

ABSTRACT

The subject of this work is the development of relations between Italian merchants and the Ilkhanate of Persia during the course of the last decades of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century. Italian presence in the Ilkhanate is discussed in a multitude of works, but often marginalised as an appendix of Italian Levantine trade relations. The aim of this work is to deal with it as an autonomous and independent subject, trying to demonstrate that the nature of Italian presence in Persia was quite different from that of Latin trade relations with Levantine and North African territories. I will conduct an analysis of Italian commercial penetration in Persia providing a quantitative analysis of trade and focusing on the city of Tabriz and its connections. I will also try to demonstrate how Italians expanded their trade networks into Persia because they played an important role in the supply of certain services and commodities both to western and Mongol aristocracies. Lastly, by analysing the institution of *ortagh* (partnership), I will try to demonstrate how Italian presence in the Ilkhanate was similarly tied to a specific conduct of life and political project, and how the sudden disappearance of the latter caused the slow decline of Latin trade with Persia.

ITALIAN MERCHANTS IN TABRIZ
UNDER THE ILKHANID RULE: TRADE
AND PARTNERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

I. SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL DELINEATIONS OF THE TOPIC

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the extent of commercial penetration of Italian merchants in the Persian region roughly between the second half of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century. The area, at the time, overlapped with the borders of the Ilkhanate, one of the successor states of the Mongol Empire. Despite its short and turbulent life, the Ilkhanate had a decisive role in securing a connection between Europe and the Far East: by granting a century of relative political stability to the region, it created the necessary conditions for Europeans to access one of the main routes to Cathay and India.¹

While the geographical scope of the project could seem rather broad, the research almost exclusively focuses on the city of Tabriz. With its sizeable population, the metropolis was by far the most important trade hub during the Ilkhanid period: it hosted merchants, intellectuals and artists from all over Eurasia. Rashīd al-Dīn, chronicler and statesman at the Ilkhanid court, defined the district of Tabriz as ‘so populous that it became an Egypt with Arghunia (Soltanieh) as the capital like Cairo.’²

In terms of temporal boundaries, the research focuses on the period roughly corresponding to the life of the Ilkhanate, meaning that a logical starting point would be the year 1258, when Hülegü Khan entered victorious in Baghdad, becoming *de facto* the independent ruler of an empire stretching from Anatolia to Afghanistan. In the Levant, the second half of the thirteenth

¹ The Persian route was one of the two possible routes to China: the other passed through the Pontic steppe and reached the city of Samarkand from the north, continuing to China through modern-day Kyrgyzstan.

² Rashīd al-Dīn Fazlullah, *Jami' u't-tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles*, (ed. W.M. Thackston, p.577).

century represents an equally logical starting point: in 1256 the so-called War of Saint Sabas marks the beginning of the Venetian - Genoese wars (1256-1381). The aim of the contenders was to acquire commercial supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea ports at one end of the Silk Road: the treaty of Nymphaeum, for instance, brought to the reconquest of Constantinople in 1261 by a Genoese-Byzantine alliance, cutting off Venice from the Black Sea for a decade.

The intended end point of the work are the fifteen years encompassing the fall of the Ilkhanate after the death of the last Ilkhan Abu Sa'id (1335) and the spread of the Black Death in the Middle East and Europe (1335-1350). The Plague played a major role in the reduction of the population and consequently in the demand of certain goods. However, political instability in Persia was a decisive factor in the contraction of exchanges: the rise of the Jalairids and the Chobanids in the region caused both Genoa and Venice to withdraw their investments from the region after uncontrolled slaughters of merchants in Tabriz between 1338 and 1345.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHY

During the last century much has been written on shared spaces and encounters between the West and other civilisations: from Pirenne to Abulafia, a huge variety of works on the history of trade and cultural exchange focused on the shared space *par excellence*: the Mediterranean Sea. Some of these works have been of great help to this study as they deal, although marginally, with the Persian region and its Mediterranean ties. The *Histoire du commerce du Levant* remains the main work to confront when studying Italian presence in Persia: the brilliant analysis of Heyd still holds nowadays as the most complete writing on the topic. *Levant Trade in The Middle Ages* by Ashtor was another essential source of knowledge and inspiration. I also consulted a sizeable quantity of material on Indo-European and Sino-

European connections: my work benefits from historiography dealing with European presence at the two ends of the Silk Road, as they frequently mention Persia and could also provide patterns that made it easier to locate Italian mercantile communities in the region.

The presence of European merchants in India and China was extensively dealt with in 1950s by the Italian scholar Robert Sabatino Lopez with works like *European Merchants in the Medieval Indies*.³ During the 1960s the topic was further addressed by Luciano Petech and the French historian Jean Richard.⁴ Those works are particularly relevant nowadays because they contain a sizeable number of edited primary sources that mention Ilkhanid Persia.

Works dealing with the Far East, often centred around travellers and merchants, shed new light on important phenomena like the spread of Christianity in China or European and Chinese perceptions of each other's worlds. On the contrary, works of European historians dealing with exchanges between the Latin world and the Ilkhanate present an evident focus on diplomacy: although this approach gives us precious insights about connections between Mongols and Europeans, it often ignores the very thing that made these connections possible: Eurasian trade networks.

In 2005 Peter Jackson gave a new perspective on the relations between Europe and Mongol Asia. In *The Mongols and the West*, Jackson addresses almost two centuries of interactions, from the beginning of the thirteenth century to the battle of Tannenberg.⁵ The work approaches the problem again mainly from a diplomatic perspective, although the reassessment of some

³ R.S. Lopez, 'European merchants in the medieval Indies: the evidence of commercial documents', *The Journal of Economic History* 3.2 (1943): 164-184.

⁴ J. Richard. 'European Voyages in the Indian Ocean and Caspian Sea (12th–15th Centuries)', *Iran* 6.1 (1968): 45-52; L. Petech, 'Italian Merchants in the Mongol Empire' in J.D. Ryan *The Spiritual Expansion of Medieval Latin Christendom: The Asian Missions* (London,2017), 211-234.

⁵ P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West (1241-1410)*, (London, 2005).

key features such as the work of missionaries in the Far East represented an important starting point for any future analysis. As for other aspects of the relations between Christendom and the Ilkhanate, they remain largely unexplored. In 1997 Jacques Paviot contributed to a volume on Ilkhanid Persia edited by Denise Aigle with an article on Italian merchants which is, to my knowledge, the only published work exclusively dedicated to the topic. Another important and more recent contribution is the selection of essays edited by Judith Pfeiffer on the significance of Tabriz from a Persian perspective, which deals quite consistently with the European presence in the city.⁶

As concerns the Mediterranean basin, a first selection process brought to my attention the works of Freddy Thiriet and Michael Balard.⁷ Although these works mainly deal with Italian colonies in the Mediterranean, investigating the ‘eastern connections’ of these areas was vital to my research. Furthermore, it was only by understanding the main features of Italian colonial and commercial presence in the Levant that I could find its traces further East. Finally, the work of David Jacoby on Middle Eastern trade represented a valuable source of

⁶ L. Molà, M. Norell, D. Patry Leidy, L. Ross, *Venezia, Genova e l'Oriente: i mercanti italiani sulle Vie della Seta tra XII e XIV secolo*, (Torino, 2012), p. 141; J. Pfeiffer ed., *Politics, Patronage, and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th-15th Century Tabriz*, (Leiden, 2013); J. Paviot, ‘Les marchands italiens dans l’Iran mongol’ in D. Aigle, *L’Iran face à la domination mongole*, (Tehran, 1997): 71-86. p.71-86.

⁷ F. Thiriet, *Régestes des délibérations du sénat de Venise concernant la Romanie: Documents et recherches sur l'économie des pays byzantins, islamiques et slaves et leurs relations commerciales au Moyen Âge*, (Paris, 1958); F. Thiriet, *La Romanie Vénitienne au Moyen Âge*, (Paris, 1959); F. Thiriet, *Quelques observations sur le trafic des gelées vénitiennes d'après les chiffres des incanti (XIV-XVe siècles)*, (Milano, 1962); M. Balard, *La Romanie Génoise*, (Rome 1978) ; M. Balard, *Les Italiens à Byzance*, (Paris, 1987) ; M. Balard, *Les latins en Orient. Xe-XVe siècle*, (Paris, 2006).

information:⁸ its specificity was useful to determine the routes of goods like silk and cloth from inland Asia to the Levant.

The Black Sea Route was equally important to establish the volume of commercial relations in Central Asia: again, my research owes much to the work of Balard and Thiriet on Genoese and Venetian notarial documentation. The contributions of Nicola di Cosmo and his work on a reassessment of the *Pax Mongolica* proved valuable to the theoretical framework of my work.⁹

Works on the Mongol presence in the Middle East are important when they mention trade and diplomacy, such as the works of Reuven Amitai-Preiss, mainly concerning the Mamluks-Ilkhanid wars and the Crusade-Mongol cooperation during the last *passagia* to the Holy Land.¹⁰

⁸ D. Jacoby, 'Oriental Silks Go West: A Declining Trade in the Later Middle Age' in *Islamic Artefacts in the Mediterranean World: Trade, Gift Exchange and Artistic Transfer*, (2010): 71-88; D. Jacoby, *Trade, commodities and shipping in the medieval Mediterranean*, (London 1997); D. Jacoby, 'Silk economics and cross-cultural artistic interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim world, and the Christian west' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58, (2004): 197-240; D. Jacoby, *Commercial exchange across the Mediterranean: Byzantium, the Crusader Levant, Egypt and Italy*, (London, 2005).

⁹M. Balard, 'Gênes et la mer Noire (XIII e-XV e siècles)' in *Revue Historique* 270. 1 (547), (1983): 31-54; M. Balard, *Gênes et l'outre-mer: Les actes de Caffa du notaire Lamberto di Sambuceto, 1289-1290*, (Paris, 1973); N. Di Cosmo, 'Mongols and merchants on the Black Sea frontier in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: Convergences and conflicts' in R. Amitai-Preiss, and M. Biran, *Mongols, Turks and others. Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary*, (Leiden, 2005): 391-424; N. Di Cosmo, 'Black Sea emporia and the Mongol empire: A reassessment of the Pax Mongolica' in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53.1-2, (2009): 83-108.

¹⁰ D. Morgan, 'The Mongols and the eastern Mediterranean' in *Mediterranean Historical Review* 4.1, (1989): 198-211; D. Morgan, and S. Schwartz, *Persian perceptions of Mongols and Europeans*, (Cambridge, 1994); D. Morgan, 'Reflections on Mongol communications in the Ilkhanate' in C. Hillenbrand, *The Sultan's Turret: Studies in Persian and Turkish Culture*, (2000): 375-85.

All these works, like the ones on western-eastern correspondence by Denise Aigle and David Morgan, proved crucial in providing a political frame for the period.¹¹

III. RESEARCH QUESTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My assessment of Italian presence in Persia inherits the theoretical framework of the concept of ‘mutual benefit’. This idea derives from the studies conducted by Nicola di Cosmo, Thomas Allsen and Elizabeth Endicott West on the role of Mongol princes as agents and facilitators of trade rather than passive intermediaries.¹² One important aspect of these relations in Persia is that they were probably tied with a long-term political project, and therefore with the life and politics of the Ilkhanid Empire. When the latter collapsed, local elites were less interested in contacts with the West, and acted violently to extract wealth from merchants rather than invest in a long-term partnership.¹³ While Allsen only marginally mentions possible applications of the concept of ‘partnership’ to westerners, in this work I formulate a hypothesis on how this idea could extensively apply to Italian merchants, trying to answer the following questions:

To what extent the increasing Italian presence in Persia during the Ilkhanid period can be connected to a commercial advantage and to the nature of goods traded? Could the commercial and personal ties between Italian merchants and Mongol elites be considered as signs of some sort of partnership?

