



Summary :

The Byzantines had established a strong presence in trade in the Black Sea region, developing commercial contacts with surrounding peoples, while various Byzantine cities along the region's coastline served as commercial centers trading both with the hinterland and outside the region. However, after 1204 this commercial activity would pass into Italian hands.

Date

4th - 15th c.

Geographical Location

Black Sea

1. Byzantine trade in the Black Sea during the Early Byzantine period (4th - 6th c.)

The Black Sea was a crossroad for international and interregional (entrepôt) trade, connecting Byzantium with Central Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia and China. Moreover, since the earliest years of its foundation, [Constantinople](#) depended on the Black Sea as a close and inexhaustible source of grain supply, originally supplementing (until its loss in the seventh century) Egypt, the capital's main source of alimentation.¹

[Justinian I](#) (527-565) reinforced trading with Lazica, the Black Sea and the Bosphorus, while he founded two new customs posts (under the customs post of Constantinople) in [Abydos](#) and Hieron, at the entrance of the Hellespont and the Bosphorus respectively, in order to tax ships sailing to and from the Mediterranean.² The significance of the Black Sea came to the fore once again when Justinian tried, bypassing mandatory Persian mediation in silk trade, to secure a connection with China by a lateral road going through the cities of [Kherson](#) and Cimmerian Bosphorus in the Crimea, as well as through Lazica in the Caucasus. Indeed, during the reign of [Justin II](#) (565-578) common interests in silk trade and a common enemy, the Persians, would lead the Byzantines to form an alliance against the Persian with the Asiatic people of the Turks, who had expanded as far as the northern Caucasus.³

2. Byzantine commercial centers and trade with the peoples of the Black Sea (7th - 12th c.)

In the Black Sea the Byzantines maintained close commercial relations with the peoples living in the northern parts of the region. In the course of time, the [Khazars](#) had taken on an intermediary role in trade between Central Asia and the West, the [Pechenegs](#) were intermediaries in trade between Kherson and the northern people, while [Russian](#) rulers had been empowered by trading with Byzantium, founding an intermittent presence in the maritime route linking the mouth of the Dnieper with the Bosphorus.⁴

The commercial significance of the Black Sea is also attested by the fact that regional trade (extending over areas within 50-300 km.)⁵ brought to Constantinople all the products of a hinterland including Bulgaria and the whole western coast of the Black Sea. Bulgarian and Russian merchants imported to the capital wax, honey, furs and linen and exported luxury items.⁶ At the same time Constantinople, a centre of entrepôt (beyond a 300-km radius) trade, received from all over the empire, apart from items of international trade, such goods as linen fabrics from [the Pontos](#) and pork from [Paphlagonia](#) or spices that came to it from Syria through [Trebizond](#).⁷

The Byzantines also held centers of regional trade along the Black Sea coastline. During the ninth and tenth centuries such centers included e.g. [Debeltos](#) on the western coast of the Black Sea, which had replaced [Mesembria](#) as an outlet of the Bulgarian trade and place of entry for Byzantine merchandise. The very important city of Kherson,⁸ in the Crimean peninsula, was a centre of exchange for its hinterland, as well as for greater Pontic area: merchants ships from Paphlagonia, [Amisos](#) and the [theme](#) of [Boukellarion](#) brought to Kherson wine and grain (the city also had its own merchants). Amastris in Paphlagonia was also an important commercial centre for the Pechenegs, living in the northern regions of the Black Sea.⁹



As regards entrepôt trade, associated with the luxury items of the eastern trade, in the ninth and tenth centuries in the southeastern coast of the Black Sea Trebizond was a commercial outlet for the products of the Pontos and certainly for merchandise, textiles and spices, coming from Central Asia and Syria on their way to Constantinople.¹⁰ In the eleventh and twelfth centuries Trebizond was the focus of maritime trade with Kherson and overland commercial routes from Central Asia, the Caucasus and Syria, while it was the main trading post for Byzantine silk and brocade textiles exported to Islamic lands.¹¹

