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### PLAGUE AND POWER: VENICE, GENOA, AND THE MONGOLS FACING THE MID-14TH CENTURY'S CRISIS

**Annotation.** *This paper analyzes the Mongol siege of Caffa in 1345/46 as the origin of the plague pandemic that struck Europe in the 14th century. Through the presentation and analysis of available documentation, an attempt will be made to reconstruct the Genoese and Venetian reaction to a danger that, although well known to the people of the time, immediately appeared as lethal and irrepressible. The consequences of the epidemic were dramatic because of the high mortality rate caused by the plague bacteria, but they also had social, economic, and political implications. The latter were particularly evident in the shifting alliances. After a period of cooperation against the Mongols, the rivalry between Genoa and Venice flared up again, leading to the third war between the two cities. A conflict broke out over the control of the Black Sea.*

**Keywords:** *mongol; plague; power; crisis; pandemia; Caffa; century; Europe; epidemic.*

#### Introduction

Preliminary notes: The plague in history. The concept of 'plague' recurs regularly in historical sources. The first mention of a 'plague' is narrated by Thucydides and dates to the Athenian period (430 BC). The epidemic claimed many victims, the most famous of whom was Pericles, and broke out around 431 during the war against Sparta. According to the Greek historian (2.49, 2): "The first symptoms were a high fever in the head and reddening and inflammation of the eyes; then internally the throat and tongue began to bleed and the breath had an unnaturally foul smell." (Hammond 2009, 97. See also Hornblower 1996, 322). We now know that it was not the plague but rather exanthema typhus caused by the bacterium *Rickettsia prowazekii*.

The Antonine plague was narrated by Galen (129-ca200), the Greek physician to the emperor Marcus Aurelius, for the first time in the *Sui libri proprii* (Galeno 2013, 101)<sup>1</sup> and in other letters of the time.<sup>2</sup> The Antonine plague claimed many victims and profoundly impacted the imagination of the time, as evidenced by Cassius Dione in his *Historia Romana* (LXXII, 14.3-4): "then there was a pestilence, the greatest that I know of: in a single day in Rome two thousand people died one after another" (Cassio Dione 2010, 221). Brought by soldiers returning from their campaigns against the Parthians in Armenia, it ravaged the Roman Empire from 165 to circa 180. It was again not plague, but more likely smallpox or measles (Litman-Litman 1973, 245-46; Zelener 2003; Brunn 2007: 201, n. 2; Harper 2017, 104 and 107; Duncan Jones 2018, 44).

Instead, it was likely bubonic plague – although of a now-extinct strain – the Justinian plague that ravaged the Byzantine Empire in the 6th century, circa between 541/42-750 (see Horden 2005; Rosen 2010; Raoult et al. 2013; Wagner et al. 2014; Sarris 2020). In addition to the well-known 14th-century pandemic caused by the bacteria *Yersinia Pestis*, the plague remained a host in human communities even in modern times, as confirmed by the cases in Copenhagen (1711), the Indian and Chinese plagues of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and finally, the pneumonic plague that struck Los Angeles between September and early November 1924.

<sup>1</sup> [1.16]: "After another three years spent in Rome, as soon as the great plague began, I left the city to return to my homeland".

<sup>2</sup> See for example the letter to the colleague, physician as him, Teuthras, who died because of the "plague" in 166 (Galeno 2013, 272-73).



The Black Death, so called maybe because of the dark bruises of hemorrhagic origin that appeared on the skin of the diseased, was one of the deadliest pandemics in human history, wiping out a significant portion of Europe's population in a relatively short period.<sup>3</sup> Few pandemic cases in pre-modern times have influenced the collective imagination of entire communities, like the plague of the 14th century, which profoundly impacted medieval society and contributed to apocalyptic thinking and ideas about the world's end during that period (see, for example, Gomel 2000). 14th-century Christian Europe often interpreted the Black Death through a religious lens. Some saw it as a divine punishment for the sins of humanity, akin to the biblical plagues. This interpretation reinforced the idea that the world's end might be near as divine wrath was being unleashed.