¹¹R. Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhanid Wars, 1260-1281*, (Cambridge, 1995); J. Richard, *Orient et Occident au Moyen Age: contacts et relations (XII^e-XV^es.)*, (London, 1976); J. Richard, *Les relations entre l'Orient et l'Occident au Moyen Age: études et documents*, (London, 1977).

¹² E. Endicott-West, ‘Merchant Associations in Yüan China: The Ortoy’, *Asia Major* (1989): 127-154. T. T. Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles*, (Cambridge, 1997); T. T. Allsen, ‘Mongolian princes and their merchant partners’, 1200-1260. *Asia Major*, (1989) 83-126; T.T. Allsen *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*, (Cambridge, 2001).

¹³ J. Pfeiffer ed. *Politics, Patronage*.

There are several factors that have been taken into consideration when answering this question, that relate with how Ilkhanid princes and merchants could benefit from this system of mutual relations. Firstly, profit through immediate economic revenue will be addressed analysing the different goods traded and the tolls extracted. This could explain why Persia was a profitable market for Italians and if and why Ilkhanid princes encouraged their enterprises. Secondly, indirect profit, which translated in prestige, position and diplomatic gains, is to relate to the role of Italians as intermediaries and facilitators.

I have initially relied on a quantitative analysis of available sources, a method that has already been used by historians like Jacoby, Thiriet and Balard to address the Italian presence in the eastern Mediterranean: by cross-referencing their research with existing commercial charters coming from the Persian region I could determine which goods were brought by Italian merchants from inland centres of trade to Mediterranean ports and vice-versa. The analysis of the extraction of wealth through taxes and tolls has to be a quantitative one: A vital source for this part of the project was *La Pratica della Mercatura*, written by Francesco Pegolotti between 1335 and 1343, a manual designed as a guide to merchants who were trading in the East and in the Mediterranean. The author utilised first-hand accounts of merchants active in Asia and described tolls and taxes on the most common goods in all the major trade centres. The approach shifts to a qualitative dimension in the second part of the work: the analysis of the relations between the merchants and the Ilkhanid court requires a more interpretative approach to the sources.

IV. PRIMARY SOURCES AND APPROACH

Due to the lack of extensive historiography on the subject, primary sources constituted an essential part of this project. In my work, I mainly rely on western documentation, and only

consult Middle Eastern sources and chronicles in translation. This choice was necessary to approach a selection of sources that could make the project doable in terms of time and space in the current situation, and it is mainly related to my linguistic abilities. The sources analysed mainly fall within three categories:

Works intended to spread technical, geographical and historical knowledge among their contemporaries. This includes chronicles and travel accounts, mentioning Italian merchants and their activities: among others, several passages of Rashīd al-Dīn's *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, Guillelmus Adae's *De Modo Sarracenos Extirpandi* and accounts by William of Rubruck, Giovanni di Pian del Carpine and Marco Polo. Manuals and first-hand accounts or letters to business partners also fall within this category, which is the most heterogeneous group. Sources like *La Pratica della Mercatura* or business letters are mainly addressed to merchants, and therefore have many technical terms: the high reliability of the data they convey is determined by their informative nature. Chronicles and travel accounts are less reliable altogether. However, the nature of those sources compels us to ask different questions while we read them. It would be probably impossible to find reliable information about the number of Italians involved in trade with the Ilkhanate in Marco Polo's *Milione*: however while reading about a market or an harbour it is possible to determine if Marco Polo was describing some place that already existed in the mental framework of his time or if he was talking about something completely unknown by his contemporaries.

Official diplomatic charters and acts of the chanceries of Venice and Genoa are usually collected in edited volumes and are easy to consult. A considerable number of sources can be found online in collections like the *Diplomatarium Veneto-Levantinum*, *Sinica Franciscana*, the *Liber Albus* (digitalised by the Archivio di Stato of Venice) or the *Monumenta* collected by

the Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Venezie.¹⁴ As concerns the acts of chanceries and senates, I would only consult those marginally, as they rarely deal with affairs beyond the Mediterranean basin. Notable exceptions are the few treaties with the Ilkhanate, the *Librum Gazarie* and Venetian and Genoese resolutions which prohibited the commerce with the Chobanids in the 1340s.

Edited notarial material: this includes a sizeable number of sources edited by the Archivi di Stato, like the testament of Pietro Viglioni, a merchant who died in Tabriz in 1263. Brătianu, Balletto and Balard also report a great number of edited contracts and notarial acts, which have been extensively consulted. Contracts, private letters and testaments have also been published by Lopez and Surdich in their studies: it is the case of the charters concerning the expedition of Loredan and his partners to Delhi.¹⁵ Documents belonging to this group are strictly juridical, and therefore more reliable when they mention numbers and goods. Adopting an alternative approach when analysing these sources means that one should assume that there was a conspicuous number of hidden transactions, which did not figure in official documents. This approach was first suggested by Lopez in his work, and could make a big difference in any quantitative analysis.

V. DEFINITIONS

This work utilises several definitions and terms the meaning of which was widely debated in the past. I deemed therefore opportune to clarify their meaning in this work:

¹⁴ For a complete overview of the series and fonds in the Archivio di Stato of Venice (ASV) see A. Da Mosto, *L'Archivio di Stato di Venezia: indice generale, storico, descrittivo ed analitico*, (Venezia, 1937).

¹⁵ Notably the charters ASV Notaio Giovanni Gallo I, f.36, Notaio Lanfranco I, f.124 in R.S. Lopez *European merchants in the medieval Indies*, pp.164-184.

Italians - the use of the term Italian in this work is, by no means, an attribute of nationality. The term is intended to signify a geographical framework (The Italian Peninsula) rather than a political one, and it is used for the sake of clarity and synthesis. The merchants we refer to represent the elite of Italian city states and are therefore Genoese, Pisans, Florentines, Venetian etc. and by no means belong to the same geopolitical entity.

Commenda and colleganza - (sometimes referred at as *commendacio*, *colleganza* *collegantia*): The Venetian term of *colleganza*, known as *commenda* in the other Italian merchant republics, identifies one of the most popular forms of contracts, signed by two counterparts, namely *debitor* and *creditor*, or *socii*.¹⁶ The main financial benefit in the *collegantia* was the sharing of the risk of long-distance expeditions. The *creditor* (sedentary investor) avoided the opportunity costs as well as the expenses and risks of overseas travel,¹⁷ but his investment halved potential losses registered by the *debitor* (the travelling partner). Furthermore, this contractual form provided liquid funds for trade by enabling ordinary members of society to invest their savings in oversea trade with little risk.¹⁸

The *debitor* (or *tractator*) received capital in form of money or goods from the *creditor* (or *commendator*). For the duration of the contract the *creditor* could exercise certain rights, including the possibility of setting the travel itinerary, the contractual due date or even deciding the types of businesses in which his capital should have been invested. The contract was fulfilled when the value of invested capital was returned to the *creditor* at the contractual due

¹⁶ The terms *debitor* and *creditor* were user in both Venice and Amalfi while, in the other Republics, the contractual counterparts were known as ‘*socii*’. K. Ulla, J. Bruch, T. Skambraks, *Methods in Premodern Economic History: Case Studies from the Holy Roman Empire, C. 1300-c. 1600*, (London, 2019), pp.158 -159.

¹⁷ J. B. Baskin, P. J. Miranti, *A history of corporate finance*, (Cambridge, 1999), p.48.

¹⁸ Alternately or simultaneously, merchants acted both as *commendator* or *tractator* on different commercial shipments with varying target location, enabling them to make the best use of their merchandise and money. Skambraks, *Methods in Premodern Economic History*, p.159.

date from the *debitor*, together with the capital gains obtained during commercial activities, with the right to hold his contractual agreed share of profits (for sea voyages usually 1/4 of the profits while for land voyages 1/3).

The Milione - The travels of Marco Polo, also known as *Il Milione*, was one of the most popular travel accounts in the Late Middle Ages. In this work, *Il Milione* was consulted for what concerns Marco Polo's description of the city of Tabriz and of the first trip of the Polo brother (father and uncle of Marco). Until recent times *il Milione* was considered to be an unreliable source, and several historians even questioned if Marco Polo ever reached China. However, recent studies demonstrated the validity of his account and proved that the Venetian reached Kublai's court.¹⁹ The pieces of text I analysed in this work all come from the Florentine version, edited by the *Accademia della Crusca* and integrated with the Venetian-French versions, considered less reliable as concerns the philology of the text.²⁰

Persia - The name Persia originally referred to a small area in southwestern Iran, inhabited by Farsi people. Nowadays the term is commonly used to designate the whole of Iran. Since the classical period, however, the name was commonly used in Latin and western sources to designate a wider area, including parts of Central Asia, Afghanistan and even Iraq. In this work, the definition of Persia is borrowed by late medieval sources and refers to the territories within the borders of the Ilkhanate, corresponding nowadays to Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and parts of Syria, Turkey, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia and Georgia.

¹⁹ See H.U, Vogel *Marco Polo Was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues*, (Leiden, 2013); T. Allsen, *Culture and conquest*, pp.59-62.

²⁰ The version of the text I consulted is the Laterza edition of 1912, M. Polo, *Il Milione secondo il testo della «crusca» reintegrato con gli altri codici italiani* (ed. D. Olivieri).

CHAPTER I

A PATH TO THE EAST: ITALIAN MERCHANTS FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN TO THE ILKHANATE

The subject of this chapter, which function as a conceptual introduction to my thesis, is to rally all the information available in the sources concerning Italian commercial presence in the Ilkhanate, more specifically in Tabriz. During the second half of thirteenth century the city was in fact the main emporium of the Ilkhanid Empire.

The documentary material I could find on Italian presence in Tabriz is rather abundant if we consider the usual scarcity of western sources concerning the area in the period: this is mainly due to the frequency of the connections between the city and its Mediterranean and Black Sea counterparts. Any possible study on Latin presence in Tabriz must start, in fact, elsewhere, precisely from the cities of Trebizond and Laiaç.

I. TREBIZOND-TABRIZ

In *La Pratica della mercatura*, a guide to measures, tolls and itineraries for fellow merchants, Francesco Pegolotti stresses how the weights and measures adopted in Trebizond are the same of those utilised in the city of Tabriz. He also provides a rather accurate guide on the most traded goods between the two cities, stating for each of those the price if transported with pack animals.²¹ By reading Pegolotti, one has the idea that the traffic between the two cities must have been very active in first three decades of the fourteenth century. According to the timeline

²¹ F. B. Pegolotti, *La pratica della mercatura*, (ed. A. Evans pp.30-31).

established by the documents, in fact, the opening of a permanent route between the two cities probably dates to the last decades of the thirteenth century.