The commercial privileges granted in the eleventh and particularly the twelfth century to the Italian maritime republics (especially [Venice](#) and [Genoa](#)), which dealt a blow to Byzantine trade by allowing Italians to trade under favorable terms, probably did not include the Black Sea area. Control by the Byzantine state was particularly tight and did not allow Italian merchants to travel to the region.¹² The prosperous city of Kherson was, from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, the only Byzantine possession in the northern Black Sea, through which the empire controlled southwestern Crimea.¹³ Its items of trade included pelts, honey, wax, and possibly slaves.¹⁴

Products from the Black Sea region were also available at the great interregional and international commercial fair of Thessaloniki, conducted every October during the feast of St. Demetrios.¹⁵ This fair was described in the twelfth-century anonymous satirical dialogue *Timarion*, where it is reported that the Black Sea merchandise did not reach Thessaloniki directly, but came through Constantinople, from where large caravans transported the merchandise to Thessaloniki by way of the Via Egnatia.¹⁶

3. Genoese commercial domination and Turkish advance (13th - 15th c.)

This situation would change radically in 1204 with the [capture of Constantinople](#) by the troops of the [Fourth Crusade](#) and the empire's partition among the Venetians and the Crusaders. One of the consequences was the displacement of Byzantine long-distance traders from the centre of the empire to the periphery and from the coast to the interior. The restoration of the Byzantine Empire with the [recapture of Constantinople](#) in 1261, though relaxing the political pressure of the West, did not succeed in doing the same with the economic pressure. The commercial privileges granted by [Michael VIII Palaiologos](#) (1259-1282) to the Genoese by the [treaty of Nymphaion](#) (1261), in order to secure their navy's assistance against the Venetians in recapturing Constantinople, were the springboard of an expansion that, especially in the case of the Black Sea, would prove fatal for the Byzantines. Within a few decades the Genoese managed to achieve commercial dominance in the Black Sea to such a degree, that from the end of the thirteenth century the Byzantines were pushed out of the region's shipping and trade. This Genoese policy would culminate in the mid-fourteenth century, when they would attempt to close off the Bosphorus at Hieron and in this way gain complete control over access to and from the Black Sea.¹⁷

However, after 1350 the relationship between Byzantine and Italian merchants would considerably improve. To a great degree this was due to the occupation of the northwestern coastal zone of Asia Minor by the Turks and their advance to Europe, facts that buried western commercial dreams of a permanent control of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. Thus, the Byzantines' commercial activities were favored by the gradual abandonment of restrictions that had been forced upon them.¹⁸ It is indicative of the activity of Byzantine merchants that during the final period before the fall, and while [Constantinople](#) was cut off and encircled by the Turks, Constantinopolitan businessmen developed notable commercial activities in various directions, developing, among other things, commercial ties with the southern Black Sea region and the [Crimean](#) peninsula.¹⁹

1. Dagron, G., *Η γέννηση μιας πρωτεύουσας. Η Κωνσταντινούπολη και οι θεσμοί της από το 330 ως το 451*, trans. Μ. Λουκάκη (Athens 2000), pp. 604-606.

2. Καραγιαννόπουλος, Ι., *Το Βυζαντινό κράτος* (Thessaloniki ⁴1996), p. 486.