For example, Matteo Villani, brother and continuator of his brother Giovanni's *Chronica*, writes that Because of the stain of sin, the whole human generation is subject to temporal calamities and much misery and to innumerable evils, which occur in the world in various ways and through different and strange movements and times, such as restlessness of wars, battles, the fury of peoples, changes of kingdoms, occupations of tyrants, pestilence, deaths and famine, floods, fires, shipwrecks, and other grievous things, of which men in whose times they occur, as if ignorant of them, are the more astonished and the less they understand the divine judgment and the less they know the counsel and remedy of adversity if they have no instruction from the memory of similar cases in past times; And in those that the unmistakable face of prosperity relates they know not how to use the proper temperament, hiding under the dark veil of ignorance the falling out and the doubtful end of mortal things (Matteo Villani 1995, vol. I, 5-6).

The mortality rate in Europe due to the Black Death was extraordinarily high, and it had a devastating impact on the population. Estimating the exact number of deaths is impossible due to limited historical records and variations in mortality rates across different regions. The difficulty in establishing figures and the demographic impact of the plague is also due to the short-term migratory movements due to the epidemic. In cities like Florence, which at the time probably had over 100,000 inhabitants, not a few people took refuge in the countryside to escape the contagion. In other regions, the opposite happened. It is, therefore, easy to find chroniclers who, while generally reliable, give very different figures. According to Matteo Villani, more than 60,000 people died in Florence. Others speak of 80,000 dead. The fact is that, regardless of the figures, during its first outbreak, between 1347 and 1351, the Black Death killed millions in Europe (see, for example, Snowden 2019, 37).

The impact of the plague varied across different regions. Urban areas, where population density was higher and sanitation conditions were poorer, were particularly hard-hit. Coastal areas, trade hubs, and cities saw some of the highest mortality rates. Rural areas were also affected, but to a lesser extent. The Black Death was not a one-time event. It recurred in Europe and other parts of the world in subsequent centuries. More than a pandemic, it was an epidemic cycle. The Black Death had profound social and economic consequences. With a significant labor shortage resulting from the high mortality, wages for laborers and peasants increased, leading to a shift in the power dynamics between the ruling elites and the laboring classes.

Still today, there has yet to be a definitive consensus among historians and scientists on the origin of the disease. The Black Plague's precise beginning is a complex historical puzzle, and it is challenging to pinpoint a single source with certainty (Slavin 2019; Hymes 2014). One widely accepted theory is that the Black Plague originated in the steppes of Central Asia (Hymes 2014, 298-99). It is believed that *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium responsible for the plague, was naturally present in rodent populations in this area (Ben Ari 2011; Schmid et al. 2015, 3020). The bacterium may have been transmitted to humans through fleas that infested these rodents. The Silk Road, a network of trade routes – terrestrial and maritime – connecting Asia with Europe and Africa, played a crucial role in repeatedly bringing the bacterium to Europe and making it endemic to the continent, where it remained until the 19th century (Schmid 2015, 3020). Merchants and travelers along the Silk Road would have encountered infected animals and fleas, facilitating the transmission of the disease to various regions.

The bubonic plague is the most common form of the Black Plague, transmitted from rodents (such as rats) to humans through infected fleas. It is possible that this mode of transmission contributed to the rapid spread of the disease in urban areas where rats were common. Climatic factors, such as changes in temperature and precipitation, may have influenced the proliferation of rodents and fleas, contributing to the

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<sup>3</sup> Scientific literature on the plague and its social, demographic, economic, and political consequences is overwhelming. For a general and updated overview, see the classic Herlihy 1997. See also Hatcher 2009, Gottfried 2010; Ziegler 2013; Cantor 205; Green 2015; Green 2020.



outbreak. Human activities, including migration and warfare, played a role in the spread of the plague. Armies and displaced populations may have carried the disease with them as they moved across regions. The epidemic may have spread from the Central Asian steppes to the Black Sea region, including Crimea (Shmidt et al. 2015, 3022 and Karpov 2016, 205-6). From there, trade and military campaigns could have introduced it to Europe.

