, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (1997) and *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (2001), Allsen underscores the active role the Mongols played in what can be termed the "imperialization" of the territories under their rule. This impact, often underappreciated, recasts the Mongols not as passive facilitators of trade but as active agents, shaping and driving global exchanges. They provided vital impulses that had far-reaching effects in the construction of their own empire.

Other scholars have approached the Mongols as a global phenomenon, such as Timothy May, author of *The Mongol Conquests in World History* (2012). The perspective that views the Mongols as agents of change and their imperial vision as a transformative force has influenced much of contemporary historiography. A prime example is the collection of essays in *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*, edited by Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (2015).

The third and final historiographical area we wish to highlight involves extensive studies on Marco Polo and his *Milione*. Polo studies form a separate strand from those focused on Black Sea trade. While the history of the relationship between Venice and the Mongols has often been overshadowed by the travels of Marco Polo, it is important to clarify that neither Polo nor his work actually played a significant role in shaping Venetian policy toward the Mongols. It is well known that Marco Polo received little recognition upon his return from "Cathay," and the Venetian Republic did not pursue diplomatic or trade relations with China based on the information he provided.

Since the first appearance of the *Milione* (*The Travels of Marco Polo*), and especially following the sixteenth-century edition by Giovanni Battista Ramusio (*Navigazioni e viaggi*), the success of the text has been undeniable. Modern studies on the *Milione*, beginning from the mid-nineteenth century, have primarily focused on two areas: first, the critical reconstruction of the text based on the various surviving versions, and second, the publication of annotated editions. These efforts, led by scholars such as Yule and Cordier, Pelliot, Olschki, Benedetto, and many others, have concentrated on the philological analysis aiming to elucidate the text. However, these are not the aspects we are concerned with. Neither the literary merit of the *Milione* nor whether Marco

Polo actually traveled to China is directly relevant to the broader relationship between Venice and the Mongols.

More recent studies following the publication of Frances Wood's *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* (1996) have been closely linked to commercial and global themes. The doubt raised by the English writer on whether Marco Polo actually traveled to China has sparked various reactions.[3] Today, thirty years after the release of the book, new studies have largely dismissed this hypothesis.[4] The most compelling work that dispels these doubts is Hans Ulrich Vogel's *Marco Polo Was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues* (2013), which uses commercial and fiscal data to confirm Marco Polo's presence in China and the reliability of the information contained in the *Milione*. The experiences of the Polos, along with Marco's *Milione* (discussed in chapter 8 of our book), illustrate the depth of commercial knowledge required of Venetians and other Italian merchants who journeyed to unfamiliar lands. However, we present these experiences without framing them as emblematic of Venice's broader relations with the Mongol world.

The Structure of This Book

We have chosen to structure this book in two parts: a historical-chronological section, and a thematic one. The first part, comprising seven chapters, traces the encounter between Venice and the Mongols, detailing the phases leading up to Venice's withdrawal from the Black Sea. By "Mongols" or "Tatars" we are not referring solely to the Mongol Empire but also to its later expressions, including Tamerlane's kingdom and the various Crimean khanates that emerged after the end of the *pax mongolica*. The political legacy of the Mongol Empire and its successors continued to play an important role in Venice's eastern policies.

Any account of the relationship between Venice and the Mongols could easily be overshadowed by a single theme: Venice's rivalry with Genoa, the major maritime power in Crimea and a perpetual enemy of the Serenissima. To prevent this often-discussed topic from dominating the narrative, we have made a concerted effort to focus specifically on Venice's interactions with the Mongols, highlighting this unique relationship without letting the Genoese rivalry take center stage.

3. See, for instance, the long review by De Rachewiltz, "Marco Polo Went to China."
4. Allsen, "The Cultural Worlds of Marco Polo"; Jackson, "Marco Polo and His 'Travels.'"

The first two chapters explore two parallel movements: Venice's eastward expansion and the Mongols' westward push. Although initially independent of each other, these movements gradually converged. On one side, Venice needed to fight its exclusion from Black Sea trade following the Byzantine–Genoese alliance of 1261. On the other side, the consolidation of the Mongol khanates—specifically the Golden Horde and the Ilkhanate in southwest Asia—reshaped the Eurasian political map, prompting the search for a new balance in the region.

Chapter 3 discusses the first phase of Venetian expansion into the Black Sea, during which Venice remained deeply engaged in its rivalry with Genoa and embroiled in complex Mediterranean politics. This chapter covers the founding of Venice's primary colony in the East: Tana, located on the Sea of Azov—a crucial bridgehead and strategic base. Chapter 4 focuses on Venice's period of greatest expansion between 1320 and 1343, within the Golden Horde. During this time, trade flourished, diplomatic relations advanced, and Venice's rivalry with Genoa entered a new phase, characterized less by the fight for supremacy and more by the necessity of coexistence.