3. Χριστοφιλοπούλου, Αι., *Βυζαντινή Ιστορία Α' 324-610* (Thessaloniki ²1996), pp. 306, 356-357; Ostrogorsky, G., *Ιστορία του Βυζαντινού κράτους Α'*, trans. I. Παναγόπουλος, ed. E.K. Χρυσός (Athens 1995) p. 140; Greatrex, G., "Byzantium and the East in the Sixth Century", in M. Maas, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge 2005), pp. 477-509, esp. 502-503.
4. King, Ch., *The Black Sea: A History* (Oxford 2004), pp. 69 ff.
5. On the terms "local", "regional" and "entrepôt trade", see Laiou, A.E., "Exchange and Trade, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries," in *eadem* (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century 2* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 705.
6. Laiou, A.E., "Exchange and Trade, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries," in *eadem* (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century 2* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 725.
7. *Τὸ Ἐπαρχικὸν Βιβλίον*, 9.1, 10.2, 5, ed. J. Koder, *Das Eparchenbuch Leons des Weisen* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 33, Wien 1991) pp. 106.420-426, 110.470-477, 94.262-96.294. Cf. Laiou, A.E., "Exchange and Trade, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries," in *eadem* (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century 2* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 725.
8. On Kherson's strategic importance for Byzantium, cf. Κωνσταντίνος Ζ' Πορφυρογέννητος, *Πρὸς τὸ νῆ διον υἱ ὀ ν Ῥωμανόν*, ch. 53, ed. G. Moravcsik, trans. R.J.H. Jenkins, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De administrando imperio* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 1, Washington, D.C. 1967) pp. 259-287. For an interpretation of ch. 53 of this work, see. Λουγγής, Τ., *Κωνσταντίνου Ζ' Πορφυρογέννητου, De administrando imperio (Πρὸς τὸ νῆ διον υἱ ὀ ν Ῥωμανόν). Μία μέθοδος ἀνάγνωσης* (Thessaloniki 1990) pp. 149-155.
9. Laiou, A.E., "Exchange and Trade, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries," in *eadem* (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century 2* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 727.
10. Laiou, A.E., "Exchange and Trade, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries," in *eadem* (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century 2* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 727.
11. Βρυώνης, Σπ., *Η παρακμή του μεσαιωνικού ελληνισμού στη Μικρά Ασία και η διαδικασία του εξισλαμισμού (11ος-15ος αιώνας)*, trans. Κ. Γαλαταριώτου (Athens ²2000), pp. 23 ff.
12. Nystazopoulou-Pelekidis, M., "Venise et la mer Noire du XIe au XVe siecle (Πίν. Δ'-Ε')", *Θησαυρίσματα 7* (1970), p. 18; Lilie, R.-J., *Handel und Politik zwischen dem byzantinischen Reich und den italienischen Kommunen Venedig, Pisa und Genua in der Epoche der Komnenen und der Angeloi (1081-1204)* (Amsterdam 1984), pp. 272-273; Day, G. W., "Manuel and the Genoese: A Reappraisal of Byzantine Commercial Policy in the Late Twelfth Century", *Journal of Economic History* 37/2 (June 1977), p. 299; *idem*, *Genoa's Response to Byzantium, 1155-1204. Commercial Expansion and Factionalism in a Medieval City* (Urbana - Chicago 1988), p. 26; Nicol, D. M., *Byzantium and Venice. A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations* (Cambridge 1988), p. 181 and n. 1; Magdalino, P., *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143-1180* (Cambridge 1993), pp. 147, 149; Laiou, A.E., "Exchange and Trade, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries," in *eadem* (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century 2* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 748. However, A. Λαϊῶ, "Η ανάπτυξη της οικονομικής παρουσίας της Δύσεως στην ανατολική Μεσόγειο και Εγγύς Ανατολή", in *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους Θ'* (Athens 1980), p. 62, leaves open the possibility that an exception had been made regarding the Genoese in the twelfth century, while Martin, M. E., "The First Venetians in the Black Sea", *Αρχαίον Πόντου* 35 (1978), pp. 111-122, claims that the Venetians as well as the Genoese had access to the Black Sea during the twelfth century, but were hardly interested in the region. Browning, R., "Black Sea", in A.P. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 1 (New York - Oxford 1991), p. 294, mentions that Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180), looking for an ally against Venice, gave Genoa the right to trade in the Black Sea.
13. Bortoli A., Kazanski, M., "Kherson and its Region", in Laiou, A.E. (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century 2* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 663.
14. Laiou, A.E., "Exchange and Trade, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries," in *eadem* (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century 2* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 748. Particularly on slave trade in the Black Sea, cf. the interesting information supplied by the historian Georgios Pachymeres, on the event of the embassy sent around 1261 by the sultan of



Egypt Baybars (1260-1277) to the emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos. The sultan sought to secure permission for Egyptian ships to pass through the Bosphorus once a year – a permission which was granted – in order to conduct slave trade in the Black. See Pachymeres, *Syngraphikai Historiae* 3.3, ed. A. Failler, trans. V. Laurent, *Georges Pachymeres, Relations historiques I* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 24/1, Paris 1984), pp. 237.1-239.5. Cf. Μοσχονάς, Ν.Γ., "Η αγορά των δούλων", in *idem* (ed.), *Χρήμα και αγορά στην εποχή των Παλαιολόγων* (Το Βυζάντιο Σήμερα 4, Athens 2003), pp. 251-252.