It is in this period that Genoese Merchants founded the emporium of Caffa (ca. 1275) and their presence is recorded in Soldaia in 1274 : notarial activities increase in the area, as confirmed by the acts of Federico di Piazzalunga.²² The increase in the volume of Genoese trade in the Black Sea was certainly due to their alliance with Byzantium and the privileges acquired by the Genoese with the treaty of Nymphaeum in 1261 and the reconquest of Constantinople by Michael VIII Palaiologos in the same year. These included the right to establish a colony on the Golden Horn, called Pera (or Galata) in 1267. As Brătianu and Balard state, however, the analysis of several hundreds of contracts does not testify an increase of traffic between Trebizond and Tabriz before the last decade of the thirteenth century, as the most common wares in the Persian city are only marginally present in contracts signed in Trebizond.²³ Things changed in the 1290s: an English embassy travelling through Persia to deliver a message to Arghun Khan stopped in Trebizond in 1291 and resided in what seems to be the house of the Genoese consul.²⁴ A notarial act in 1302 reports: ‘factus logia in qua regitur Curia Januensium.’²⁵ The presence of such an authority as early as 1290 indicates a remarkable Genoese presence in the area. The importance of the Trebizond-Tabriz connection was again destined to rise in the following years, as testified by the increasing number of contracts and

²² M. Balard, *La Romanie génoise*, pp.114-118.

²³ G. I. Brătianu, ‘La mer Noire, plaque tournante du trafic international a la fin du Moyen Age’, *Revue historique du Sud-Est européen*, XXI, (1944), pp.36-39. G.I. Brătianu, *Actes des notaires génois de Péra et de Caffa de la fin du treizième siècle (1281-1290)*. Vol. 2., (Bucarest,1927) ; M. Balard, *Gênes et la mer Noire*, p. 33. Spices and other goods commonly traded in Tabriz can be found in the contracts of Lamberto di Sambuceto, but remain marginal compared to the volume of other goods traded. Before going to Cyprus, Sambuceto was a notary in Caffa, and the acts he registered in 1289-90 are among the most important sources for the history of Black Sea trade in the late thirteenth century.

²⁴ *I conti dell'ambasciata al Chan di Persia nel 1292*. (ed. Desimoni, C., p.33.)

²⁵ *I conti dell'ambasciata*, p.553.

the establishment of Genoese consulates and small colonies along the route between the two cities. Eventually, in 1313 Genoa established in Caffa the so-called *Officium Gazarie*, a patrician council tasked with governing Genoese colonies in Crimea and along the coasts of the Black Sea and regulating trade in the area. The office's jurisdiction soon expanded to Trebizond and reached Tabriz by the beginning of the second decade of the fourteenth century. The council was presided by 'Officium octo sapientum constitutorum super factis nauigandi et maris maioris' and by the Genoese consul of Caffa.²⁶

II. LAIAS-TABRIZ

The increase of Italian presence in the Black Sea did not mean that other areas were neglected. Genoese and Venetian communities were very active on the southern route to Tabriz. The starting point of expeditions trying to reach Persia was the port of Laias, the most prosperous city and the largest port of the small Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. Marco Polo describes Laias as follows:

[in the Kingdom of Cilicia] There is a city on the sea named Laias, where you can find abundance of goods: all the spices coming from far inland are traded there, and Venetian and Genoese merchants move spices, clothes, wool and all sort of wares from that city to everywhere else. All the merchants who want to move inland must start their routes from this city.²⁷

The city of Laiazzo, as the Italians called it, became during the second half of the thirteenth century, one of the most important ports of the eastern Mediterranean basin. Polo mentioned

²⁶ *Monumenta Historiae Patriae edita iussu regi Caroli Alberti, Leges Municipales* ed. Regia Deputazione di Storia Patria, (Torino, 1838), p.222.

²⁷ *Milione*, XIV, p.16. The translation from the original edited text is mine.

the port several times during his narration, and stopped in the city at least twice during his trip to China in 1271.²⁸

The study of Italian presence in Laias conducted on notarial documents found a substantial amount of transactions in the second half of the thirteenth century: we have eleven Genoese and thirteen Venetian *accommedacio* contracts registered in the city between 1274 and 1280.²⁹ According to estimates, Genoese notarial documents compiled in Laias in just three years (1274-1277) contain 684 personal names.³⁰

Italian contracts make up a sizeable part of commercial documents we have for that period in Laias, while percentages are much lower in the nearby Cyprus. This may not mean much, but if we cross reference these data with those of Pegolotti concerning the goods traded in both cities, we can easily see that Laias functioned as the doorstep of a wider trading network, stretching all the way from Italy to Persia and Egypt: in short, that Italians went to Cilicia because they were going elsewhere.³¹ As Froux remarks, in fact, the goods imported in the city probably came from Italy or southern France and were distributed all over the Levantine coast. It is impossible to find such large quantities of imported oil and grain anywhere in the Levant at the time.³² Italians also sold iron, manufactured items and clothes. On the contrary, Pegolotti

²⁸ *Milione*, III, IV, XIV, pp.7,8,16.

²⁹ Balletto L. *Notai Genovesi in Oltremare, atti rogati a Laiazzo da Federico di Piazzalunga (1274) e Pietro di Bargone (1277, 1279)*, (Genova, 1989).

³⁰ C. Otten-Froux, 'Les relations économiques entre Chypre et le royaume arménien de Cilicie d'après les actes notariés (1270-1320)'. *L'Arménie et Byzance: Histoire et culture: Byzantina Sorbonensia* 12 (1996): 157-179, pp.174-176 ; C. Otten-Froux, 'Laias dans le dernier tiers du XIIIe siècle d'après les notaires génois', *The medieval Levant: studies in memory of Eliyahu Ashtor (1914-1984)*, (Haïfa, 1988), p. 152.

³¹ Heyd dedicates an entire chapter to Laias, describing Cilicia as the main access to Persia. , W. Heyd, *Histoire du commerce du Levant au moyen-âge*. Vol. 1. (Leipzig, 1885), Chapter II C. *La Petite Arménie ,considérée comme vestibule de l'Asie Centrale*, p.73-92.

³² C. Otten Froux, 'Les relations économiques', pp. 35-36. Traffic increased especially after the first decade of the fourteenth century.

does not mention valuable local goods except from cotton; instead, he insists on fees and prices for the transport of spices, fine clothes and silk, products clearly coming from elsewhere.³³ This wide discrepancy between inbound and outbound trade in the city, as we will see, is a sign of the fact that Laias began to acquire importance as a transit station towards the east rather than a commercial hub in its own right.³⁴

Since the reign of Levon II (r.1270-1289), privileges were accorded to Venetian and Genoese merchants, although Venice had a predominant political position in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. In 1288 Genoa renegotiated the agreements with Levon in exchange for military help against pirates and Mamluks. The Republic sent a small fleet commanded by Benedetto Zaccaria.³⁵ Around that time we have also quite a few information about Genoese buildings in the city:³⁶in 1289 a Genoese *loggia* (palace) is mentioned in a contract signed at the beginning of the reign of Hethum II.³⁷ Venetian privileges, although much older than Genoese ones, were also confirmed by Levon II in 1271 and his son Hethum II (r.1289-1307) in 1307.³⁸

Ciocîltan states that the Cilician port had a progressive decline due to its precarious political position and the submission of the Armenian kings to the Mamluks, which caused a shift of

³³ *La pratica della mercatura*, p. 62.

³⁴ See final remarks.

³⁵ *Le trésor des chartes d'Arménie: ou, Cartulaire de la chancellerie royale des Roupéniens: comprenant tous les documents relatifs aux établissements fondés en Cilicie par les ordres de chevalerie institués pendant les croisades et par les républiques marchandes de l'Italie, etc.* ed. V. Langlois, (Paris, 1863), pp.126-128, 156.

³⁶ L. Balletto *Notai Genovesi in Oltremare*, pp.198,174,398.

³⁷See M. Balard, *Notai genovesi in oltremare: Atti rogati a Cipro de Lamberto di Sambuceto (11 ottobre 1296-23 giugno 1299)*, (Genova, 1983).

³⁸ *Diplomatarium Veneto-Levantinum sive acta et diplomata res Venetas, Graecas atque Levantis illustrantia a 1300-1350.* (Monumenti storici pubblicati dalla R. Deputazione Veneta di Storia patria, vol. V-Serie I) ed. C. Cipolla, (Venezia,1881), p.38.

trade on the Trebizond-Tabriz route.³⁹ This is, in my opinion, not entirely correct: firstly, the fact that Armenian Kings paid tribute to the Mamluks did not make them subjects of Cairo. Until 1291 the kingdom kept paying a double tribute, remaining a vassal under the protection of the Ilkhanate.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the embargo of 1291 against the Mamluks, as we will demonstrate in the next chapter, will further increase the importance of the port: in 1297, there was an important battle between Venetian and Genoese in front of the port of Lais, which testify the centrality of the city in the interests of the two republics.

Lastly, the reason why Genoese merchants were also very active on a northern route was, in my opinion, quite simple: the intermittent conflicts with Venice reignited in the last decade of the thirteenth century, so they tried to exploit areas in which they had the protection of several allies. This does not mean that Genoese traders disappeared from the southern Lais-Tabriz route: on the contrary, their presence is testified by the fact that they received several privileges from the kings of Cilicia even after 1305-07, the years in which Lais was sacked by the Mamluks and the Kingdom of Cilicia entered in a period of political turmoil that would last until 1320. Still after that date, trade in Cilicia would continue to prosper, as the embargo against Egypt was renewed in the second decade of the fourteenth century, making the city one of the main entrepôts in the Levant until it fell permanently to the Mamluks in 1337.

³⁹ V. Ciocîltan, *The Mongols and the Black Sea Trade in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, (Leiden, 2012), p.49.

⁴⁰ C. Mutafian, *L'Arménie du Levant (XI e-xiv e siècle)*. Tome II (Paris, 2012), p.173.

III. TABRIZ

As concerns Tabriz, the testament of Pietro Viglioni, a Venetian merchant, is the earliest sign of Italian presence in Tabriz in our possession, and it was written in the city as early as 1263.⁴¹

At the redaction of the testament, several more Italians are present, coming from other cities like Pisa or Piacenza.⁴² However, as Heyd remarks, if the city had a permanent colony by then, Viglioni would have left his goods in custody of the local *bailo* (magistrate) instead of that of Acre: the year 1263 is a very early date to expect some sort of structured development.⁴³ There are several other mention of Italians in the city between 1263 and 1294, the year in which Marco Polo reaches Tabriz for the second time during his trip back to Italy from China.

The earliest mention of Genoese presence in Tabriz is a document published by Gheorghe Brătianu: a letter from Luchetto de Recco to the fellow merchant Lamba Doria, in which the former demand his compatriot to meet in Sivas or Tabriz to settle a debt with him.⁴⁴ Other Genoese documents similarly concern commercial matters: reimbursements and the settlement of debts in three documents from 1289 to 1292 and the hiring of a falconer on the Trebizond-Tabriz route.⁴⁵ There is also a letter of thanks from Pope Nicolas IV (p.1288-1292) to a Pisan nobleman (*Iolus* or perhaps *Jolus*?) who helped Franciscan missionaries to proselytize in the city, providing them with ‘consilium, auxilium et favorem’.⁴⁶

⁴¹ *Testamento di Pietro Vioni Veneziano fatto a Tauris*, Archivio Veneto, XIII, XXVI, Parte I, (Venezia, 1883), p.161.