However, the balances established during this period began to falter in the 1340s, leading to the crises discussed in chapter 5, which tracks the eventual collapse of the Mongol Empire as a supranational entity. While relations between Venice and the Mongols maintained their center of gravity in the Golden Horde, the political repercussions of the empire's collapse could be felt on all levels. The fall of the Ilkhanate and demise of the Yuan dynasty in China in 1368 effectively marked the end of Mongol supremacy in Asia.

Following from this, chapter 6 explores Venice's position within this shifting political climate, where new figures emerge in the "Tatar" world, pretenders to the Mongol Empire's remnants, first among them Timur, who attempted to revive the imperial vision of Chinggis Khan. Finally, chapter 7 describes Venice's twilight years in the Black Sea, from the rebuilding of Tana after its destruction by Timur to the eventual Ottoman conquest. This period was not one of inevitable decline, but rather marked by highs and lows that demonstrate Venice's steadfast determination to maintain its presence. However, with the rise of the Ottomans and transformations as profound as those that initially drove Venice toward the Mongol East, Venice ultimately withdrew from the Black Sea.

The second part of the book consists of four chapters that address broader themes. The first of these is devoted to Marco Polo, whose journey to Cathay represents a unique and pivotal moment in the history of Europe's knowledge

of Asia. We treat this as a self-contained event, rather than an integral part of Venice's relationship with the Mongols or the wider culture of Mongol and Chinese trade. Special attention is given to the chapters in Polo's book that shed light on the practices and institutions governing trade and finance. As recent economic studies based on Chinese sources have confirmed, the accuracy of Polo's observations is remarkable, due largely to his commercial acumen, which set him apart from other travelers like Ibn Battuta or Odorico da Pordenone. Despite the cultural differences, Marco Polo's keen observations reveal that these worlds were not entire disconnected.

Chapter 9 delves into the evolving geography of trade, innovations in transportation, including routes, ports, and ships, as well as legal and diplomatic frameworks required to formalize relations with the Mongols. Without such frameworks, merchants would have been left to negotiate on their own, without state backing. We also examine the associations between merchants and investors that allowed capital to reach even the most distant corners on the trade route map. Chapter 10 focuses on instruments of exchange, including the essential language skills of merchants. While some managed to learn a smattering of eastern languages, most relied on interpreters and translators. Although Medieval Latin served as the lingua franca in Europe, traveling east from Constantinople meant crossing linguistic borders where multiple trade languages prevailed, particularly Turkic (Cuman) and Persian. This period also saw advancements in financial tools, including the minting of new coins designed to facilitate long-distance trade across non-integrated systems. The issue of standardizing weights and measures was another challenge; while medieval Italian cities used different measures for various goods, the problem became exponentially more complex beyond Italy. Merchants had to rely on equivalency and experience accumulated over many trips to navigate these disparities.

The final chapter discusses the goods exported and imported by Venetian merchants. We take a closer look at key commodities in international trade, such as wheat, silk, and slaves. An overview of the goods transported on Venetian ships is crucial to understanding the shifts in trade over the various phases of Venice's presence in Asia. The accompanying charts, while not exhaustive, illustrate the overall significance of Asian trade in Venice's economy.

The world that the Mongol conquest had created was initially one of fear, apprehension, and a sense of impending disaster. European defenselessness against the devastations visited upon Christians from Rus' to Hungary conjured up apocalyptic visions. Once the dust settled, however, and the "Tatars"

turned from conquest to government, new scenarios opened up before the eyes of Mediterranean powers that had long based their fortunes on connecting places and peoples, through commerce and diplomacy. Genoa and Venice, thanks to their maritime supremacy, were uniquely placed to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the Mongol expansion. In the second half of the thirteenth century, both republics began to move into the Black Sea, which became, famously, the turntable of global trade, where goods from the East and the West were loaded on cargo ships or caravans and carried to remote markets across Eurasia. While the story of Italian merchants in the Mongol Empire has been told many times, it has been focused on Genoa, which surely was the main protagonist of the Italian commercial expansion in Asia. Venice was moved by similar interests and goals but its experience was different, bound by special constraints and unique circumstances. Once it extended from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, their bitter rivalry forced Venetian merchants to carve out their own spaces and, in the process, build a separate relationship with their Mongol partners. Venice on the Black Sea is once again poised between water and land, a familiar stance, but in a much more precarious equilibrium. Venice's strategy, from a position of relative weakness, was one of survival, resistance and constant adaptation to fast-changing circumstances. Its war galleys had to intervene against Genoese threats to protect trade and diplomacy with Mongol rulers. And yet, amidst wars with familiar enemies and fragile partnerships with alien allies, for over a century and a half the economic interests of Venice's commercial class continued to thrive in different forms. Even when the Mongols were no longer powerful, the dream of unfettered access to the richest markets on earth continues to attract merchants, adventurers and travelers. The story of Venice and the Mongols unfolds on the eve of a far more globalized world, which in many ways it anticipates.

INDEX