

SERGEJ PAVLOVIČ KARPOV, История Таны (Азова) в XIII–XV вв. [History of Tana (Azov) in the XIII–XV centuries]. Vol. I: Тана в XIII–XIV вв. [Tana in the XIII–XIV centuries] (Новая Византийская библиотека. Исследования). Saint Petersburg: Алетейя 2021. 378 pp., 6 figs. – ISBN 978-5-00165-314-1

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SERGEY KARPOV has devoted a considerable part of his long academic career to studying the history of the Black Sea in the late Middle Ages. He has focused in particular on two sites which were home to Genoese and Venetian trading posts in the period, Tana and Trebizond. Having previously published an extensive historical monograph on the Empire of Trebizond,¹ he has now chosen to sum up the results of his extensive research on Tana.² The book under review is the first of two volumes and discusses the period from the emergence of Tana in the 1260s to the aftermath of its sack and destruction by Tamerlane in 1395. Its planned sequel will deal with Tana's 15th-century history up to its capture by the Ottomans in the 1470s.

The name Tana was used by Westerners in the late Middle Ages for the outposts of two Italian maritime republics, Venice and Genoa, as well as a much larger settlement to the south of them, Azak, located in the territory of the Golden Horde. Azak, which also included separate Greek, Armenian, and Jewish quarters, was located on the banks of a swampy delta where Don flows into the Sea of Azov. *Ad confinia mundi et in faucibus inimicorum nostrorum* – thus a document of the Venetian Senate from the year 1436

1. SERGEJ PAVLOVIČ KARPOV, L'impero di Trebisonda, Venezia, Genova e Roma 1204–1461. Rapporti politici, diplomatici e commerciali. Roma 1986; IDEM, Трапезундской империи. Saint Petersburg 2017.

2. The most important publications on Tana in the XIII–XIV centuries include: MAXIM MAXIMOVIČ KOVALEVSKIJ, К ранней истории Азова. Венецианская и генуэзская колонии в Танае в XIV веке. In: Труды XII археологического съезда в Харькове 1902 г. Moscow 1905, vol. II, pp. 109–174; ELENA ČESLAVOVNA SKRŽINSKAJA, Storia della Tana. Studi Veneziani 10 (1968) pp. 3–45; MIHNEA BERINDEI – GILLES VEINSTEIN, La Tana-Azaq de la présence italienne à l'emprise ottomane (fin XIIIe–milieu XVIe siècle). Turcica 8.2 (1976) pp. 110–201; LORENZO PUBBLICI, Venezia e il mar d'Azov. Alcune considerazioni sulla Tana nel XIV secolo. Archivio Storico Italiano 163 (2005) pp. 435–483.

describes the location of Tana (p. 200). Tana was indeed a unique place, full of contrasts. KARPOV rightly calls it a key meeting point of the Western and Eastern worlds, where the Sea of Azov, a maritime ‘extension’ of the Mediterranean, lapped against the Eurasian steppes through which ran a transcontinental trading network known as the Mongolian Route (p. 248). When access to Tana was cut off in 1343, Venice and many other areas of Western Europe were threatened with famine; prices immediately skyrocketed, and there was a shortage of grain, salted fish, and spices. A letter from the Venetian Senate to the Genoese Doge Giovanni di Murta (1349) even states that Venice could not function without food supplies from Tana (p. 131). The conflict over Tana that emerged at that time was among the reasons for the Black Death to spread across Europe. In the 14th century, relations between the Italian maritime republics of Genoa and Venice depended on the current situation in Tana (p. 84), and Tana became the direct cause of at least one war between them (1350–1355) (p. 127). In reality, however, when we refer to Tana, i.e. the areas occupied by both Italian trading posts after an agreement between Venice and Özbek Khan in 1332, we mean an area of only about 6.6 hectares (measuring just 220 by 300 m!) inhabited by several hundred people (p. 71, 191). In the second half of the century it grew about three times larger (p. 119), though it seems that its area was never fully built up.