⁴² Archivio Veneto, XIII, XXVI, p.161. Paviot states that one of the testimonies is French, without providing any evidence of the fact, J. Paviot, ‘Les marchands’, p.74.

⁴³ W. Heyd *Histoire du Commerce du Levant*, pp.94-97.

⁴⁴ G. Brătianu, *Recherches sur le commerce génois dans la mer Noire au XIIIe siècle. Avec 5 planches et une carte*, (Paris, 1929), p.315.

⁴⁵ G. Brătianu, *Actes des notaires de Pera et Caffa*, p.257, 286-87 ; Balard, *Les actes*, p. 129. 192

⁴⁶ J.L. Von Mosheim, *Historia tartarorum ecclesiastica*. (Leipzig, 1741), app. 97.

The first part of the decade ranging from 1280 to 1290 was, in fact, quite a hard one for Christians: a persecution unleashed by the Ilkhanid usurper Tegüther in 1282 must have stopped commercial penetration for a while. However, it was after the enthronement of Arghun that Italian trade really started to flourish. According to Petech we can observe a close cooperation between Genoese merchants and the Ilkhan, that could have led to the establishment of a permanent colony.⁴⁷

In 1294 Polo describes the city as full of Genoese merchants attracted by the thriving economy and the availability of precious goods. According to Polo and to the bishop of Soltanieh Guillelmus Adae who writes around 1317, the Genoese started several projects with the approval of the Arghun Khan (r.1284-1291), including arming galleys to safeguard the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea coasts and preparing an expedition in Baghdad along the Euphrates and Tigris rivers to damage Mamluk's trade with India.⁴⁸ All in all, we can clearly see that Genoese presence in the city was established earlier, with documents ranging from the 1280s to the end of the 1290s.⁴⁹ Venetian presence, after a first but small penetration, comes with quite a delay: the first official documents concerning the relations between the Republic and the Ilkhanate date to the first decade of the fourteenth century. By then, both Venice and Genoa felt the need to regulate their presence in the city: the already mentioned *Officium Gazarie* devolved much of the administrative affairs of the city to the consul and to 24 wise men, in charge of every

⁴⁷ L. Petech, 'Les marchands italiens dans l'Empire Mongol' *Journal asiatique* vol. 250 (1962) 549-574, p.561.

⁴⁸ The origin of Adae is debated. In *Recueil des historiens des croisades* (RHC) he is described as either French or Albanian. He was bishop of Soltanieh from 1318 to 1329. The Genoese expedition eventually failed because of internal rivalries within the Genoese community (Guelphs- Ghibellines feuds). Guillelmus Adae, *De modo Sarracenos extirpandi* (1316-17) in *Recueil des historiens des croisades: documents arméniens*, Vol II. ed. E. Dulaurier, (Paris,1869), p.551; *Milione*, XVII, p.22.

⁴⁹ Although, according to Paviot, the Republic sent the merchants Pietro Viadro and Simeone Avianturo as early as 1286, we do not know the purpose of their expedition. J. Paviot, 'Les marchands', p.74.

aspect of Genoese trade in the city.⁵⁰ Venice also had an institutional presence in the city: documents testify the presence of a consul and the existence of a numerous community by 1320.⁵¹ Furthermore, the Serenissima sent several embassies to the Ilkhans, 1305, 1320, 1323, 1327, 1328, 1329, and again in 1342: the two treaties of 1305 and of 1320 are particularly important as they regulate legal and commercial relations between Venetian citizens and local magistrates.⁵² The sizeable number of official documents concerning Venetian-Ilkhanid relations could be the result of the shifting alliances in the Black Sea region, with Venice establishing its own colony in Soldaia, and the willingness of the Republic to compensate for the Genoese advantage.⁵³

If Venetians notably increased their presence, traces of other Italians can be found until 1344, even if the *Officium Gazarie* eventually forbade Genoese trade in the city in 1341:⁵⁴ we also know of the signatures of four merchants from Piacenza, a Pisan and one Genoese on two powers of attorney dated respectively 1328 and 1332.⁵⁵ Genoese names are also present among the testimony of an inquiry conducted in 1331 on the heresy of some Franciscans, among other merchants from Milan, Florence, Piacenza, Asti.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ 'Item quod consul Taurisii debeat stare in regimine consulatus per menses sex [...] Item quod perdictum dominum consulem Taurisii et consilium suorum uigintiquatuor [...]' *Monumenta Historiae Patriae*, pp.222-223.

⁵¹ *Diplomatarium Veneto-Levanticum*, p.192.

⁵² *Diplomatarium Veneto-Levanticum*, pp.173, 192, 209, 222.

⁵³ N. Di Cosmo, 'Mongols and Merchants', p.410.

⁵⁴ The Genoese merchant Tommasino Gentile was probably forced to stop in the city after a shipwreck along Persian coasts on his way to China. He was then put to trial by the *Officium Gazarie*, but eventually absolved. ASGE Notai antichi, 33, c. 223v published by R.S. Lopez, *Su e giù per la storia di Genova*. Vol. 20. Università di Genova. Istituto di paleografia e storia medievale, (Genova 1975), XII. p. 134-135;

⁵⁵ H. Bautier, 'Les relations économiques des occidentaux avec des pays d'Orient', in J. Delumeau, J. Richard. *Sociétés et compagnies de commerce en Orient et dans l'Océan Indien*, (Cambridge,1968), p. 326.

⁵⁶ G. P. Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell'Oriente francescano*, Vol.3, (Firenze 1906), p.436-438.

IV. SOME REMARKS

While analysing Italian presence and Italian trade routes between the Mediterranean Basin and Persia, one must keep in mind that any differentiation between short-distance and long-distance trade does not have much relevance. For example Froux states that Cypriote-Armenian trade connections were often overshadowed by the importance given to long-distance trade routes.⁵⁷ This is probably true, but we must keep in mind that Italian trade with Cilicia owed its very existence to those routes (and to those with Egypt and Syria) and it can only be studied and understood in that bigger frame. Why would Italian merchants go all the way to Cyprus to export oil or grain? They could have easily sold those products (as they did, indeed) to northern European markets at the same price. In several passages of *La Pratica della mercatura*, especially in those concerning tolls and transport, it is quite evident that Italian merchants (and probably other merchants as well) conceived trade routes as some sort of strings of pearls, in which every station had its own needs of different wares.⁵⁸ If a merchant moving from point A to point C found out that one of his wares could be sold in point B with a decent margin of profit he would immediately sell and buy something else he could make a profit of in the next stop. That is precisely what we are looking at when we analyse exchanges between Cyprus and Cilicia, but also applies to all the Italian trade along the silk road.

I also wish to make some final consideration about my interpretation of the sources in the period 1280-1320. During the third quarter of the thirteenth century Venice seemed to have an advantage in establishing contacts with the early Ilkhanate. Both the testament of Pietro Viglioni and the first trip of the Polo brothers date from around 1263-1264. The situation,

⁵⁷ C. Otten Froux, 'Les relations économiques', p.157.

⁵⁸ One of the examples of this is *La Pratica della Mercatura*, p.23. Pegolotti suggest to his readers to sell their clothes in Urghench and exchange them with silver, that they could exchange with paper money in China to buy silk.

however, had probably already changed by the second half of the 1260s. A war with Genoa, which started in Outremer in 1256, and the reconquest of Constantinople in 1261 must have dealt a heavy blow to Venetian interests in the East by cutting off Black Sea routes at least until the 1268 treaty with Byzantium. In their second trip in 1271, the Polo Brothers were forced to make a detour through Lais instead of taking the Tana route which was, according to Pegolotti, by far the shortest path to China. It is reasonable to think that Venetian trade in the Black Sea was critically weakened in the decades ranging from 1261 to the end of the century: the mass killing of Venetian citizens instigated by the Genoese in Constantinople in 1294 was the reason why the Polo could not take the Black Sea route back to Italy that year and probably also explains why the first Venetian privileges in the city of Trebizond, according to Heyd and De Simoni, do not appear before the first two decades of the fourteenth century.⁵⁹

It is from around 1280 that Genoa replaces its rival in Tabriz, although it is striking that we have very little official documentation on Genoese presence in the city: This is partly due to the different commercial strategies adopted. In this first period, as I will try to demonstrate in the following chapters, Genoese probably excelled in terms of cooperation with local rulers and private entrepreneurship, acting mainly as private citizens rather than collectively: this gave them an edge, smothering economic relations. The Venetians, on the contrary, started contacts with a more structured approach, leaning on the rudimentary diplomatic infrastructure of the Republic. Lastly, in a final period ranging from the second decade of the fourteenth century to about 1342-44, both Genoa and Venice leaned to a more institutional approach to trade with the Ilkhanate. This could be partly due to the fragile political situation of the Ilkhanate and to the growing intolerance towards Christian in Persia.

⁵⁹ Brătianu *Recherches*, p.270; Milione, II, p.2 ; *La pratica della mercatura*, p. 21-22; *I conti dell'ambasciata*, p.553; W. Heyd, *Geschichte des Levantehandels im Mittelalter*. Vol. 2, (Stuttgart, 1879), p.101.

CHAPTER II

WHY THE ILKHANATE? ROUTES, GOODS, TOLLS AND TRANSPORT

In the second chapter of my work I wish to address, as far as the sources I have consulted allow me, the economic aspects of Italian presence in the city of Tabriz and in the Ilkhanate. These include the routes used, the tolls paid, the goods traded and the expected revenues. All these elements can be practically summarised by the one single question: why did Italians extensively expand their trade network towards eastern Anatolia and Persia?

I. COSTS AND BENEFITS

The first logical explanation that has been provided by historians is that, especially after 1291, it was economically convenient for Venetian and Genoese to bypass their Middle Eastern intermediaries and therefore increase the margin of profit on goods coming from Asia, because of the growing hostility and competition with the Mamluk Sultanate.⁶⁰

This interpretation relies mainly on two main points: firstly, it implies that the prohibition of trade with the Mamluks issued in 1291 by pope Nicolas IV in response to Mamluk's offensive on the Kingdom of Jerusalem had negative effects on Italian exports in the Levant, forcing the merchants to find an alternative route to export manufactured products. Secondly, it implies

⁶⁰ V. Ciocîltan, *The Mongols and the Black Sea*, p.47-49; Ashtor, *Levant Trade*, p.17-18.

that Italians in Persia continued to buy and sell the same goods they were exchanging with Egypt.⁶¹

My Idea is that too much emphasis has been put on the papal embargo on Egypt as a cause of the increased Italian trade with Persia. Guillelmus Adae, in the first decade of the fourteen century, mentions how several Genoese were excommunicated ‘Pro Facto Alexandriae’ and attacks Genoese for supplying the Mamluks with Christian slaves and all sort of manufactured goods to improve their army and navy.⁶² The Venetians were also very active in the area, organised annual convoys to Alexandria and even concluded a new treaty with the sultans of Cairo in 1302. They were also later exempted by the pope from the embargo, under certain conditions.⁶³ Furthermore, even if prohibited to go to Mamluk held Egypt or Syria, Italian could export goods in Cyprus and Cilicia and sell them to Egyptian or Syrian traders on local markets. This is further testified by the increasing importance of the port of Famagusta in exchanges with Egypt.⁶⁴ As concerns Lais, we know that in 1305 there were about 2000 Muslim merchants trading in the city.⁶⁵

Lastly, by consulting Pegolotti and making some calculations, one quickly realises that Egypt was a, in general, a more convenient market than Persia, even in the first half of the fourteenth century.⁶⁶ Surely the tolls on goods sold in Alexandria were, according to Pegolotti, very high

⁶¹ E. Ashtor, *Levant Trade*, p. 43, 57.