#### *Materials and Methods*

Tana, Caffa, and the Mongol siege. Since the second half of the 13th century, Genoese and Venetians frequented the coasts of the Black Sea, where they built trade settlements. Some of these settlements developed into full-fledged cities with infrastructure and a defensive wall, like Caffa (Feodosija), run by Genoese (See, for example, Khvalkov 2017). Others remained in the size of quarters and served as commercial outposts in the Mongol Empire. The easternmost of these resolutions run by Italian merchants was Tana, at the mouth of the Don River on the Azov Sea (Karpov 1995; Karpov 2002; Pubblici 2005; Karpov 2021; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022). Tana was a portion of territory in Azak given to the Italians by the Mongol authorities to benefit from its strategic position at the gates of Asia and promote international trade. Here, Genoese and Venetians had their consular representatives, and in the mid-14th century, their communities were significant, but locals remained the majority. Many had regular relations with Italians: shared foundations, shops, and taverns. Concluded contracts; sometimes, they appeared as partners in companies. They were active in the buying and selling of enslaved people. They brought luxury goods to Tana from China and India, which the Italian merchants bought there and resold them locally or transported them back home. In this climate of daily interaction, things changed abruptly in the late summer of 1343 (Karpov 2016; Pubblici 2017).

In September, a fight broke out in Tana between a Venetian citizen and a Mongol merchant. A copious bibliography exists on the event and its causes (Karpov 1996, 35-40; Karpov 1997, 67-70; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 113-18). According to the Swiss Franciscan John of Winterthur (d. ca. 1348), a wealthy Muslim merchant struck the Venetian merchant Andreolo Civran with a fist or a whip. The causes of the violence are not specified. However, Andreolo Civran took revenge for the insult. Gathering a group of compatriots, he went to the attacker's house and killed him and his entire family.

An episode confined to the individual sphere soon became a clash of powers and forced Genoa and Venice to rethink their strategies in the Levant completely. The Mongol Khan Janibeg laid siege to Tana, which soon forced all the Westerners to flee, finding shelter in Caffa, better fortified and difficult to take. The Genoese authorities agreed to welcome the Venetian citizens to Caffa, showing solidarity in the face of a common threat; those who could, found shelter also in the Venetian quarter of Constantinople. But not everyone had managed to escape, and the authorities of Genoa and Venice had to act on two levels: evacuate those who remained in Tana and resume diplomatic relations with the Mongols as soon as possible, heal the breach with Janibeg and resume sailing to the Black Sea.

However, things took a different turn, and after expelling the 'Franks' from Tana, the Khan also attacked Caffa. The Genoese resistance thwarted the Mongol siege, and in February 1344, the city's inhabitants broke the siege to the point that the Mongol army had to retreat. Having avoided the danger of the fall of Caffa, Genoa, and Venice embarked on diplomatic negotiations with the Mongols and among themselves. Between January and February 1344, the Senate of Venice carefully considered the serious news coming from Tana (Thiriet 1958-1961, I: 54).

Despite joint diplomatic efforts, which lasted until early 1345, the two cities achieved nothing from Janibeg. To increase the pressure on the Mongols, on 1 July, Genoa and Venice redefined the terms of a union that would last until the end of the following March 1346 (Thomas and Predelli 1880-1899, I, 279-285). As a result of the alliance –an entirely contingent and not structural fact– Genoa granted extensive privileges to Venice: frequent, in addition to Caffa, the district of Pera, and the two cities established a bilateral commitment to boycott Tana (Thomas and Predelli 1880-1899, I: 279-280). But Genoa had played its cards well, and the concessions made to Venice would bring no advantage to the Serenissima since the agreement, concluded in late summer, would only come into force in autumn when the navigation of the Black Sea was practically at a standstill (Morozzo Della Rocca 1962, 271; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 119).

On 13 November 1345, after examining the ambassadors' letters, the Senate acknowledged the failure of the diplomatic mission and ordered its ambassadors to return (Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 120). It called its envoys to return by the union's deadline, i.e., 1 April 1346. Indeed, in the winter of 1345-1346, Janibeg attempted a new assault on the city walls. This effort also failed, but its consequences would affect an entire continent.