15. On the fair of St. Demetrios, see Vryonis, Sp. Jr., "The *Panegyris* of the Byzantine Saint: A Study in the Nature of a Medieval Institution, Its Origins and Fate", in S. Hackel (ed.), *The Byzantine Saint, University of Birmingham Fourteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (Studies Supplementary to Sobornost 5, London 1981), p. 202-204; Tafrafi, O., *Thessalonique au quatorzieme siecle*, (Paris 1913, reprint Thessaloniki 1993), pp. 117-119; Καλτσογιάννη, Ε., Κοτζάμπαση, Σ., Παρασκευοπούλου, Η., *Η Θεσσαλονίκη στη βυζαντινή λογοτεχνία. Ρητορικά και αγιολογικά κείμενα* (Βυζαντινά Κείμενα και Μελέται 32, Thessaloniki 2002), pp. 19-22.

16. *Τιμαρίων ἢ περὶ τῶν κατ' αὐτὸν παθημάτων*, ed. R. Romano, *Pseudo-Luciano, Timarione* (Napoli 1974), pp. 55.155-158 [= R. Romano, *La satira bizantina dei secoli XI-XV* (Classici Graeci, Torino 1999), p. 118.141-143]. See A.E. Laiou, "Thessaloniki and Macedonia in the Byzantine Period", in J. Burke, R. Scott (eds.), *Byzantine Macedonia: Identity, Image and History, Papers from the Melbourne Conference, July 1995* (Byzantina Australiensia 13, Melbourne 2000), p. 7; *eadem*, "Exchange and Trade, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries," in *eadem* (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century* 2 (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 756.

17. Matschke, K.P., "Commerce, Trade, Market and Money: Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries," in Laiou, A.E. (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century* 2 (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 789. On Byzantine trade in the Black Sea during this period, see Laiou, A.E., "Byzantium and the Black Sea, 13th-15th Centuries: Trade and the Native Populations of the Black Sea Area", in A.N. Fol (ed.), *Bulgaria Pontica, Medii Aevi II* (Sofia 1988), pp. 164-201. On late Byzantine commerce in general, see the important studies of Laiou-Thomadakis, A.E., "The Byzantine Economy in the Mediterranean Trade System; Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34-35 (1980-1981), pp. 177-222; *eadem*, "The Greek Merchant of the Palaeologan Period: A Collective Portrait", *Πρακτικά της Ακαδημίας Αθηνών* 57 (1982), pp. 96-132.

18. Matschke, K.P., "Commerce, Trade, Market and Money: Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries," in Laiou, A.E. (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century* 2 (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), pp. 590-1.

19. Matschke, K.P., "Commerce, Trade, Market and Money: Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries," in Laiou, A.E. (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century* 2 (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 39, Washington DC 2002), p. 793.

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Τὸ Ἐπαρχικὸν Βιβλίον, ed. J. Koder, *Das Eparchenbuch Leons des Weisen* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 33, Wien 1991).

Quotations

How the products from the Black Sea arrive to the trade fair of St. Demetrios in Thessaloniki (12th C.)

Εὐξεινος δὲ πρὸς τὸ Βυζάντιον τὰ ἑαυτοῦ διαπέμπων ἐκείθεν καὶ οὗτος κοσμεῖ τὴν πανήγυριν, πολλῶν ἵππων πολλῶν ἡμιόνων ἀγόντων τὰ ἐκείθεν ἀγώγιμα.

Τιμαρίων ἢ περὶ τῶν κατ' αὐτὸν παθημάτων, ed. R. Romano, Pseudo-Luciano, *Timarione* (Napoli 1974), p. 55.155-158 [= R. Romano, *La satira bizantina dei secoli XI-XV* (Classici Graeci, Torino 1999), pp. 99-175, esp. 118.141-143].