⁶² *De modo*, pp. 531, 553.

⁶³ D. Jacoby, *Between Venice and Alexandria: Trade and the Movement of Precious Metals in the Early Mamluk Period*. The Middle East Documentation Center (Chicago, 2018). p.116-117; 134.

⁶⁴ See D. Jacoby *Studies on the crusader states and on Venetian expansion*, (London, 2017) Chapter VII: ‘The Rise of a New Emporium in the Eastern Mediterranean: Famagusta in the Late Thirteenth Century’

⁶⁵ We could not consult the source that Ciocîltan cites, probably *Abū'l-Fidā*: this, however, demonstrates that the presence of Muslim merchants in those areas was quite common. Ciocîltan, *The Mongols and the Black Sea*, p.148.

⁶⁶ E. Ashtor, *Levant Trade*, p.57.

(about 20%); however, the costs of transportation and the tolls to be paid in the stations and caravanserais from Lajas or Trebizond to Tabriz made up for the difference and even surpassed the cost of shipping goods from Italy to Egypt.⁶⁷ For instance, a merchant carrying the same amount of goods to Alexandria and to Tabriz would have been forced to pay the shipping and a tax on the sold goods in the first, amounting to roughly from 25 to 30 golden florins on goods worth 100 florins. In Tabriz, tolls decreased dramatically, and amounted to a mere 5 florins to be paid on a worth of 100 florins, both on import and export. However, the costs of transportation included both a sea route and an overland route, and were quite impressive. Just the tolls on the stations from Lajas to Tabriz amounted to 11 golden florins *per soma*, meaning for each pack animal. Furthermore, to this amount one should add the costs of living for the entire caravan, customary tolls to pay in the caravanserais, and the shipping costs from Italy to Lajas or Trebizond.⁶⁸

II. THE ROUTES

Travel times and routes were also very important at the time, and were surely a decisive factor when foreseeing the profit of an investment. One could estimate a trip from Italy to Syria or Alexandria could last, in the thirteenth century, from fifteen days to about a maximum of a month.⁶⁹ The well-known traveler Ibn Jubayr, for instance, sailed from Acre in 1184-1185 on a Genoese round-bottom commercial ship and was shipwrecked in Sicily about a month and

⁶⁷ *La Pratica della mercatura*, p.65.

⁶⁸ *La Pratica della mercatura*, p.25-28; 64-65. To calculate the exchange rates between different currencies we used Pegolotti's equivalences: 1 Persian bezant was 1/3 of a golden Florentine Florin, while one Mamluk bezant roughly corresponded to 1 and 1/6 Florin.

⁶⁹ G. Moše. *Jews in Islamic countries in the Middle Ages*, (Leiden, 2004), p.564

ten days after his departure, despite adverse winds.⁷⁰ Traveling to Persia was certainly more time-consuming: the trip from Italy to Lais would last about the same as the ones to Egypt or Syria; from Italy to Trebizond even more. As concerns the overland itineraries, I deemed relevant to analyze two important sources that report the possible routes to arrive in Tabriz.

Several historians and expert archaeologist tried to identify the stops along the way to Persia mainly using in Pegolotti's work, with no little disagreement if we exclude the most recognizable names. Heyd and, in recent times, Thomas Sinclair and Jacques Paviot tried to describe the Lais-Tabriz route. I tried to present a synthesis of these accounts, reporting the main parts of the itinerary as Sinclair interprets it and comparing it with another important source. Rather than try to pinpoint every single spot I will be making some observations on Pegolotti's itinerary by dividing it in four main parts, hoping this division could be helpful in the understanding of the commercial routes at the time.

The journey of an Italian merchant from Lais to Tabriz according to Pegolotti counted twenty-seven stops excluding the starting point and the arrival.⁷¹ The most important cities on the path were in order Sivas, Erzincan and Erzurum. If we look at a map of the area, the easiest path for a modern traveller would be to reach Iran by cutting through northern Mesopotamia. However, at the time this implied two major difficulties: first, the crossing of the Taurus mountains in a border area between the Kingdom of Cilicia and the Mamluks, second, the trip through semi-desertic areas in northern Syria and Iraq, an area ravaged by the Mamluk-Ilkhanid conflict.⁷² We can safely say that the route proposed by Pegolotti was the easiest at the time

⁷⁰ See K., Yaacov, and I. Jabour. 'The westbound passage of Ibn Jubayr from Acre to Cartagena in 1184–1185.' *Al-Masāq* 22.1 (2010): 79-101.

⁷¹ *La Pratica della mercatura*, p.28.

⁷² The Mamluks sacked the Armenian city of Hromkla on the Euphrates (modern-day Rumkale) in the area in 1292, causing great shock in Cilicia and capturing the head of Armenian Church, the Catholicos.

and therefore the most common. Following Sinclair's interpretation, we can define the four parts of the itinerary: Departing from Laias, the voyager stopped in *Colidara*, easily identified as modern day Kadirli. Once crossed the Taurus the road would continue north reaching two important caravanserais along the border between the Ilkhanate and the Seljuk domains. The first and probably most famous one is the Sultan Han, built in the first decades of the thirteenth century by the sultans of Rûm, and named by Pegolotti *Gavazera del Soldano*.⁷³ The role of caravanserais and the tolls paid at these stations was very important in the Ilkhanid economic system, as we will stress later: the fact that Pegolotti mentions explicitly four of them on the route to Tabriz is quite significant.⁷⁴ Upon reaching the city of Sivas, in which the Genoese had established a consulate as early as 1280,⁷⁵ the merchant would then begin the second part of the trip, moving eastward, reaching the city of Erzincan by crossing the mountainous inner Anatolia at modern-day Kemah, just south of Bayburt. From Erzincan, the merchant could travel to Erzurum with relative ease, presumably passing through a couple of caravanserais outside the city, mentioned by Pegolotti as *Gavazera* and *Bagni di Arzerone*. From Erzurum, the final part of the trip remains the most difficult to identify: Sinclair quite convincingly proves that the city called *Calacresti* by Pegolotti must be Ağrı, north of Lake Van. After a few stops from there, the Florentine merchant mentions *Arcanoé*, clearly identified as mount Ararat on

⁷³ P. Blessing, *Rebuilding Anatolia after the Mongol Conquest: Islamic Architecture in the Lands of Rum, 1240–1330*, (London, 2016), pp.174-175.

⁷⁴ Other places mentioned by Pegolotti have been identified as caravanserais by Sinclair, but we cannot be sure about those toponyms. See. T. Sinclair, *Eastern Trade and the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages: Pegolotti's Ayas-Tabriz Itinerary and its Commercial Context*. (London, 2019), Chapters 1-2.

⁷⁵ 'Statuti della colonia genovese di Pera' *Miscellanea di storia italiana XI* ed. V. Promis (Turin, 1870), CCXLVIII, p. 761.

the southern banks of lake Van. This means that the group reached the southern Caucasus and then moved southward towards the city of Tabriz from the north.⁷⁶

If we compare Pegolotti's stops with those of another important document, *I Conti dell'Ambasciata al Chan di Persia*, we can easily reconstruct the last part of the itinerary for both. *I Conti*, as we already mentioned, deals with the expenses of a group of men sent by the king of England Edward I to Persia in the years 1290-1292. The expedition led by an English nobleman Geoffrey Langley, presumably departed from Genoa at the end of 1290 accompanied by Buscarello de' Ghisolfi, a renowned Italian merchant at the court of the Ilkhans.⁷⁷

The document is nothing more than a dry report of expenses made and places visited. Nevertheless, it provides useful information on the trade made along the way, and mentions that the company was hosted several times by Genoese merchant residing in the cities visited. It also confirms, in my opinion, that the routes from Trebizond and Lajas overlapped at some point. Following the indications on the documents, we can reconstruct that the party reached Trebizond from Constantinople and stopped in the city for a while. From there, they took the inland route to central Anatolia and Tabriz, stopping in Bayburt, not very far from the stop identified by Sinclair with the city of Kemah in Pegolotti's itinerary. From there, to the indication on how they reached Tabriz are very confusing, as several parts of the document are missing. We know for sure that the group stopped in Erzurum on its way to Tabriz, and reached a place called *Argis* before entering in Persia. The name *Argis*, as Desimoni reports, was the

⁷⁶ As mentioned, Desimoni infers that several places on the route were fortified by the Genoese, with mutual agreements with local rulers and the Ilkhans. *I conti dell'ambasciata*, p.33; M. G. Canale, *Nuova istoria della Repubblica di Genova, del suo commercio e della sua letteratura, dalle origini all'anno 1797*, v. 2, (Firenze, 1860), p.458.; L. Petech, 'Les marchands', p. 552.

⁷⁷ J. Paviot, 'Buscarello de' Ghisolfi, marchand génois intermédiaire entre la Perse mongole et la Chrétienté latine (fin du XIII^{me}-début du XIV^{me} siècles)', *La Storia dei Genovesi*, XI (Genova, 1991), 107-117.

ancient name of Lake Van, meaning that the Itinerary of Buscarello and his companions from this point is very close to that of Pegolotti (about a hundred kilometres from mount Ararat) if the two are not coincident.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the stop in Erzurum seems an obligatory one in both routes, signifying the importance of the city in Anatolian overland trade.⁷⁹ Finally, it is also very probable that both expeditions took a southern route from Van, reaching Khoy and eventually Tabriz along the lake Urmia. This contradicts the thesis of Jacques Paviot, who states that the two itineraries took completely different routes to the city.⁸⁰

If we consider the travel times for both itineraries, according to Pegolotti going on horseback from the Black Sea to Tabriz took about 12-13 days, and with a caravan about 30 days.⁸¹ Oddly, the Florentine merchant does not report the estimated travel time for the Lais-Tabriz route, but, given the above, we can state that it was probably even more challenging in terms of time, considering that it was several hundreds of kilometers longer.

If we add the prohibitive travel times and the estimated costs, Persia did not look like the ideal market for Italians. If we also consider that, at least until the first decade of the fourteenth century, documents suggest a privileged position of Italians in the Levant and an almost absolute absence of trade privileges in inland Turkey and Persia, the answer to the question ‘why Persia?’ must be searched elsewhere.⁸²

⁷⁸ *I conti dell'ambasciata*, p.75; Sinclair states that clearly also Argis must have been on Pegolotti's route T. Sinclair, ‘Some Conclusions on the Use of Coins on the Ayas-Tabriz Route (Late 13th and First Half of 14th Century AD).’ *Publications de l'Institut Français d'Études Anatoliennes* 25.1 (2012): 87-103, p.92

⁷⁹ See P. Blessing, *Rebuilding Anatolia*, chapter III; T.A. Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey: An Architectural & Archaeological Survey*, Vol.2, p.286. Sinclair stresses how Ibn Battuta describes the decadent state of the city in the 1330s, a period in which traffics with the West start to drastically reduce in the Ilkhanate.

⁸⁰ J. Paviot, ‘Les marchands’, p.72.