*Results and Discussion*

The plague and its consequences. The Mongols also attempted an offensive from the sea but were repelled by the Genoese fleet off Crimea (Ciociltan 2012, 211-12; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 120). Meanwhile, the Mongol army faced a much more dangerous enemy than the Italians: the plague. The most detailed source on the siege of Caffa of 1345-1346 is the chronicle of the Placentine notary Gabriele de Mussi (or de' Mussis, quoted above), which provides many details about the epidemic in the ranks of the besiegers. However, de Mussi never left his city; his account has survived in a late 14th-century copy, and his information is likely the result of accounts he heard from merchants on their return from the Levant.

The plague that hit Europe in 1348 was already endemic in Asia in the 1330s. The debate on the plague's origin is still open. Nonetheless, the first reports of widespread and unexplained mortality in China are recorded in sources as early as the time of the Mongol conquest of Xia, 1226/1227 (Hymes 2014, 285-307; Campbell 2016, 246-47; Slavin 2019, 59-60).

In 1345, the plague reached the Northern Caspian steppes and struck the cities of the Golden Horde, particularly Saraj and Astrakhan. Between the spring and summer of 1346, the contagion spread to the Volga region, and in early 1347, the first outbreaks developed in the Caucasus to reach Tana and Caffa. According to de Mussi's account, during the siege of Caffa, the Mongols used catapults to throw the corpses of plague victims inside the walls and, in this way, infect the besieged. Although we have no confirmation from documentary sources, there is no doubt that the presence of the plague in Crimea played a decisive role in the transmission of the plague in Europe.

The Placentine chronicler's reconstruction has influenced the historiographical debate on the origin of the disease in Europe as he was closely connected to Genoese and Venetian affairs in the East, was well-informed, and was likely informed of the events by direct witnesses. Even if some parts in De Mussi's version appear exaggerated, the source is generally considered reliable, and there is little doubt that the plague arrived in Western Europe on Genoese ships from the Black Sea. But it probably arrived on board ships carrying grain after 1347. Large quantities of grain had accumulated in the granaries of all the region's towns. Given the 'cohabitation' of grain and rats, it is very likely that at the end of the war between the Italians and Janibeg, when shipping resumed, rats carrying fleas infected with the plague bacillus were shipped along with the grain. By contrast, although linked to a different trade route in Russia, the plague was spread by similar mechanisms by parasites of fur-bearing animals such as marmots (Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 121-22). Furthermore, the epidemic was likely linked to the famines that had struck locally almost everywhere (Schamiloglu 2017, 326); Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 121, n. 53).

The plague was undoubtedly a crisis factor in Europe and Asia in the 14th century. However, it hit the Christian West with vehemence as it was grafted onto an already critical economic context. Crops in Italy mid-decade had been poor, prompting the Venetian authorities to import cereals from the Golden Horde despite the embargo established by the treaty with Genoa of 1345. On the political side, by the mid-14th century, the situation in the Black Sea basin was deteriorating. In 1338, Venice decided to abandon the markets of the Ilkhanate because of the unstable political situation. Moreover, the climate in Asia Minor was not calming down. Byzantium and Trebizond were engaged in continuous conflicts. From 1321 to 1354, the fragile Byzantine Empire of the Palaeologues was torn apart by a civil war that seemed to have no end. Trebizond in 1341 and 1348 was besieged by the Ottomans. In the second siege, the Venetian quarter was severely damaged by fire. Between 1348 and the following year, Genoa and the Trebizond Empire faced each other in a destructive war.