Another striking contrast is the wealth of the preserved archival records, especially regarding trade, in comparison to the poverty of the material remains. Despite intensive archaeological work, especially in recent years, knowledge about the topography of Azak, as well as the location and borders of the Italian trading posts there, remains rather rudimentary. While Ibn-Battuta mentions ‘beautiful buildings’ in Tana (p. 50) and other written sources record a number of churches, none of these have been identified yet. We are essentially left with finds related to crafts, traces of housing (including some from the 14th century), ten yurts (pp. 191–192), and a mill, most of which were found outside the area that seems to have formed the Italian concessions. The only ‘vestige’ directly linked to the Italian colonies is the surviving tombstone of the Venetian consul Jacopo Cornaro, who died there on 18 August 1362 (p. 151), and several seals, including that of the Venetian Doge Andrea Contarini (1368–1382) (p. 159).

After the introduction (pp. 5–6) and a review of the historiography (pp. 6–12), KARPOV expertly describes the archival sources regarding Tana (pp. 12–27), noting the great disproportion in the number of Venetian sources (or those concerning Venetian activities) in relation to Genoese

and other ones. The numbers for a basic types of document, viz. notarial acts, are the most striking here: 1,253 Venetian acts from the 13th–14th centuries are known from Tana, in contrast to just 14 Genoese acts (pp. 16–17). A similar, but not as stark, disproportion is found when we consider the data from prosopography: 3,266 records concern Venetian Tana, while 1,945 are related to its Genoese counterpart (p. 27). The fundamental Genoese source for the region’s history, *Massaria Caffae*, only has three extant 14th-century books, all dated after 1375, and just the last of these, the one for 1386–1387, actually refers to Tana (p. 221). The number of preserved Venetian sources and their extensive use by the author has inevitably resulted in the book emphasizing the Venetians’ role in Tana, with the activities of the Genoese and their trading post, as well as Azak itself, forming a sort of backdrop. At times, when the reader encounters the term Tana, they may be unsure whether KARPOV had in mind the Venetian trading post, which he writes about most often, both Italian outposts, or the whole of Azak. This has influenced the presentation of the history of the Genoese-Venetian conflicts, showing them primarily ‘through a Venetian lens’.

KARPOV very briefly presents the earlier settlements at the mouth of the Don, especially ancient Tanais (pp. 27–29), before beginning his account of the late medieval origins of Tana (Chapter I, pp. 30–48). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these are lost in the mists of time. Although the late 16th-century Polish historian Maciej Strykowski placed the founding of the Genoese trading post in the 12th century (p. 30), KARPOV notes that Azak was only established around the mid-13th century (p. 38) and it was probably then that Western trading commenced – there are mentions of it in 1269 and 1271 (p. 43). It was even later, and in several stages, that the trading posts stabilized – first the Genoese one (late 1280s), then that of the Venetians (between 1317 and 1325) (pp. 44–48). Chapter II (pp. 49–62) describes international trade routes running both to and from Tana and provides, on the basis of medieval travellers’ accounts, very interesting information about travel by sea and land (the journey from Tana to Khanbaliq-Beijing took 284 days!) (p. 52). Chapter III (pp. 63–89) discusses the peak of Tana’s commercial importance (1300–1343), when the Venetians secured a concession from Özbek, Khan of the Golden Horde, and in 1333–1336 built a caravanserai (p. 73).

Chapter IV (pp. 89–159), the longest in the book, is titled ‘The Crisis of the mid-14th century’, although it covers the period from the ‘incident’ in 1343 until 1378, i.e. until the beginning of the War of Chioggia. The description

of the ‘incident’ (a verbal insult followed by a fistfight) and the detailed reconstruction of the subsequent Venetian-Tatar riots, the Latin-Tatar conflict, and finally the Venetian-Genoese war of 1350–1355, which had consequences for almost the whole of Europe, reads like a perfect thriller novel. This confirms KARPOV’s incredible ability to build a narrative based solely on primary sources. The strong involvement of the Venetian patriciate in Tana was demonstrated by the fact that it was difficult to appoint a judge-auditor in Venice who did not have family ties with the participants of the events there (pp. 102–103). According to a *yarlyk* issued by Khan Janibeg in 1347, the Venetian factory was to be moved to a place separated from the Genoese one and significantly reduced to an area of only 2.12 hectares (p. 121). Nonetheless, a peace accord signed in Milan that ended the war in 1355 stipulated that all Venetian inhabitants of Tana were to be evacuated (p. 139). With this, Venetian interest in the northern Black Sea temporarily turned to the Crimea, and Azak itself began to decline.