⁸¹ *La Pratica della mercatura*, p. 29

⁸² We have already analysed several privileges accorded to Italian merchants all over the Levant before the fourteenth century. The first Persian privilege was signed in 1306.

III. BUYING IN TABRIZ

Once determined that big shipments to Persia were not more economically advantageous than cross-Mediterranean trade, the explanation of the steady increase of Italian commercial presence in the region can be probably found in the nature of Italian trade.

A passage about the Tabriz in Marco Polo's travels give us some hints on the nature of goods a merchant could buy in the city:

Merchants go [in Tabriz] from all over the places: Latin merchants there especially seek strange wares, coming from distant places, and they make great profit out of them. In the city one can find many precious stones.⁸³

Pegolotti's treatise seems to confirm what Polo states: in his work he lists the most commonly traded goods for the most important trading emporia in Europe and in the Middle East, providing the reader with the correspondent measures and weights in Venice or Genoa.⁸⁴ In Tabriz, it is particularly striking the complete absence of the least expensive goods. We know, for instance, that Persia had a sizeable production of wool, cotton, ceramic tiles and other less expensive goods under the Ilkhanid rule.

Cotton cultivations, for instance, had been extensively introduced in Persia by the Khwārazm: the production was probably not as high as that of Egypt or Syria, but it is peculiar that Italians never took interest in the export of cotton from the region.⁸⁵ During the period we analyse Venetians and Genoese mainly bought cotton in Cilicia and on the coasts of Syria and Lebanon: even in the midst of an embargo, in 1304, Venice negotiated a treaty concerning the export of cotton with the Mamluk Sultan without even conceiving a similar agreement with the Ilkhanate:

⁸³*Milione*, XX, p.22.

⁸⁴ Concerning London and the South of England, for example, he clearly mentions tin, wax, almonds, wool and rice, product that were widely produced in the area. F. Pegolotti, *La Pratica della mercatura*, p.255.

⁸⁵ Sir H.A.R. Gibb, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol.1. (Leiden, 1980), p.556-558.

cotton is even absent in the list of wares Pegolotti mentions when talking about Tabriz.⁸⁶ We also know from Marco Polo that another precious but rather encumbering resource was traded with India rather than Europe. Persian horses, amongst the finest in the world, did not reach the Mediterranean. The costs of transportation would have been disproportionate to sell a commodity that would have not been fully appreciated by European elites, accustomed to different kinds of horses.⁸⁷

If we compare the goods traded in Alexandria with those of Tabriz, we can certainly notice that that the volume of Italian trade in the Egypt was probably much bigger and therefore its nature was a more generic one. If in the pages dedicated to the city of Tabriz Pegolotti only deals with prices and measures for indigo, pearls, silk, coral, cinnabar, fine spices and pelts of exotic animals, those goods are also mentioned among the wares sold in Alexandria, but among hundreds of other less expensive goods, like aloe, cotton, dates and dry fruits.⁸⁸ Pegolotti also mentions that pearls and silver wares are exempted from taxes in Persia and the testament of Pietro Viglioni lists several strings of pearl among the propriety of the merchant, attesting that Italians already dealt in pearls at least since the second half of the thirteenth century.⁸⁹

In the last chapter of his work on Pegolotti's routes, Sinclair compares the data concerning products available in Tabriz and in Laias, analysing the nature of the products arriving in the Armenian port from the east. Again, there is no trace of common or inexpensive wares: indigo,

⁸⁶ *La Pratica della mercatura*, p.27

⁸⁷ *Milione*, CLXXII, p.248.

⁸⁸ *La Pratica della mercatura*, p.26-27; Peter Jackson mentions a passage from a Marino Sanudo, in which the Venetian, advocating for a crusade against Egypt, states how Persian luxury items are superior to Egyptian ones, as the latter are ruined by the long sea journey. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West* p.312.

⁸⁹ Archivio Veneto, XIII, XXVI, p.161.

several varieties of silk, Persian gold-worked clothes and pearls dominate Sinclair's list.⁹⁰ The same goods and fine spices are attested in Trebizond in the same period by notarial acts.⁹¹

In short, it seems that Italians preferred expensive and easily transportable wares. This was partly due to the prohibitive transportation costs mentioned above, but it is also connected, in my opinion, to the high expectations of fellow investors. Even a single travel to Persia was expected to yield great revenues, therefore an optimisation of investments was necessary. In the case of the Loredan expedition to India reported by Lopez, for example, we know that pearls bought by one of the merchants were shipped in France when he decided to leave his companion in Urghench and come back. This was probably a wise choice because, according to the merchant, they were sold with a huge margin of profit in comparison with his companions.⁹² Concerning silk, if in Italy the prices of raw silk remained relatively low, in continental Europe the so called *panni tartarici* had a great success among the aristocratic elites. Such clothes, often weaved in Lucca using raw material coming from Persia, were present then in Flanders and various pieces reached Rome and London even before the fourteenth century.⁹³ To give a few example, in 1294 Isabelle the Luxembourg purchased

⁹⁰ Caspian silk coming from Central Asia was preferable to that coming from China for the inferior transportation costs. Ashtor, *Levant Trade*, p.60. See Conclusions in T. Sinclair, *Eastern Trade and the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages: Pegolotti's Ayas-Tabriz Itinerary and its Commercial Context*, (London, 2019)

⁹¹ Ashtor, *Levant trade*, p.63.

⁹² The pearls sold were worth about 17000 bezants each merchant got an equal share of them. 'o vendudo asset meio le mie cosse che non a fato algun de loro, perch'io le mandie in Franza', Archivio di Stato, Venezia, Procuratori di San Marco, Misti, Busta 122 in Lopez, *European Merchants in the medieval Indies*, p.179

⁹³ D. Jacoby, 'Oriental Silks at the Time of the Mongols: Patterns of Trade and Distribution in the West' in *Oriental Silks in Medieval Europe. Riggisberger Berichte 21.* (2014): 92-123, p.105; J. Preiser-Kapeller, 'Civitas Thauris. The Significance of Tabriz in the Spatial Frameworks of Christian Merchants and Ecclesiastics in the 13th and 14th Centuries', in J. Pfeiffer, *Politics, Patronage*, p.258; See also A. E. Wardwell, 'Panni Tartarici, eastern Islamic Silks Woven with Gold and Silver (13th and 14th centuries)' *Islamic Art* 3 (1989): 95-173.

Caspian Silk via an Italian intermediary at a very prohibitive cost, and a silk robe belonging to the Ilkhan Abu Sa'id has been found in the tomb of the Rudolph IV von Habsburg.⁹⁴

IV. SELLING IN TABRIZ

Italian exports in Persia were probably very different from those in Egypt for several reasons. Firstly, the Ilkhanate, unlike the Mamluk Sultanate, did not rely on European or Mediterranean markets for the import of certain basic goods. This is simply because its ties stretched towards East Asian markets and the other Mongol *ulus*. If it is incorrect to talk about a 'Mongol Eurasian system', we can certainly state that the commercial links of the Ilkhanid world with China were much stronger than those with Europe or the Mediterranean.⁹⁵

If the Ilkhanate did not need European markets to thrive, Mongol courts all over Eurasia greatly appreciated western craftsmanship. Two episodes we know of are particularly significant in this sense: around 1254, William of Rubruck vividly describes a mechanical fountain built for the Great Khan by a Parisian artisan probably named Guillaume and positioned at the centre of the great hall of the palace in Karakorum.⁹⁶ Almost a hundred years later, the brothers Loredan,

⁹⁴ S. Farmer, *The silk industries of medieval Paris: artisanal migration, technological innovation, and gendered experience*. (Boston, 2016), p.39; concerning the funeral robe of Rudolph IV see M. Ritter, and L. Korn. 'Kunst mit Botschaft: Der Gold-Seide-Stoff für den Ilchan Abū Sa'īd von Iran (Grabgewand Rudolfs IV. in Wien)–Rekonstruktion, Typus, Repräsentationsmedium', *Iran and the Caucasus* 13.2 (2010): 105-135.

⁹⁵ See M. Favereau, 'The Mongol Peace and Global Medieval Eurasia', *Comparativ* 28.4 (2018): 49-70; E. Tagliacozzo, H. F. Siu, and P. C. Perdue *Asia Inside Out: Connected Places*. (Cambridge, Mass, 2015) p.130

⁹⁶ W. Van Ruysbroeck, *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World, 1253-55: As Narrated by Himself, with Two Accounts of the Earlier Journey of John of Pian de Carpine*. (London, 1900), p.208

travelling to India in 1338, decided to carry with them a clock and a little fountain, clearly either as gifts or wares to trade.⁹⁷

In 1263, in Tabriz, the testament of Pietro Viglioni gives some explanation on exported goods. Here is a list of some of the most notable items that the Venetian merchant wished to sell in the city: altogether, they are worth about 4'000 Tabrizi bezants roughly corresponding to a thousand gold florins.⁹⁸

- ‘Tauleri eletaule lavorate de christallo e di diaspado edargiento, e di pietre e di perle’: Viglioni refers here to two chess tables. They are made of lead glass, precious stones, jasper, silver and pearls.
- A horse saddle, covered with the same stones used for the chess tables, with a caparison made of silk with golden embroideries.
- A lead glass and silver vial and several crystal and silver cups.
- Pelts of wild animals, probably bought on the Black Sea coast.
- Lastly, but more importantly, Viglioni mentions roughly 250 meters (!) of clothes that he owns in co-property with fellow citizens. Those clothes are ‘Lombard, Venetians, Germans and *Stanforti* clothes coming from northern France (Malines) and Flanders’.⁹⁹

Viglioni states that these goods were ‘mie et latrui’ which means they are owned in co-property with other merchants. As in the case of the Loredan, well documented by Lopez, these goods

⁹⁷ See Archivio di Stato, Venezia, Procuratori di San Marco, Misti, Busta 122 in Lopez, *European Merchants*.

⁹⁸ Viglioni also has several items clearly bought on local markets, like the pearls mentioned earlier.

⁹⁹ Those clothes are also present in other contracts preceding the beginning of the fourteenth century, and they are all destined to Persia. Brătianu, *Recherches*, app. XVIII, XVII, XIX, XX.

were probably paid for in Venice with shared capitals, probably in a contract of *accommedacio*.¹⁰⁰

In short, Viglioni's testament seems to point towards the same trend confronted concerning the exports: Italians seemed to prefer expensive manufactured goods to more generic ones, that were probably sold on the road in Levantine ports like Laias or in the Black Sea, in exchange of other local expensive products (like fur in the case of Trebizond).¹⁰¹ Ashtor, for instance, reports the activities of the brothers Ansaldo, Giovanni, and Giacomo de Olivera, who had founded a company in 1330 or 1331 and exported French cloth to Persia but were also active in Syria.¹⁰² Sinclair also confirms this hypothesis in his analysis, pointing out the imbalance of trade flowing in and out of Laias, with luxury goods only transiting through the city and European less expensive manufactured product being sold in the local markets.¹⁰³ The comparison with Alexandria and the Levant is striking: strong commercial ties between the Mamluks and southern Italian markets with a predominance of exports of raw materials like timber, grain, linen, oil and wool highly contrast with the luxury-based exchanges taking place in Persia.¹⁰⁴ This does not mean that Egypt did not import or export luxury goods, but rather that trade was more generic and extended to all sort of wares: Pegolotti mentions the fact that tariffs were only paid on goods imported in Egypt, hinting at a measure probably adopted by the sultans to protect local markets from an overflowing of western products.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Archivio Veneto, XIII, XXVI, p.161.