The events of 1343 and the Mamluk conquest of Laiazzo in 1337 forced Western merchants to resume relations with the Mamluks. Given the stalemate in negotiations with Janibeg and the dangerous alliance with Genoa, Venice was vulnerable and decided to reopen trade channels in the Levant. If the colonies of Caffa and Tana had developed as an alternative to other routes, the war with Janibeg threatened the trading bases on which they had concentrated the bulk of their trade and investments. After the expiry of the union with Genoa (April 1346), the Venetian authorities decided not to renew it and try the diplomatic route with Janibeg again, but on their own. The sources are silent on the final months of 1346. However, we know the situation was still very fluid as the galleys put up for auction in September could only pass through the straits after carefully evaluating the problem. Diplomatic relations with the Jochids re-emerged from the records in the spring of 1347 when Genoa and Venice signed a separate peace with Janibeg, who could not continue in a war that had severely damaged the Mongolian economy (Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 125-26; Pucci Donati 2023, 64-65). The meeting between the representatives of Venice and Janibeg was successful because, on 16 May 1347, the Florentine merchant Vannino Fecini from Candia could report that peace had returned and trade with Tana had resumed. For its part, Genoa immediately mobilized to end the embargo and obtain a



return to Mongolian ports from June 1347. On 26 December of the same year, Janibeg granted Venice a separate area from the Genoese quarter (Morozzo Della Rocca 1962, 275; Venezia-Senato 2007, 103-4; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 124).

The return to Tana did not correspond to a peaceful reprise of relations between Genoa and Venice; besides the political situation, the consequences of the plague were enormous. The Florentine chronicler Baldassarre Bonaiuti (1336-1386) wrote that.

#### *Conclusion*

And so many died that there was no one to see them, and many died of hunger because as one lay on his sick bed, the astonished people of the house said to him: 'I'm going to the doctor,' and they closed the door to the street, and never returned. The people abandoned him and then by food, and with a fever, he fell ill. Many begged them not to leave them when evening came, and they said to the sick man: "So that at night you don't have to arouse those who serve you, and it is hard work day and night, take some sweets and wine or water yourself, and here it is on the bedstead on your head, and then you can take some things." And when the sick man fell asleep, he went away and did not return. If, by his luck, he found himself comforted by this food at night, in the morning he was alive and strong enough to make his way to the window, he stayed half an hour before anyone crossed it, if the road was not very straightforward, and when someone passed by. He had a little voice that could be heard; he called out, and when he was answered, he was not helped. Therefore, no one, or few, wanted to enter a house where anyone was ill.

If we accept as good the figures we have, between 1346 and 1353, approximately 25% of the population of the Golden Horde lost their lives to the disease. In Tana, the victims were even more numerous; we believe that almost half of the residents in the Venetian part of the city died due to the epidemic. The political consequences of the demographic backlash the two Italian maritime republics suffered were even more critical. After the war with the Mongols and the alliance with Genoa, Venice invested all its resources in Tana. Competing with Genoa to regain stable positions in Soldaia (Sudak) was too costly when labor was scarce both in the shipyards and the military ranks.

Venetian strategy and interests clashed with Genoese dominance on the Black Sea. The alliance between the two cities had been an indispensable necessity during the conflict with Janibeg. Still, once diplomatic relations with the Mongols were re-established, Genoa and Venice were again pitted against each other. All the more so since the international framework had changed dramatically. The end of the Ilkhanate, the steady advance of the Mamluks in the eastern quadrant of the Mediterranean, and the Byzantine crisis forced much of the trade northwards. Navigation to the Sea of Azov was unavoidable for the two maritime powers, whose competition became fiercer than before. On 29 July 1347, the Genoese consul in Caffa ordered the navy serving in the Black Sea to seize a Venetian galley bound for the mouth of the Don and divert it to the Crimean port. Tensions between the two cities increased. Nevertheless, Venice maintained a consul in Caffa, still active in 1348.

The situation precipitated the Venetian-Genovese war in the summer of 1350. The conflict lasted a long time and ended with the peace signed in Milan (16 January 1351) by the diplomatic representatives of the two cities in 1355. Neither republic had won the war, and both imposed a three-year ban on sailing to Tana (devetum Tane: Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 127).

From a commercial point of view, the plague epidemic had no less consequences. Following the Peace of Milan, the trade volume resumed, and Genoa and Venice found a *modus vivendi* in Tana. Despite the gradual deterioration of the political situation within the Golden Horde, Venetian and Genoese merchants continued to frequent the mouth of the Don, and the slave trade became increasingly important.