Chapter V (pp. 160–172) describes Tana from the War of Chioggia to the attack of Tamerlane (1378–1395), and Chapter VI (pp. 173–184) – developments at the turn of the 14th century. KARPOV cites a description by the Venetian envoy Pietro Miani (Emiliani), which is particularly interesting and valuable: it presents Tamerlane’s camp, set up near Azak, in the inner part of which there were eunuchs and three hundred women in Persian clothes, ‘one more beautiful than the other’, while the khan himself occupied a golden throne and two elderly Franciscans sat beside him (p. 174). Whilst perhaps something of a caricature and exaggeratedly picturesque, this text captures the ‘colour’ of the area and period.

The long Chapter VII (pp. 184–236), ‘The Image of Tana’, discusses, inter alia, the city’s population. The author mainly uses data from the files of the Venetian notaries Benedetto Bianco (1359–1362) and Lorenzo di Nicolo (1359). Italians, including 929 Venetians and 141 Genoese, account for 82.3 per cent of the recorded figures (pp. 188–189). Of course, KARPOV is aware that the Genoese, not to mention representatives of other nationalities, resorted to the services of Venetian notaries to a lesser extent than Venetians did. This means that the data presented on the basis of notarial acts in general, and especially two notaries of one nationality (even an extremely busy one, as is the case with Bianco), always give a distorted picture of the population of a given trading post. KARPOV further notes the important circumstance that ‘the commercial successes of the Genoese and Venetians in the Levant seem to have consisted in the fact that many of them were not Genoese and Venetians in the proper and precise sense’.

In other words, many merchants operating in the broadly understood Levant would enter the market through and thanks to connections with Venice and Genoa, but their origins lay in other cities and regions of northern and central Italy and the two republics ‘exploited’ their civilizational achievements for their own benefit (p. 190). In a section devoted to the political and legal status of Tana, the author joins the recent debate about using the term ‘colony’ to describe such Italian medieval institutions (the Venetian sources refer to Tana as a *locus* in a geographical sense, while in the administrative sense the term *regimen* is employed). He also stresses that the trading posts were located in the area under the authority of the Khan of the Golden Horde, rather than the control of Genoa or Venice (pp. 196–198), and goes on to describe the administration of the Venetian and Genoese trading posts.

Considering what has been said above, it is not surprising that only six pages (pp. 222–228) are devoted to the topography of the trading posts. Some information on this subject (especially fortifications) can be gleaned from depictions of Turkish Azak at the end of the 17th century, but it concerns buildings dating mainly from the Ottoman period. If there are any earlier buildings depicted there, they were erected in the 15th century as part of the restoration of Tana after Tamerlane’s sack in 1395. In any case, none of these structures have survived to the present day (p. 224). Moreover, the defenses of the fourteenth-century Venetian trading post were described using the term *fortilicia*, and the documents never mention a fortress, a castle, or a citadel. Interesting data is provided by the files of the Venetian Senate, which mentions buildings belonging to the commune, and by Bianco’s notarial acts, which contain quite detailed descriptions of residential houses: interestingly, these were often surrounded by ditches and palisades or hedges (*sbarro*) (p. 227).

The brief Chapter VIII (pp. 237–244) is devoted to the Church in Tana. The Latin Church had its episcopal see there, recorded since 1345 (p. 238). This is predated by the presence of the Mendicant orders: the Franciscans had a locum in Tana prior to 1275. Their popularity among local merchants is highlighted by an extraordinary account from 1336, when they supported the idea of using stone to build a Dominican church on a plot which the commune had originally bought (from a Muslim named Mehmet Hodja) for the consul’s house and a caravanserai (p. 240).