¹⁰¹ Fur is present in several notarial documents, including the testament of Viglioni. Pegolotti mentions fur among the luxury items one could buy and sell in Tabriz. *La Pratica della mercatura*, p.27.

¹⁰² Ashtor, *Levant Trade*, p.50 ; J.Heers, L. Liagre-de Sturler 'Les relations commerciales entre Gênes, la Belgique et l'Outremont d'après les Archives notariales génoises' (1320-1400).' *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 48.2 (1970) pp. 508-510.

¹⁰³ See Sinclair, *Eastern Trade and the Mediterranean*, Conclusions.

¹⁰⁴ D. Howard 'The Mamluks' in S. Carboni, *Venice and the Islamic world, 828-1797* (Milano, 2007), p.75.

¹⁰⁵ *La Pratica della mercatura*, p.72.

CHAPTER III

COMMERCIAL AND PERSONAL RELATIONS: A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN ELITES ?

I. THE ORTAGH

The nature of the goods traded, in my opinion, directly relates to the question of partnership. Several historians have studied the phenomenon of partnership between the Mongols and Asian merchants, especially Uighurs and Muslims, identified as Hui-hui by Chinese sources.¹⁰⁶ This practice became, as mentioned, widely popular among Mongol elites. In general, merchants in the Empire enjoyed a privileged status because Mongol princes wanted ‘the best of two worlds’, so relied on merchant for a steady supply of commodities.¹⁰⁷ Allsen clearly states that, at least in the beginning, the partnership was, profit wise, not particularly economically advantageous for the princes: he provides several examples of Mongolian princes paying excessive prices for certain wares or refunding merchants for a value greater than the lost goods. It is yet not clear how tax exemption affected the *ortoghs*: they were probably immune from customary taxes but, starting from the reign of Mongke, regulations became stricter. The liability for eventual losses probably appeared with the formation of the *ulus* and the loss of unity of the Mongol Empire, bringing the partnership closer to a form of loan. This was probably due to the settling of Mongol frontiers and the decrease of revenues from tributes and raids.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ E. Enkhbold, ‘The role of the ortoq in the Mongol Empire in forming business partnerships.’ *Central Asian Survey* 38.4 (2019): 531-547, p.533.

¹⁰⁷ Allsen, *Mongolian princes*, pp.83-84, 121.

¹⁰⁸ Enkhbold, ‘The role of the ortoq’, p.543.

A lot of the debate concerning the *ortagh* revolves around the kind of capital used in the partnership. Chinggis Khan and his family, according to chroniclers, supplied their *ortoghs* with gold and precious goods when they sent them to trade with the Khwārazm.¹⁰⁹ It is also clear that during the reign of Mongke and Ögödei the practice continued, and the capital that financed business partnerships still included both money and various sorts of goods.¹¹⁰ This differentiated the *ortagh* from the Muslim *mudharaba*, in which only cash was accepted, but made it rather similar to the Italian institutions of *commenda* or *societas*.¹¹¹ The similarities between the *ortagh* and other forms of business partnership like the Italian *commenda* or the Muslim *mudharaba* have been also stressed by Allsen. However, according to him, the *ortagh* is hard to compare to any contract, as any kind of commercial partnership was, for the Mongols, some sort of *ortagh*: bestowing their capital on a merchant already meant ‘privilege’.¹¹²

This privilege also meant close cooperation in other fields: we know, for instance, that Muslim merchants, especially Uighurs, were held in great esteem by the Mongols, who used the talent of a skilled group of individuals for the benefit of the whole Empire, employing them in a multitude of fields, including administration and tax collection.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, ed. H.R. Gibb, The Hakluyt Society, (London, 1928), p.88; Atâ-Malek Juvayni, *The history of the world conqueror* (ed. J. A. Boyle, pp.78-79); *Jami ‘u ‘t-tawārīkh*, p.228

¹¹⁰ Ögödei hired Muslim merchants in sizeable numbers as *ortoqs* and administrators: Juvaynī, *The world conqueror*, p.224. *A number of merchants had come that day. They took the wares of each of them and Qa'an gave them all a greater sum than the actual price*; Jackson, citing Waṣṣāf, explains how Berke and Hülegü deliberately slaughtered groups of *ortoghs* in the other's service in the wake of a military campaign in 1263. P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, pp.125, 310.

¹¹¹ E. Enkhbold, ‘The role of the *ortoq*’, p.535.

¹¹² Allsen, *Mongolian princes*, p.119; For the role of *ortagh* in Yuan economy see Endicott-West, Elizabeth. ‘Merchant Associations in Yüan China’.

¹¹³ ‘Allsen, *Mongolian princes*’, p.124.

II. PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS WITH ITALIAN MERCHANTS?

Despite the discouraging lack of evidence, the hypothesis of a possible partnership between Mongols and Italian merchants deserves our attention. Italians indeed knew about these sort of arrangements: the institute of the *ortagh* is mentioned in the *Codex Cumanicus*, a sort of dictionary created by missionaries for evangelising purposes (but probably compiled with the help of merchants) translates *ortagh* with the Latin *socius* (which is the same term used to designate a partner in commercial contracts).¹¹⁴

In Marco Polo's travel, a passage clearly suggest some form of agreement of such nature occurring between the Polo brothers and Berke Khan, the ruler of the Golden Horde. The fact that this reference is absent in some of the manuscripts could explain why in most of the English or modern Italian translations I consulted it clearly loses much of its meaning. The passage literally translate as follows:

They gifted him with all the jewels they were carrying, the Khan gave them goods that were worth twice as much the things he received; [The Khan] then sent them to sell those goods in parts in which were sold at very good prices.¹¹⁵

Polo clearly suggests some form of unwritten agreement between the two brothers and the Khan. In this case the agreement takes the form of a gift, but doubtlessly the two brothers are bound to sell the goods received, and cannot just refuse to do so. In a society like the Mongol's, where rituals and gift often assume more than one meaning, it is certainly legitimate to doubt about the selflessness of Berke's gift. That of the Polo brothers it is clearly something very similar to

¹¹⁴ *Codex Cumanicus*, ed. Géza Kuun, Budapest Oriental Reprints, Ser. B 1, (Budapest, 1880), p.114. See notes 19, 20.

¹¹⁵ *Milione*, I, p.2.

an *ortagh*: they do not receive gold as an investment in their enterprise but trade goods, to sell where their newly acquired partner sees fit.¹¹⁶

In Persia Italian merchants probably had, at least until the first decade of the fourteenth century, the same degree of friendly relations with Ilkhanid rulers: Guillelmus Adae's treatise is probably one of the most precious sources on the subject. When the bishop hints at the commercial/military Genoese expedition along the Euphrates to curtail Mamluk's trade organised by Arghun Khan (1284-1291) he uses the expression 'favente eodem imperatore, imo poc(t)ius faciente', which literally means that the emperor not only favoured the expedition, but took an active part in it, probably by covering providing trade goods or arming the galleys for the expedition:¹¹⁷ Ciocîltan, in fact, mentions an agreement of this sorts when he reports a Genoese galley being paid for by Arghun khan to protect trade in the Black Sea.¹¹⁸ If such agreements existed, they would have been surprisingly similar to contemporary contracts signed in Italy concerning the shared property of a ship like the *colonna* and *carati* partnerships, brilliantly compared to *ortagh*-like agreements by Enkhbold.¹¹⁹

Relations between Italian merchants and Ilkhanid elites must have been quite close too. For instance, we know from Rashid al-Dīn that women belonging to the Mongol-Persian elite invested their revenues from tributes or booty in their own *ortaghs*:¹²⁰ this practice became very

¹¹⁶ Allsen, *Mongolian princes*, p.121,

¹¹⁷ Guillelmus Adae, RHC, p.551. The Dominican also talks about the Genoese slave trade, mentioning that the Genoese provided the khan of the Golden Horde with all sort of slaves, including Christian ones. Could this be true for Persia as well? Adae mentions a flourishing slave market in the city of Tabriz .

¹¹⁸ Ciocîltan, *Black Sea trade*, p.141

¹¹⁹ Such sophisticated forms of partnerships contracts existed in Genoa and Venice in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and were stipulated that several partners shared the ownership of a ship, Enkhbold, *The role of the ortoq*, p.538

¹²⁰ *Jami 'u't-tawārīkh*, p.701,732.

popular, as Persians locals literally sold their sons as ortoghs in the service of the Mongol ladies and dignitaries.¹²¹

If such contracts were so widespread, one of our sources could confirm a similar partnership occurring between a Venetian and the *khatun* (mother of Abu Sa'id): in a letter sent by the Venetian magistrate Marco De Molino to the Doge in 1324, the consul complains about the lack of discipline of one of his fellow citizens, Domenico Quirini: the man had ignored the prohibition to conduct trades with a local merchants and was denounced to the consul by his compatriots. To get his revenge against the men who spied on him, he begged the mother of the Abu Sa'id to imprison them.¹²² Such influence of a foreign individual at the Persian court cannot be overlooked: we cannot exclude that the close relations between and the Venetian merchant and the *khatun* were due to some sort of business partnership occurring between the two. One should also consider that *ortagh*-like contracts mainly involved jewels and expensive wares: a large amount of these goods was available to Mongol ladies, mostly exempted from customary taxes all over the empire and easily transportable in Europe for a great profit. Furthermore, entering in a partnership with a Mongol prince or aristocrat did not prevent Italian merchants to sign contracts with fellow citizens or pursue their own economic interests and vice-versa: this virtually doubled the potential gains of one single travel.¹²³

Stricter regulations concerning business conducted with locals, like the treaty signed between the Republic of Venice and the Ilkhanate in 1320, also testify that partnerships with Mongols were quite widespread. Starting from the second decade of the fourteenth century Venice and Genoa aimed to impose a stricter control on business in the region, probably because of the rapidly evolving internal situation of the Ilkhanate. One of the most important clauses of the

¹²¹ Enkhbold, 'The role of the ortoq', p.541.

¹²² *Diplomatarium Veneto Levantinum*, p.192.

¹²³ See note 21; Enkhbold, 'The role of the ortoq', p.537.

treaty of 1320 states that Venetian merchants were not to be compelled to sell their goods against their will. The importance it is given to the subject in the treaty and the fact that the matter is present in a successive agreement suggest that the practice of forcing merchants to sell their goods must have been quite widespread: this was probably due to the willingness of the Mongol elites to force *ortagh*-like practices on Venetian merchants, like the one accepted by the Polo brothers.¹²⁴

As for Genoa, the *Officium Gazarie*, from the second decade of the fourteenth century, also started to impose stricter regulations to the merchants willing to trade in Persia: business was only allowed to those with a licence released by the consul of Tabriz, and for a maximum consecutive period of 4 months; merchants were only allowed to use cash money and goods they brought from Italy and they had to keep track of their transactions: in order to avoid fraud, the patrimony of foreigners who accompanied merchants could amount to a maximum of 2,000 Tabrizi bezants; if pack animals had to be used, the negotiations concerning their purchase had to be carried out by the consul or three *boni homines* chosen among the Genoese community. More importantly, all Genoese merchants were prohibited to conduct business and form a society or to associate capitals to buy trade goods with locals.¹²⁵ Restrictions like the last one were probably also applied, although less systematically, by local authorities of other cities, like in the of the above mentioned dispute between case between the Venetian consul and Domenico Quirini.