The plague epidemic affected Genoese and Venetian politics and trade in the Mongolian Empire. If, on the one hand, the second half of the 14th century was marked by worsening security conditions on the caravan routes and an increase in conflict that made navigation complicated, on the other hand, we note a consistency in the volume of trade. The demographic backlash and the need for isolation due to the pandemic partly caused a slowdown in communications, but it did not last. Venice and Genoa could adapt to the new environment; they increased their resources to purchase enslaved people, especially young men, to employ in agriculture and manufacturing. Most enslaved men the Genoese and Venetians bought for decades were bound for the Mamluk sultanate, where demand was always high. From the second half of the 14th century, the flow of 'heads' became increasingly directed towards the Italian peninsula. On the other hand, imports of cereals decreased, while purchases of all foodstuffs for local consumption remained high. Exports, especially of wine, also reduced.

In conclusion, we note that the plague epidemic had, among other consequences, a big part in provoking the third Veneto-Genoese war; it changed established political balances between the two cities and



influenced the type and trajectories of trade flows. The epidemic returned to the Italian communities in Tana with a regular rhythm, and the one of 1361 was particularly violent. However, it did not discourage the merchants of Genoa and Venice from frequenting those distant markets and lands no longer unknown.

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**Лоренцо Публичи**

**ЧУМА И ВЛАСТЬ: ВЕНЕЦИЯ, ГЕНУЯ И МОНГОЛЫ СТОЛКНУЛИСЬ С КРИЗИСОМ  
СЕРЕДИНЫ XIV ВЕКА**

**Аннотация.** В этой статье анализируется монгольская осада Каффы в 1345/46 годах как причина пандемии чумы, поразившей Европу в 14 веке. Посредством презентации и анализа доступной документации будет предпринята попытка реконструировать реакцию генуэзцев и венецианцев на опасность, которая, хотя и была хорошо известна людям того времени, сразу же показалась смертельной и непреодолимой. Последствия эпидемии были драматичными из-за высокого уровня смертности, вызванного бактериями чумы, но они также имели социальные, экономические и политические последствия. Последнее было особенно очевидно в меняющихся альянсах. После периода сотрудничества в борьбе с монголами соперничество между Генуей и Венецией вспыхнуло вновь, что привело к третьей войне между двумя городами. Разгорелся конфликт из-за контроля над Черным морем.

**Ключевые слова:** монгол; чума; власть; кризис; пандемия; Каффа; столетие; Европа; эпидемия.

**Лоренцо Публичи**

**ОБА ЖӘНЕ КҮШ: 14 ҒАСЫРДЫҢ ОРТАСЫНДА ВЕНЕЦИЯ, ГЕНУЯ ЖӘНЕ  
МОҢҒОЛДАРДЫҢ ДАҒДАРЫСҚА ҰШЫРАУЫ**

**Аңдатпа.** Бұл мақалада 1345/46 жылдары монғолдардың Каффаны қоршауы 14 ғасырда Еуропаны басып алған оба індетінің себебі ретінде талданады. Қолда бар құжаттарды ұсыну және талдау арқылы генуалықтардың және венециандықтардың сол кездегі адамдарға жақсы белгілі болғанымен, бірден өлімге әкелетін және еңсерілмейтін қауіпке реакциясын қайта құру әрекеті жасалады. Эпидемияның салдары оба бактерияларынан болатын өлім-жітім деңгейінің жоғары болуына байланысты күрт болды, бірақ олардың әлеуметтік, экономикалық және саяси салдары да болды. Соңғысы әсіресе одақтардың өзгеруінде айқын көрінді. Моңғолдарға қарсы күрестегі ынтымақтастық кезеңінен кейін Генуя мен Венеция арасындағы бақталастық қайтадан өршіп, екі қала арасындағы үшінші соғысқа әкелді. Қара теңізді бақылау үшін қақтығыс басталды.

**Кілт сөздер:** Моңғол; оба; қуат; дағдарыс; пандемия; Каффа; ғасыр; Еуропа; эпидемия.