The final Chapter IX, ‘Trade and crafts in Tana’ (pp. 245–298), contains some particularly interesting data. Exports included grain, fish and roe,

skins (e.g. squirrel fur, p. 259), hemp, spices, and silk. Textiles, Greek and Italian wine, but also more ‘specialized items’, were in their turn imported: in 1338, for instance, Venetian merchants carried a mechanical fountain and a clock to Delhi via Tana (p. 254). One is impressed by the scale of the financial operations in Tana and the value of the goods traded there. In 1399, a single ship’s cargo was valued at 240,000 ducats (p. 183); over the course of 7 months in 1392–1393, Pietro Stornello invested 50,000 ducats in the purchase of silk fabrics, some of which he had bought in Samarkand and transported to Tana (p. 265); Sebastiano and Giacomo Badoer brought over a ton of silk from Tana in the years 1390–1392 for just one contractor; one batch of skins recorded in 1359 weighed over 12.5 tons (p. 258), etc., etc. Another important point is the scale and profitability of Tana’s trade in slaves, who were undoubtedly the most important ‘commodity’ there. This had a long tradition, stretching back to the role of Tanais in Classical Antiquity, as recorded by Strabo (p. 252). Interestingly, the slave trade is essentially omitted in fourteenth-century ‘trade manuals’ (pp. 249–252). Much is explained in this respect by the confidential instructions (*que littere dantur in secreto*) given to the Venetian consul in Tana and to the captains of the Romania galleys in 1394: one was to transport slaves secretly and carefully (*quam cautius et oculitis poteris*), especially in the case of those who were to be subsequently sold to Muslims in Asia Minor and Egypt.³ Once again, the numbers speak for themselves: out of 1,081 substantial transactions recorded in Tana in the years 1359 to 1399, as many as 728 concern slaves (p. 267). It was ‘officially’ possible to transport up to 160 slaves on one cog, but cargos in excess of 200 are known (pp. 267–268). The chapter ends with very instructive sections devoted to the monetary circulation and crafts in Tana (pottery, furriery, bone products, blacksmithing, milling). Lists of Venetian and Genoese consuls, of Roman Catholic bishops, and of Venetian and Genoese notaries working in Tana form a very important and valuable supplement (pp. 301–306).

In sum, KARPOV’s excellent book acquaints its readers with the history of an extraordinary and extremely important medieval settlement. The book’s significance also lies in the fact that its contents lead to broader conclusions. The first of these concerns the complicated and ambiguous nature of Venetian-Genoese relations. The *Devetum Tanae* and the Genoese ban on the entry of Venetians to Tana *Quod non iretur ad Tanam*, despite lead-

3. DANUTA QUIRINI-POPŁAWSKA, *Włoski handel czarnomorskimi niewolnikami w późnym Średniowieczu*. Kraków 2002, pp. 159–163.

ing to wars, did not prevent the two republics from communicating and even becoming allies with the common goal of regaining the concession in Tana after 1343 (p. 108). Some documents also demonstrate strong personal connections and mutual trust between inhabitants of the two Italian trading posts, such as when a Venetian gave his son to a Genoese craftsman in 1385 to learn the trade (p. 296). We can also see reciprocal influences and even deliberate imitation. When the Venetians wanted to take over Vosporo (modern Kerch) in 1340–1341, they planned to organize it in a manner similar to Genoese Caffa (p. 80). From 1411 onward the Senate of Venice made a series of decisions on the construction of new walls around the Venetian colony: the instructions stipulated that residential houses would be built within designated plots, a solution modelled on the earlier example in Caffa (*quod nullo modo permittatis construi et de novo hedificari aliquos domos que non sint de supra in Culmine plane ad modum terratiarum sicut sint ille de Chaffa*).⁴

A second conclusion concerns the close connections between the northern and southern coasts of the Black Sea, especially between the Venetian settlements in Trebizond and Tana, in the late Middle Ages. For example, in 1368 Tana was expected to pay for fortifying the trading post at Trebizond (p. 159), and goods imported from Venice to Tana were often, especially in the second half of the 14th century, subsequently transported to Trebizond (p. 257). The Greek church in Tana belonged to the see of Alania (in the Northern Caucasus), but the latter was combined with the see of Soteriopolis (near Artvin in Turkey) and its bishop often resided there (p. 241).

Translated by AEDDAN SHAW

Keywords

Black Sea; Venice; Genoa; Golden Horde

4. KOVALEVSKIĬ, К ранней истории Азова, p. 160.