¹²⁴ ‘Che in nessuna citade o luogo del nostro imperio li nostri Veneciani no possa esser costretti a tomagar ne vender le soe cose senza soa volontà.’ *Diplomatarium Veneto Levantinum*, p.173

¹²⁵ ‘negocia vel aliquam habere societatem vel facere aliquam empcionem comunem cum aliquibus extraneis habitantibus in imperio Persie’, *Monumenta Historiae Patriae*, p.223.

III. TRADE PARTNERSHIP AND MORE: A POLITICAL PROJECT?

In Persia, Italian merchants were not the only Christians tasked with important missions, as they lived in a multicultural environment where the line between the role of merchant, courtesan, diplomat and financial intermediary was quite blurred.

During the reigns of Hülegü (1258-1265), Abagha (1265-1282), Arghun (1284-1291) and Gaykhatu (1291-1295), and only with a brief interruption during the reign of Ahmed Tekuder (1282-1284), Christianity had been favoured by the Ilkhans. Hülegü and his successors were in fact Buddhists, but the Ilkhanid court hosted representatives of every religion in the empire. The correspondence between the first four Ilkhan and European powers was very intense and Christians were used as messengers and intermediaries to carry information and to organise an offensive against the common enemy. These people belonged to local elites, as in the case of Rabban Şawma and Hayton of Korykos, or were missionaries sent by the Pope in the east, like Giovanni di Pian Del Carpine and William of Rubruck.¹²⁶ Italian merchants were presumably the first to make contacts with Ilkhanid elites and very soon transformed commercial partnership into a wider range of relations. We have amply seen that Mongols liked to rely on a limited amount of trusted people to conduct different kinds of businesses Italian merchants clearly fitted in that picture: they often came from the richest and most important families of the respective cities. They could write and read, spoke several languages and were accustomed to long-distance travel.

¹²⁶ For instance, Hayton of Korykos, Armenian nobleman from Cilicia and envoy of Pope Clemence V and Philip IV the Fair, resided at the Ilkhanid court for several years, and even took part the 1299 campaign against the Mamluks. See. C. Mutaftian, 'Héthoum de Korykos historien arménien. Un prince cosmopolite à l'aube du XIVe siècle.' *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes. Journal of medieval and humanistic studies* 1(1996): 157-176.

There are several examples of Italian merchants not only acting as envoys of the Ilkhans, but even claiming to be permanently in their service. Just to mention a few, Tommaso Anfossi, a Genoese merchant, is consistently mentioned the bearer of several letters and as travel companion of Rabban Şawma in his embassy to the west in 1287¹²⁷

After Anfossi's demise, another Genoese took his place: Buscarello De Ghisolfi was sent by the Ilkhan Arghun as ambassador to the pope and the king of France, bringing proposals for an alliance against the Mamluks of Egypt: in the letters is referred to as a member of the Khan's royal guards (*qurči*, quiver carrier).¹²⁸ As we already mentioned, on his way back in 1290 he also escorted the English embassy of Sir Geoffrey Langley, too late to meet the khan, who died in 1291, together with the last remnants of the crusade states. Buscarello, however, remained in the service of the Ilkhans as his presence is attested as late as 1305 at Oljeitu's court.¹²⁹

Efforts for a concrete military cooperation led to several other embassies: the Pisan Isolo di Anastasio, envoy to pope Boniface VIII before the joint Ilkhanid-crusade expedition of 1299-1302 against the Mamluks, claimed to be a *vicarius* of the Ilkhans in the government of Syria and the Holy land. Unfortunately, the expedition failed, and the expectations of the merchants were not fulfilled.¹³⁰ During the campaign, however, we can find traces of another important Italian at the Ilkhanid court. Tommaso Ugi from Siena, describes as 'sword bearer' 1300-1307 is mentioned in several letters between Arghun and pope.¹³¹ An unknown Florentine chronicle cited by Manni reports, in 1295, another embassy led by 'Dominus Guisciardus de Bastaribus

¹²⁷ P. Borbone, *Storia di Mar Yahballaha e di Rabban Sauma Cronaca siriana del XIV Secolo*, (Torino, 2009), app. p.241-245.

¹²⁸ B. Spuler, *Die Mongolen in Iran: Politik, Verwaltung und Kultur der Ilchanzeit 1220-1350*. (Leiden, 1985) pp. 229-30.

¹²⁹ 1305/1307 Reg. Clem. V, III, p.332 in Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, p.178.

¹³⁰ J. Richard, *The Crusades, c. 1071-c. 1291*, (Cambridge,1999), p.468

¹³¹ J. Richard, *The Crusades*, p.456. The integral text of some of the letters is published in P. Borbone, *Storia di Mar Yahballaha*, app. p.242.

de Florentia Ambaxiator Magni Tartari cum centum sociis omnibus tartarice indutis.’¹³² This Guisciardus is also present in two other sources: a document attests his presence in Italy as intermediary with Charles of Anjou for the release of a Pisan prisoner and a chronicle from Giovanni Villani mentions that he was born and raised in the Ilkhanate, with his parents presumably in the Ilkhanid court as early as the 1270s.¹³³

This last evidence is particularly important, especially if compared to another document in our possession. A Venetian charter from 1328, in fact, is a response to a petition of a young Venetian ‘infantia constitutus, ad partes ulteriores Tartarorum’ (born and raised in Tartar land). The man, referred in the document as Isachus, son of Giovanni Venerio, probably had come to Venice for the first time in his life, asking to be recognised as a Venetian citizen.¹³⁴

Italians conducted their own business interests while on official missions: Buscarello de Ghisolfi had businesses in Genoa and, while accompanying the English ambassador, invested 600 silver pounds in Genoa. Michele Dolfino, the Venetian envoy who signed the treaty of 1320, collected sort of credit in Trebizond during his trip to Persia; finally, the first Venetian envoy to the Ilkhanid court in 1305 acted probably as testimony in an economic dispute between a Persian and a Venetian merchant.¹³⁵

Outside of personal business, we have no concrete proof that these merchants acted both as economic and diplomatic intermediaries on behalf of the Ilkhans or European aristocracy at the same time, buying and selling on behalf of their patrons. We know, however, that such practices were very common among Muslim merchants. One of the most famous cases refers to Fakhr al Dīn, a merchant from Kish dispatched to China by Ghazan Khan with a diplomatic mission

¹³² D. M. Manni, *Osservazioni storiche circa i sigilli antichi dei secoli bassi*, XXX, (Firenze, 1786), p. 94.

¹³³ G. Villani, *Nova Chronica* ed. G. Porta, (Parma, 1991), XXV, p.561.

¹³⁴ *Diplomatarium Veneto Levantinum*, p.209-210.

¹³⁵ *Diplomatarium Veneto Levantinum*, p.222.

but also to collect some investments for his master: the merchant, however, after supplying ships as part of his commitment to the contract, concomitantly pursued business opportunities on his own.¹³⁶

The idea that merchants could be pursuing both diplomatic and economic interests of their masters is confirmed by the chronology we established in the first two chapters. It is clear that Italian mercantile activities peaked during the period ranging between the reign of Arghun (1284-1291) and that of the first Ilkhan to convert to Islam, Ghazan Khan (1295- 1304). Ilkhans continued to favour multiculturalism and exchanges between religions even after the conversion; however, relations between Ilkhanid rulers and Europe started to shrink during the reign of Ghazan's successor, Öljeitü (1304-1314). During his rule, politics of the Ilkhanate began to shift away from Syria and Turkey towards the most perilous eastern border with Chagatai. The fragile alliances with Cilician Armenia and Georgia were compromised, and numerous revolts in Anatolia broke out.¹³⁷ For this reason, the 'Frankish alliance' lost much of its meaning and eventually broke after a treaty signed with the Mamluks in 1322 by Abu Sa'id. During the reign of the latter (1316-1335) episodes of intolerance against Christians became more frequent: Catholicism had almost disappeared when friar Jordanus visited the Ilkhanate in 1330,¹³⁸ and merchants were probably among the first victims of the rising intolerance. This could explain the stricter regulations on trade issued by Venice and Genoa, probably meant to

¹³⁶ Enkhbold, 'The role of the ortoq', p. 538; B. Z. Kedar, M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, *The Cambridge World History, Volume 5, Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict, 500CE–1500CE*. (Cambridge, 2015), p.553.

Concerning the voyage of Fakhr al-Din see Y. Qiu, 'Background and Aftermath of Fakhr al-Din Tibi's Voyage: A Resurvey of the Interaction between the Ilkhanate and the Yuan around 1298 AD.' *Bulletin of the institute of history and philology Academia Sinica* 87 (2016): 67-124.

¹³⁷ King Hethum II of Armenian Cilicia was assassinated in 1307 during the reign of Öljeitü by a mongol governor, probably instigated by the Mamluks. During the years preceding his assassination the king had to deal with several revolts in Anatolia on behalf of the Ilkhans, namely overlords of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia.

¹³⁸ Jordanus Catalani, *The Wonders of the East* ed. H. Yule, Hakluyt Society, (London, 1863), p. 9. I. Gillman, H.J. Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, (London, 1999), p.143.

avoid conflict with the locals. Eventually, with the fall of the Ilkhanate, any political design of alliance and cultural exchange with the West was abandoned by local rulers, who needed money to finance the petty wars they were involved in, and acted violently to extract wealth from Latin merchants, luring them in Persia with false promises.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ *Georgii et Iohannis Stellae annales genuenses* ed. L. Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, Vol. XVII, p.139 losses under the Chobanid rule were estimated by Stella in 200 000 Genoese pounds of silver.

CONCLUSION

Italian merchants were certainly a minority among the huge number of traders moving along the Silk Road in the thirteenth and fourteenth century: they did not establish in Persia anything similar to their flourishing Levantine colonies and communities, and the Ilkhanate was certainly never a substitute of Egypt and Syria in terms of trade volume. So why Persia? As this work stressed, the most important thing that tied Italians to the region was a probably their privileged role. They were greatly appreciated by Ilkhanid princes because they belonged to Italian urban elites, they were highly qualified and reliable individuals, they were able to afford the excellences of European manufacturing and to supply them to the Mongol court, relying mainly on quality rather than quantity. In return, they could bring back to Europe luxury and easily transportable products, probably acquired through commercial deals and in partnership with local elites. Those products were exempted from taxes in the Ilkhanate and reached Tabriz with relative ease: from there, probably through a combination of several partnership contracts, they were sold to European elites creating a direct exchange between the upper classes of two worlds. These exchanges inevitably translated into communications: the presence of colonies and consulates in the Ilkhanate clearly indicates that these merchants also pursued diplomatic ties with Persia and enabled wider connections between the latter and Latin Europe. All these relations were facilitated by the enmity between the Ilkhanate and the Mamluk Sultanate but also by the massive presence and influence of Christian individuals at the Ilkhanid court and declined when these two preconditions ceased to exist. This work represents nothing but a preliminary study on this system, and my proposition as a future researcher is to further investigate this subject, as new material could improve our knowledge of Eurasian connections in pre-modern times. The idea that the diplomatic and economic field, that have been always artificially separated in their study could eventually come together in a single research could clearly open new horizons on the study of Mongol relations with Christendom.

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